The Things They Say

In May 2013, in the weekly BBC radio programme ‘A Point of View’ John Gray gave a talk on the Titus books. Wikipedia tells me that – hold on! Are you sitting comfortably? OK, now take a deep breath – John N. Gray ‘formerly held posts as lecturer in political theory at the University of Essex, fellow and tutor in politics at Jesus College, Oxford, and lecturer and then professor of politics at the University of Oxford. He has served as a visiting professor at Harvard University (1985–86) and Stranahan Fellow at the Social Philosophy and Policy Center, Bowling Green State University (1990–94), and has also held visiting professorships at Tulane University’s Murphy Institute (1991) and Yale University (1994). He was Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics and Political Science until his retirement from academic life in early 2008.’

Two days later, a certain P.V.E. Wood wrote in his blog: ‘I always considered John Gray intellectually second rate – I considered that I could drive a coach and horse through his articles in the New Statesman – but I think more of him now I know that he likes Gormenghast.’

http://pvewood.blogspot.ch/2013/05/gormenghast-my-spiritual-home.html

Posted on Sunday, 12 May 2013

So here are some extracts from Gray’s talk, ‘Leaving Gormenghast’ (aka ‘The Myth of Modernity’). It can still be heard complete on the BBC’s iPlayer (at http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s8vw9) and read, also complete, on the BBC’s ‘NEWS Magazine’ website (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22464374), posted on 10 May 2013.

Mervyn Peake’s Gormenghast novels – Titus Groan, Gormenghast and Titus Alone – have been read in many ways. For some of their readers, they re-state the essential message of romanticism – the assertion of the individual against conventional restraints. For others, the novels are a coming-of-age story – the story of how Titus ceased to be a child and became a man. Yet others interpret them as belonging to a tradition that includes Tolkien – the author of Lord of the Rings – and some later writers of science fiction.
No doubt the novels are all of these, but perhaps they’re something else as well. Too original to belong neatly in any genre, and too full of lovely indecipherable images to be read as anything like an allegory, they have no simple message to convey. Yet I think they may have something interesting and subversive to say about what it means to be modern.

We like to imagine that the coming of modern times marks a fundamental alteration in human experience. Whenever it began – some say with the decline of medievalism, others with the rise of modern science – our world is shaped by the belief that it’s different from anything that existed before.…

Until a few hundred years ago, most people believed human history was cyclical – a series of rising and falling civilizations in which what some generations gained, others lost. Today, nearly everyone thinks otherwise. The modern world is founded on the belief that it’s possible for human beings to shape a future that’s better than anything in the past. If the Gormenghast novels have any continuing theme, it’s that this modern belief is an illusion.…

Gormenghast is the scene of cataclysmic upheavals: the burning of the castle’s library – a crime committed by the sisters of the ruling Earl and plotted by the destructively ambitious former kitchen boy Steerpike – the subsequent madness and suicide of the Earl, and a struggle between the Earl’s devoted servant and the castle’s chef that ends with the chef being killed by the servant, a great flood, and a fight to the finish between Steerpike and Titus.

Despite these disruptions, the life of the castle goes on. Whatever its inhabitants do, however much they may revolt against it, the castle doesn’t change.

The world that Titus finds when he leaves the castle is also a human world – one of incessant change … continuously transformed by new inventions: little wandering spy globes, seemingly intelligent, follow Titus wherever he goes. It’s a world littered with the casualties of unceasing innovation, some of whom take refuge in a subterranean realm beneath the city.…

The dwellers in the castle may be mesmerized by tradition, but the modern world Titus enters is possessed by a dream of the future that’s
equally unreal. Yet it’s the world beyond the castle that Titus chooses to live in, and it’s worth asking why.

When he turns his back on the ritual-bound castle, it’s not because he accepts the modern myth in which the future can be fashioned by human will or intellect. He knows that’s as much a dream as the stability of the past, and ultimately as stifling. …

Leaving Gormenghast means leaving behind childish dreams – whether of the past or the future. Titus knows he can’t change the modern world any more than he could change life in the castle. But maybe he can find what life in the castle denied him – a home in the present. © John N. Gray 2013

A familiar experience?

Have you ever wandered round your local book shop and thought that every book looked the same? That the next big thing is the same as the last one? It’s not entirely accidental. Publishing is an industry awash with me-too products. Publishers love to describe a book by what has gone before, so that any pitch of a new novel inevitably becomes something along the lines of ‘Captain Caveman meets Anna Karenina.’ They believe that they can only get a book into the readers’ hands by arguing that ‘people who liked *Finnegan’s Wake* will love this.’ As a result, it’s all the more surprising when we encounter someone whose work really *is* different to everyone else’s. Such a person is Mervyn Peake, the master of Gormenghast.

I remember very well the first moment I encountered the work of this mysterious, glorious, uncompromising author. It was a hot day in summer, and I was leaning on a wooden desk splattered by long-dried ink and scarred by penknives, taking an English exam. It may have been a GCSE or an A-Level. I turned the page to the blind reading passage to encounter, all of a sudden, a text the like of which I had never seen before, and I think, I never will again.

Before my eyes, the black ants of typed text stamped back and forth, threw off their regular lines and transformed into a forest of dense green foliage. A bizarre creature was moving or flying or bounding before the eyes of the startled protagonist. It was the section of chapter
19 of *Gormenghast* in which Titus Groan first encounters The Thing, a Kaspar Hauser-esque wild child who has been deserted and left to her own devices in the forest. Shaking with excitement, I stumbled out into the bright afternoon of freedom, with three words tattooed in biro on my wrist: ‘Mervyn Peake Gormenghast’.

http://alastairsavage.wordpress.com/2012/05/13/titus-in-the-land-of-nightmares/