

Review

Daniel Karlin, *The Figure of the Singer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 240 pp. £35.00. ISBN 978-0-19-921398-6 (hbk).

John Hughes, *Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960s*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. 256 pp. £55.00. ISBN 978-1-4094-3002-5 (hbk).

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A couple of lines from 'Visions of Johanna' kept running through my head as I read John Hughes's book and the final chapter, on Dylan, of Daniel Karlin's:

Now, little boy lost, he takes himself so seriously
He brags of his misery, he likes to live dangerously.

Given the kind of artist Dylan is, it is impossible not to be aware of the discrepancy between the seriousness with which literary criticism must take him, and must take itself, and the dangerous riskiness of the artistic endeavour that is Bob Dylan. A great deal of great art takes dangerous risks, of course, and lives and becomes great by that danger; and it has been the responsibility of literary criticism to define that in literary art. Dylan, however, despite Christopher Ricks, is not a literary artist. Both Daniel Karlin and John Hughes make obeisance to Ricks's close linguistic study, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*: but, although both are trained in literature and teach in literary departments, neither in fact treats Dylan as literature. What is crucially at stake is, precisely, a way of sophisticatedly identifying and then responding seriously to Dylan's dangerously risky procedures and strategies. So, what both books invite the reader to ponder is the issue of whether 'seriously' can rhyme with 'dangerously', with or without the italics Dylan gives the words when he sings them—or at least (the caveat Karlin's book enforces) when he sings them on the record, when he records them, which is of course the way they sound in my head.

Karlin's chapter on Dylan, called 'Columbia Recording Artist Bob Dylan', closes a study of the figure of the singer in English and American poetry. The book is interested in the origin and fate of a trope, the figure of the literal singer, and the paradoxical representations of song in verse not intended to be sung. Karlin is selective but still wide-ranging, and deeply informative in the literary history he uncovers. After tracing a history of the figure of the bard originating in Orpheus,

Apollo and Homer, and—alternatively—a history of the figure of the singer as it originates in Sappho, the book includes discussion of, among others, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Walt Whitman and Thomas Hardy, and devotes a great deal of attention to nineteenth-century women poets and to the theme of poetry and birdsong, before culminating in Dylan. Karlin names only one other book that handles a comparable theme, Marc Berley's *After the Heavenly Tune* (2000), so we must consider this a pretty path-breaking enterprise. The book is enormously informative and illuminating and, in numerous close readings containing reference to a large variety of other material too, Karlin wholly justifies the originality of his preoccupation and procedure. I occasionally found the sheer concentrated intellectual density of the book more dazing than dazzling and wondered if case study was not ramifying too far in the direction of instance than reflection: but for the path to be adequately broken the case must of course be elaborately made. There are numerous brilliantly specific and notable readings: of Robert Burns reading Pope, for instance, in a way provocatively challenging a received way of understanding the relationship; and a luminous account of the way that in Robert Browning's 'Pippa Passes' 'the music that we cannot hear'—the music of Pippa's song, that is—'gives us the *concept* of an overwhelming affective quality in Pippa's singing'.

Since Karlin is, in effect, offering a new slant on a very old history in this book, making more visible—making *visible* now—what had never really had secrets to conceal but what certainly has riches to reveal, he must also evolve an appropriate mode and procedure; and his means of selection and comparison seem right, even though he admits that he could have chosen a quite alternative cast list; and perhaps this might have led to alternative conclusions or at least have modified the conclusions arrived at. This is work, however, that others might well take up. Since Karlin is essentially tracing what is both a quarrel and a love affair (his terms) between poetic language and song, I also wondered whether there might not be a helpfully analogical form of criticism available in that other critical and theoretical activity which deals with what it has named the relationship between iconophilia and iconophobia, the love of and the terror of the icon or image: the study of ekphrasis, that is to say, of poems which read paintings, in which some exactly comparable matters of power, subjugation, revolt, defiance and gender engagement are also provocatively at issue. The fact that Bob Dylan is now recognized as a painter as well as a singer might add piquancy to any such use of analogical method, particularly since Dylan himself adduces the potential for metaphoric relationship with his title 'When I Paint My Masterpiece'.

That song's title is also its refrain, and Karlin is, inevitably, greatly preoccupied with refrain, and, in his final chapter, with Dylan's use of it. His reading of Dylan,

which will of course be of most interest to readers of this journal, fittingly closes a book with this subject, because Karlin reads the opposition in Dylan between 'original' recording and live performance as 'a new arena within song itself' for the very old quarrel and affair. Hence his entitling of his chapter with the cheesy phrase that encourages us to 'welcome' Dylan at the start of every contemporary concert (doesn't it make the heart just sink?). Refrain, the line repeated again and again in a song, becomes for Karlin the signature of something essential in Dylan the 'recording artist', in whom, Karlin says, 'repetition is a form of damnation': 'The knowledge that what he sings can be played over and over again has affected the way Dylan both writes and sings, and the way he has been both listened to and "read"'. Under this rubric Karlin offers penetratingly subtle readings of the early songs 'Emmett Till', 'Eternal Circle' and 'Ain't Gonna Grieve' and also of 'This Wheel's on Fire'. The critical perceptiveness of these readings, which is not exactly any known species of 'literary' criticism, but a kind of performance criticism, I suppose, responding to the actual nature of the object and not to any simulacrum of the object—the 'lyrics' on their own, for instance—becomes, as it advances, its own justification; and the method is a very sophisticated way of responding with commensurate seriousness to the risk of the activity in which Dylan continues to stake his being.

John Hughes is similarly preoccupied with Dylan as performing artist. His book begins by considering a number of what he calls 'themes', including 'continual becoming', 'photographs' and 'inspiration', and proceeds by reading the work of the 1960s chronologically from *Bob Dylan* to *Nashville Skyline*. Dylan's 'art at this time', Hughes says, 'works by way of a creative commerce with the unseen, its forward impulse inseparable from surrender to what comes *ex nihilo*'. The book is an elaborate expansion, with illustration, of this perception, which has for Hughes various erotic (in the widest sense) and political implications or ramifications. His is a study of 'the heedless, risky momentariness of Dylan's art', in which the singer becomes 'an exemplary avatar of emancipation'. 'Self-truth for Dylan', says Hughes, 'is a matter primarily not of message but of process, a function of a turning away, and an overturning, that involve also a self-dividing motion, an inner creative imperative of self-displacement'. This way of writing about Dylan runs the risk of pretentiousness, but in fact Hughes never falls into the trap, partly because he manages a scrupulous linguistic fidelity to his actual emotional and sensual response to Dylan, and partly because he tempers his awe with wit in a way suggesting that he maintains an ironic awareness of the appropriate provisionality of his own procedures with the endlessly provisional Bob Dylan. His method has learnt from French post-structuralist work, and he quotes Gilles Deleuze on Dylan: but unlike some instances of such influence in English, the method is recreated in

a very readable style of Hughes's own (although there are some sentences which would profit from the lopping of a few adjectives or adverbs).

Along the way, Hughes offers engagingly knowledgeable accounts of such things as the impact of England and of British song on Dylan; he is generously referential to a community of Dylan criticism and scholarship; and he distinguishes carefully between what works and what fails to work sometimes in Dylan's lyrics, showing also how a song can work even though its lyrics don't, wholly. I part company with him in his reading of 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll', which seems altogether too revisionist or deconstructive to me in its sense that Zanzinger kills Hattie out of 'envy'; but here, as elsewhere too, Hughes's reading is stimulating, provocative and searching. Some of his formulations are exact and memorable, as when he refers, for instance, to 'that strange, characteristic algorithm by which [Dylan] makes a song live by disappearing into it, by becoming its medium'. I know exactly what that means; and perhaps it's even what Dylan meant when he said in one of those utterly compelling 1960s interviews, about which Hughes writes very well indeed, that he wrote 'mathematical' music.

What Hughes's method, which is not very interested in matters of form, may at times risk, though, is insufficiently distinguishing the songs from one another; but a certain concrete specificity or structural attentiveness may be worth sacrificing in the interests of the book's overall character as what we might consider virtually a sacramental theology of Dylan. In Hughes's formulations of what he at one point actually calls—with, it appears, more than merely figurative force—Dylan's 'sixth sense', Dylan becomes not only existential hero, epic hero and romantic genius, but saint or stoic of perpetual becoming. He becomes in effect what Jack Nicholson once called him, 'the transcendent Bob Dylan'. This is a reading profoundly in tune with Dylan's own perception of himself in the 1960s in *Chronicles*, when he reaches for a style of magic or mystical theology in order to say that he then had 'power and dominion over the spirits'. 'I had it once, and once was enough', he adds grimly, hinting at the personal cost involved for the possessor of such occult capacity (Dylan 2004). Hughes's book makes the strongest possible case for the true exceptionality of Dylan and has the strongest possible sense of his now thoroughly disseminated cultural and political influence and impact. In tracing the stages of Dylan's career—or his careering, maybe—in the 1960s, John Hughes offers us a kind of Zeno's paradox of dialectically creative performativity and leaves at least this reader with a question: will it ever be possible to trace not just a trajectory but an aetiology of Bob Dylan?

I recently watched *The Other Side of the Mirror*, Murray Lerner's collection of Dylan material from the Newport Folk Festival (the DVD of which includes a fascinating interview with the compellingly engaging Lerner himself). After his 1964

concert, which includes an extraordinary performance of 'Chimes of Freedom', on which John Hughes comments illuminatingly, the crowd continues for a very long time to refuse to accept Peter Yarrow's reiterated insistence that Dylan's set really is over and that other performers must be given their turn. Eventually, after what is clearly a nightmare for the dutiful if slightly pedantic and very handdog Yarrow, Dylan returns briefly to the stage to reiterate—paradoxically it may be—that he really can't return. He has to stand on tiptoe to reach the microphone and appears to be in a state of euphoria or ecstasy, his whole body quivering in excited motion. It's a wonderful image of a man barely able to contain himself, a man beside himself. It is therefore a visual realization of the profound truth of Dylan's performances and songs too, which characteristically exceed themselves and offer their listeners the opportunity to exceed themselves in turn, at least for as long as the song lasts. This is an image and a truth to which these books offer eloquent testimonial.

References

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