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'Boy in Darkness': from Parody to Satire

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In a 1982 article in the *Mervyn Peake Review* Ronald Binns maintained that '*Boy in Darkness* parodies Christian myth, although the extent to which Peake intended the novella as a caustic satire on Christianity and Biblical authority remains obscure' (p.8). This implies that Peake hovers between parody and satire, which is paradoxical because, as each involves a different literary ethos, they are usually poor bedfellows. Indeed, parody is 'repetition with critical distance' (Hutcheon, p.6) and is largely playful, whilst satire uses (often caustic) irony to denounce some form of vice or folly. Although I disagree with Binns' view that the tale leaves the reader 'perplexed' and 'baffled' (p.10), I do think that it is necessary to elucidate the parody/satire paradox in order to start making sense of Mervyn Peake's magic-realistic story.

The parody in 'Boy' largely consists of an uncanny inversion of the Darwinian concepts of evolution and natural selection. Concomitantly, Peake compounds the parodic element with a much more serious, near-blasphemous, re-writing of Christianity's dichotomization of human nature. Unlike Binns, I am wary of trying to figure out what Peake's intention may have been, but what is clear to me is that we should not be chasing any form of authorial 'moral intent' in the story. For instance, Binns resents that Titus's victory depends 'on a simple trick rather than upon *a clash of moralities*' (p.9; my emphasis); and R. Boerem and J. Seland (writing together in *Peake Studies*) strangely argue that 'the Lamb of God (John 1:29) is such a well-known Christian symbol that it is *jarring* to see the Lamb of 'Boy in Darkness' prove to be more of a satanic symbol' (p.15; my emphasis). These terms imply that both Binns and Boerem/Seland

had a pre-conceived Christian agenda that would make any link between the Lamb and Evil unpalatable to them.

Incensed by the meaningless ritualistic routine of his life, Titus Groan decides, on the night of his fourteenth birthday, to seek adventure outside the castle. He reaches a river of death, which he crosses on a skiff helped by a large group of yellow-eyed dogs. He finds himself in a 'foreign land' and falls asleep until noon at least. When he wakes up, he walks towards a forest and meets Goat, a strange half-man, half-goat, who proposes to take him to 'the heart of life and love', the Lamb. On the way they are intercepted by Hyena, a narcissistic and brutal scavenger who refuses to let Goat get all the credit for finding the Boy. Crossing a dreary wasteland, they reach a dark chamber where the Lamb moves his finger over the boy's face and ascertains his pride and nobility. He tells the two creatures to prepare a 'feast of transformation'. The Boy is given food and falls asleep. When he wakes up, he tries to stir rebelliousness in Hyena and Goat, but the Lamb foils the plan and starts putting a spell on the Boy. In a desperate move, the Boy flings coins behind the Lamb and breaks the spell long enough to be able to strike the Lamb with a sword stolen from Hyena and reduce him to a fleshless heap of wool. Thereupon Hyena and Goat retrieve their human shape and silently leave the den. As for the Boy, he crosses the river again and is taken back to the castle by a rescue party. Now, this brief summary leaves no doubt about the initiatory pattern of the story, and links it with the central motif of the first two Titus books, the young earl's heroic rebellion against cumbersome tradition.

There is not much I could add to Boerem and Seland's discussion of the rebellion and initiation motifs. They convincingly argue that the boy's escape from the castle is a rebellion against 'the crushing confinement of meaningless ritual' and is, more generally, 'a heightened form of the common rebelliousness of youth against tradition' (p.6). As he lies in bed watching a 'map of mildew' which is symbolically 'the rotting world of Gormenghast' (p.8), the boy seems to fear 'a corruption of his very personality, his sense of self' (p.9). And when he reaches the river, it is pretty clear that what will be happening on the other side will be an initiation of sorts, with Cerberus-like dogs

helping him cross Lethe to an alien land akin to the Underworld from which no soul returns unless it is a hero's like Ulysses'. In the last few lines only the allusions to classical mythology are mine, and I beg to disagree with Boerem and Seland's near-theological argument that the evil force the boy is fighting in Lamb-land is 'false doctrine' (p.10). From this point on in their discussion of 'Boy', Boerem and Seland are injecting a dose of Christian theology into a tale that seems rather, in my view, to undermine the evangelical division of human nature into body and mind.

Let me focus first on the parodic dimension of the novella, that is, on Peake's witty fictional reversal of evolution and natural selection. The Lamb is one of the most incongruous mock-creators in twentieth-century fiction. Its incongruity stems from two interrelated motifs. Firstly, the Lamb as parodic Almighty Lord initiates a fall from humanity to semi-animality, which is a somewhat twisted rewriting of the post-lapsarian fate in store for mankind in Genesis. And, secondly, this 'fall from humanity' is described in terms suggesting that the arrow of evolution has flown backwards, not forwards. In *The Voice of the Heart,* Peter Winnington points out that 'this is genetic engineering in reverse, active atavism' (p.98), which has a string of grimly comic consequences: the survival of the more animal men; the demise of rational thinking; and the death of moral sense. It is the second aspect which is now on my critical agenda as the first requires no further comment.

In a piece on 'Peake, Wilde and Aestheticism', Ron Hindle observed that 'Human/animal fusions occur very frequently' (p.7) not only in Peake's own fiction and poetry, but also in his illustrations, notably his illustration for Wilde's 'The Sphinx' (pp.3–6). This feature of Peake's aesthetics has not gone unnoticed in critical quarters. In *The Voice of the Heart* Peake Winnington devotes a whole chapter to Peake's animals and chimeras, for instance. In a context which has some bearing on my topic, Sophie Aymès discusses a frequent rhetorical device in Peake in connection with the portrait of Billy Bottle. She describes this device as 'a fall from the sublime to the grotesque, from human ideal figure to animal life' (p.19). The grotesque in Peake is linked to the forfeiture of humanity via the regression to hybrid

forms of existence. I do not find it unduly cynical to point out that a blend of animality and humanity defines every single one of us, but only the keener mind can discern the animal lurking beneath the social veneer, and the Lamb has an omniscient mind of this calibre, as is recognized by Alice Mills in her book on *Stuckness*:

> The shapes into which the Lamb has transformed his subjects are part of their true nature, discerned and encouraged to manifest by his supernatural powers rather than imposed on non-bestial beings. The Goat was always hypocritical and a coward, the Hyena always a bully. In these respects the Lamb could be considered a power for truth, even though this truth is intolerable to most of his subjects, who die as a result of having it manifest in their bodies. Like the mythic Greek prophet Tiresias, the Lamb has supernatural insights into the human psyche though he is physically blind.
>
> (p.187)

This is a truly remarkable insight. *In illo tempore* the human beings inhabiting the wilderness on the other side of the river got the Lord they deserved. The Lamb is indeed 'a power for truth' when he diagnoses the kind of animal that any 'guest' harbours within, and his Last Supper rituals are meant to tilt his prey ever so slightly towards their animal self. I say 'ever so slightly' because the Lamb does not so much want to bestialize the humans that fall under his spell as reduce their rational faculties and their moral sense enough to make them malleable and docile. Goat was a lickspittle and Hyena was a simian bully before they were 'realigned' by the Lamb, as Alice Mills points out. Proof of this is that, when the spell on Hyena and Goat has been broken by Titus and the two old men move away from the chamber, 'One had a sloping back, the other a sidelong shuffle' (*Boy in Darkness and Other Stories,* p.92). What was altered in the 'realignment' (p.82) was not so much their nature as the 'proportion' of animality and humanity.

What exactly is this 'realignment' ominously in store for the Boy? When Goat first meets him, he promises him 'a banquet', a delicious meal (by Goat's standards) of 'figs and rushes' (pp.40–1). The paraphernalia that the Lamb tells Goat and Hyena to prepare rather sug-

gest black magic (p.82). In any case, it is a major 'transformation' (p.83) that the half-beasts will witness as they put the Boy to bed, 'his flesh to be reshaped; his heart to be shrivelled, and his soul to feed on fear' (p.82). We are not told what diet the Lamb serves his victims in order to 'realign' them, but the meal itself and the transformation ritual seem to be grim parodies of, respectively, the Last Supper and Eucharistic transubstantiation. The Lamb's 'sentience' (p.91) is an omniscient telepathic capacity to break down mental resistance and effect a bodily and psychic beast-ward transformation. Whilst the transubstantiation – the changing of bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ – is intended to spiritualize the faithful, the Lamb's banquet makes animality the dominant component in man's nature. The body is transmogrified into a demi-beast's, and the mind follows suit. Hyena's bullying ways, which must have been 'just' verbal prior to re-alignment, have become brutally physical, and Goat's obsequiousness is an animalized version of Uriah Heep's insincere and slavish humility. The comic element in all this is the sense in which regression (not evolution) of the species and transmogrification (not transubstantiation) are parodically fused into one single motif. This biological and religious *mise en abîme* even has an extra, literary, dimension since Peake parodically topsy-turvies in 'Boy' the narrative strand that he found in H. G. Wells's *Island of Dr Moreau* – instead of animals being turned into Wells's demi-humans, in Peake humans are transformed into demi-beasts.*

The Lamb's agenda is clearly not to kill his worshippers, yet it has resulted in dismal failure in every case except Hyena and Goat. The Lamb himself 'found it impossible to know what it was that killed them and what it was that kept them alive' (p.60). He drew his finger along the face of each victim (for instance the gazelle man's on page 70, or the Boy's on page 81), then he proceeded to deprive them of their will, and 'by degrees the form and character of the beasts they had somewhat resembled began to strengthen and little signs began to appear, such as a note in the voice that had never been there

* For the link between Peake's novella and Wells's *Moreau*, see Ronald Binns, pp.3–4.

before, or a way of tossing the head like a stag or lowering it like a hen when it runs to its food' (pp.59–60). The Lamb's 'loathing … and burning hatred of all humans' (p.60) should be blamed for his failure to keep them alive, and Peake offers fascinating insights into how this hatred produces the near-extinction of the new species. The Lamb is likened to a 'swaying stoat with its upright carriage and its kiss of death upon the jugular' (p.72). He does not go for 'the jugular', though, for he is 'not interested in corpses'. What he wants is to debase each creature so much that 'the creature yearned for annihilation at the hands of the torturer' (p.72). This annihilation as willed by each victim upon him- or herself is what Freud calls Thanatos. It is really an extreme form of masochism.

From a Darwinian viewpoint, survival depends on what the Lamb himself calls 'some necessity for survival' (p.70), that is to say, a strong life instinct, a strong Eros. When inertia prevails over energy, death inevitably ensues. All this explains why, unlike the other victims, Hyena and Goat have survived for hundreds of years. The Goat's 'power of running seemed to have no bounds. He did not pant or gasp for air' (p.42). Even more impressively, Hyena's 'raw vitality of the blood' was such that 'as he ran over the fens and grasses a kind of throbbing went with him' (p.46). There is even an element of magic, in the primary sense of this word,* when Hyena, seeing the outline of a human face, 'began to tremble with so terrible a vitality of the blood that the distant Goat stared about him as though there was a change in the weather or as though the sky had changed colour' (p.44). Goat's and Hyena's longevity should be put down to the animal vitality that they possessed from the start, to 'their general coarseness of soul and fibre' (p.69).

The Lamb's single achievement from a Darwinian perspective has been the survival of the stupidest, not of the fittest. I find it strange that the word 'comic' has not been used to depict the mood in much of the tale, because what is fictionalized in 'Boy' is *The Origin – and*

* 'Magic: 1. The supposed art of influencing the course of events and of producing extraordinary physical phenomena by the occult control of nature or of spirits' (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*).

the End – of the Stupid Species. Personally, I can nearly empathize with the Lamb when he is shown indulging the 'chagrin' that, 'of all the divers creatures to have passed through his tiny, snow-white hands, creatures of all shapes, sizes and intellects, he should find himself left at last with a couple of near-idiots – the cowardly and bullying Hyena and the sycophantic Goat' (p.70). This is good comedy, as is the ambiguous relationship between the two creatures. They may exemplify the erotic complementarity of sadism and masochism: Goat needs to be brutalized by Hyena; Hyena needs a passive masochist for erotic fulfilment. This could be the perfect love relationship in Lamb-land.

Peake is not content to fictionalize the quasi-extinction of the hybrid species in parodically Darwinian fashion. This aspect of the story also has a philosophical dimension:

> a decade or more had passed since the last visitor sat down at table with him – sat down and saw the veiled eyes of the Lamb and knew even as he stared at his host that his soul was being sucked out of him. He had died, like the rest, the brain running too sharply from the body or the body leaping like a frog in search of the brain, so that they broke apart, and, like the machinery of the mines, they died away into silence and emptiness of death. (p.69)

The balance between body and mind ('Νοῦς ὑγιὴς ἐν σώματι ὑγιεῖ', '*mens sana in corpore sano*') is one of the invaluable legacies that have come down to us from the Age of Pericles and Classical Rome via the Renaissance. The least that can be said is that the Lamb does not wholeheartedly endorse this ideal, neither for his guinea-pigs nor for himself.

This leads me to turn from parody and address the satirical element in 'Boy'. It might be 'religiously correct' to argue, with Boerem and Seland, that the Boy is 'a Christ destroying the Antichrist, which nullifies the interpretation of the Lamb as an attack on Christianity' (p.17), but such an interpretation is itself 'nullified' by a web of metaphorical clues suggesting that, in 'Boy', Peake is grappling with a conception of human nature that has arguably had catastrophic consequences over the centuries. In a short piece about 'Boy', Diana

Wynne Jones speaks about 'the major insight' that 'the brain needs the body and the body will sometimes do strange things in order to express what is in the brain' (p.45). Inseparability of body and brain: this is the crux of the matter. Wynne Jones is implicitly referring to the Lamb's frantic period of waiting until the Boy wakes up, and to this illuminating authorial intervention:

> The Hyena shot a sideways glance at his companion and found no enlightenment there. How could they know that such were the fermentations in the brain of the Lamb that they could not be endured a moment longer without the aid of the body; for there comes a time when the brain, flashing through constellations of conjecture, is in danger of losing itself in worlds from which there is no return. And so the body, in its wisdom, flies alongside, ready, by means of its own rapidity, to grapple, if the need arose, with the dazzling convolutions of the brain. What the Hyena and the Goat were witnessing was just this. The intellectual excitement which the Boy aroused in the Lamb was of such an order, that, as it mounted in intensity, the little white fingers, rising intuitively to the occasion, held, by means of their own agility and speed, madness at bay. (p.84)

I could be wrong, but I feel that it is not so much an omniscient narrator as Peake himself who is speaking to us here. My misgivings about intentional fallacy notwithstanding, we should be grateful to Mervyn Peake for letting us into his 'intentions' here because he does not leave his readers much leeway for Christian correctness. For instance, the 'wisdom of the body' is starkly contrasted with Christ's insistence that the highest ideal to be pursued by (some) Christians is the eunuch's: 'and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake'.* The body is never 'wise' in the Gospels.

* See Matthew 19 :12, where Christ tells his followers that there are three kinds of eunuchs: the lucky few who did not have any instinct when they were born; those (mostly slaves, I presume) that were castrated by other men; and those who deny the body in order to gain easier access to heaven.

The dehumanizing transformation effected by the Lamb on his prey purports to bestialize their body and reduce their thinking and moral faculties, but it fails because in so doing the Lamb severs the body from the brain, 'the brain running too sharply from the body or the body leaping like a frog in search of the brain, so that they [break] apart' (p.69). Peake is explicitly telling us here that the body and the mind should be pulling human beings in the same direction. When the fragile balance is upset through demonic experiments, the body and the mind 'break apart', and death necessarily ensues.

The second passage is even more explicit on this philosophical issue. The Lamb does not have much of a body, but what little material substance he is made of is absolutely necessary to prevent him from going mad when he is gripped by 'constellations of conjecture' and by 'dazzling convolutions of the brain'. Only the 'wise body' can hold 'madness at bay' through the movements of the hands,

> circling one another, separating, threading and weaving their ten fantastic fingers in such a delirium of movement, that nothing could be seen but an opalescent blur of light that sometimes rose, sometimes sank and sometimes hovered like a mist at the height of the White Lamb's breast. (pp.83–4)

This is an extraordinary reversal of the Christian tenet that the spirit should hold sway over the body's requirements. The Lamb's antics remind us of the truism that evil derives from the mind, not the body.

C. G. Jung made the point somewhere (possibly in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*) that Christianity should be blamed for opening a chasm between the body and the mind. The Lamb is an extreme avatar of Christianity's dualistic thinking and depreciation of the body, the 'eunuch syndrome' that produced the celibacy of priests a millenium ago. He is evil because he is an icy brain, a disincarnate intellect. (In the chapter on 'Animals' in *The Voice of the Heart* Peter Winnington shows that the motif of 'disembodied intellect' (p.103) equates to evil in Peake's fiction.) The philosophical origin of Christian dualism is the Socratic injunction to rise to the non-sensory, timeless realm of ideas (as is conveyed by Plato's myth of the

cave) and to leave behind the – arguably – gross material world.* Platonic idealism is contrasted with materialism, the most influential proponent of which was Lucretius, who wrote: 'mind and body are born together, grow up together and together decay' (p.109). The mind is made up of fine atoms, which dissolve into nothingness at death, and even the 'spiritual principle in man' is no supra-sensory agent and disappears with the extinction of the body (p.100).

Not the least fascinating aspect of 'Boy in Darkness' is that Mervyn Peake fictionally intervenes in this age-old debate between idealists and materialists, and appears to side with the latter. Only a materialist can describe the body as 'wise' and a bodiless brain as absolutely evil. Here Peake follows in the footsteps of William Blake: 'Man has no body distinct from his Soul', 'Energy is the only life, and is from the Body', and 'Energy is Eternal Delight' ('Proverbs of Hell' in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* p.252). And so Mervyn Peake was of the Devil's party too!

The most intriguing aspect of the tale is the Lamb's near-bodilessness, which makes it difficult to apprehend the nature of his craving for the Boy. The end of the tale confirms that he is almost completely incorporeal. Yet his sickly attraction for the Boy can only be described as lustful. When he smells something human coming to him, an 'all-but-invisible tremor passed over his blind face' (p.61). He responds to the prospect of sensing the boy's 'youth' (p.78) with a 'jet of sound [springing] through the darkness' (p.79) that Ronald Binns aptly described as 'a cry of orgasmic exultation' (p.8). When he assesses the boy's degree of nobility or animality, 'a kind of covetous and fiery rash spread out beneath the wool so that the milk-white curls appeared to be curdled, in a blush from head to feet' (p.82). As for his frantic behaviour when he is waiting for the Boy to wake up, I agree with Binns that it is some sort of 'onanistic delirium.' Strangely enough, Binns also argues that Peake 'shies away' (p.8) from making these sexual meanings explicit. Had Peake been more explicit, he'd be writing pornography, and we might not be discussing his *oeuvre*!

* On this philosophical matter, see André Comte-Sponville's *Le mythe d'Icare,* pp. 70–2.

What is of immense psychological interest here is that absolute evil results from the brain working autonomously from the (all but extinct) body. 'He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence,' as Blake famously wrote in his 'Proverbs of Hell'. The Lamb desires *and* is about to act, but only intellectually, which would make his 'pestilence' even worse than if he had a body for 'action'. No sexual molestation is in store for the Boy. The *mental* torture that he would be subjected to would be the loss of his humanity. His would be a perverse mind in a semi-animal body, but he would presumably keep enough consciousness to be aware of the immensity of the loss. At some stage in the story, Goat movingly makes us realize that his was really a fall story (like in Genesis, albeit parodically) as he tries to interpret the tears ('bits of broken glass') in the Boy's eyes and to remember the time when he was 'beastless' (p.63). Though the Boy cries simply because he is very hungry, it is clear in this context that Goat dimly remembers once being able to feel compassion and empathy. Here again, it is the wise body that seems to show to the mind the path to true humanity.

There is an interesting sequel to the mind/body motif in 'Boy in Darkness'. The first time Goat speaks about his Lord, he describes him as 'the heart of life and love', and he insists that 'that is true because he *tells* us so' (p.42). The Lamb who preaches life and love then turns out to be a dark angel of death and hatred. Philosopher André Comte-Sponville has much to say about the schizophrenic use of 'love' and 'life' in Plato and Christianity, for which the purpose of life is to cleanse the soul of all impurities in order to, eventually, separate the corrupt body from the pure soul. The word for this separation is death. Life and the body are hated to such an extent that 'living is a sin, unless one only desires death' (my translation of André Comte-Sponville's *Vivre*, p.25). I doubt very much whether Peake might *intentionally* have written any fiction about this philosophical debate, but intentions are irrelevant here. Common sense is sufficient for anyone, let alone a literary genius, to realize the existence of insuperable tensions within a religion that harps on *life* provided it is on the other side of the grave and on *love* for one's neighbour commingled with hatred of one's own body and obsession with sin. These are

the contradictions that Peake satirizes in the Lamb, who is ironically geared with all the inverted paraphernalia of Christian iconography (the crown of thorns/bones; the angelical features and bleating meekness; the blindness that does not indicate a saintly gaze inwards but sheer demonism; the reliance on two extremely keen senses, smell and hearing, that are usually associated with animals of prey, not with the divine; etc).

There is one last aspect of religion that Peake satirizes in his novella, not the Gospels but the Christian Church. When Hyena is facing the Lamb, his 'brutal strength and beastliness' evaporates, and he is 'transmuted into something weak and slavering' (p.66). Hyena and Goat have lost all capacity to resist the Lamb's injunctions, for self-debasement has been instilled into the two creatures' brains, and the only 'human' condition they can envisage is a slave's:

> Hyena and Goat had once upon a time been rebellious. . . . But that was very long ago, and they had now known for many years that they were of a lesser breed and that to serve and obey their master was its own reward. (pp.55–6)

Their fear of incurring the Lamb's wrath is so overwhelming that they have developed 'the art of deaf and dumb language and also of lipreading' (p.66). The Lamb's rule is one of terror, of reading into people's minds and also of hearing the faintest noise from his worshippers, such as 'the sound of the cessation [of lipreading], a sound resembling that of a cobweb crumbling to the floor or the step of a mouse on moss' (pp.66–7). That form of terror prevailed in the Christian world until the Renaissance, which marked the debunking of an almighty deity by such philosophers as Pico della Mirandola on behalf of Man. What is satirized by Peake here is no longer the spiritualistic content in the Christian Bible but the contradiction between the Gospels' theoretical love message and the Christian institutions' practical recourse to wrath and terror to brainwash believers into passive submission. Relevantly enough, Comte-Sponville indicts the Church, not Christ (*'l'Eglise, non le Christ'*), for this debasing shift from love to blind obedience (*Vivre,* p.117). And, when the Boy tries to awake 'in [the two half-beasts'] bodies the ulcer of insurrection',

he uses a rhetoric fraught with ironical references to the Christian 'good news', telling them that he is 'a courier from another world' and that they are 'sons of man' but live in a place which is just good enough 'for worms'. The Boy traps them 'into a confession of fear' (p.88), for he knows that it is only 'terror' that holds them back (p.89). The Christ analogy (as upheld by Boerem and Seland) is clearly ironical in this context, because it is not so much freedom that the Boy is holding up to the two creatures as more terror for 'fawners, slaves and sycophants', albeit not for Goat and Hyena who would be promoted to the rank of masters with 'golden thrones' (p.88). Christ wanted to break the master/slave dialectic, whilst the Boy uses here Christian jargon to perpetuate this dialectic. He is a Machiavellian dialectician, whose only purpose is to save his skin by having the engineer (the Lamb) hoist with his own petard (brainwashing the gullible).

The Boy's victory over the Lamb has been described as a baffling anti-climax for the tale, since the child easily outwits 'an old scarecrow, swaddled in wool': 'One thrust of Titus's sword and the creature is cast down, shown to be empty, a hollow lamb' (Binns, p.8). The ease of the Boy's victory should be qualified, though, for the transformation is already underway when he somewhat miraculously finds the means of breaking 'the spell of scrutiny' (p.91). More importantly, Dianna Wynne Jones remarks that, until the last couple of pages of the story, 'Titus has been a mere helpless body', and only when he tells himself 'that his body is connected to a brain' does he manage to ward off the curse of hybridity (p. 45). This is a valuable insight within the context of my 'materialist' argument: unlike the Lamb who is a demonic brain disconnected from flesh, Titus uses both intelligence and cunning (when he flatters the two creatures and tries to engineer their rebellion) and physical action (when he flings coins behind the Lamb and stabs him to death). Here again, Peake fictionalizes the inseparability of body and mind, especially for the sake of heroic endeavours involving the fight with evil.

To conclude, some thoughts on the absence of brain and blood and on the 'complete emptiness devoid of bones and organs' (p.92) when the Boy has slashed the Lamb open with his sword. Evil is

immaterial and devoid of substance – this is apparently what Mervyn Peake is suggesting about the Lamb. Alice Mills quotes Richard West's contention that 'Peake "is using the Occidental concept that at bottom Evil does not exist in its own right, but only as a corruption of Good"'. This interesting point is confuted by Alice Mills on the ground that 'there is no evidence that good prevails' once the Lamb has been destroyed (Mills, p.187). My disagreement with Mills is linguistic and epistemological. I do not think that 'Moral Good' is expected to prevail in 'Boy in Darkness' because this is not so much a moral tale as a philosophical one. What is meant by 'good' and 'evil' should not be understood ethically but as philosophical terms involving our definitions of the body and the mind. Comte-Sponville impressively expresses the gist of the materialist credo in these terms: 'priority of the body, primacy of the mind' (*'primat du corps, primauté de l'esprit'* – *Icare,* p.263). When the 'priority' of the 'wise body' is negated (as is the case in Platonism, in Christianity … and in Lamb-land), indeed when the body itself is reduced to 'half a million curls . . . seraphic in its purity and softness' (p.56) and to an icy brain, then the human beings under the rule of an incorporeal tyrant are in deep trouble. We should not underestimate the profundity of Mervyn Peake's magic-realistic tale in times that have seen the re-emergence within sick brains of lethal ideologies propounding hatred of the material world this side of the grave and craving for the spiritual world on the other side.

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