

The End of the Trial of Man by Paul Stubbs

written by Anthony Seidman | May 28, 2015



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In American poetry, much talk has revolved around the mystique of the difficult poem, the open sequence, or the “saturation job” on some field of inquiry—to quote from Olson—yet very often the reader is left with brilliant, yet overall, failed embarkations, such as Crane’s *The Bridge*, or at other times with a work so disjointed and vast in its scope—be it an *A* or the *Maximus Poems*—that it leaves the diligent reader who knows the best of Dante, the shorter, yet inter-connected poems that comprise *Les Fleurs du Mal*, scratching his or her dandruff as to why hundreds of pages that very often seem incidental should be deemed as important as, say, *Orlando Furioso*, or *Os Lusíadas*—to mention two works that boast a pagination running up into the hundreds, and yet are readable from the first reading, and prove to be so upon the twelfth or fifteenth reading.

The End of the Trial of Man, by English poet Paul Stubbs, is a radiant, rough, and imminently intelligent “saturation job.” Its subject is the art of Francis Bacon. Just published by *Arc Publications*, this collection shows how Stubbs has reached his fullest as a “serious” and even “difficult” poet, yet one who is willing—who perhaps feels compelled—to guide us as Virgil “out from the darkness” and “God’s aborted.”

In the section of *Azul...* wherein Rubén Darío—that Nicaraguan arbiter of *Making It New* in Spanish—confers medals to the poets he admires most, he offers a

sonnet praising Whitman, an incongruous gesture when one thinks of Whitman's flowing cadence, catalogues, and end-stop lines. Moreover, the fourteen lines praising the poet whose "soul of infinity is like a mirror" and who employs a harp "carved from ancient oak" comes wedged among medallions to such poets as Leconte de Lisle and Salvador Díaz Mirón—poets celebrated for their sculptured rhyme. That being said, the careful reader of such a masterpiece as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" knows that Whitman was carefully plotting the poem as if it were a sonnet. (A "barbaric yawp" medallion by Darío would have been a gimmicky gesture.) Now jump to Francis Bacon; too much has been written about the violence of his life, the disorder of his studio, the mystery and irrationality and vigor and violence of his paintings. One could spend one's time better marveling at the perfection of the paintings, the channeled violence, perhaps, and the way the canvasses are *not* punched through with holes. Stubbs knows that in Bacon we have a response to history, human circumstances, all mapped out in a manner that is controlled, a scientific, if you will, disorientation among a painter's palate, the narration inherent in triptychs, and the human body, but not so obviously or easily rendered as the scribbles and knife-slashes of a bedlamite (even the flashing teeth that reappear in canvas after canvas, as Bacon once quipped, need not *only* be interpreted as snarling, but *also* wild laughter).

Readers familiar with such long masterpieces by Stubbs as *Ex Nihilo* have become familiar with the taut and searing intelligence in his poetry. His poems often appear in open sequences or long pieces, and the characteristics they share most with each other is the same piercing intelligence that examines a question or obsession from multiple perspectives, often simultaneously. Indeed, the poems make one think of the worm-gear, that screwdriver turning in and around its self. Yet Stubbs has developed a voice of his own. No one around today has poems that even *look* like his on the printed page, nor possessing the insistency on crafting poems that are very often interior / dramatic monologues from the most wildly idiosyncratic constellation of voices, be it a man-God returning to nothingness, or, as in *The End of the Trial of Man*, the Beast of Yeats, an Apostate, or The Ugliest Man, The Higher Man, and The Second Birth of Man, as in "The Three Final Phases of Perdition," an extremely strong poem in this new collection.

By exploring Bacon so relentlessly —and Stubbs has already written deeply about other challenging voices and visions, such as Rimbaud and W.S. Graham—the poet has found the paintings to be repositories and dark mirrors of the experience of humanity, especially after the culmination of the Judeo-Christian worldview simmering over to its flashpoint after the mid-century. Instead of penning the often merely lapidary or celebratory ekphrastic poesy, each poem threads commentary and dialogue with diverse howls from history, be it Yeats, Nietzsche, Spengler, Heidegger, Rimbaud, Stubbs himself, with the paintings of Bacon that, in return, explore Crucifixions, the Furies, Pope Innocent X. At the center of each poem in the collection one senses the radiation-suction-gust of some immemorial loss, an "attempt to bleed back God." Indeed, both Bacon and Stubbs, whatever their religious beliefs—or lack thereof may be—are profound theologians, that is, minds dissecting the logic of the Gods. Where Bacon relentlessly digs into the meat nailed on wood in multiple canvasses—starting with his ghostly *Crucifixion* of 1933—and seems to

gather no response, Stubbs carves from the sinews of God-hunger a poem like "The Apostate," drawing its energy from the poem "Figure with Meat" of 1954 by Bacon. *"In church, today, we encounter him, the priest, / struggling to confront Christ's skeleton there, / struggling to sit out God's decomposition in a chair..."*

Other poems seem to address the cannibalism or abandonment of faiths. Often, the Furies appear in Bacon's work—*Aeschylus in His Style* by W.B. Stanford was a book that fascinated Bacon, with its "reek of human blood"—and yet they seem to disjointedly merge and rip themselves from the now-predominant Christian imagery. In a similar manner, Stubbs provides us with a pathetic image of Yeat's Beast, now forsaken, "slumped against" the "gravestone of Yeats." Another wildly original poem by Stubbs, "The Birth of God," describes the *"the tearing of the first celestial / membrane / and hydrogen inhaled, / as, from your still subcutaneous udders / secretes now our / future human blood..."* This coupling of details that seem human, yet also extraterrestrial, makes us ponder how close this God may be to the forsaken beast of Yeats.

As with many great poets, Stubbs doesn't provide a solution to these cogitations about the meat and guts of experience. We may be inhabiting a barren steppe as a result of apostasy. We may have been left like a deformed child in a clay jar at some immemorial crossroads for the wolves to devour us. What's certain is that these questions will lead us only to a utopia, a no-place, or the nightmare of it, where all utopias end.

In a poem entitled "Death of Utopia," Stubbs addresses the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit, as Ginsberg wrote in *Howl*. We are provided with the *"last known clump of Eliot's world"* and we tread a *"steaming earth where tomorrow man will arrive, to give birth to it: his eschatological foetus"* and *"Eliot, not Christ, rots back onto the grass..."*

Such a dialogue between Eliot and angst in both Stubb's and Bacon's work is just one aspect that informs this collection with a gravity and sense of the epic that many have aspired to, yet couldn't achieve.