

DESIRING ALTERITY: A LACANIAN READING OF THREE MODES OF BEING  
IN MERVYN PEAKE'S *BOY IN DARKNESS*

DESEAR LA ALTERIDAD: UNA LECTURA LACANIANA DE TRES MODOS DEL SER  
EN *BOY IN DARKNESS* DE MERVYN PEAKE

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**Abstract**

Mervyn Peake's *Boy in Darkness* (1956) is a novella that consistently develops the tension among modes of being which are inextricably linked to our notions of identity and alterity: the human, as presented in the complex networks of culture; the nonhuman, as given in nature; and the posthuman, as a combination of human and nonhuman through technological or magical influences. Concerned with the conflicting relationship between people and the world they inhabit, the Peakean narrative depicts such a relationship through a phenomenon that at once separates and binds together all three modes of being: language. While the nonhuman diversity—animals, fungi, nonliving matter—does not exhibit speech, the human and its complementary yet feared alterity—genetically modified individuals—interact within what Lacan calls the symbolic order, from which subjectivity emerges. It is within this order that desire, the roots of which are found in a perpetual sense of lack, unites linguistic beings in a shared experience of nostalgia. The insistence on a return to an idealized former state motivates the entire narrative, in which the protagonist is torn between the desire to be altered and the desire to restore his sense of self. Using Lacan's theory of object lack in his Seminar IV, this paper aims to explore the paradoxical quality of

**Resumen**

*Boy in Darkness* (1956), de Mervyn Peake, es una novela corta que desarrolla de manera consistente la tensión entre tres modos del ser indisolublemente relacionados con nuestras nociones de identidad y alteridad: lo humano, según acontece en las complejas redes de la cultura; lo no humano, según ocurre en la naturaleza; y lo poshumano, sobrevenido de la combinación de lo humano y lo no humano vía la incidencia tecnológica o mágica. Preocupada por el vínculo conflictivo entre la gente y el mundo que habita, la narrativa peakeana presenta dicha relación mediante un fenómeno que a la vez separa y une los tres modos del ser: el lenguaje. Mientras que la diversidad no humana—animales, hongos, materia no viva—no ostenta el habla, lo humano y su alteridad complementaria a la vez que temida—individuos genéticamente modificados—interactúan en lo que Lacan llama el orden simbólico, desde donde emerge la subjetividad. Es dentro de tal orden donde el deseo, cuyas raíces se hallan en una sensación perpetua de carencia, interrelaciona a los seres lingüísticos en una experiencia compartida de nostalgia. La insistencia en el retorno a un estado previo e idealizado motiva la totalidad de la narración, en la que el protagonista se desgarrar entre el deseo de ser alterado y el deseo de restituir su sentido del sí mismo. A través de la teoría lacaniana de la falta de objeto en el Seminario IV, el presente artículo

desire in Peake's novella, where the conflicting relationship among the three modes of being results from the subject's endless yearning for the absent and the unattainable.

pretende explorar la cualidad paradójica del deseo en la novela corta de Mervyn Peake, donde la relación conflictiva entre los tres modos del ser resulta de la incansable añoranza del sujeto por lo ausente y lo imposible.

**Keywords:** *Mervyn Peake* || *Otherness* || *Identity in literature* || *Posthumanism in literature* || *Transhumanism* || *Gothic fiction (literary genre)*

**Palabras clave:** *Mervyn Peake* || *Otredad* || *Identidad en literatura* || *Posthumanismo en la literatura* || *Transhumanismo* || *Novela gótica (género literario)*

*No one can give anyone else the gift of the idyll; only an animal can do so, because only animals were not expelled from Paradise.*

—MILAN KUNDERA, *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING*

## Introduction

While Mervyn Peake's *Boy in Darkness* (1956) seems to form part of the Gormenghast world, it is not one of the novels that comprise the author's extensive trilogy—*Titus Groan* (1946), *Gormenghast* (1950), and *Titus Alone* (1959). Much shorter than the tripartite epic, the novella delivers an alternative episode in the life of a fourteen-year-old, called the Boy, who undergoes a sudden transition from his medieval surroundings to an abandoned subterranean industrial complex. Three posthuman characters secretly abide there: Hyena, Goat, and Lamb, the latter of which hybridizes people with animals and murders many in the process. As the Boy is about to meet either genetic alteration or death, he manages to break free from his captors, kill Lamb, and indirectly make Goat and Hyena turn back to being human. The narration is therefore structured upon a circular pattern that is motivated, mainly, by the protagonist's constant longing to resume his previous life (both factual and imagined) and, collaterally, by the reversion of posthuman characters into one of their former modes of being.

Within such circularity, the nonhuman world plays a crucial role in the development of the text. The Boy's relationship with it is what in fact sets the story in motion, for a humble insect traversing the ceiling of his room makes him think of freedom

and inspires him to abscond. The incidence of nature within human space thus motivates the movement of the text both forward—with the Boy's abandoning the Castle to become someone, or rather something else—and backward—with his return to the Castle and his idealization of the non-symbolic state of nature as one of freedom and enjoyment decreasing toward the end of his ghastly adventure. The narrative insistence on several levels of return—ontological, spatial, noetic—and the nostalgia for supposedly former modes of being convey the Boy's ambiguous desire to abandon the human realm and to preserve it, allowing for a reading of the Peakean Gothic ecology from the viewpoint of Jacques Lacan's theory of object lack. This paper thus aims to interpret the conflicting relation in *Boy in Darkness* among three modes of being—human, nonhuman, posthuman—as resulting from the subject's dependence on desire, a phenomenon exclusive of the symbolic order, for the absent and impossible.

### **Monarchs, Castles, Duties: The Symbolic Order**

An adolescent, the protagonist is expected to rule a kingdom but starts out as an already fatigued, saddened individual who is trapped in a world of unrelenting moral ought. The novella's opening lines display the difficulties he must endure: "The ceremonies were over for the day. The Boy was tired out. Ritual, like a senseless chariot, had rolled its wheels—and the natural life of the day was bruised and crushed" (Peake, 2011: 181). The relationship of the human world with its environment comes about in terms of hostility: imposing itself on life in the form of Ritual, the human mode of being not only damages nature, but reproduces people who are just as bruised and crushed under the recurrence of convention. The Boy as monarch is its first victim: rather than lord of the Castle, he is prisoner of purposeful though "senseless" architecture. The Boy is, therefore, not to dispose of the Castle and its institutions, but to be disposed of by them, with "no option but to be at the beck and call of those officials whose duty it was to advise and guide him" (181). Preceded for countless generations by such way of life and unable to modify it, the Boy grows aware of his captivity and develops ambivalent feelings for the Castle, at once a dear and an abhorred place where he is allowed to exist, albeit through lacking. His is a

dreary culture of subjective circumscription but it is also the place that propels the development of his self-awareness.

The Boy's relationship with the Castle is influenced by its attributes, which precede its inhabitants, frame their freedom of action, and, at the same time, stir their desire. This turns the medieval building into an agentive entity that fulfils the role of language as understood by Lacanian theory: it foregoes and constitutes subjectivity, removing it from nature and creating the psychic cleavage that introduces desire—i.e., the pressing need to recover a lost object that cannot be found again (Lacan, 2020). The Castle thus assumes what Lacan terms the function of the Father: it is not a concrete, masculine individual who acts as parent to a child, but an abstraction of the structuring function that allows “the organisation of the symbolic world”, which, on the one hand, enables subjectivity and sanctions desire; on the other, it constitutes a “circumscribing bond” (50) that suffocates, persecutes, and gives rise to phobia. The Castle at once secures the linguistic subject and becomes a horrific omnipresence with a “vengeful, sadistic, punishing aspect”, thus constituting the “cruel and insatiable agency that bombards [the subject] with impossible demands” (Žižek, 2007: 80). The Castle appears especially threatening as the Boy's desire to escape grows in the first pages of the novella. Commingled with language, administration, and punishment, the Castle operates in terms of the big Other, the Lacanian instance of the inescapable entry into the linguistic world of the human mode of being.

The phobic element that derives from the protagonist's struggle with the Castle as big Other can be seen in the polarized ambivalence of feelings, which range from the appreciation the Boy bestows on his sense of self to “a frame of mind quite savage in its resentment” (Peake, 2011: 181). His conflicting experience ends up manifesting in the form of Gothic fear as the narrative voice asserts that he “had on many an occasion been terrified, not only by the silences and glooms of the night but by a sense of being watched, almost as though the Castle itself, or the spirit of the ancient place moved with him as he moved, stopped when he stopped; for ever [*sic*] breathing at his shoulder-blades and taking note of every move he made” (183). The Castle's omnipresence leads the Boy to be afraid of his own desire for transgressing its double function of prohibition and structuration. To abandon it would imply “the dire peril of his becoming irrevocably lost or falling into the hands of evil forces” (183), two possibilities that materialize in the novella in the form of the Boy's abduction by Goat

and Hyena and the attempt of transformation and murder at the hands of Lamb. Both consequences can be read as the fulfillment of the fear of castration since they punish the Boy’s violation of taboo, but they also suggest the departure from neurosis—where the subject is organized around the fear of castration so as to belong to functional society—and the terrifying entry into psychosis, which would disable the Boy as governor and as partaker of the symbolic order.

It is inside the paternal Castle, or big Other, that the Boy’s original fears arise, for rather than a castle described, we encounter a Castle that does—hence the capitalization,<sup>1</sup> also present in *Ritual* and *Boy*. This makes these aspects of the narrative not a discernible triad but an entity of indivisible constituents that foreshadows the failure of the Boy’s search for his lost object—since his transformation into something other than human is half-attained and eventually reversed—, but which also ensures his safety. The inseparability of these elements is made evident in the narration on two levels: physically, the Boy returns to the Castle at the end of the story untransformed; psychically, to escape the posthuman pit, instead of resorting to unmediated action, he adheres to language, which increases in complexity as it turns into preaching and deploys mock-Christian discourse to convince Goat and Hyena to join him against Lamb. The human character is therefore unable to detach from linguistic activity, making his desire to belong to the realm of nature an impossible ambition. The equation here established between Castle and language as the function of the Father, or as condition for the human mode of being, evinces the essence of the symbolic order, which happens before the subject and enables its advent, like “a power station [...] already up and running [...] which has been functioning here for as long as you can remember [...] For as long as there have been functioning signifiers, subjects have been organized in their psychical systems by the specific play of the signifier” (Lacan, 2020: 42). This, says Lacan, is “in stark contrast to the notion of nature” (2020: 42). The preexistence of the symbolic, rather than implying vastness, constrains the subject to a certain way of existing, one which is subjected to a

<sup>1</sup> Numerous editions have alternatively kept or discarded the capitalization of the word Castle, as well as added or avoided the Boy’s name, Titus. The 2011 edition I use maintains the 1978 version by Peake’s widow, Maeve Gilmore, who kept the capitalization of Castle and Ritual in the first pages and largely resisted calling the Boy Titus. I find Gilmore’s choices more appropriate for a freestanding reading that, on the one hand, requires no previous knowledge of the Gormenghast trilogy and, on the other, invites an ampler allegorical dimension less readily available through proper names.

never-ending search for completion that aspires to the retrieval of a lost object that, for the speechless infant, is the mother, and, as such, the experience can never be repeated. This discordance introduces “an essential and fundamentally conflictive division into [the] re-found object and into the very fact of its re-finding”, a re-union that is unattainable where the symbolic function “plays the role of a disturbing force in all the subject’s subsequent object relations” (Lacan, 2020: 45). The Boy’s longing is thus condemned to failure, as the desired retrogression cannot be fulfilled unless he deserts subjectivity.

Torn between deciding to remain human and to become nonhuman, the Boy’s irreconcilable position is augmented shortly after he contemplates the apprehension engendered in the familiarity of home.<sup>2</sup> His fear is equally directed towards the symbolic order, which brings the artifice of the Castle-language to an uncanny life of its own, and to the non-symbolic, to be found in “the silences and glooms of the night” (Peake, 2011: 183), an area that remains, after all, in impenetrable darkness to the linguistic being. If the Castle represents language, the night is the shapeless outline of nature par excellence. This nature is always sought to be crushed by the wheels of Ritual because it reveals that which should remain concealed: the real. No signifiers enter it and, therefore, it poses the absence of any known and knowable structure, giving rise to the dangers of traumata that language prevents by “provid[ing] a guarantee of coherence” (Ragland-Sullivan, 1992: 50). Because of this, the Boy’s considerations before abandoning his linguistic home make him doubt his pursuit: “Remembering these times when he had lost himself he could not but realize how much more frightening it would be for him to be alone in the darkness of a district alien to his life, a place remote from the kernel of the Castle where, although he detested many of the inhabitants, he was at least among his own kind” (Peake, 2011: 184). There is no suggestion that the alien district is a land with other humans; what the Boy is after, however frightening, is the absolute alterity of the realm of nature. He is then given to both fearing and longing for the human mode of being with an eagerness almost as desperate as he both rejects and desires alterity. The narrative voice emphasizes

<sup>2</sup> The Freudian notion of the *Unheimliche*, or uncanny, consists of “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud, 1953: 220). In *Boy in Darkness*, the place where the Boy feels most at home is also the place that haunts him as it develops a willful, bedeviling presence, thus playing the simultaneous roles of the familiar and the unfamiliar.

that “to be alone in a land where nothing can be recognized, that is what he feared, and that is what he longed for” (2011: 184). This ambivalence generates an additional tier of nostalgia, this time for his actual human life as considerably more attractive—in view of its interpretability—than the inscrutable nonhuman one. But because he imagines nature to be his primordial object and his own previous mode of being, the idealization of non-symbolic boundlessness outweighs the Boy’s nostalgia for the human home and guides the effort of his search for the fulfilment of desire, which at once arouses the subject’s disturbing restlessness and strives for rest (Lacan, 2020).

### **Fungi, Flies, Dogs: The Real Order**

Sleep does not overcome the Boy when he is sent to his room after the ceremony of his fourteenth birthday. Despite exhaustion, while in bed he stares at the “ochre-coloured and familiar patch of mildew that stretched across the ceiling like an island” (Peake, 2011: 181). This made-up island has inlets, bays, and coves that the Boy resorts to in a narrative of exploration, where “he had many a time brought imaginary ships to anchor in hazardous harbours, or stood them off when the seas ran high where they rocked in his mind and set new courses for yet other lands” (2011: 182). Mildew, a type of fungus, is what first allows the Boy to conceive his lost object. Not incidentally, the function of mildew in his perception is to play the role of something else: an island and the water that surrounds it. Thus, replacing within the signifier *mildew* one signified (‘fungus’) for another (‘island’, ‘water’), the Boy resorts to a metaphor that is highly suggestive of the mother’s womb, an idyllic space where the problems of subjective split, and lack and desire did not exist. The womb, to his dismay, is a place to which he can never go back. Therefore, what the Boy is inheriting in his ancestral room, together with the ability to systematize the search by means of storytelling, is the condition of yearning for the lost object, a state proper to the human mode of being and one which nature, here represented by fungus, is completely free of.

The subject who observes the real order then assumes that it relishes in the absence of any form of constraint and, in metonymic proximity to the idyllic womb, becomes the desired object. But upon realizing that he cannot achieve any form or degree of freedom inside the Castle because the human world, with its “hundred

familiar faces,” cannot but remind him “of some ritual duty,” the Boy grows “too irritable to make-believe and the only thing he stared at was a fly that was moving slowly across the island” (Peake, 2011: 182). Inadvertently growing alien in its amorphousness and quietude, mildew no longer invites the Boy to play the childhood game of the island and is replaced by an insect, which he finds more relatable: it moves with legs and wings; it sees with huge eyes; it becomes “an explorer, I suppose”, precisely what he would like to be:

Only a little part of his consciousness was taken up with watching the fly but that little was identifying itself with the insect so that the Boy became dimly aware of exploration as something more than a word or a sound of a word, as something solitary and mutinous. And then it came, all at once, the first flicker of imperative rebellion, not against any one particular person but against the eternal round of deadly symbolism. (Peake, 2011: 182)

The fly not only reveals its existence outside the paternal law of the Castle as it roams in the island of mildew at unlimited leisure—which is indicative of returning to or remaining with the mother unrestrictedly; it also lives beyond the signifier as “more than a word or a sound of a word”. To the Boy, the fly is the accomplishment of wholeness, a state of mind he fully realizes he has never experienced and yet interprets as a loss. Additionally, it is noticeable that, just as the Boy is not given a proper name and, therefore, is not a specific individual but a proxy for subjectivity, the text clarifies that his rebellion is not aimed at defying another subject, but at dismantling the extension of the human mode of being by seeking to satisfy his desire for alterity.

Paradoxically, the search and not the finding of the object is, according to Lacan (2020), precisely the condition for subjectivity, because “in the human world the structure, the point of departure for objectal organization, is the lack of the object” (48). The subject therefore exists primarily as a “being-for-lack [that] has as its principle [*sic*] referent loss itself” (Ragland-Sullivan, 1992: 50). Thus, racked by a ceaseless pining for what he is not, the Boy initiates the search for a mode of being that, in his view, precedes his own. To go back to being nonhuman, like the fly that explores his room without the weight of protocol, would set him free of a life of duty he did not choose. But the retrogression cannot be, as he never was an animal: this is

later proven by the posthuman characters, who continue to exist within the symbolic order as linguistic beings despite dwelling in ontological liminality.

The impossibility of return is not yet fully acknowledged by the Boy, and his search is undertaken immediately after he looks into the mirror. The duplicate image serves an equally double purpose: on the one hand, it allows the recognition of the Boy's dissatisfied subjective condition, and, on the other, it situates the uncanny in the self:

He took a deep breath and looked slowly around the room and was then suddenly arrested by a near-by face. It stared at him fiercely. It was a young face despite the fact that the forehead was puckered up in a deep frown. Hanging on a cord around the neck was a bunch of turkey feathers.

It was by those feathers that he knew that he was looking at himself and he turned away from the mirror, tearing, as he did so, the absurd trophy that hung around his neck. (Peake, 2011: 183)

The experience of seeing his own reflection introduces once more the dimension of ambiguity: upon first encountering the face, the hostility of the fierce gaze and the furrowed brow convey a sense of estrangement and signal the imminence of danger, foreshadowing the attack he will suffer from posthuman characters who live within the same linguistic frame as the Boy. However, the mirror also brings the illusion of wholeness and bridges the gap, or loss, created by the symbolic order with the insect's presence in his room as a creature integrating non-symbolic existence and slightly anthropomorphic features. Both sinister and familiar, the Boy's reflection allows him to reinforce his identification with the insect and to conceive the possibility of happiness. Bound thus to the persistent nostalgia for his lost object, for a sense of unity that was never experienced, the Boy abandons his home in the hopes that he will find the joy he has imagined.

Once away from the Castle, he comes across a river near which a frightening pack of dogs gathers. Upon noticing the protagonist, the creatures form a semi-circle and begin to close in on him, forcing him to step into a skiff and start rowing. Notwithstanding the Boy's alarm, the pack is not there to attack him, but to intentionally direct the course of the skiff across the stream. The nonhuman mode of being now represented by predatory mammals that are also domestic pose a complex

reading. While they seem ferocious and are even described as “appalling”, “wicked”, “frightful,” and “devilish” (Peake, 2011: 189-190), they appear to inhabit an in-between register that simultaneously terrifies the human character with nature’s unpredictability and assists him through intuitive interaction, much like sacred entities in ancient myth. Serving as incomprehensible foreboding, the role of these dogs is to take him to a place where the fulfillment of his desire is far from bringing a harmonious and enjoyable end; on the contrary, the land across the river puts everything the Boy has attained in the symbolic order to the test. The extent to which this test is taken constitutes a threat to his mode of being—i.e., to his subjectivity and his life.

The dogs’ half-wild, half-domestic condition, together with their inescapable trial, suggests an intertextual gesture at the Greek myth of the Sphinx, at once a creature that combines the earthly, to be found in the co-incidence of human and animal traits, with the supernatural, as the Sphinx has access to transcendental knowledge. Providing a third psychic threshold within both the narrative threshold of the Oedipus myth (before and after parricide) and the spatial threshold that leads into the city of Thebes, “the Sphinx’s monstrous presence makes clear [...] that she is a metafigure for Oedipus’ entire condition. He is perhaps not as conspicuous as she, but his existence similarly infects the Greek world order with a deviant, disturbing, marginal element” (Renger, 2013: 26). Likewise, the triple threshold can be found in *Boy in Darkness*: the narrative structure divides the story into two sections—one for the punitive Castle and one for the deathly posthuman mine; it also “generates an intervening space” (Renger, 2013: 25), which is the river the Boy must cross. Lastly and most importantly, the dogs, like the Sphinx, represent the psychic threshold that mirrors the Boy’s desire for unregulated pleasure, thought to be attainable by reentering the mother’s womb—i.e., by assuming the idyllic nonhuman mode of being, which finds its metaphorical correlative in the dogs’ life in the wild. Such excess threatens, as mentioned earlier, to annihilate subjectivity: the Boy’s potential entry into psychosis through an overexposure to the real order is insinuated by his withdrawal from the linguistic and organizing function of the Castle.

On the one hand, the dogs’ intermediary situation allows the Boy to partially identify with them in a way not distanced from his identification with the fly back in his room, finding in them a vital quality that provides him with some degree of relief: “he was less ill with terror than he might have been, utterly alone. The dogs

were unwittingly his companions. They, unlike the iron and the stone, were alive and had in common with him the throb of life in their breasts and he threw up a prayer of gladness as he dug the long pole into the mud of the riverbed” (Peake, 2011: 189). On the other hand, their ambivalent act of pursuing-guiding constitutes a form of communication that vaguely resembles the linguistic-threatening function of the Castle and that the Boy is forced to adopt in order to keep the dogs appeased—just as he would reluctantly comply with convention in the Castle—and to avoid drowning in the river—another water metaphor of the womb and the non-symbolic which simultaneously evokes unity, psychosis, and death. However, unlike the Sphinx, the dogs do not arrange linguistic riddles for the hero to solve: their lack of words places them closer to the real order, and, for this reason, they remain an illegible omen. Rather than weakening the mystery of their activity in the river, the dog’s speechlessness contributes to at least three effects: the anxiety that marks the Boy’s journey, the enigma behind the transition from one world to another, and the horror of genetic modification and death. The dogs therefore prefigure the Boy’s encounter with a form of alterity that exists in the middle of the human and the nonhuman, as well as with the possibility of his desired transformation and death. Given their own inconclusive condition as unreadable guardians of the threshold, the dogs announce the liminality of the posthuman mode of being as the failed outcome of the Boy’s desire.

### **The Posthuman Pit: No Paradise Regained**

Before crossing the river, the Boy takes the nonhuman realm as the only possibility of cohesion and, therefore, as his only chance for happiness. Even the dogs, who point at a life in the threshold of different modes of being, operate as a homogeneous entity that is imagined by the hero to “[lie] down all together in a single blot of darkness” (Peake, 2011: 189). His interpretation of the real order—a construal that escalates from the fungus fixed to the ceiling to the fly that navigates it and, finally, to the dogs who intentionally steer the skiff across the river—directs the Boy’s desire for an idyllic lost object in the direction of an otherness he would like to incarnate. Paradoxically, such a progression from the most natural to the least natural announces the unfeasibility of the hero’s aching endeavor on meeting posthuman beings. They turn out to

be as desirous as himself, which evinces their own object lack on the surface of their yearning, while at its core lie their speaking efforts to conceal the anxiety simultaneously caused by the real and by their insurmountable distance from it. The Boy's disappointment in his search thus lies in the replacement of his heavenly garden of fungi, plants, and animals for the posthuman project that, on top of leading a linguistic-based existence, occupies an underground industrial building, a space that braces the artificiality of such a mode of being.

The qualities of the posthuman dwelling, together with its residents, invite a multilayered reading that ranges from analyses of religious imagery (West, 1989; Boerem & Seland, 1995) to hypotheses of the parody of Darwin's evolutionary theory (François, 2013). Other types of research include an approach to sexual perversion (Binns, 1982) and, recently, to the blurring margin between wakefulness and dreaming in relation to the surrealist movement and the post-war debris (Maslen, 2023). The psychoanalytic method used by Alice Mills (2005) to interpret the posthuman lair includes a Kristevan reading of such space as one of abjection, where "both cave and monster embody the mother as womb and tomb, threatening to reabsorb her son into a state of undifferentiated oneness" (197-198). Mills' reading of the posthuman episode implies that the Boy is not entirely different from his captors as their roles within the mine cannot be clearly distinguished. To this consideration I add that all four of them simultaneously inhabit and establish the problematic, hazy quality of multiple thresholds which ultimately succumb to the weight of the symbolic order: they speak.

While the physical hybridity of humans and animals represents, together with the river, one of the most conspicuous thresholds in the novella, the encounter with posthuman beings constitutes yet another undefined border where desire and horror are hardly distinguishable. This is the dreaded, abject undifferentiation around which the Boy's ambivalence is constructed. Since remaining in such psychic border would turn the experience unbearable, the Boy struggles to read the signs of the uncanny in the first posthuman he meets, Goat, in terms of equivalences with previously seen entities to reduce the impact of the sudden meeting. He symbolizes the unknown so that he can continue to equate, substitute, and think through language, and, in doing so, he adheres further to the organizing function of the Castle: "he was facing something that could never have been discovered in the precincts of his home. It was

in some way of another order. And yet what was it that made this gentleman so different? His hair was curly and dusty. This was somehow revolting but there was nothing monstrous about it. The head was long and huge. But why should that, in itself, be repellent, or impossible?" (Peake, 2011: 191). The indefinite edge between fear and desire soon intersects with another threshold where relief and disappointment merge as the Boy finds out the posthuman character is a linguistic subject like himself. This new convolution of feelings is evinced by the Boy's first affirmation addressed to Goat, which is grammatically delivered as a complex sentence with a strong indication of uncertainty: "I think I would like to go home" (2011: 192). The vertiginous superposition of psychic thresholds enhanced by the Boy's interlaid clauses is further worsened by Goat's first words: "I am Goat [...] I have come to welcome you, child. Yes... yes... to welcome you" (2011: 192). The vacillation at the end of his speech suggests he is lying, at once increasing the sense of danger that ensues in the form of abduction and which reflects back to the Boy the highly problematic quality of his own symbolic condition: towards the end of the novella, he also resorts to lying and utilizing rhetoric to persuade Goat and Hyena. Following Mills's appreciation of the abject in the posthuman episode and extending it beyond the incidents in the mine, I argue that, rather than establishing apprehensible differences between the monster's deviancy and the hero's normalcy, the two modes of being intermingle even before arriving at the mine due to the deceptive nature of their linguistic interactions.

Thus, as extensions of the Boy's own search, posthumans display the failed outcome of the human pursuit for alterity. Goat, Hyena, and Lamb fit nowhere in nature as well as nowhere in society; but more importantly, they are all in search of something—a search that is no less excruciating than the Boy's. Posthuman beings are farther removed from their lost object: unable to complete the transformation into nonhumans and therefore seeing their chances for the long-wanted return to rest destroyed, they are now also unable to go back to the human community and survive in the final threshold: that of the monster. Their dwelling below the ground, not a natural cave but a sophisticated excavation with "chimneys or shafts of old metal workings, mine-heads, and littered here and there in every direction, girders and chains" (Peake, 2011: 205), also suggests posthuman beings simultaneously inhabit the space of culture and its norms, and the space of desirous transgression. They replicate the sadistic big Other, but this time with them as perverse subjectivities: they

conform a hierarchal society with Lamb as ruler, who may well be represented by the mineheads, while his institution of criminal activity as their way of life is pointed at by the chaotic cluttering of girders and chains.

However, the Boy eventually discovers that Goat and Hyena are not acting of their free will. This enables the hero to devise an escape plan that now involves other speaking beings. Realizing that both humans and posthumans share the belief in nature as the one realm of idyll, the Boy promises Goat and Hyena to release them from their torment under the big Other's demands by offering reintegration to the real order. However, such a return is manifestly partial in the Boy's speech and, for that reason, as unsuccessful as the posthuman project itself:

“What a place to live in!” said the Boy. “This is a place for worms, not for the sons of man. But even the worms and the bats and the spiders avoid this place. For this is a home for fawners, slaves and sycophants. Let it be somewhere free, somewhere splendid, somewhere where you, sir”—he turned to the Goat—“can bury your splendid head in soft white dust, and where you”—he turned to the Hyena—“can cut a cudgel, yes, and use it too. And ah! the marrow-bones for your fierce jaws—the endless marrow! And I have come to fetch you.” (Peake, 2011: 229-230)

To join worms, bats, and spiders in a free and splendid place would be, for Hyena and Goat, no different from joining the fungi, the flies, and the dogs for the Boy. However, his sermon is already problematically built: while freedom from cultural constraints is implied in the endless chewing for Hyena and the rubbing of Goat's head on something pleasant—two activities that would stand for dysfunctional behavior as linguistic beings—the interference of the symbolic order seems inevitable when the Boy appeals to their condition as sons of man, addresses Goat as sir, and mentions the crafting of a tool. The promise is already a fiasco and anticipates the posthumans' reversion into humans, not into animals. The fact that their real half is lost in favor of their symbolic half announces the Boy's return to the Castle and highlights deficit as the everlasting, puzzling condition of the (post)human subject.

In fact, the beginning of the Boy's transformation and possible death continues to bolster up conflict as he resists what he had originally sought to achieve. It is precisely

when he recognizes Goat and Hyena’s yearning—thus enabling his power to observe his own experience of object lack from a certain distance—that his original desire to be “reverted” into a nonhuman being threatens him with the loss of his subjectivity:

he screamed to find that his fingers were not only curled unnaturally, but that the whole arm was swinging to and fro, as though it had nothing to do with him or his body.

He tried to raise the hand but nothing happened, except that as he cried with fear there was a note in his voice he did not recognize. [...] He tried to retreat but his legs would not obey him.” (Peake, 2011: 232)

Arms, legs, and voice no longer belong to him; their change responds to the Boy’s original desire to be altered, but loss of command of his own body suggests the danger of fulfilling the transformation. Because of this danger, in deciding to fight Lamb the Boy attempts to return to his human abode; in other words, the Boy seeks to fully enable his own subjectivity by restoring the linguistic function of the Castle he had once longed to leave in favor of the maternal womb, whose state of undifferentiation now appears as dreadful. The text thus plays with the tension of circularity and paradox: nostalgia is at once directed to an imaginary past, that of the nonhuman being which the Boy believes to comprise a prior stage of his life, and to an actual past as a distinguished, but powerless, human in the Castle. Unfortunately, the return to the Mother is no less frightening than the return to the Father: one threatens the subject with suspension and the other threatens the subject with further subjection; the Boy bets for grim struggle within the latter, thus renouncing Paradise.

The absolute dissolution of the beauty imagined to exist in nature appears in the Boy’s final showdown against Lamb, and desire reveals its empty core. On the level of the subject’s nostalgia, the emptiness of Lamb’s body discloses that the search for the lost object is a search for its very absence rather than for its retrieval. Upon being cut open, the nonexistence of viscera in Lamb is revealed: “There was no blood, nor anything to be seen in the nature of a brain. The Boy then slashed at the woollen body, and at the arms, but it was the same as it had been with the head, a complete emptiness devoid of bones and organs” (Peake, 2011: 233). The hollow vessel, this bewildering encounter with nothingness, has been variously interpreted by scholars.

For Mills (2005), it represents yet another reinforcement of the Boy's psychic paralysis since "he learns nothing from [the journey] [...], retrieves no treasure [...], rescues no maiden [...], saves no kingdom. Instead, he forgets and returns to the castle, unchanged" (191); Lamb's body and the Boy's adventure equally disappear into oblivion. The Lacanian theory of object lack, however, allows for a reading that situates *Boy in Darkness* as a tale of desire and its unremitting search. Lamb's bloodless death with no bodily components, no fluids, no sounds, and no smells stands for the subject's dependence on desire for the absent and impossible: that long lost Mother, the ideal of wholeness, to which the speaking being can never return. The slashing of Lamb also suggests the Boy's intentionally psychoanalytic dissection of his own desire because, in addition to a search for the lost object, the journey implies an *eros* for discovery, a drive for knowledge and self-examination that, in the end, allows the subject to inhabit the symbolic order, but not without conflict. The outcome of this double search is joyless since the authentic object of desire consists of a lack that compels the linguistic being to endlessly prolong an ungraspable homesickness for a home that never was.

## Conclusion

As a Gothic novella concerned with culture's problematic relationship with itself and its alterity, *Boy in Darkness* provides a disturbing ending. The Boy's return to his human home is not a triumph since he does not reenter the Castle as its lord; instead, he is found "lost and weary in a crumbling courtyard" (Peake, 2011: 233) and carried in someone's arms—someone whose identity remains, like all other human characters in the novella, unstated. Revisiting the symbolic order puts the Boy back at the mercy of an uncanny big Other that will continue to dictate his every action and thought. The journey meets insoluble paradox and increases the conflict that, from the first lines, arises in the form of lack and nostalgia, which lie at the heart of the human mode of being and take the restless form of desire. The actual closeness to desubjectivation and death in the posthuman lair leads the Boy to an acute contradiction in which he eventually fights to reestablish what he knows: his speaking self and his ever-dissatisfied world. The Peakean approach to nature is thus constructed in the same troubling key found within the symbolic order: none

of the possible ontological options (the nonhuman, the human, and the posthuman modes of being) offer the possibility of happiness.

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