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ALREADY IN FRONT OF YOU AND FAR BEHIND

The Icon Maker by Paul Stubbs

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On arriving in Paris from the provinces and clearly faced with no other plausible reaction, Arthur Rimbaud urinated on the manuscripts of establishment poetasters and summarily destroyed the ‘poetic’ Parisian lodgings the Parnassians had provided for him. In our own era, where endless droves of exhaustively honed ‘accessible’ poems preen themselves centre stage and rafts of plaudit-festooned collections drift downstream to be sieved by deluded panhandlers against the indifferent mesh of history, we look for someone to at least follow Rimbaud’s rebellious lead, in spirit if nothing else. Fortunately there are stirrings abroad and signs of fresh voices coming in over the ether. One of the most ambitious and unsettling is Paul Stubbs. His first collection ‘The Theological Museum’ has already initiated a few darkly luxuriant ripples through poetry circles, catching the attention of high priestesses Carol Anne Duffy and Alice Oswald.

The poetry of Paul Stubbs is the antithesis to the general outflow from the poetry world depicted above. One thing is sure; here is a poet unlikely to ever leave the stubborn stain of a few narcissistic lines culled from a vigil over a sleeping lover’s form in a well-appointed pension in Umbria. Like a broadside salvo he crashes onto the well-buffed, ordered decks of English poetry. Stubbs’s pirate ship bristles with unruly syntax and is powered by a genuine visionary impulse, in his case a desire to shake something fresh and bold out of the fusty symbolism and creaking rhetoric of religion. Stubbs, as Alice Oswald observed in her foreword to his first collection, appears locked in a pitiless struggle with language, shaking it to keep it awake, harrying it to process the unrefined materials of his imagination.

But beyond then the glottal stop
of all prayed for human stumps,

what new frequency of man is God about to switch your
own human dial to? What new para-torso finally

to resist them, worms?

From *Imitations of the Blind*

Naturally there have been critics of Stubbs’s somewhat ‘difficult’ language, his eccentric grammar and ‘unconventional’ syntactical adventures. Such traits give these long poems at first sight a certain spasmodic wildness and earthy vigour, a sense of revolt and restless originality. However, this seemingly reckless

headlong dash for expression at the cost of reason is a mask, for Stubbs's language is in fact icily precise and lucid within the well guarded perimeter of his style, and as in the films of innovator Jean Luc Godard, one does not always have to feel immediately comfortable or understand precisely either language or image, but merely to 'sense' that it's right in that particular moment of the film or poem's life and somehow underpins or contributes to the overall vision proves sufficient. Only after the Godard image cascade has passed can we weigh the film in its entirety as we realise it has somehow brushed against our soul in the right way, though we are unable to explain why. The Stubbs poem leaves similar traces on our being as it passes. Reaching instinctively for support, the first thing we need to do is return to the poem and reread it, because this dense, shimmering, disconcerting, always dangerously smouldering tinder box of poetry has seeded its own quick growing plantations of confusion and questioning in the reader's mind. How often does Stubbs propose to the reader the following rhetorical aside as a grimly serious enquiry? And how often does he ask this without stating it explicitly?

I wonder then what planet
you believe you are on?

Stubbs responds by ceremoniously crashing his cymbals over the ears of the wilfully deaf. He shines his powerful beam into the eyes of the wilfully blind. He yanks the ostrich heads out of the muck of believer anxiety, existential frailty and pathetic crutch wielding delusion. This poet wants to wake mankind from a lethal stupor, from the trance of believing the satisfying loftiness of established models, both Atheist and saved, jaded sinner and ecclesiastical acrobat. By relentlessly breaking their elaborate codes, Stubbs alerts the whole cast to the potential idiocy of counting on anything. In the poem *After the Flood* he explains:

With a clump of forsaken flesh in each fist,
where the thoughts of no death lie,

the saved they watch their
torsos depart the final bony-rail;
while the atheists said what
they had to say,

faiths were secured, bibles written,
though the DNA of Christ's blood

failed quite naturally to match
the blood of all men...

Stubbs' world is one operating 'beyond religion' where all the main players of the mortal procession are forcibly called up to re-evaluate themselves; Satan, The Priest, The Atheist, in a clutch of compulsive spell-binding poems, fall one by one to his inspired remodelling. Like voodoo dolls helplessly pinned by Stubbs, they embark on painful contortions of their physical form, struggling to exist with a meaningful representation for man when the mask of their delusion is removed. Other poems echo this supernatural transmutation, causing a dream-like drag on normal perception. In the poem *The Pope Departs His Heaven*, heaven itself is depicted as a landscape infected by industrial technology in which we get to 'hear'

the whirring of
those giant celestial turbines,
as God he flicked
on that inestimable switch;

And then again in an extraordinary visual image we are told that heaven existed 'before God's birth'

Before the great uncut canopy
of man's flesh, it began even
to strain

the guy ropes of his imagination

In the remarkable poem *The Icon Maker* Stubbs questions both the religious and cognitive human processes that man goes through before settling on a suitable 'representative' of a God in the form of an icon. As the 'last man' he prepares to 'destroy a matchstick model of our universe' and we learn how 'an enfilade of new torsos are handed the wrong rib again'. Uncanny scenes which might have come out of Bosch or Brueghel; 'a skyful of fish-birds' co-exist with a refreshingly uninhibited imagery. The slow motion metamorphosis image is crucial to Stubbs' vision and often comes in a series of convulsive or dramatic movements. Limbs are 'hoisted into the air'. The Priest hides the body of Christ 'like a boulder behind the stitches' of his own 'ageing sag belly'. An almost hallucinatory impulse intercedes to establish new forms of expression.

From birth until your death, the three persons of the trinity
they hold up in front of
themselves on sticks the face-masks

Of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kant;

From 'The Atheist'

Paul Stubbs is that rare thing, a poet who feeds on the great themes which have been only nibbled at by most, a poet who is not afraid to take the risk of exposing his flanks through daring advances. Sustained on a European sensibility and a deep reading of key classical and mythological texts, Stubbs writes with assuredness and gravity and most importantly unlike anyone else. Like the growing number of those who are aware of that very necessary shot in the arm to English poetry delivered by the vision of Paul Stubbs, I look forward with great anticipation to his third collection which promises to take his themes and subject beyond the miraculous achievement of *The Icon Maker*.

Will Stone