

while not acquiescing to it only as a demand? His inclusion of facts ordinarily elided in fiction and memoir—dressing, making coffee and tea, turning the car key in the ignition, riding the subway to the studio where he writes—is curious. He expresses irritation with the mundane as much as he praises it, as if he wants to get back to writing about the life he is too busy living.

Next to nothing has been written about Knausgaard's provocative title—*Min Kamp*—which is clearly meant to evoke Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf*. (Knausgaard's title is changed in translation in countries where Hitler's work is banned.) It is a gesture typical for Knausgaard: he absolves himself from being explicitly offensive by showing us how thoughtful and open he is about himself. It is another way in which we are meant to see his capacious project as radical. But, to return to Welty's statement, we might raise a crucial problem: what are the implications that close examination of the world *affirms*? For Knausgaard the mundane is impervious to abstraction: a meaning cannot be extracted from it. But the first volumes of this ongoing project demonstrate—and, I suspect, later volumes will continue to do the same—that this road of excess leads to a conventional palace of wisdom.

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Richard Owens, *Ballads*. Buffalo, NY: Habenicht Press, 2012. 120pp. \$12

Balladry, like the US House of Representatives, in the language of today's best demagogues, is supposed to be "close to the people"—close to their traditions, their affections, and their prejudices. But under the control of its own scholarly, adjudicating representatives, balladry, too, belies congressman John Boehner's claim that the "voice of the people will be heard through our majority." This kind of claim presumes an impossible immediacy between the thought and expression of the folk and the decision making of those who act on their behalf in the political arena or in the republic of letters. In the afterword to *Ballads*, his collection of experimental lyrics, Richard Owens makes clear that in the history of British balladry an elite minority has always spoken through the voice of the people. Owens recounts the famous moment in which Bishop Thomas Percy rescues a manuscript of forgotten ballads from being used as his housemaid's kindling, and how Percy reworked the volume for publication as *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). For Owens, Percy destroys the ballads a second time when he tries to save them: what gets lost in Percy's (and all subsequent) ballad rewritings is the subterranean current of populist energy, embodied in the housemaid's fire, that would have returned oral tradition to its originary status as a thing of the air—as the "epiphytic," as

Jonathan Williams called it—where it belongs to the people. While the Bishop Percys of literary history mourn the compromised state of popular poetry that comes to them in fragments mishandled by the people, Owens would have us mourn the popular impulse compromised at the hands of elite relic hunters and improvers. Owens's own ballads, as critical reflections on this antipopulism, often present little more than paralinguistic gestures of this mourning. Still, in those poems that address the exploitation of labor and financial debt as the traditional problems of the people, Owens establishes a powerful form of balladry for an expanding underclass that now, probably, includes you and me, the educated but economically insecure readers of experimental poetry.

Literary adaptations (or appropriations) of the ballad since romanticism can be understood as a unified tradition that keeps printed poetry linked to song, simulating orality by means other than performance. In "Bonny Barbara Allan," perhaps the closest he comes to adapting any of the ballads whose titles he borrows as framing devices, Owens represents the orality of the Anglo-Scottish ballad through arcane orthography:

o hooly hooly—gin ye be  
on your death bed lying  
so slowly aye as she put on  
a garland for the dying

The poem is modernist in its compression of the ballad narrative into a complex of two images: one lover on the deathbed, the other wearing a funeral garland. The poem's orthographical strangeness is just as much Mallarmé as it is Coleridge: though its nonstandard spelling and phatic expressions convey the orality-effect of a deracinated dialect verse, this is a game played with the written signifier. When Owens uses parataxis as an organizing rhetorical device, the strange orthographies attest to the instability of linguistic representation just as they do to the philologist's faith in the integrity of the print object as a record of departed voices. The ballad here is less a genre than the result of a practice that Maureen McLane describes as "remediating the oral." Invoking the same literary tradition, Owens calls the ballad "this degraded thing shot through with a sense of pastness, cultural infancy and a charming but sometimes dangerous rusticity that needs to be carefully framed and reined." His own ballads replicate and allegorize the ritual known as the elite literary appropriation of popular poetry, in which, as Owens puts it, the ballad becomes one of those "angelic whores from the other side of town that rich men sometimes marry." While the antiquarian version of this ritual treats oral tradition as a malleable textual artifact, Owens ups the ante by subjecting his traditional sources to the techniques of the lettristic avant-garde. Confident that extreme parataxis, semantic

indeterminacy, the manipulation of language as a recombinatorial system, and the collage of source materials constitute a kind of political work on our means of public expression, Owens abandons the contract struck between romantic and postromantic poets and their readers: here, the high lyric does not promise to preserve the rhetorical connection to the speaking voice or to that voice's traditions.

Owens cares deeply about the popular traditions that are betrayed by literary appropriation—mean remediation. The severity of his language in assessing the literary tradition of balladry is proof: literary ballads, he says, are often “nothing more than vehicles hijacked or manufactured to map a desired past onto the poverty next door,” a politically motivated version of what Susan Stewart calls “distressed artifacts.” But the underlying question for Owens's ballad practice is whether we can hear a poetry (if not a voice) of popular resistance within the blank parody of elite ballad editing. The strongest poems in the collection do make political gestures. Take “Ride an Old Paint,” a poem Owens bases on a southwestern cowboy song Carl Sandburg collected in *The American Songbag* (1927). In Sandburg's version, the cowboy, astride his paint horse, leads a herd of ragged cattle to the trail's end in Montana: “They feed in the coulees, they water in the draw, / Their tails are all matted, their backs are all raw.” Sandburg concludes with an almost gothic vision of the dead cowboy's bones set atop the riderless, westward-turning horse. Owens assembles a poem not about the spiritual destiny of the frontiersman but about commercial traffic and profiteering in chattel:

tails matted  
backs raw

purchased  
& tender

paid for  
& stored

among the  
old things

gathering they  
cannot bear it

will not have it  
—to be kept so

in the case  
of having been

Ballads are made through acts of framing, Owens reminds us, and he frames this one as a manifestation of the gross inequality between elites and the “poverty next door.” For a young poet writing in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, the image of trafficked chattel has a clear tenor in the labor market of those from whom capital—“in the case / of having been”—has been divested. Amid the poem’s language of contemporary finance and commodities trading, “they / cannot bear it // will not have it so” rings as a blunt rallying cry. Owens is making his critique of cultural elitism the occasion for a forceful response to the current economic crisis, brought into relief against the grammatical ambiguity and figural opacity of the poem (what is the antecedent of “they,” after all?) through an ordinary and direct statement that simply says “no.” No romantic, vatic rhetoric or singularized voice of the collective is necessary: a vague but inclusive subject and a negative assertion that shifts intentionally to the future tense is sufficient to register the populist defiance and will that makes the ballad a vital touchstone for political poetry, not just a “thing shot through with pastness.”

These moments of populist defiance in Owens’s poems seem so striking and so worthy of the ballad because of the genre’s history as a tool for marginalized groups organizing their resistance to oppression, whether in the form of imperial consolidation on the British periphery (during the ballad-collecting efforts of the Scottish Enlightenment) or of segregation and state-sponsored terrorism in the Deep South (during the Jim Crow era collecting of African-American ballads and folk songs). With “Poor Man Lazarus,” Owens vocalizes resistance to the economic debt that is one current source of oppression for the expanding American underclass. His poem shares little with the spiritual from which it takes its title except for the address to the redeemed beggar of Luke’s gospel as a source of (economic) salvation. Lazarus, ambiguously, is the “debtor in possession,” both subject to imprisonment for his outstanding debts and capable of arresting the upward redistribution of wealth by withholding his interest payments. Refusing to pay for its own deepening dependency on the wealth of economic elites, the ballad’s deindividuated voice declares, “we are not willing / to be bondsmen / never at our own cost.” Owens edges toward the bardic here in his rhetoric, but even these universalizing gestures are circumscribed within the particular group: because of its economic context, and its resonances with remote oral traditions, “Poor Man Lazarus” will elicit recognition and defiance from a special audience of the educated but powerless. The poem’s scope localizes further in its closing image, which evokes the reclaimed “commons” of the Occupy movement’s tent cities:

—gardens  
thrust back into the common gaol

which is all at present  
what you owe & refuse to yield

The utopian green world of the Occupy activists is refigured, by dint of the pun, as the convergence of our common goal (a renewed commonwealth and public good) and the jail we share when the dream collapses under police force. Our goal is what we refuse to yield, but our sacrifice of freedom is what we owe for it. The image is lucid, the rhetoric is direct, and the political allegory is clear: organizing a collective response to the fallout of the 2008 crash, Owens strikes all the right affective chords of a contemporary protest ballad.

But more often than not Owens's poems remain outside the court of the popular ballad's populist rhetoric. Owens wants his poems to bear the wounds of contemporary economic and political crises, and to reflect the remediation by which romantic cultural elites produced a thing they called the "poetry of the folk." Hence the torqued prosody and the tortured syntax that readers will come to associate with the verse techniques of high modernism rather than bardic postromanticism. In "Billy in the Darbies," for instance, Owens takes a literary ballad from a narrative that should furnish abundant resources for a populist critique of exploitation and instead produces a collage of Melville's language that merely creates the frisson of being caught up in contemporary economic forces: "greasy hogs brood / on the collateral organs of others / muted." This is an earth-shattering sentence with a mixed metaphor that knowingly comments on the people's loss of voice. But given their separation from orality, normative syntax, and even referentiality, Owens's ballads can seem like artifacts of the degradations that he decries in the elite romancing of the folk. By incorporating this irony into the heart of his poems, Owens reflects on an ideological contradiction at the heart of romanticism and its folk legacy. And while this act of ironic framing counts as good lyric practice, it also transforms the ballad from a court in which the lowly get (perhaps) their only real hearing into another rarefied enclosure for the sports of the literary elite. Joshua Clover, writing on the 2010–2011 student protests in the UK, mentions that Shelley became a "pop icon" for opponents of economic austerity; one stanza from *The Masque of Anarchy* became a street protest chant, ending: "Ye are many—they are few." Owens's *Ballads* needs to be read in the context of this popular political reappropriation of the romantic lyric. But readers will need to keep waiting for a contemporary Shelley, someone who will produce utterances that can be remediated from the top down, from modern lyric to street song. Owens has invoked the ballad tradition to reflect on the difficulties besetting the revival of a genuine popular poetry, not to revive it on his own.

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