

GIVING THE WORM NO HOLLOW FOOD

Francesca Bell
The University of Newcastle

Mervyn Peake is probably best known as the author of the Gormenghast trilogy of novels. He was also an exceptional visual artist, poet and costume designer. The following poem from his anthology *Shapes and Sounds*, published 1941, a few years prior to the time he drew his illustrations for Grimms' fairy tales, is Peake at his best and most moving, as he often is when 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. (Peake, *Shapes and Sounds*, 31)

I could feel Peake had got under the skin where the blood moves in his understanding of Grimms' tales. He has a child's wonderful clear-eyed openness, the ability of children to focus their attention in the 'wrong' place. For instance, I remember once an old violinist playing me a tune on his violin, nodding at me affectionately in appreciation of this lovely melody we were sharing, and all I could think about was the magnificent folds of this old gentleman's double chin, a thousand times more impressive to me than the sound of his playing. Mervyn Peake, I'm sure, with his uncomplicated pencil, would have made those chins sing. My hope is to consider Mervyn's poem as an artist's statement, and talk about creative expression in relation to the theme of our symposium.

All the way through this poem you can feel Peake struggling to reach out and touch some kind of reality, 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, and he has this desperation about him, so that you can't doubt his dedication to expressing the 'one Essential'. It takes hold of him to the extent that it becomes a *consummation* of his

eyes. Then he tells us through this strange, unforgettable image, how the achievement of a radical new awareness by some means compensates the earth with something of real, alimentary value. His dead eyes will ‘give the worm / No hollow food’. I found this image particularly affecting. Maybe it lets me think that art can be food — valuable, not just vanity. I guess artists are flattered to think that way. I felt it gave creativity a genuine relevance, but something deeper seemed hidden in this image.

The poem asks about the meaning of life, the age-old adolescent questions. How can I make a genuine, heroic contribution? What’s the point of my life? How can I feed the world with my pictures? Thinking about these questions recalled to mind the work of Ernest Becker, a brilliant mind and a great cross-disciplinarian, writing in the 1960s and 70s, also unafraid to ask these age-old adolescent questions. Becker’s most famous book was *The Denial of Death*, and in it he proposed an explanation of heroism as mankind’s way of coping with fear of death, an argument which runs like this:

We human creatures are fated to live with the knowledge of death. Becker says: ‘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’ (Becker ix).

Reminders of mortality — for instance, the suggestion that my birthday cake might collapse if I insist on the right number of candles — can be confronting. ‘Existence,’ said Vladimir Nabokov, ‘is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness’ (Nabokov 19). Awareness of being in that crawl space can suddenly feel like incurable cabin fever in the brain: you’re telling your legs to run away but there’s absolutely nowhere to run. Everywhere is back inside *you*. All the meaning drains out of the universe through some mysterious plughole, and your sanity seems about to be sucked down there too. If you survive, this was probably only a small wave of death-terror. But who knows if a tsunami won’t roll up the beach tomorrow?

According to Becker, culture — primitive or contemporary — provides a theatre for heroism, for winning self-esteem, protection against that ever possible tsunami of death-consciousness. We keep the plug firmly in the universe’s plughole by say, composing another symphony, or shopping for a new electric blanket. But the catch is that culture is only symbolic. It’s *artifice*, a giant situation comedy to help us through the night and fend off the terror of *truth*. But it is just *artifice*: not real, not flesh and blood.

Alas, once we taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge, there’s no going back; meeting God in the garden in the cool of the day, Adam and Eve are already embarrassed by their hastily sewn fig aprons. Unfortunately, as existentialism has more recently taught us, it isn’t just the bit Sigmund Freud blamed for humanities woes which is at fault, but the whole physical organism. It is the physical organism which gets sick, or killed, by a falling brick. Nakedness makes us ashamed, but death makes us terrified.

Because it is the physical organism which dies, the physical organism suffers denial too. So does the physical environment. Denying death denies life. The symbolic culture world provides our surrogate life, the life you have when you’re not having a life. Our compulsive need to make our symbols substitute for corporeal realities is what Becker calls the ‘vital lie’, 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. And these wars, unfortunately, 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 235). That is to say, the most important secret we keep is the knowledge that we are keeping secrets: 'repression' only works if we don't know it's happening, and Becker gives new and poignant meaning to Freud's old concept.

So Becker is describing a hopeless dilemma: facing inevitable death involves terror we can't endure, but refusal to face it condemns us to a life un-lived, getting round in fig leaf aprons and funny hats. Whether you agree with Becker's thesis or not, I ask you to think about the notion that 'creatureliness', physical embodiment, not only feels horrible when you're sitting in the dentist's waiting room, it also presents itself as an existential problem. Our environment, like our organism, must be expurgated, sanitised, made manageable. We must have control. We can't allow tigers to be wandering the streets, and we like to suppose that we can fix climate change because it was our doing in the first place.

So what does the dilemma of having an infinite, immortal inside encased in a finite, mortal shell mean for an artist like Mervyn Peake? Artists have a reputation, very undeserved, for wanting to 'suck the marrow' out of life. Traditionally, their morals are considered bohemian. They are supposed to have no shame. Hence, the irony in the old joke about the oil painter who, after many days at his easel painting his nude model, decides, when she arrives at the studio one morning, to offer her a cup of coffee before work. They've no sooner sat down to chat than there's a knock at the door. "Quick," the painter exclaims, "it's my wife. Get your clothes off!"

Peake was a bohemian. He wore a beret, and, according to his wife, '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.' He lived and worked in the glory of his senses. In *The Craft of the Lead Pencil* he says: '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.'

Art's concerns are all-importantly *aesthetic*. As the great and much neglected art philosopher 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'(Langer 25, 73).

Now 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 expresses 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'. Primarily, at least at some point, if the artist isn't too drunk to notice, it is *conscious*. So of 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'. Conscious images — *qualia*, as philosophers refer to

them, a term to describe experience as it feels to the feeler (Jackson 1982, p.127) — Peake believes can provide degrees of nutrition for worms. It is an extraordinary claim.

Recent research by Portuguese neurologist Antonio Damasio 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, which is 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.

So what happens when future-oriented, very sophisticated brains like yours and mine, run slap bang into the prospect of inevitable death? I guess it’s a bit like a computer trying to divide by zero. Acceptance of this truth contradicts the brain’s responsibility to protect the organism. Like a good parent, telling her ten-year-old the R-rated movie mummy and daddy are watching tonight is dull and boring, the brain solves the problem using *artifice*. With its own representations of reality to call upon, maps of the organism’s ideal state, the brain can build a closed circle, a defended fort. 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’.

The American philosopher 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.” Contemporary evidence from neurology supports this claim. Professors George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have traced very convincingly the roots of human cognition and abstract reasoning to the sensorimotor system and the emotions. To give you a feel for this kind of research, here is the opening of Tim Rohrer’s chapter “Image Schemata in the Brain” from the 2005 book *From Perception to Meaning: Image Schemas in Cognitive Linguistics*:

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, Grady 165)

Rohrer’s research bears out Lakoff and Johnson’s. Such an embodied view of thought rejects any divide between mind and corporeality. Life as it is danced in heart and limbs and viscera *is* the music of our thoughts and our language. Take for instance, the theme of this symposium, *truth*, implying ‘agreement with reality’. The word *true* is believed to grow from the same root and trunk as *tree*: firm and straight. When these sibling words were young, lovers plighted their *troth*, as many still do, beneath a sheltering tree, and it’s sad and ironic that we now live on a deforested planet amongst a superabundance of truths.

Our minds work by association. Our thoughts saw up the wood of the world to make things. Chairs snugly buttress human backsides. We can't any 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, with such *artifice*, sometimes it's tricky 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.

But consider the possibility that metaphor, sourced in the human body and the body's negotiation of its environment, constitutes *all* of conceptual thought and our sense of identity. Yet, by our peculiar *artifice* we then disguise metaphor as 'literal' truth. I think 'literal' truth is symbolic truth unrecognised as symbolic. In fact, we have a hard time acknowledging 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. (James 101)

Qualia — how things *seem* — are what arise after repression has done its work. Becker would say that creature anxiety keeps us blind. In Peake's formulation, surfaces appear opaque. Our perceptions mustn't be allowed to threaten our hard-won symbolic detachment and partition 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' Negative Capability 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' (Rilke 88), faces this terror, with only artistic integrity as an ally.

In *The Denial of Death* 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." (Becker 120)

Mervyn Peake's 'transcendental dimension' is replete with worms, eyeballs, and ears the shape of shells. Art for him means quietly observing and recording. It's a kind of openness, a learning to see. As Mervyn says,

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.

The ‘corporeal’ — from Latin ‘corpus’, body — the world of matter in the form we conceive of it is in fact one more symbol: a metaphor, constructed like any ‘higher level’ image. It can carry scary 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 we envision the *stuff* life is made from. Do we envision something holy, or degraded? Is the universe living or dead? Is the blue planet a paradise of beauty, or mud we have to clean off our shoes?

Our sensory organs determine what we perceive, and unconscious projections of fears and emotions may tarnish what we 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 what if the worm is 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.

Human *artifice* — a litter of car bodies, stock market reports, climate change agreements, strewn behind us in our flight from death — feeds no creature of any kind. The planet cannot speak, but it can weep. 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. As Rilke tells us, in virtually the same voice as Blake’s:

Nature and all the things of our daily use are provisional and frail; as long as we are here, however, they are our possession and our friendship, partners in our suffering and joy, just as they have been the intimates of our predecessors. . . Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

Mervyn’s worm isn’t a creature to fear. If it were possible to relinquish such fear, our thoughts, our feelings, only ever metaphors, would readily reassimilate with the soil — the humus — from which they originally grew. And isn’t that what it means to be human?

The final stanza of 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. (Peake *Shapes and Sounds* 32)

WORKS CITED

- Becker, E. *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, Free Press: New York, 1962
- Bentley, G.E. (ed.) *William Blake's Writings*, Oxford University Press: London, 1978.
- Clinton, B. *My Life*, Knopf: New York, 2004
- Damasio, A. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, G. P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1994.
- . *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, Harcourt Brace: New York, 1999.
- . *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, Harcourt Brace: New York, 2003.
- Hampe, B. and Grady, J. (eds.) *From Perception to Meaning: Image Schemas in Cognitive Linguistics*, Mouton de Gruyter: Berlin, 2005
- James, W. *Pragmatism and Other Writing*, Penguin: New York, 2000.
- Jackson, F. 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, 1982, pp. 127-136.
- Johnson, M. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987.
- . *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007.
- Lakoff, G., and Johnson, M. *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1980.
- . *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books: New York, 1999.
- Langer, S. 1957, *Problems of Art*, Scribner: New York, 1957.
- Nabokov, V. 1989, *Speak Memory*, Vintage Books: New York, 1989.
- Peake, M. *Shapes and Sounds*, Chatto & Windus, Village Press: London, 1941/1974.
- . *The Craft of the Lead Pencil*, Wingate: London, 1946.
- Rilke, R.M. *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Mitchell, S. Random House: London, 1987.