

## Suffering, endurance and acceptance

*Katharsis*, Gavin Bantock (86pp, First Servant)

*Christos*, Gavin Bantock (313pp, First Servant)

I was first introduced to Gavin Bantock's work by my friend Brian Louis Pearce, who was the poetry editor for The Quarto Press, which produced a series of handprinted pamphlets. *Isles* was an awkward A4 edition which included a selection of excerpts from Bantock's long poem *Christ*, which had been published by Donald Parsons in 1965 and won both the Richard Hilary Award and the Alice Hunt-Bartlett Award. Anvil had published several other titles by Bantock, including *A New Thing Breathing*, which includes several short poems placed around a central long poem, 'Person'; this book remains a personal favourite.

Recently, I was somewhat surprised to find a revised and retitled version of *Christ* had been issued by the author, and also to find 'Person' re-presented as part of *Katharsis. A Trilogy*, again in a volume published by the author.

For me, 'Person' fares better than *Christos* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though it is now the central part of the *Katharsis* trilogy, which starts with 'Hiroshima', a declamatory and vivid exploration of the effect of the atomic bomb on the titular city. 'Person' is quiet and more approachable, a psychological exploration of self which uses various imagistic devices to try and rationalise and anchor the human within the world, to rationalise despair and hurt and the personal. 'Ichor', the final text, is again more declamatory; the narrator is restless and lost: 'I do not think that after this I shall love the world' he declares towards the end of the poem, before recognising a sense of equilibrium and natural return to be enough for him, as 'ichor' (a divine elixir) surges through his body.

There is something of the wheel of life here, and also something Nietzschean (without the fascist overtones), a confusing sense of despair balanced with acceptance, and the rather old-fashioned idea of suffering, endurance and purification. Bantock's poetry is, at its best, most reminiscent of T.S. Eliot at his most abstract: there are specific images, but they are used as philosophical evidence, spun within a web of reference and allusion. When it works it is superb, stirring, thoughtful stuff, but at times the train of thought can be hard to follow, and the notion of suffering to find what the cover blurb calls 'physical and moral regeneration' is a strange one.

*Christos* is written in 26 parts, each attached to a letter of the alphabet, interspersed with a number of Passacaglia. In the original edition these were not separated out or numbered as they are here, and although on one level the structure is now easier to understand, they feel even more like asides than they did before.

Subtitled 'Lovesong of the Son of Man', *Christos* is a study of a man seeking self-perfection, a man in dialogue with himself, a man who encounters Johanan and Madalena, two co-protagonists used to bounce ideas off and contrast with the Christ figure. Bantock's Christ is only human, an aspirational and obsessed figure finding his way through encounter, expectation and assumption towards a kind of humanist nirvana:

I have been loved by God  
Now I must return forever that love  
I must go down that shining road  
There is no end to that way on the crying seas  
I am forever that singing gull in love's wake  
Now I know  
that for crime-bent men who adorn fields  
finish echoes in the wind when love beckons

ends the poem, 8130 lines after it begins. On the way there has been despair and suffering, rejection, love and crucifixion. '[M]en understand nothing but destruction / I cannot speak of building stars' cries the Son of Man, late in the poem, but elsewhere there is more strident declamation, at times reminiscent of the gnostic *Perfect Thunder Mind*:

The Man cried THESE GAUDY HALLS  
CANNOT CONTAIN MY THUNDERING SOUL  
WHICH STRIDES DOWN THE STAR-ROADS  
NOR CAN THE FRAIL DRUMS OF HUMAN EARS  
CONTAIN THE MONUMENTAL SONG  
THAT ROARS FROM MY SOUL'S LUNGS  
THERE IS NOTHING HERE AS HUGE  
NOR IN THE CRIES OR DESIGNS AS FAR  
AS THE FURTHEST WELL OF HE WORLD'S END  
TO FULFIL THE EXPOUNDINGS OF MY MIND  
ONLY BRAINS BUILT OF RADIANT BEAMS  
GATHERED FROM BEYOND THE COSMS  
CAN COMPREHEND MY SOUL'S INFINITY

My inner teenage self loves this kind of thing, but in the end one has to say this is over the top and somewhat vague mysticism, which I would love to see rooted in physical landscape and human experience. There *are* passages of this, but there is also too much declamation and abstraction, much it seems to me, rooted in Greek tragedy and mythology, sometimes confusing and complex simply for its own sake.

Like *Katharsis*, *Christos* is ultimately a text about suffering, endurance and acceptance. Bantock's Son of Man 'cannot change the world' and struggles to change himself. He seems tragically condemned to a pre-destined and inescapable course of action, one that seems, again, to be seen as a way of suffering for the purpose of self-enlightenment, even as death arrives.

Bantock's poetry is strangely out of time, rooted in lyricism and philosophical content in a world where we pay more attention to how language can shatter, fragment, question and provoke through its own forms and experiment. They are fascinating exercises in long-form poetry, indeed epic poetry when it comes to *Christos*, but however much they intrigue, confound or annoy, they ultimately seem to be the fascinating products of 'a mad visionary': a term bestowed upon Bantock by John Heath-Stubbs in 1966 which Bantock himself references in his 2016 afterword 'Genesis of the Poem' and seems surprisingly keen to embrace.

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Gavin Bantock's Youtube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/user/firstservant/videos> includes readings of these and other books. The author's website is at <http://www.gavinbantock.net>