Fierce Loves and Faithless Wars: Bruce, Byron and the Man of Feeling

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Abstract

Lord Byron's epic poems, and more pointedly his parliamentary record as exhibited by his speeches, express a rare communion with the plight of the working man and a singular opposition to unjust war. These sentiments, hilariously and cuttingly explored in *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, set him apart from the archetypal, systemically controlled male of his time. His work shares intriguing connections with the songs and expostulations of Bruce Springsteen, whose musical efforts against the Vietnam war, including *Born in the USA* and *Your Hometown,* are marked by outright tragedy and winking irony as well as the kind of subversive rhetorical melodies found in Byron's work.

Additionally, Springsteen's vast library of songs espousing the real, abstract and enduring challenges of working-class Americans (particularly men) parallels Byron's open parliamentary support for the society of Luddites. Drawing from Ildiko Csengei's essay *The Fever of Vain Longing,* which posits that Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* sees the transformation of the Byronic Hero into The Man of Feeling, I argue that while the unstirred Byronic Hero often stands in opulent contrast to the socially isolated, margin dwelling male trope that peppers Springsteen's songs, this transformation aligns the two poets' transgressive archetypes.

In his 2016 autobiography, *Born to Run*, Bruce Springsteen writes: "Music on the radio is a shared fever dream, a collective hallucination, a secret amongst millions, and a whisper in the

whole country's ear." In a salutation to the subversive rhetoric that often defines his work, he adds: "When the music is great, a natural subversion of the controlled message broadcast daily by the powers that be...takes place."[1] The metaphor of musical transmutability as shared fever dream is demonstrated by the intertextuality upon which Springsteen established his musicology. From Woody Guthrie to Elvis, the singer's catalog characterizes the amalgamation of his personal American harmonic, a progression from within a progression among an illustrious lineage of forebears. With political and sonic influences derived largely from early and middle 20th century American musical and social movements, Springsteen's ethos, at least on the surface, reverberates quintessential Americanness. Yet, this perspective fails to harmonize even further historic and global determinants that render his work universally appealing.

This essay will explore one such influence in the poetical and temperamental foundation of Lord Byron's poetry and history of political activism. The temperamental intrinsic that complicate Byron's most prolific trope, the Byronic Hero, suggest that the characterization of this archetype is grossly limited. I extend the complexity offered by Ideko Csegei's study of the Byronic Hero in Byron's first epic poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, to encompass the Byronic Hero more generally. Csegei's argument that the characterization of the Byronic Hero in Canto III of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is representative of the man of feeling, an emotionally receptive and melancholic character relic from the age of

[1] Springsteen, *Born to Run*, 184.

sensibility, is crucial to my assertion that Byron's Romantic persona helped foreground a cultural atmosphere that would later help globalize the rhetorical message of Springsteen's music. My discussion of Byron's work will be anchored on the anti-war and anti-nationalist sentiments of his final epic poem, *Don Juan,* and an analysis of his direct parliamentary involvement. Further, Springsteen's lyrical and melodic modes of making meaning will be used to explore the prospect of Byron's work as anticipatory of Springsteen's, both in spirit and trope.

Springsteen's construction of what I will call the Loner, a socially isolated, margin dwelling male archetype that populates much of his musicology, relies on paradoxical affective postures of lyrics and melody (interchangeably) to express the dogged ironies that haunt the American dream. That is, by embedding upbeat lyrics into downbeat melodies or overlaying upbeat melodies against downbeat lyrics, Springsteen's rendering of the Loner echoes Bryon's man of feeling as a subpersonality of the Byronic Hero whose affective discourse cleverly defies the national metanarrative. Put differently, Springsteen and Byron are united in their deployment of paradoxical aesthetic techniques to expose the impossible irony of working-class life in pre-1990's America and nineteenth century England respectively.

Byron's popularity with an audience of poor and working-class English couched itself in the subversive, anti-nationalist rhetoric of his poetic activism, suggesting the sort of pedigreed dissent that Springsteen identified in Reagan's socially regressive era. Springsteen's responsiveness to a painfully identified

decaying American moral superiority aligned him with those who suffered most viscerally under the flag of glory. My discussion of Springsteen's music will be limited to his work pre-1990s, except for "The Ghost of Tom Joad," which was written in the early '90s, a melodic and lyrical curveball against the plainly romantic *Tunnel of Love* and soulfully optimistic *Lucky Town,* his two previous albums without the E Street Band. "The Ghost of Tom Joad," then, will be included in my analysis of Springsteen as an expression of earlier political sentiments deferred.

One hundred and fifty years after Byron's death, Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* album detonated the American music scene with a raunchy and inspired catalog of songs which, at first listen, seemed like a good soundtrack to party to. The album's title track was an incensed and strident anthem to disenfranchised Vietnam veterans, performed with such precise irony that Ronald Reagan erroneously blared it across the stage of a campaign rally during his run for a second term in office. The move angered Springsteen, prompting a curt reply: "His attention elicited from me two responses: The first was… 'fucker!'. The second was, 'the president said my name!'"[2] Like Byron, Springsteen's position as a public figure elicited a necessary stance on major political issues of the day. He stood so brightly in the spotlight; his actions had come to be vulnerable to misinterpretation. Byron, who perished of malaria on Grecian shores while in service of the Greek War of Independence, anticipated Springsteen's legacy of civic transgression and political

[2] *Born to Run*, 327.

consciousness. For both, the enmeshing of art and politics proposed the prospect of social change from within aesthetic rhetoric. Springsteen's commitment to the cause of Vietnam veterans and his opposition to the unjust Vietnam war are soulfully addressed in *Born in the USA,* along with ripping laments for the quickly evaporating industrial American working class. The songs are marked by outright tragedy and winking irony, as well as the kind of subversive rhetorical melodies found in Byron's work.

In *Don Juan*, the Byronic Hero reaches its formalized apex in the titular character, whose frequent engagement with ambiguous morality reveals him as temperamental, violent, and psychically tortured. Distinct from the traditional hero trope, the Byronic Hero's complex personal code of ethics prefigures certain iterations of Springsteen's Loner. The Loner draws temperamental depth from the suffering he experiences at the hands of society quickly moving past him, economically and socially. Dwelling in the shadow of Vietnam, an omnipresent ghost that manifests psychically and tangibly, he is pushed against the ropes, held back, and reeling from a callous homecoming. He engages in the reckless ablution of violence, as in *Meeting Across the River* and *Nebraska,* even as he expresses joy (*Dancing in the Dark*), revels in his selfhood (*Out in the Street*) and laments his emotional boundaries (*Stolen Car)*. Analogizing the Byronic Hero in narrative complexity and political involvement, both personas are marked by the politics that surround them, compelled to choose a side while standing on

the sidelines of a social order that largely rejects their fierce commitment to ideological authenticity.

While Byron's devotion to the working class causes surfaces largely subtextually in *Don Juan,* his diligent attention to the social tax of political conflict in the poem is a rich testament to the rhetorical skill with which he nuanced his narratives. The "productive class" of England's politically pawned, socially powerless laborers emerge sympathetically in more than one of the poet's works. Drawing from another of Byron's poems, *The Corsair*, Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud suggests that the poet's concern for the underclass was tangential to his suspicion and distaste for his own social stratum, the parasitic upper class: "By staging the 'unrepresented' matter of dispossession in an exotic setting, Byron likens an oligarchic British polity interested only in defending property interests to an Oriental despotism disavowed by enlightened Europe, suggesting that economic policies of, by and for the stakeholders will result only in discontent and defiance from the 'productive' classes."[3] One such policy would have been the Frame-Worker Bill, which sought to suppress the political activism of stocking weavers known as Luddites.

The Luddites were a community of textile laborers from Nottinghamshire whose "trade and communities were threatened by a combination of machines and other practices

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[3] Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud, "Becoming Corsairs: Byron, British Property Rights and Orientalist Economics," *Studies in Romanticism* (50, no. 4 ,2011: 685-714), 688.

that had been unilaterally imposed by the aggressive new class of manufacturers that drove the Industrial Revolution."[4]. A radical faction of anti-industrialist dissenters who destroyed textile machinery as a form of protest, the Luddites earned the derisive label of "machine breakers". The unfortunate marker cost them much in the way of public image and framed Lord Byron's public support regressively. Among their complaints was the use of wide frames to produce hosiery, a practice that "produced cheap, inferior goods."[5] In a speech to parliament on February 27th, 1812, Byron contended that the use of wide frames was not only detrimental to the working class but also fatal: "These machines were to them [industrialists] an advantage, inasmuch as they superseded the necessity of employing a number of workmen, who were left in consequence to starve."[6] Despite his 15 years as a member of the House of Lords, the speech marks one of only three official forays into the political sphere for Byron. The moment calcified the poet's image as an anti-war, anti-nationalist aesthete, with sections of his speech devoted to the "destructive warfare...of the last eighteen years," which he claimed had "destroyed their [working class] comfort, your comfort, all men's comfort."[7] When the Frame Bill passed, increasing the punishment for

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[4] Luddites. "Machine Breaking." Luddites at 200, www.luddites200.org.uk/theLuddites.html. Web.
[5] Luddites
[6] Lord George Gordon Byron, "Frame Work Bill," Speech delivered to Parliament February 27th, 1812, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1812/feb/27/frame-work-bill.
[7] "Frame Worker Bill."

Luddism to include execution and banishment, Byron's ironic "Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill" poetically characterized the disenfranchisement of the failed frame worker's cause. "Britain must prosper with council like yours", he wrote, "whose remedy only must *kill* ere it cures."[8]

The Luddite cause was inescapably doomed to fail in the face of unbridled English industrialism. Byron himself was discovered to be something of a relic by the time he joined forces with Greek freedom fighters in 1823, existing in a historical moment rapidly advancing past the pastoral candor he held so dear. Yet it is important to note, as Philip Kitcher does in *Science, Truth and Democracy*, that the Luddite label denotes more than mere machine-breaking:

> They may complain that the sciences have deprived us of faith in a deity, or that they have estranged us from the beauties of the natural world, or that they have raped nature and overridden the values of women and people of color, or that they have created technological societies in which human lives are reduced to a single dimension.[9]

Also pertinent to this point is the lingering sentiment of Luddites as miserable cretins bent on hamstringing industrial progress for personal gain. It is not my prerogative to initiate a stance on Luddism, rather, I hope to illuminate the complexities of the historical moment that likely inspired Byron to act in their favor.

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[8] Lord George Gordon Byron, "Ode to the Frameworker's Bill," *Selected Poems*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

[9] Phillip Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy,* (Oxford, Oxford University Press Incorporated, 2001), 157.

It should be noted that Byron's artistic trajectory from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* to *Don Juan* suggests the development of his political perspective from *a* candid observer to an indignant proctor. *Don Juan*, which was left unfinished at the time of his death, demonstrated a new depth of political understanding, and a shift towards a more nuanced rhetorical approach that considered the tastes of his audience.

For Springsteen, whose early work was marked by youthful and largely character-driven lyrics, 1982's *Nebraska* located the emotional focal point of those characters within the social and political determinants that surrounded their lives. Continuing the subtextual deliberations of *The River*'s B-side tracks, the melancholic offerings on the album represented Springsteen's deeper and more personal political consciousness. *Nebraska*'s threadbare tracks echo through the haunting sonic channels of a four-track recorder, new technology at the time which characterized the album with a deeply reverberated, lo-fi ambiance. Lyrically, *Nebraska* is distinguished by tales of disenchanted and embittered rural Americans searching for their own redemptive arcs. Its tracklist explores a desperate scatter of bad decisions, heartbreak, and rebellion spurred by widespread economic devastation in the United States. At the time of its release, industrial America's salubrity was waning as a shift to a service economy began to take hold.

The haunting and tonally bereaved offerings of *Nebraska* were anticipated on an earlier album, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, which included a B-side track titled *Factory* that touchingly limns

the physiological agony and paradoxical gratification of a hard-working factory job. "F[10]actory takes his hearing/Factory gives him life," Springsteen sings, diagnosing the paradoxical psyche of manual laborers who depended on jobs that often robbed them of vital ingredients for a life well lived while providing the financial support they needed to maintain their families. "That scared me," the singer would later write of the line, "I only had my father's experience to go by and no intimate knowledge of men who were at ease with family life."[11]

Springsteen's reckoning of family life and manual labor complicates the working-class persona around which he crafted his musicology. The opacity of his inner life, revealed in snatches and dreamy recollections in his autobiography, only deepens the psychological complexity that surrounds his musical relationship with poverty and disaffection. *Born to Run*'s attempts to honestly contextualize Springsteen's image as a working-class hero are marked by thorough and compelling recollections of his youth in Freehold and the "lifeless, sucking black hole" of his childhood years.

In a 2018 interview with Springsteen in *Esquire,* Michael Hainey deems the working-class hero image a mere stage persona, identifiable by the pilfered plaid work shirt and dirty jeans of Springsteen's father. When Springsteen crafted his public personality, Hainy insists that he merely "stole his father's work

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[10] Bruce Springsteen, "Factory," *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, Columbia, 1978. Track 7.
[11] *Born to Run*, 272.

clothes and his persona—if Doug Springsteen wouldn't love his true son, maybe at least he'd love a reflection of his son as himself."[12] This would suggest that the parabled image is an attempt by Springsteen to capture the approval of the father who so resoundingly denounced his son's romantic personal aesthetic. "Gentleness, timidity, shyness," Springsteen writes, "These were all things I wore on the outside and the reflection of these qualities in his boy repelled him."[13] Yet, in taking up his father's work clothes as a stage uniform, Springsteen did more than emulate. His act of appropriation served as a means through which he could explore the pain of filial rejection, a public performance of the raging animas that galvanized his cultivation of the Loner trope. In Springsteen's words:

> Now those whose love we wanted but didn't get, we emulate them. That's the only way we have, in our power, to get the closeness and love that we needed and desired. So when I was a young man looking for a voice to meld with mine, to sing my songs and to tell my stories, well I chose my father's voice. Because there was something sacred in it to me. And when I went looking for something to wear, I put on a factory worker's clothes, because they were my dad's clothes. And all we know

[12] Michael Hainey, "The Mind Is a Terrifying Place. Even For Bruce Springsteen.," (*Esquire*, November 27th).
[13] *Born the Run*, 29.

> about manhood is what we have seen and what we have learned from our fathers, and my father was my hero.[14]

There is little doubt that the Loner, in his almost purely reactive engagement with the world, is a figure captivated by loss. Songs like “My Father’s House” and “My Hometown” tend the image of Springsteen’s father as a mercurial umbra against and a figure of deathly stasis at the peripheries of the open road, where the Loner finds redress from his father’s emotional detachment in the physical expanse of the highway. Beyond the painful distance Springsteen associates with his father is the omnipresent shadow of the singer’s own existential crisis. Exacerbated by bouts of depression and defined by lingering self-doubt, Springsteen speaks candidly throughout his autobiography of the fear that motivated two major emotional breakdowns. In *Born to Run*, Springsteen remarks that the “red misting rage” summoned by his father’s cumulative resentment was like a “silent, dormant volcano” within him. “All of this,” he adds, “sat on top of a sea of fear and depression so vast I hadn’t begun to contemplate it.”[15] Rhetorically, Springsteen’s proximity to fear inhabits the looming shadow of anti-intellectualism, a great, spontaneous monster with whom the Loner must contend for the survival of not only the Self, but the energetic sensations that make life worth living.

For Byron, fear proved both a motivating factor and a damning source of anxiety. Because a Romantic perspective

[14] Bruce Springsteen, “Springsteen on Broadway,” dir. Thom Zinny, Walter Kerr Theater, Oct. 3, 2017-Sep. 4, 2021.
[15] *Born to Run*, 272.

requires Keats' attention to a "life of sensations," it follows that fear, as an emotion and an aesthetic influence, is included in what Irving White calls "the direct intuitions of the imagination."[16] White writes of Keats, yet the sentiment applies to Byron's empirical musings on fear, which suggests that sensations of fear surfaced paradoxically in sync with his personal success. In a journal entry from 1821, he writes of a "fear of what is to come-a doubt of what *is,"* adding that fear is the "leaven" of hope, echoing Springsteen's descriptions of cataclysmic fame marked by damning depression. "We never fear falling except from a precipice-the higher the more awful,"[17] Byron writes, offering a preliminary to Springsteen's later echoes of unassailable despair amidst blinding personal accomplishments. In his personal life, the impulsivity and recklessness with which Byron assuaged his fears formed the basis for his Byronic Hero by way of associative therapy. Springsteen's failed first marriage, hovered over by his fear of filial duty and stagnation, is superficially redolent of Byron's own dismal union. Yet, the artist and poet break from one another's Romantic perspectives, with Springsteen's Loner materializing out of the absence elicited by the Byronic Hero, whose usual remedy to resolve ideological conflict is to flee. The prospective duality in Don Juan, then, figures into Byron as artist, self and persona.

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[16] Irving H. White, "John Keats as a Critic," (*The Sewanee Review* 34:451, 1926).
[17] *Lord George Gordon Byron and Richard Lansdown, Byron's Letters and Journals: A New Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 377.

Don Juan's Romantic complexity gestures to Byron's public persona, symbologized in the glaringly opulent *Albanian Dress* portrait. This is the Byron embossed into the psyche of the Romantic literati, ever waxing in the **illumin** of the rockstar persona. Yet, *Don Juan*'s moral investigations fail to honestly elucidate the hubris and daredevilry offered by the lifestyle of sensory experience that Byron lived and advertised. Like Springsteen, the unbidden violence of the political regime to which he was tethered saturated Byron's poetic responses in irony and cynicism. In Canto VII of *Don Juan,* the narrative pivots between scenes of rhapsodic humor and devastating solemnity, enmeshing the rush of gallant young men eager for battle within the subsequent devastation of their violence: "Then there were foreigners of much renown,/Of various nations, and all volunteers;/Not fighting for their country or its crown,/But wishing to be one day brigadiers;/Also to have the sacking of a town;--/A pleasant thing to young men at their years."[18] Rather than stake their lives for the sake of glory and nation, Byron's clamorous youths ride into battle in the quest of unmitigated sensations, unconstrained fury, and the countenance of war. Their naivety, leveled by arrogance, offers the tactility of conflict as reparation for its folly. Springsteen's *Glory Days* would not be out of place, blaring over the battlefield of Ismail, Springsteen worrying "I hope when I get old I don't sit around thinkin' about it/But I probably will."[19]

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[18] Byron, George Gordon, "Don Juan", Project Gutenberg, 2007. Web. VII, XVIII.
[19] Bruce Springsteen, "Glory Days," *Born in the USA*, Columbia, 1984. Track 10.

A closer read of Canto VII reveals the subversive wit with which Byron resisted such a sentiment. "A pleasant thing to young men" he says, and yet later, we are denied the reparative glory of the battlefield: "Oh, ye great bulletins of Bonaparte!/Oh, ye less grand long lists of killed and wounded!...Oh, Cæsar's Commentaries! now impart, ye/Shadows of Glory! (lest I be confounded,)/A portion of your fading twilight hues--."[20] It is the *shadow* of glory that hues the battles of Ismail, a darkened cast over the resplendent youths who seek the restitution of a war memory on which they can rely when they grow old. Reinforcing the perspective of war as fruitless, Byron adds: "When I call "fading" martial immortality,/I mean, that every age and every year/...Some sucking hero is compelled to rear,/Who.../Turns out to be a butcher in great business,/Afflicting young folks with a sort of dizziness."[21] For Byron, War was unmistakably a political instrument of the bourgeois. As such, its function was in opposition to a liberated social spirit.

Imbued with a clanging hubris so pronounced it is rendered ironic, Springsteen's *Glory Days* echoes the winking irony with which Byron sets up his doomed foot soldiers. Confronting the wake of their own nationalistic "dizziness," *Glory Days'* anonymous characters rhapsodize an innocent, pre-Vietnam adolescence that is idealized in hyperbolically American tropes: baseball memories and the girl next door. The roadside bar, another trope, is where these memories cede to current reality.

[20] *Don Juan*, VII, LXXXII.
[21] *Don Juan*, VII, LXXXIII.

While still a fitting party song, the honky tonk tone and whooping impetuousness of the tune draws a narrowed eye when set against the equally raucous title track, the tone of which resulted in a phenomenon of Pop misinterpretations from less critical fans and political opportunists alike.

Rhetorically, *Glory Days* cues its melodic irony from the Byronic notions of symbologic inflection that arise in Canto VII of *Don Juan,* wherein the nationalistic function of war is subversively revealed as its true purpose. The missing 4th verse of *Glory Days* exposes Springsteen's deliberation to more overtly politicize the song, revealing a direct address that, had it been included in the final cut, would have corrupted its melodic irony. In the section of eight lines that never made it to the final version, Springsteen writes candidly of a father who "worked the line for 20 years" only to be "let go"[22] without recourse. Committing himself to a lonely chair in the "Legion Hall," the father figure of the missing verse is an undisguised gesture to the Loner at the extremities of his self-isolation. His exclusion suggests the deliberateness of the hyperbolic American symbology in the song's lyrics which, without the presence of the father, has nothing to clash against except itself. Certainly, the song can be decoded as a party anthem that plays in the midst of a funeral, a lyrical benediction to reckless rock stardom amongst a diminishing empire. At the time of *Glory Days*' emergence in the living rooms and gymnasiums of American youths, the meta-narrative of the nation's glory days were receding into the rearview mirror. Distinguished by a spirit

[22] "Glory Days."

of national innocence and military prowess, American exceptionalism shrunk into a mythological history.

With the stylized rage of disenfranchised Vietnam veterans as lyric material, *Glory Days* is less a devotional longing than an anarchistic lament. I am reminded of the first stanza of *Don Juan*'s Canto VII, wherein the anonymous narrator declares, "O Glory! what are ye who fly/Around us ever, rarely to alight?/There's not a meteor in the polar sky/Of such transcendent and more fleeting flight."[23] Composed of the same ephemeral passion that afflicts young soldiers with a "dizziness," Canto VII sees the same lamentatious resolution of anarchistic glory that surfaces in *Born in the USA*. For both, lyrical irony is deployed alongside language characteristic of direct political subversion, so that glory reveals as a damaging cosmetic influence over national ideology. The lyrics of "Glory Days" lament a retrospective ideal of the Self while the melody forms the song's rhetorical paradox with an overlay of jocular, traditionalist guitar that rises up into the song's well-known honky tonk keyboard rift.

Other songs on the album follow this formula as well, including "Working on the Highway," a jocular tune with bluegrass flourishes, a song so upbeat its lyrics, describing difficult manual labor and a sexual relationship between an adult man and an underage girl, are easily obscured. "Dancing in the Dark" offers lyrics about a similarly downcast Loner, working nights and struggling to survive, underlaid beneath the song's famous and persistently optimistic dance beat. "I get up in the evening,"

[23] *Don Juan*, VII, I.

Springsteen sings, "and I ain't got nothing to say/ I get up in the morning feeling the same way/ I ain't nothing but tired/ Man I'm just tired and bored with myself."[24] What is so striking about *Born in the USA* is its dynamic deployment of the Loner trope beyond the desperate margins of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and *Born to Run*. *Born in the USA* redrafts the Loner to include the possibility of joy, of ecstatic sensation amongst the decomposing infrastructure and economic devastation of post-Vietnam America. "Dancing" and "Glory Days" precede "Cover Me" and "My Hometown," respectively, layering a perspective of Springsteen's developing trope as both engaged in the business of living and deeply introspective. In this way, *Born in the USA* is ironic and political even as it is deeply Romantic, in the Byronic sense.

Where Vietnam's dubious resolution premised an era of national disillusion, the ambiguous British military triumph of 1815's Battle of Waterloo offered a brief and palliative salve to the socioeconomically disenfranchised young men who had saturated the battlefield**.** In the wake of the battle, warmongering politicians saw a startling political backlash from the working class, who were denied a share of the wealth from the conquest and had been subsequently abandoned to contend with a crumbling industrial economy. "Yet I love glory-glory a great thing" Byron muses, "Think what it is to be in your old age/ Maintain'd at the expense of your good king:/ A moderate pension shakes full many a sage."[25] It was a

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[24] Springsteen, *Born in the USA*, "Dancing in the Dark."

[25] *Don Juan*, VIII, XIV.

"moderate pension" that drew many poor Englishmen into war under the promise of financial restitution, however modest. Byron winks at his audience, as he so often does, relying on their political leanings to cleave a space for political interpretation, which here suggests that war not only generates an atmosphere of greed among the working classes (who stand to lose much), but also makes dullards of the wise. Still, to a nation hamstrung by class division and the elusive specter of royalty, a flash of coins proved an adequate motive to a populace largely subjugated by an erupting Industrial Revolution.

Byron's rhetorical attacks on the public perception of Waterloo as a national success mark the poet's fragile relationship to the industrial class, who devoured his work yet remained socially and economically isolated from the man himself. *Don Juan* expostulates against the needless violence of war from the vantage of an ivory tower. As Britain's war weary populace mulled the Duke of Wellington as Waterloo's heroic visage, Byron cloyingly humiliated the celebrated general from a vantage of extreme privilege. Canto IX of *Don Juan* spends ten stanzas lobbing sarcastic insults at Wellington, who was a member of Byron's own class. These sections of the epic poem are marked by sharp and rapid sarcastic assurances - "I'm sure I mean no harm"[26], "I don't mean to reflect,"[27] - as if the true setting of this canto is not Ismael but a private party, a moment

[26] *Don Juan*, IX, LVI.
[27] *Don Juan*, IX, XLIX.

and place where Byron's very serious charges would amount to little more than banter. Moreover, the stanzas forming Wellington's reproach take the form of a narrative aside that deliberately blurs the distinction between Juan as a character and Byron as a poet. His derisive claims of no offense allow an innocent but winking transgression that slips beneath the skin, challenging notions of empire and colonialism while claiming no ill will. It can be said that, for his working-class audience, *this* is Byron's glory, while the shifting avarice of the Byronic Hero offers a compelling aesthetic through which to prospect the waning relevance of a unified national spirit.

The Byronic Hero assuages his audience with charm, intelligence, cunning, and perhaps above all, an air of moral ambiguity. Moreover, the persona appears to attach and detach from Byron himself, presenting as at once autobiographical, then removed. Some of these qualities apply to Springsteen's Loner, who is both representative of the singer's ideological foundations yet divergent in lifestyle and socioeconomic status. The two characters are linked not only by a deep sense of injustice, but also by a tendency towards violence, recklessness and an ingenerate suspicion of social mores. They are personas caught between a fervent desire to live and the circumstantial hazards that so prominently illuminate the prospect of death. Yet where the Byronic Hero's recklessness and violent tendencies manifest from a vantage of privilege and agency, ergo the soldier who volunteers for battle to partake in its sensations, the Loner is defined by lack of agency. He is acted upon, and his errancy is a

response to these actions. This distinction forecloses a full comparison between these tropes. It is thus useful to turn to Idiko Csengei's man of feeling as a subpersonality of the Byronic Hero as a persona is defined by his affected responses to others.

Csengei's compelling study, "The Fear of Vain Longing", offers the man of feeling to resolve temperamental discrepancies within the Byronic Hero. A transformed Byronic Hero, the man of feeling is imbued with a deeper sense of empathy and moral conviction than his raunchy and sometimes egomaniacal counterpart. "The man of feeling", he posits, "sees others through the lens of his own compassionate mind whilst teaching those he encounters along the way to sympathise."[28] Further, "through the transformation of his hero from a disaffected character to a man of feeling Byron thus brings home to his readers war as an emotional experience."[29] Suturing personal grief to collective mourning, the transformed persona identifies the source of his own despair within the social and political affect of a national ethos**.** Csegei suggests that the deployment of this trope limns the transfiguration of Byron's political consciousness by explicitly demonstrating his own growing anti-war sentiments. Csegei frames his analysis through Byron's epic poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrim*, a work that explores the tactile landscape of Waterloo and offers the tender anguish of young Harold's political disillusionment as evidence of a transformed Byronic Hero. Yet, I argue that *Don Juan*'s subtextual

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[28] Ildiko Csengei, "'The Fever of Vain Longing': Emotions of War in Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto III," (Romanticism 24, no. 1, 2018: 86-98), 95.
[29] Csengei, 97.

discourse with Britain’s post-Waterloo melancholy opportunes a more dynamic man of feeling.

In Canto VIII, amidst the anarchistic violence of a stormed Ismael, Juan comes across a young Turkish child, a new refugee generated by the chaotic displacement of war. Faced with the dilemma of his own violent involvement, Juan’s characterization of heroism demands an ambiguous retort. His decision to rescue the girl is crucially impulsive, yet marked by nascent empathy, an ethical compulsion removed from his sense of duty. Witnessing the child’s near death, Juan “...raised his little captive from/ The heap a moment more had made her tomb.”[30] As a poet, Byron often gestures to the dehumanizing consequence of war, which deems “human clay but common dirt”[31] and forces significant acts of moral compartmentalization upon its human agents. Juan’s willingness to rescue the girl, even as doing so puts his regiment in danger, suggests further ethical complications than are traditionally assigned to the Byronic Hero.

Juan’s act of heroism is informed by raw emotions and inculcated with unmitigated sensitivity. His sentimental reaction to the girl represents a rare Byronic foray into the affect, further complicating the poem’s treatment of thematic heroism: “she open'd her large eyes,/And gazed on Juan with a wild surprise./Just at this instant, while their eyes were fix'd/Upon each other, with dilated glance,/In Juan's look, pain, pleasure, hope, fear, mix'd/ With joy to save, and dread of some

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[30] *Don Juan*, VIII, XCIV.
[31] *Don Juan*, VII, LVIII.

mischance/ Unto his protégée."[32] If we are to posit that Juan is a Byronic Hero experiencing a temporary character shift into the man of feeling, the nature of Byron's hero as a static trope is called into question**.** I have similarly shown how Springsteen's Loner exists in an indeterminate space, a stubborn capriciousness that comes through most prominently in the reformed Loner of *Born in the USA*. When Juan instantly names the girl his *protege,* he recalls the hubris of the Byronic Hero within a moment of deviated temperament. Similarly, the ruckus youths of "Darlington County" lie to win dates and are later arrested for undetermined recklessness. The ethical opacity of Juan's act hedges concerns of personhood against compulsive nationalism, helping to focus the depth of humanity contained in a persona often characterized as moody and self-serving. Indeed, the subconscious intertextuality that joins Springsteen to Byron is supplied first by the textual function of irony as a political barometer, and second by the subjectivity of character tropes that confound the Byronic Hero and the Loner. The Loner's connectivity to a diasporic characterization of Springsteen's fanbase distills his public perception as working class, blue-collar, and white. Yet, in Springsteen's own words, the archetype was constructed to defy classification:

> My model was the individual traveler, the frontiersman, the man in the wilderness, the highwayman, the existential American adventurer, connected but not beholden to society...*individuals* who

[32] *Don Juan*, VIII, XCV-XCVI.

> worked on the edges of society to shift impressions, create worlds, imagine possibilities that would then be assimilated and become a part of the culture at large.[33]

Perhaps the most pertinent point made by Springsteen is that his persona is meant to "shift impressions," to fundamentally alter the very society which rejects the Loner yet holds him accountable to its institutional demands. The Loner is meant to defy definition, inhabiting a symbological landscape exhausted by the tropification of maleness, Americanness, and the national spirit. The characterization of masculinity heard in "Atlantic City," for example, argues that desperation, and violence, exist organically alongside the unnavigable social challenges that relegate the Loner to the margins. The song carries us through scenes of cataclysmic city life in a hard version of America's East Coast, depicting a callous and over-industrialized landscape defined by the suzerain dominion of frenetic socio-political circumstances. Frantic and emotional appeals for love, reciprocity and a shared dream expostulate against lamentations of abject hopelessness. "Our luck may have died and our love may be cold," Springsteen sings, "But with you forever I'll stay."[34] For an unemployed, socially castrated man edging into a life of crime ("So honey last night I met this guy and/I'm gonna do a little favor for him,") the claim of everlasting love is less an expectation of truth than it is a salve on the gaping wound that the character lives each day: "Everything dies baby,

[33] *Born to Run*, 430-31.
[34] Bruce Springsteen, "Atlantic City," Nebraska, Columbia, 1982. Track 2.

that's a fact/ But maybe everything that dies someday comes back."[35]

Yet even as "Atlantic City" anticipates a promise -"We're goin' out west where the sands turnin' to gold"- the potentiality for redemption is undercut by tonally depressed cadences and lyrical doubt. Springsteen often references crime in his music, frequently engaging the desperate irreparability associated with criminal status in the United States, where criminality is characterized by a state of social isolation so severe that it removes the possibility of redemption, social or otherwise. Even still, "Atlantic City"'*s* musical progression is defined by dueling tonality, offering the aspirational folk beat of an echoing mandolin amongst a largely downbeat and persistent guitar melody.

Tonal paradoxes dominate the musical universe which surrounds the Loner, whose self-doubt and personal accountability surface in the rhythmical underbelly of Sprinsgsteen's songs. At times complex, as in "Atlantic City," and at others schizophrenic, as in *Glory Days*, the agitated musical accompaniments surrounding the Loner's meta-narrative gesture to the cultural obscurity he inhabits. Like Juan, the Loner crests waves of glory and revels in the pseudo-spirituality of a cult of individuality, only to discover that his survivalist impulse is determined not by a warrior's spirit but by the desperation and disenfranchisement imposed on him. He admits to his role in his own dissolution and expatriation, yet his most tangible crimes suggest that symbiosis can be found within a barbarous

[35] "Atlantic City."

subculture. Considering Springsteen's larger attention to place and setting throughout his discography, "Atlantic City"'s prominent depictions of homelessness and the act of homeleaving are of no little consequence. Migration and exodus intersperse the Loner's attempts at acculturation, community building, and love making, offering movement as the only reply to institutional rejection.

Springsteen's weary road to the ironically dubbed "promised land" frequently takes on characteristics of infinity, the journey marked by the experience of the road rather than the anticipation of the arrival. In "The Ghost of Tom Joad," howling incantations of a country steel bar riff punctuate the locomotive churn of a migration narrative. "The highway is alive tonight/But nobody's kidding nobody about where it goes," Springsteen sings, "The highway is alive tonight/Where it's headed everyone knows."[36] For the Joads of Springsteen's homage, as well as their literary models, a Sisyphean effort precedes social banishment, marking the living road with particular poignance as the insignia of communal grief. "The Ghost of Tom Joad" is a literal exploration of its title, a dismal salutation to the specter of the marginalized; economic and social "others" sent whirling down the highway in search of nationhood. Yet as Brent Bellamy points out, Springsteen toys with conceptualizations of the road as predetermined, revealing a cloying lyrical irony in the singer's crafted evocations of movement.

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[36] Bruce Springsteen, "The Ghost of Tom Joad," *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Columbia, 1995. Track 1.

Bellamy notes that roads are, by nature, fixed paths, and as such, deny the atmosphere of unbridled freedom that Springsteen often attempts in his sweeping, melodically vast anthems. "The figurative road simply replaces an early myth of freedom," Bellamy posits, "and the Promised Land with one that is just as imagined and, ultimately, just as false."[37] It is no surprise, then, that the Loner persona is often associated with dramatic social breaks, desperate escapes facilitated by cars and motorcycles that, melodically, suggest power. Lyrically, however, the road reveals the elusivity of freedom and the omnipresence of social order even on the open highway, an arena often deemed empty and lawless.

"The Ghost of Tom Joad" represents a melodic break in Springsteen's representations of the Loner. Here, The Loner hovers in the languishing parlance of Tom Joad, amalgamated in Springsteen's own lyrics and a monologue from Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. The song maintains a low-frequency musical grounding, deriving energy, not from sweeping melodies but Springsteen's interjected and cadential voice as it lifts at the start of the chorus. Originally released in 1995, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*'s Loner reimagines earlier visions of the persona by denying its listeners melodic redemption.

By contrast, the 1978 LP *Darkness on the Edge of Town* establishes this character in a manner more typical of Springsteen. Like the man of feeling, his handiwork is marked by compulsion

[37] Brent Bellamy,"Tear into the Guts: Whitman, Steinbeck, Springsteen, and the Durability of Lost Souls on the Road," (Canadian Review of American Studies 41, no. 2 , 2011: 223-43), 235.

rather than impulsion. Surrounded by restless, twinkling and at times anarchistic musical accompaniments, *Darkness*'s Loner is fleshed by the desperation that informs his energy. He is a reactionary figure, testifying the affect and apathy resounding from the empty arena, the edge of town, the abandoned factory. His characterization maintains the *kairotic* salience denied the Byronic Hero, whose exploits are an interpretation of individual desire, rather than an expression of rebirth among the margins, the borders, or the limits.

I will add that the nature of heroes (generally) corresponds with, rather than differs from, that of loners (lower case). For both tropes, the character's journey, his emotional scope and contentious reality, experience expanded functions. They are endowed with the depth of complexity that accompanies heroic acts and react earnestly to the subjectivities of so-called "heroic situations," which often demand ungovernable and impulsive responses. Classed into isolation with enormous responsibility heaped upon them, the ever-looming potential for failure haunts not only their maleness but the validity of the hero figure as a trope. It is thus imperative to briefly address the violent edge of these two personas.

While the Byronic Hero's speculative nature and near disastrous dedication to an elusive authentic self dissociates him from the established tradition of literary heroism, Don Juan's willingness to engage in the Siege of Ismail suggests a common misanthropy with certain ideations of Springsteen's Loner. Notable among these is the male persona found in the title track of *Nebraska*

as well as several that appear on the *Born to Run* album, including *Meeting Across the River* and *Incident on 57th Street*. Each of these iterations selectively deviates from a largely analogous male archetype who is both dolefully young and perilously destined for a life of crime. The lyrical synchronicity that adheres these calamitous figures to one another strings from song to song, establishing an abrasive rhetoric hemmed by the fluctuating melodic temperament characteristic of Springsteen's catalog. The line "Here stuff this in your pocket/It'll look like you're carrying a friend"[38] corresponds methodically with a similar line from *Incident on 57th Street,* "...Those romantic young boys/All they ever wanna do is fight,"[39] suggesting that Springsteen makes note of the gravity of street violence even as he fetishizes it, insisting upon its cultural significance and individual relevance.

Violence, as a randomized act, a measure of systemic crime, or a reflection of untenable rage, distinguishes itself from the measured brutality offered by military warfare. It is relevant to note that, for Bryon and Springsteen, this distinction reserves a measure of artistic license wherein violence itself can echo an affected individual or collective ethos. For instance, Juan's fomenting manhood and flexible code of personal ethics often collide dangerously with a barely contained and always frothing taste for chaos. Yet, the poet relies on his youthfulness to resolve the contemptible rift between Romantic boy and violent foot

[38] Bruce Springsteen, "Meeting Across the River," *Born to Run*, Columbia, 1975, Track 7.
[39] Bruce Springsteen, "Incident on 57th Street," *Born to Run*, Columbia, 1975 Track 5.

soldier: "But Juan was quite 'a Broth of a Boy,' " Byron writes, "A thing of impulse and a Child of Song...if he must needs destroy,/ In such good company as always throng/ To Battles, Sieges, and that kind of pleasure, / No less delighted to employ his leisure."[40] For Juan, the impulse to engage in violence takes such an assumptive place in his character, it at times supersedes his desire for personal agency and harmony. Yet it is this very *willingness* to enlist chaos that allows him to enter literal and rhetorical spaces that are morally ambiguous in nature, spaces where he must contend with complex ethical decisions. The notion of chaos as impetus to individual growth permeates *Don Juan*'s broader plot, which contains scenes evocative of the literary absurd. Juan is seen cross-dressing or comically leaping through a window to escape a lover's angry husband, offerings of gender ambivalence that subvert the authority of an omniscient social order. Such scenes question social obedience as a vehicle for harmony and augment the presence of Romantic Irony by submitting the text itself as an artifact of the absurd.

To be sure, the unconventionality of these figures we cautiously call heroes variously clashes and ebbs with their relatability. We are at once offered a hero who is uncertain, a sometimes introvert, shy of conflict and critical of war, yet subject to the frenetic catharsis of violence and crime. It is thus that the poetry of Byron and Springsteen challenges structuralist notions of social intrinsicity by proposing margin-dwelling characters whose moral compass is reflective not of mores, but of the Self.

[40] Don Juan, VIII, XXIV.

Because the Loner and the man of feeling typically resolve internal tension through individualistic acts of violence, recklessness, or forbearance, their presence fundamentally challenges bourgeois notions of the common good and national glory. Anti-war sentiment, in this context, finds intrinsic nourishment within the layered experience of social castration and its affective individual struggle, as they are written in these personas.

The very volatility that destabilizes these figures from structural interpretation renders them living. Delivering the layman from the altruistic burdens imposed on him by war, political regression and reductive ideals, the Loner and the man of feeling bear witness to the subaltern. The artistic challenge, then, becomes one of psychic de-matriculation and decolonization; an effort at the formalistic level, as with Byron, or the melodic and cadential, as with Springsteen. Poetic language, which reaches towards the heart and not the head, locates its ultimate value within its transferability, transgression, and disposability, the weight of its cadence and whimsy a product of its economic insignificance. It is apt to say that Byron's lamentations to the disaffected anticipated Springsteen, offering a transgressive poetic on which the wailing signal of *Born in the USA*'s burned-out renegade could resound. The durability of the soul subjected to disaster, its hardiness in the attempt of dissolution, remains crucial to the transmutability to which Springsteen speaks. Transmitting the poetical and communal significance of the bard, the griot, and the pastor, the Loner and Byron's Hero continue to articulate the

complexity of political imposition and social isolation on levels of the artistic, political and social.

In drawing together Springsteen's Loner and Byron's man of feeling, I hope to have illuminated the need to view Springsteen's work from a broader, even cross-national and cross-historic perspective. The respective tropes of Romantic virility offered up by the Loner and the man of feeling suggest fungible expressions of national and masculine identity. For Springsteen, the Loner is crafted from within the cradle of Romantic affect, a reactive figure whose political psyche is not, as might be assumed, developed out of the vapid terms of a failing American dream. Rather, the haunted highways on which the Loner enacts the perpetual motion of escape reach across the globe. This broadened lens is useful in illuminating Springsteen as a global player working within an aesthetic and political trajectory reaching further back than just American blues and folk. A globalized view represents a radical challenge to the fantastical image of Springsteen as an American ambassador working within the parameters of and responding to the stimuli of uniquely American political and social situations. Measuring Springsteen by a metric is insufficient and threatens to cast his lexicon into historical and political obscurity, existing in a bygone time and addressing long dead political issues. Rather, the complexity embedded in the Loner can be read alongside his insistent political and emotional development as a model for American masculinity that is determined by the complex tension between a singular national identity and one that admits a relationship with globality. The

Loner and man of feeling stand watch atop that fateful hill, out over its precipice to sublime darkness beyond the edges of our towns, to peace or rest, to the lives on the line where dreams once lost might be found.