
BOSS

The Biannual
Online-Journal of
Springsteen Studies

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Springsteen Studies

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Mission Statement

BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies aims to publish scholarly, peer-reviewed essays pertaining to Bruce Springsteen. This open-access journal seeks to encourage consideration of Springsteen's body of work primarily through the political, economic, and socio-cultural factors that have influenced his music and shaped its reception. *BOSS* welcomes broad interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches to Springsteen's songwriting and performance. The journal aims to secure a place for Springsteen Studies in the contemporary academy.

Submission Guidelines

The editors of *BOSS* welcome submissions of articles that are rigorously researched and provide original, analytical approaches to Springsteen's songwriting, performance, and fan community. Inter- and cross-disciplinary works, as well as studies that conform to specific disciplinary perspectives, are welcome. Suggested length of submission is between 15 and 25 pages.

Contact

To access *BOSS*, please visit <http://boss.mcgill.ca/>

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Contents

Introduction to *BOSS*

Caroline Madden

Contributors

6

Articles

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

Helen Rehana Ganiy

9

“Pullin’ Out of Here to Win”:

The Narrative Flexibility of “Thunder Road”

Dana DeVlieger

42

Reviews

***American Lonesome* by Gavin Cologne-Brookes**

Thomas Alan Holmes

100

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth issue of *BOSS: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies*, an open-access journal devoted to the study of Bruce Springsteen's music, performance, and legacy. In this issue, we continue to explore Springsteen's impact on music and culture. 2023 marks the triumphant return of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band performing live on tour and the 50th anniversary of *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* Yet the past two years have been just as busy and prolific.

After the 2020 release of the critically acclaimed album *Letter to You*, Springsteen reformulated *Springsteen on Broadway* and performed for several months to celebrate the reopening of Broadway in 2021. In 2022, he released *Only the Strong Survive*, a soul covers album that honors the music that inspired his craft and showmanship. These works attest to Springsteen's extraordinary ability to adapt, renew, and engage with popular culture in unique ways. With these special events, *Springsteen Studies* is more relevant than ever.

For half a century, Springsteen's work has drawn connections to countless other subjects: politics, social issues, literature, music, film, and theatre. *BOSS* reveals the relationship between Springsteen's canon and various artistic and cultural movements. The fifth issue features articles from scholars and experts on a variety of topics.

The first piece by Helen Ganiy is entitled "Fierce Loves and Faithless Wars: Bruce, Byron and the Man of Feeling." Ganiy draws connections between two artists from different centuries. She discusses how Springsteen's music connects to the poetry and political activism of Lord Byron. She focuses on Lord Byron's anti-war and anti-nationalist sentiments in his final epic poem, *Don Juan*, and his direct parliamentary involvement as an influence on Springsteen's music. The Byronic Hero, a melancholic character, is also discussed as relating to Springsteen's construction of the "Loner": a socially isolated, margin-dwelling archetype in his music. Both Byron and Springsteen are united in their deployment of paradoxical aesthetic techniques to expose the impossible irony of working-class life in their respective time periods and countries.

“‘Pullin’ Out of Here to Win’: The Narrative Flexibility of “Thunder Road” by Dana DeVlieger discusses how Bruce Springsteen's performances of his song "Thunder Road" have evolved over time. The author examines three different performances of "Thunder Road" from 1975 and how Springsteen's writing and performance decisions in each recording suggest different personas and narrative trajectories for the protagonist. DeVlieger argues that it is Springsteen's "empathetic imagination" that allows him to understand and convey the struggles and experiences of the working class in his music. The article also discusses the theory of "conceptual blending," which refers to the process of combining elements from two different mental spaces to create a new domain. DeVlieger's piece offers a new way of looking at one of Springsteen's most popular, career-defining songs.

Lastly, we have a review of Gavin Cologne-Brookes' book *American Lonesome*. The book examines Springsteen's formative environment and outsider psychology, arguing that the artist's confessed tendency toward a self-reliant isolation creates a tension in his work between lonesomeness and community. Cologne-Brookes' considers Springsteen's portrayals of solitude in relation to classic and contemporary American writers, from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson to Flannery O'Connor and Joyce Carol Oates. These connections attest to the scope and depth of Springsteen's work.

We hope that this issue will provide a deeper understanding and appreciation for the music and career of Bruce Springsteen. Springsteen has proven himself to be one of the most enduring and respected figures in the music industry, and he continues to build on his legacy each year.

Caroline Madden, Managing Editor

Contributors

Helen Rehana Ganiy is a PhD student at Rutgers University studying English Literature. Her research interests include 20th and 21st century Black American literature, with a particular focus on posthumanism and materiality. She is also a creative writer with short pieces published in *The New Orleans Review* and *Big Muddy*. She is currently working on a short story collection as well as other academic research projects

Dana DeVlieger received her Ph.D. in Music Theory from the University of Minnesota, M.A.s from the University of Chicago and Ohio State University, and her B.A. from the University of Notre Dame. Her primary area of research is at the intersection of popular music and copyright law, and she is currently a third year J.D. candidate at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law. Some of Dana's music copyright research has recently been published in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. A lifelong Springsteen fan, she is thrilled to have the opportunity to see the present project through to publication.

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He has taught courses in American literature, many focusing on his interests in Appalachian, Southern, and African American literature. His scholarly and creative work has appeared in such journals as *The South Atlantic Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *The Valparaiso Review*, *The Connecticut Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *The Appalachian Journal*. With Roxanne Harde, he has co-edited *Walking the Line: Country Music Lyricists and*

CONTRIBUTORS

American Culture (Lexington Books); with Jesse Graves and Ernest Lee, he has co-edited *Jeff Daniel Marion: Poet on the Holston* (University of Tennessee Press); and, with Daniel Westover, he has co-edited *The Fire that Breaks: Gerard Manley Hopkins's Poetic Legacies* (Clemson University Press). He has received the College of Arts & Sciences Distinguished Research Award for 2014-2015 and the 2020 ETSU Graduate Council's Graduate Mentor Award. Iris Press published his debut poetry collection, *In the Backhoe's Shadow*, in 2022.

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

Helen Rehana Ganiy

University

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 Byron'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

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

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.

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 disenchanting 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. “F¹⁰actory 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, Hainey insists that he merely “stole his father’s work

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.

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, symbolized 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

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 impetuosity 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 lamentation 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

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 Ildiko 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. Csengei suggests that the deployment of this trope limns the transfiguration of Byron's political consciousness by explicitly demonstrating his own growing anti-war sentiments. Csengei 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

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

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 Springsteen'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.

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 hardness 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.

“Pullin’ Out of Here to Win”: The Narrative Flexibility of “Thunder Road”

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Abstract

In *Conceptualizing Music*, Lawrence Zbikowski uses the idea of conceptual blending to build upon Nicholas Cook’s understanding of song as multimedia, explaining how the music and lyrics of a song can work together to create a more complex narrative than either component could on its own. While Zbikowski’s examples are taken from German art song, the present project applies this idea of conceptual blending to popular music, investigating how different recordings of a song can alter its narrative. I examine three versions of Bruce Springsteen’s “Thunder Road,” all recorded in 1975: an early live performance in February, the studio recording released in August, and a later live performance in October. This investigation of “Thunder Road” highlights an interesting issue present in popular music: the artist can continue to tweak his/her/their arrangement of a song in live performances, drastically altering the song’s narrative. Springsteen’s alterations to the song’s music and lyrics over the course of 1975 create three distinct protagonists, each negotiating their own relationship the desire to escape from a small town and find a better life on the open road.

Despite his current fame and financial success, Bruce Springsteen is hailed as a champion of the working class because of his blue-collar roots and the working-class experiences embodied in many of his songs. Yet, in the opening monologue of his Broadway show, Springsteen jokingly points out that he has never held a real job or had a five-day work week until his Broadway

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residency. So, what is it about Bruce Springsteen that makes him a working-class hero? Is it his identity as a white, Catholic, Italian/Irish-American son of blue-collar parents that explains his ability to speak to the working class experience?² Or is it in "the sometimes intangible features of his performances... sheer vitality, raw energy, and expressive delivery – that Springsteen conveys working-class value"?³ While these things certainly play a role in the creation of Springsteen's performance persona, I would argue that it is what Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde term his "empathetic imagination" that enables him to "bear witness to the dreams, struggles, disappointments, and small victories that determine our everyday lives."⁴

Drawing on his personal experiences, as well as those of friends and family, Springsteen's songs present passionate characters with palpable emotions that his listeners can connect with. Springsteen crafts his music and lyrics with meticulous precision, blending the two together to effectively convey the psychological states of his characters and imbue their stories with narrative nuance. His 1975 song "Thunder Road" demonstrates how his blending of music and lyrics projects complex personas and narratives.

² Mike Cadó and Teresa V. Abbruzzese, "Tracking Place and Identity in Bruce Springsteen's *Tracks*," in *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen* ed. Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 95-118.

³ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴ Irwin Streight and Roxanne Harde, "Introduction: The Bard of Asbury Park," in *Reading the Boss*, 8.

In popular music studies, a studio album recording is considered the primary text of a song. Many popular musicians will replicate their album recordings in live performance, with no more than subtle interpretive changes. However, some performers view their studio recordings as simply one interpretation of a song, and their live performances are often substantially different from what appears on their albums. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Bob Dylan, but Springsteen has also made significant changes to his songs in live performances over the course of his long career. In the case of songs like “Thunder Road,” such changes can alter both the persona of the main character and the outcome of his desired escape.

This article looks at three different performances of Springsteen’s song “Thunder Road,” all from the year 1975: the studio recording released in August; an earlier performance at The Main Point in Bryn Mawr, PA in February; and the version appearing on the *Live 1975-85* album from a concert in West Hollywood, CA in October. I begin with a brief overview of how this project engages with conceptual blending in music scholarship.⁵ Then, I examine how Springsteen’s writing and performance decisions in each recording suggest three equally

⁵ While conceptual blending is an inherently interdisciplinary topic, the primary disciplinary lens of this project comes from the field of music theory.

convincing yet distinct personas⁶ and narrative trajectories,⁷ ultimately determining whether each recording's protagonist ends up "pullin' out of here to win."

Conceptual Blending

The following analyses are grounded in the idea of *conceptual blending*, a term from cognitive psychology that refers to the "process in which elements from two correlated mental spaces combine into a third."⁸ This concept has been applied to music by scholars like Lawrence Zbikowski, who argues that conceptual blending goes beyond notions of cross-domain mapping or musical metaphor to a point where elements from two different conceptual domains – in this case, music and text – blend together to create an entirely new domain. Though other scholars have addressed the dialectical relationship between music and text using different terminology, conceptual blending provides a

⁶ Allan Moore writes of a song's persona as informed by the lyrics, vocal melody, and singing style. Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012). Moore distinguishes this from the "persona environment," which is communicated by the accompaniment and can interact with the person in various ways. In the following analyses, however, I use the term persona to address the character that the lyrics, melody, singing style, and accompaniment combine to convey.

⁷ David Nicholls has discussed the application of narrative theory to popular music. David Nicholls, "Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts," *Music & Letters* 88, no. 2 (2007), 297-315. The recordings of "Thunder Road" discussed in this paper are party to Nicholls' fourth level of narrative: "both lyrics and music contain elements of narrative discourse, which to some degree operate independently of each other, though always in relation to an overlying story." *Ibid.*, 301.

⁸ Lawrence Zbikowski, *Conceptualizing Music: Cognitive Structure, Theory and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 245.

useful visual representation of the blend taking place: conceptual integration networks, or CINs.

This graphical technique, developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, helps “formalize the relationship between the mental spaces involved in a conceptual blend, to specify what aspects of the input spaces are imported into the blend, and to describe the emergent structure that results from the process of conceptual blending.”⁹ In a CIN, the input spaces on either side of the diagram contain elements of the two different domains that are being correlated; in the case of popular music, these domains would be the lyrics and the music.¹⁰ The two inputs give rise to the blended space at the bottom of the diagram; here, the resulting narrative or persona. The generic space, which appears in the topmost circle, dictates the fundamental categorization that the input spaces and blended spaces share.

While Zbikowski’s work applies conceptual blending to German art song, it can easily be applied to twentieth-century popular song. Popular music has certainly addressed the idea of blending, even if musicologists have not referred to it explicitly by that name:

In the world of pop music, it is pretty meaningless to say of a lyric that it is good: it is only one piece of the jigsaw puzzle and must be judged not on its own merits but on

⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰ While there is arguably a third input – the visual element – involved in the study of live performance, this element will not be addressed in this article because the focus is on the interaction of music and lyrics in three specific sound recordings.

the way it fits in with the other pieces, both distinct from them and at the same time completely dependent on them.¹¹

Bruce Springsteen's oeuvre epitomizes the symbiotic relationship between music and lyrics, and a particularly strong example of this is "Thunder Road." I begin my analyses by looking at what the words and music of each recording separately contribute to the song's narrative and persona.¹² It should be acknowledged that the lyrical and musical analyses that follow, like any such analyses, are subjective interpretations based on my own reading and listening. They are nevertheless supported by the text and music of the songs and present one plausible way of making sense of the relationship between these three recordings.

Studio Recording – August 1975

Lyrics

"Thunder Road" is the opening track on Springsteen's third studio album, *Born to Run*. This album can be seen as a bridge, both thematically and musically, between his first two albums and the three that followed *Born to Run*: *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *The River*, and *Nebraska*. Springsteen's first two albums contained

¹¹ Antoine Hennion, "The Production of Success: An Anti-Musicology of the Pop Song," *Popular Music* 3 (1983), 182.

¹² The analytical discussion of the studio recording is the longest, as it serves as a point of reference and comparison for the other two recordings. To avoid redundancy, the discussions of the February and October live recordings are limited to the differences from the studio recording.

Dylan-esque lyrics and lush orchestration in their tales of optimism, romanticism, and innocence.¹³ Beginning with 1978's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, however, Springsteen's songwriting turned thematically towards stories of isolation and hopelessness, set with comparatively sparse instrumentation.¹⁴ While *Born to Run* is closer to the earlier albums in terms of orchestration, the lyrical turn towards passionate first-person narratives seems to foreshadow the thematic shift towards the realistic depictions of working-class desperation that appear on *Darkness*.

Born to Run also marks a turning point in the trajectory of Springsteen's career. While *Greetings from Asbury Park* and *The Wild, The Innocent, and The E Street Shuffle* were critically acclaimed, they did not have the commercial success that his record label had expected from their much lauded "New Dylan."¹⁵ At the time, Columbia Records was considering dropping Springsteen so that they could put more resources into promoting their newest sensation, Billy Joel. For this reason, *Born to Run* served as Springsteen's last chance to make it big in the music industry. Though he was not a member of the workforce at the time of its composition, his desire to escape his blue-collar roots helped to infuse the album with palpable desperation.

Springsteen is a perfectionist when it comes to his songwriting, often going through several versions of his lyrics to make sure that the words were exactly what he wanted. This semi-

¹³ Cadó and Abbruzzese, "Tracking Place."

¹⁴ Ibid. One could also read that album as containing a mix of despair and hope.

¹⁵ Marc Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012).

obsessive writing process is evident in the composition of the *Born to Run* album; the titular track alone took six months to write and record.¹⁶ Because Springsteen worked on his new material while touring, he tested early versions of many of his new songs at live shows before recording them. One such song is "Thunder Road." Through significant rewrites, "Thunder Road" was transformed from a story of a restless, car-obsessed teenager who does not understand the meaning of despair to the tale of a determined and desperate young man who is trying to convince his cautious love interest to leave her claustrophobic life and run away with him in search of something better. The lyrics to the studio version of "Thunder Road" are given in Appendix 1.

The opening stanza of the song depicts the protagonist sitting in his car outside the house of a girl named Mary, listening to the radio and watching as Mary comes outside. In the first line, Springsteen describes a screen door slamming in an otherwise peaceful scene, as if the door is closing quickly to keep the house's occupants from escaping. This stanza is filled with Catholic imagery, from Mary's name to the description of her as a "vision."¹⁷ These lyrics suggest that Mary is repressed by the expectations of her upbringing, but they also imply that Mary is repressing herself

¹⁶ Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 208.

¹⁷ While it could be argued that this is Christian imagery rather than specifically Catholic, the focus on Mary is a distinctly Catholic feature, as are the stories of Mary appearing in a vision to believers (for example in the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe). Additionally, it is well-known that Springsteen himself was raised Catholic and so referring to the imagery as Catholic seems appropriate.

in order to retain the self-sacrificing status that the speaker attributes to her.

As he watches Mary emerge from the house, the speaker is listening to Roy Orbison "singing for the lonely" on his car radio, referring to Orbison's popular ballad "Only the Lonely."¹⁸ This song gives voice to a man who has just had his heart broken and is saddened by the painful realities of the world. Orbison's last verse, while still dark, offers a glimmer of hope to all those familiar with this heartache: "Maybe tomorrow/A new romance/No more sorrow/But that's the chance -/You gotta take/If your lonely heart breaks/Only the lonely."¹⁹ Springsteen's protagonist clearly identifies with the lonely speaker in Orbison's song, indicating to the listener that he has experienced pain but sees Mary as his "new romance," his chance for something better.

When the speaker identifies with the song on the radio, he switches from observing the scene to addressing Mary directly. He sings, "Don't turn me home again, I just can't face myself alone again/Don't run back inside darling, you know just what I'm here for," implying that this isn't the first time he has asked her to run away with him. He knows that she is scared to leave her comfort zone. He suggests, however, that with a little faith, they can escape to a better life together. The speaker seems to put his foot in his mouth when he tells Mary she isn't a beauty, but what appears to be an insult is the speaker's way of saying that, though Mary may

¹⁸ Roy Orbison, "Only the Lonely," *Lonely and Blue*. Washington, D.C.: Monument Records (1960).

¹⁹ Ibid.

not be perfect, she still deserves a chance to escape her circumstances.

In the third stanza, the young man shifts from pleading with Mary to accusing her of ignoring this opportunity. Instead of escaping, she puts her head in the sand or dwells on her misery, letting it eat away at her. The image of the cross once again portrays Mary as a would-be-martyr, while the reference to "throwing roses in the rain" paints her as childlike. The speaker claims that Mary is fervently waiting for a rescuer but, when he finally shows up to offer her an escape, she is too scared to act. Though the young man acknowledges that he's far from perfect and can't fix all her problems, he has the means to get away and can offer Mary the chance to find something good.

Springsteen's use of the phrase "dirty hood" is open to several interpretations. The most obvious is the engine under the hood of the car, suggesting that their chance to escape is, quite literally, "beneath this dirty hood." Another possible reading is that the speaker's passion and desperation are housed in the heart that beats beneath his dirty sweatshirt. Finally, the speaker could be using "hood" as a slang for himself. In this case, the lyrics take on a sexual connotation, implying that Mary can escape the expectations of her Catholic upbringing by taking the speaker as her lover to achieve a fleeting type of escape. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and the multiple meanings might simply serve to reinforce the inextricability of the man, the car, and the possibility of escape. Though the speaker is vague about where

they will go or how exactly things will be better once they get there, he is adamant that escaping now is their only option.

The fifth stanza romanticizes their escape as the speaker describes racing down an empty highway with the windows rolled down. This description contrasts with the opening image of the slamming door, suggesting that the repression of their lives will disappear as soon as they leave town. It is as if the speaker gets caught up in his own optimism, thinking of the endless possibilities that lie beyond the limits of their small town. The line "We've got one last chance to make it real/To trade in these wings on some wheels" once again argues that Mary must give up her self-sacrificing behavior and embrace her real hope for salvation: the speaker and his car.

In the sixth stanza, the young man explicitly states his invitation to Mary, letting her know that, while leaving her comfort zone is terrifying, she will not have to take the risk alone. His desperation and passion are palpable in this stanza as he describes his intention to "case the Promised Land." Casing is colloquially understood as checking the scene of a theft in preparation for committing the crime. This tells the listener that the speaker has had a hard life; he believes that if he wants something for himself, he will have to go out and take it. Even the name of the highway conjures power, passion, and earth-shaking intensity.²⁰ He calls the highway "a killer in the sun," perhaps implying that if they don't go, the possibilities of their escape will become "*what ifs*" that slowly kill them. The speaker reminds Mary that she has not

²⁰ This is also likely a reference to the 1958 film of the same name.

resigned herself to that fate yet. All she has to do is get in the car and hang on for the ride; the car will do the rest.

The young man mentions his guitar playing in the seventh stanza, suggesting that this will be a way for the couple to support themselves. He seems confident that if he gets out of his small town, he can make a life for himself as a musician. Then, he reminds Mary of their current situation: his car is ready and waiting, she just needs to commit to the idea of leaving. He will not force her to sacrifice her safety and comfort; the choice is Mary's. The speaker acknowledges that Mary may be hesitant because he has yet to tell her he loves her (the "words that I ain't spoken") or assure her that everything will be okay. He addresses these concerns by saying that, though excitement lies ahead, neither of them can know exactly what will happen once they escape: "all the promises'll be broken."

However, the protagonist predicts what will happen to Mary if she chooses not to come with him: she will regret her decision and be haunted by memories of boys like him who tried to save her. The eighth stanza describes this in eerie detail, from the "skeleton frames" of the cars to the "screams" of the spurned saviors. Even her graduation robe, a symbol of the accomplishments that were expected of her, "lies in rags" suggesting that staying for the sake of duty and obligation will end up being worthless.

Night is a time filled with potential and opportunity over the course of the song. As the magic of the night wears away, however, "in the lonely cool before dawn" Mary will hear the

sounds of car engines and change her mind. She'll run out to join him, but it will be too late. Having issued this warning, the speaker extends one last invitation to Mary before turning the attention back to himself. He concludes by passionately declaring that "It's a town full of losers, I'm pulling out of here to win." While he would like Mary to join him, he must leave regardless of her decision.

Music

Determined to address the criticism leveled at the production quality of his first two albums, Springsteen used *Born to Run* to showcase the latest recording technology. He strove to create the perfect rock record, obsessing over every detail of the album's recording and production. His first two albums had been recorded live, with all the band members playing at once, but Springsteen decided to use the technique of overdubbing on *Born to Run*. This allowed him to create an enormous, Phil Spector-inspired wall of sound on this album.

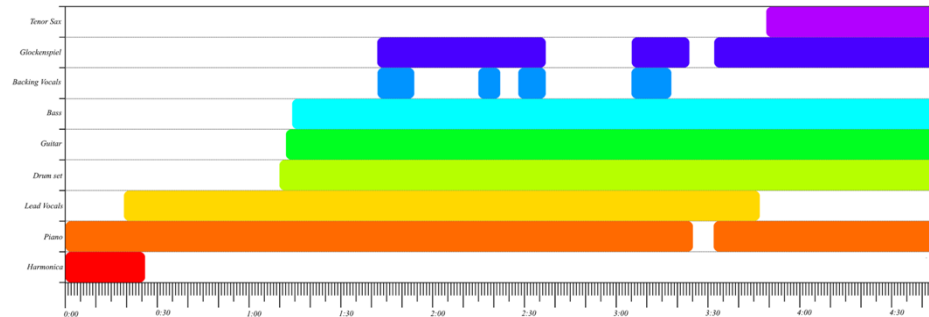
Another aspect of *Born to Run* that sets it apart from the earlier albums is his method of composition. Springsteen wrote all the songs for *Born to Run* on the piano instead of his primary instrument, guitar. In the words of E Street Band keyboardist Roy Bittan, "There's a great difference when you write on the piano.... I think that oftentimes on the piano you can discover things that you wouldn't discover on the guitar."²¹ Composing at the piano allowed Springsteen to create powerful melodies in the album.

²¹ Thom Zimny, *Wings for Wheels: The Making of Born to Run* (New Jersey: Thrill Hill Productions, 2005).

Though the piano is the most prominent instrument in the song, the other instruments have their affective roles to play. One of the key musical features of "Thunder Road" is the crescendo created by adding layers of instruments over the course of the song, as illustrated in Figure 1 on the next page.

The song opens with a simple melody played by piano and harmonica. The piano becomes more rhythmically active at the end of this introduction, creating a sense of rushing by shifting from a relaxed two-beat tempo into a driving four. The first two stanzas of the song are accompanied solely by the piano. Both the arpeggiated eighth notes of the right hand and the sparse, syncopated bass of the left occupy a register higher than the vocals, highlighting the rough quality of Springsteen's voice. The treble accompaniment conveys a quiet timidity under the rhythmically steady vocals. Despite the simplicity of the texture, the constant eighth notes in the right hand of the piano suggest an underlying urgency. At the beginning of the second stanza, there is a measure of strong, stable chords that shifts the register of the accompaniment down an octave, giving the impression of growing strength and confidence. Though the basic melody of the second stanza is the same as the first, the range of the vocal line expands upward, further energizing the song.

Figure 1: Texture Diagram for Studio Recording



The texture begins to build just before the third stanza with the entrance of the drums, guitar, and bass. The addition of these other instruments does not automatically turn “Thunder Road” into one of the more haphazard jam sessions found on Springsteen’s earlier albums, however. The bass doubles the left hand of the piano while the usually prevalent guitar adds simple harmonic and rhythmic support to the primary accompaniment of the piano. The nervous running eighth notes of the first two stanzas are replaced by more confident chordal support, highlighted by the simple drum set part. As the instruments lock together into a strong and stable accompaniment pattern, the vocal line becomes less rhythmically and dynamically predictable. Even still, all the parts form a coherent whole as the accented downbeats and extended vocal line propel directly into the fifth stanza.

Here, Springsteen introduces the organ and the backing vocals into the mix for the first time. The guitars and keyboards merge into a unified accompaniment, and the drum set becomes more prominent. In the production of the album, the backing vocals

were put very low in the mix, creating a distant, almost echoless effect, like shouting across a wide-open space. A measure of sixteenth notes on the drum set launches the song into the next stanza, bringing back the introductory melody in the vocals and keyboards. In the second half of the stanza, the keyboards continue this melody while the vocals add in the melody of the earlier verses overtop. The layering of the two different melodies adds to the crescendo effect of the song while also emphasizing the growing independence of the vocals, and they rise in register and volume to give the impression of uncontrollable excitement.

There is a two-beat drum fill between the sixth and seventh stanzas, which brings the vocals back under control and reunifies the accompanying instrumental parts. Here, Springsteen finally introduces the lead guitar as a focal instrument for the first time in the song, adding yet another voice to the expanding texture. At the end of the stanza, the vocal line ascends in contrary motion to the accompaniment and the last two measures crescendo through the repeated eighth notes in the piano, drum set, and vocals. By the last line, the vocals sound more like passionate screaming than singing, breathlessly leading into the end of the song.

The next stanza brings the vocals down from their screaming heights and reinstates the strong, syncopated accompaniment, this time with the guitars higher in the mix. At the beginning of the final stanza, the keyboards drop out for the first time in the song, introducing a new vocal melody with guitar and bass accompaniment. Midway through the stanza, the piano, and organ return with steadily descending quarter notes. The end of the

stanza is highlighted by colorful licks from the piano and guitar. As Springsteen sings the last lines of the song, the accompaniment builds from steady quarter notes to desperate eighth notes, outlining a clear IV-V-I cadential progression.

However, this cadence is done as the drums continue to build and a descending piano glissando lead into the song's instrumental conclusion. This eight-bar repeated outro introduces the final instrument: the tenor saxophone. The passionate saxophone melody trades the spotlight back and forth with the piano counter-melody. The harmonic progression of the outro, ending on the dominant, perpetually propels itself back to the tonic at the beginning of the passage. The only fitting way to end this cycle is with a fade-out.

The Blend of Lyrics and Music

"Thunder Road" is a strong example of how Springsteen deliberately blends his lyrics and music in order to convey complex characters and stories. The simple instrumentation and diatonic melody of the introduction set the scene of a small, quiet town. The rough quality of Springsteen's voice at the beginning of the song provides insight into the character of the narrator, suggesting someone rough around the edges who has not had an easy life but is not going to let that keep him down. The soft, high accompaniment implies a quiet timidity: the hesitation of a young man who has been rejected before and is almost afraid to ask again. The register of the accompaniment also has an ethereal quality that enhances the religious imagery present at the beginning of the

song. Overtop of the running eighth notes, the vocals are rhythmic and steady, like a speech that has been rehearsed over and over. One can almost see the young man practicing in front of a mirror, trying to work up the courage to approach Mary again. Despite his steadiness, the constant motion of the accompaniment implies an underlying urgency that drives the speaker to plead with Mary, even if it means risking another rejection.

When the speaker says, "I just can't face myself alone again," the piano accompaniment crescendos to mirror his growing confidence. The young man is not sure of much, but he knows that things cannot stay the way they are: it is time for a change. This determination is palpable through the musical gestures at the end of the phrase that shift the register of the accompaniment down, increasing both the volume and stability of the song. The singer's voice reaches up to F# on the lyrics, "show a little faith." In speech, a person's voice rises in pitch when one becomes impassioned, so it is appropriate that the vocal line ascends when the young man addresses Mary's concerns. It is as if he is telling her that she should have faith despite being scared. The lyrics no longer feel like a prepared speech; the speaker knows that he is getting carried away, but what he has to say is so important that he just cannot hold it in.

All traces of the young man's timidity are gone from the music as well as the lyrics by the time the drums, guitar, and bass enter. The support of the other instruments allows the vocal line to become more impassioned. The speaker is no longer afraid of offending Mary as he blatantly accuses her of hiding behind her circumstances. With endearing self-deprecation, he acknowledges

that he is not a knight in shining armor. Even still, he knows that he can offer her the chance she needs and, therefore, he is her opportunity for redemption.

The music of the fifth stanza embodies the excitement and desperation of the young man, who by now is completely carried away. He is no longer outside Mary's house; in his mind, he has already made his escape and he dreamily recounts what freedom on the open road feels like. The snare drum at the beginning of the sixth stanza snaps him back to the present and, for the first time, he explicitly invites Mary to run away with him. As he presents his invitation, he repeats the name of the highway, "Thunder Road," several times. It is as if just saying the name, with all its earth-shaking connotations, should be enough to convince Mary. Clearly, the young man is unable to contain himself as his voice rises in register and volume to exclaim, "Sit tight, take hold, Thunder Road."

The young man brings up his guitar playing just as the lead guitar is introduced into the mix. This is the first time that the guitar is prominent in "Thunder Road." As biographer Marc Dolan describes it, "waiting for the instrument to enter on this track perfectly conveys the song's gradually dawning hope."²² Mary may not have said yes yet, but she also has not said no, so the young man continues to describe his ideas for the future. The overall dynamic of the song builds dramatically when he sings, "And I know you're lonely for words that I ain't spoken / But tonight we'll be free. All the promises'll be broken." By the time he reaches the

²² Dolan, *The Promise of Rock 'N' Roll*, 121.

lyrics about broken promises, his vocals are closer to screaming than singing, as if sheer volume will assuage Mary's concerns about what will happen once they leave town.

The eighth stanza energetically predicts Mary's fate should she reject the speaker's offer. As he describes the "ghosts in the eyes of all the boys you sent away," the lead guitar interjects as if its voice will be one of the ghosts that will haunt Mary's thoughts. The vocals reach desperate heights on the line, "They scream your name at night in the street," and stay in that register to describe the symbol of all that Mary has worked for being reduced to "rags."

The keyboards disappear as the lyrics set a scene "in the lonely cool before dawn." The silencing of the piano, which has been the central instrument for the entire song, represents the silencing of Mary's hope for escape. It appropriately sets the lines that describe Mary being haunted by the ghosts of her missed opportunities. The piano and organ return with steadily descending quarter notes as the speaker tells Mary, "when you get to the porch they're gone," signifying her hope for escape, potentially disappearing into the distance. Just before the singer extends his final invitation to Mary, the guitar plays a soloistic blues riff, as if to remind Mary that her would-be savior is still there and that she has not missed her chance yet. As the young man sings his last desperate lines, the accompaniment and vocals build into their final crescendo. The instrumental ending tells us at least part of the story's ending: the young man has escaped. Whether or not Mary joined him is left open to speculation. Perhaps the descending

piano line just before the last lyrics symbolizes Mary running down the porch steps to join him in his victorious departure.

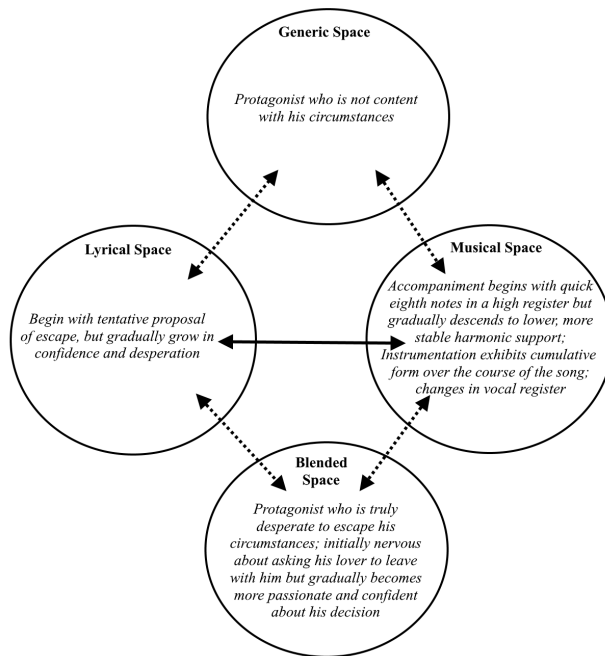


Figure 2: Persona CIN – Studio Recording

Figure 2 shows a CIN of the persona created in this song. The lyrics of the studio recording begin tentatively as the protagonist invites Mary to come with him, but he gradually grows in confidence, desperation, and passion as he tries to convince her. Similarly, the accompaniment begins in a high register that sounds tentative, but later moves to more stable harmonic support. Over the course of the song, the instruments are gradually introduced into the texture, what Mark Spicer would call a “cumulative

form."²³ This textural crescendo communicates increasing confidence, supported by changes in vocal register at key moments of the song. Together, these features create a protagonist who is truly desperate to escape his circumstances.

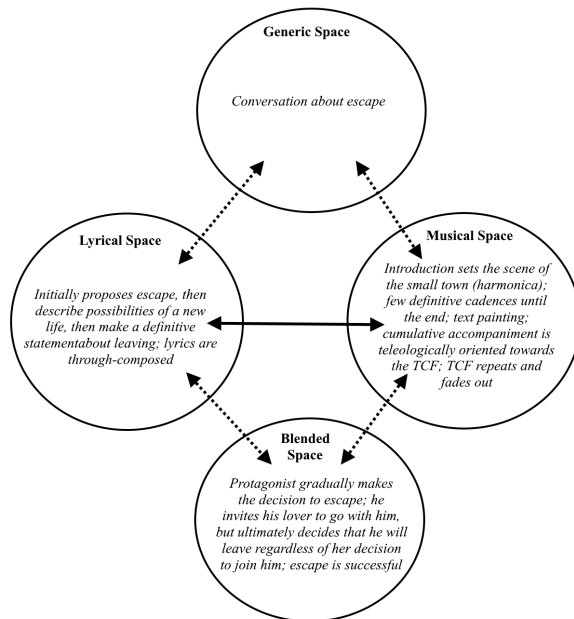


Figure 3: Narrative CIN - Studio Recording

A CIN of the narrative trajectory of this recording is given in Figure 3. The through-composed lyrics (a composition that does not have repeated sections) initially propose escape, then move to discussing the possibilities of a new life. The protagonist concludes with a definitive statement about his intention to leave. Musically,

²³ Mark Spicer, "(Ac)cumulative Form in Pop-Rock Music," *Twentieth-Century Music* 1, no. 1 (2004): 29-64.

the introduction sets the scene of a small town through the use of the harmonica. Perhaps it is even the protagonist himself, leaning against his car and playing harmonica along with the radio. There are few definitive cadences over the course of the song, with the strongest one occurring on the last line. Finally, the cumulative form of the song is teleologically oriented towards the climax of the outro, which repeats and fades out in a way that could signify driving into the distance.²⁴ The absence of the harmonica at the end of the song, the marker of the small town from the beginning, communicates that the setting has changed. Over the course of the song, the protagonist gradually comes to the decision to escape. He invites Mary to go with him but ultimately decides that he will leave regardless of her decision. The exuberant outro communicates that his getaway is a success.

Bryn Mawr, PA – February 1975

Lyrics

Before recording the version of “Thunder Road” that ended up on *Born to Run*, Springsteen performed an early draft of the song with the parenthetical subtitle “Wings for Wheels.” This version includes lyrics with a different focus than the studio recording, beginning with the name of the singer’s girlfriend: here, Angelina instead of Mary.²⁵ The lyrics of this recording appear in Appendix 2. The first and second stanzas are largely unchanged but, by the

²⁴ Brad Osborn, “Subverting the Verse-Chorus Paradigm: Terminally Climactic Forms in Recent Rock Music,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 35, no. 1 (2013): 23-47.

²⁵ Note that both names fit with the religious imagery, referencing angels in the early version and the Virgin Mary in the studio version.

third stanza, the singer seems more focused on his car than his girlfriend. He quickly shifts from assuaging her fears to pressuring her to make up her mind so that he can get back on the road. He seems more interested in going for a drive than in leaving town for good. The fourth stanzas of the two recordings communicate similar ideas but use different imagery to convey passion and excitement. The speaker in the "Wings for Wheels" version does not address the difficulties of starting a new life, but instead focuses on how they will "dance all the way" out of town.

The next-to-last stanza does not have a clear parallel to the studio version. It conjures images of the shore town life that is the focal point of "4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)" from Springsteen's second album. The singer laments that the season is over, the cold is coming in, and he wishes "I could take you to some sandy beach where we'd never grow old." This identification of a specific location makes the story less generalizable. This is not a generic small town where nothing ever happens; shore towns are busy places during the summer but become quieter when the tourists go home. Situating the town on the shore makes it seem like the young man's desire to leave is merely temporary until the next summer rolls around.

The final declaration in the studio recording is "I'm pullin' out of here to win." It is definitive and action oriented. Here, the lyrics are "baby I was born to win." While passionate – and perhaps foreshadowing "Baby we were born to run" – they are passive and do not contain any direct statement of action.

Music

The harmonica is absent from the beginning of this recording and the instrumentation is different, including violin and substituting organ for the studio recording's glockenspiel. The balance between instruments does not seem as intentional, though this is a live performance as opposed to a carefully crafted studio track. Before the next-to-last stanza, the energy drops down and the instrumental texture thins out, signifying a change of mood. Just before the last line, the energy begins to build back up again, reaching a similarly strong cadence as the studio recording. After this strong conclusion, however, the saxophone leads the band back in for an outro that feels disconnected from the rest of the song. It sounds like a party or a jam in the style of "The E Street Shuffle," ending the song on an upbeat note.

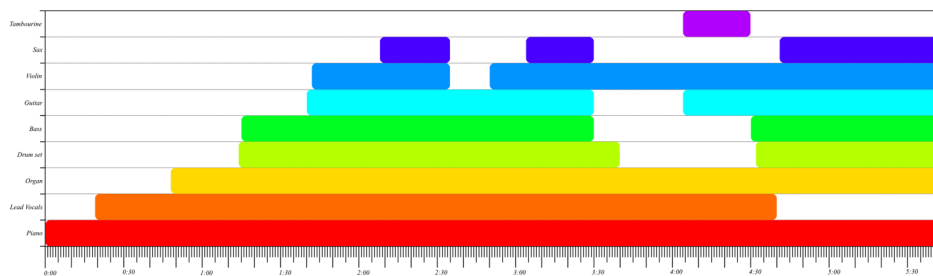


Figure 4: Texture Diagram for "Wings for Wheels"

The Blend of Lyrics and Music

The lyrics of this version of "Thunder Road" invite the protagonist's girlfriend to run away with him, but he is not focused on the realities of escaping and his reference to the end of the

summer in a shore town indicates a boredom that will disappear by the next summer. The introduction of instruments on the track, shown in Figure 4, does not have the same organized, goal-oriented feel of the studio recording. These features communicate a protagonist who is young and bored rather than desperate and determined to escape, as illustrated in the persona CIN in Figure 5.

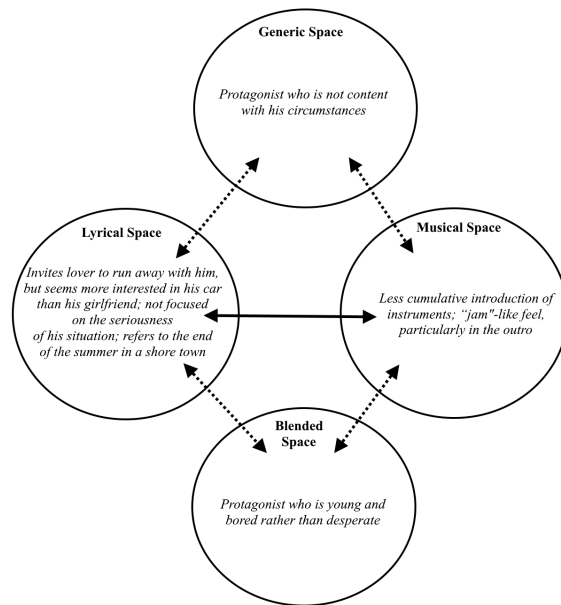


Figure 5: Persona CIN – "Wings for Wheels"

Figure 6 shows the CIN for the narrative of this recording. A lack of seriousness is communicated both in the proposal of the escape and the description of how it will happen. The closing lyrics also do not convey definitive action. Musically, the accompaniment is relaxed and not goal oriented. The instrumental balance is a bit

haphazard, and the closing material does not seem to fit with the rest of the song. Overall, it seems that this protagonist's situation is not serious and can be fixed by a long drive and an end-of-summer party. He does not escape, and that's okay. He believes he is "born to win."

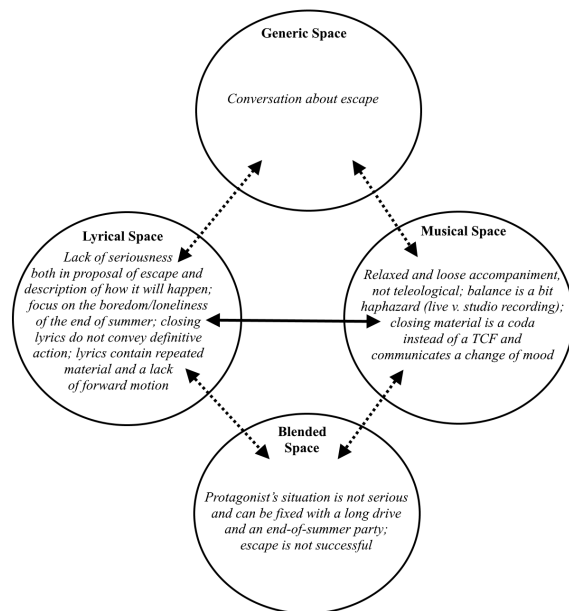


Figure 6: Narrative CIN – "Wings for Wheels"

West Hollywood, CA – October 1975

Music

The lyrics of the West Hollywood recording from October of 1975 are the same as those on the studio recording, but the

accompaniment is strikingly different. This performance took place in the 500-seat Roxy Theatre, a relatively intimate performance venue for Springsteen. Though the beginning of the track contains the introduction of "Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band," the only instruments that appear on the track are piano, harmonica, lead vocals, and glockenspiel. The tempo of this recording is about 20 beats per minute slower than the studio version, giving it a tired feel. Previously energetic parts of the song are played with rubato and the register of the melody appears an octave lower. In the outro, the piano plays the melody, countered by mournful vocal wailing, glockenspiel, and the return of the harmonica.

The Blend of Lyrics and Music

While the lyrical substance is the same as the studio recording, the tempo is also slower, and the voice stays in a lower register, conveying a lack of energy (see Figure 7). This protagonist comes across as significantly older and more hopeless than the singer of the other two recorded versions. The CIN for the persona of this recording's narrator is given in Figure 8.

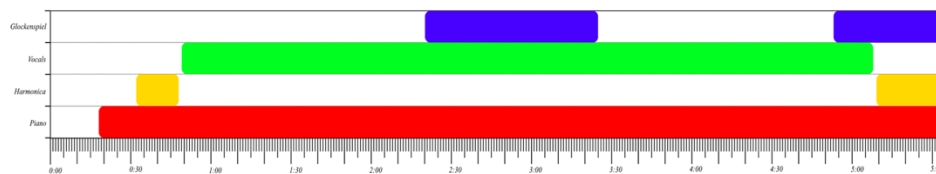


Figure 7: Texture Diagram for *Live 1975-85*

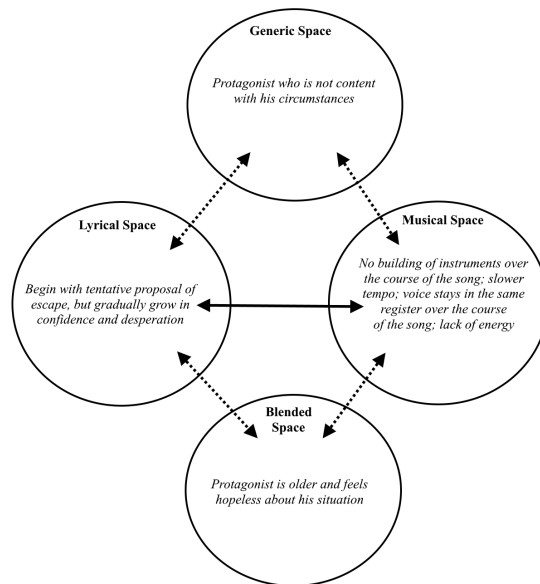
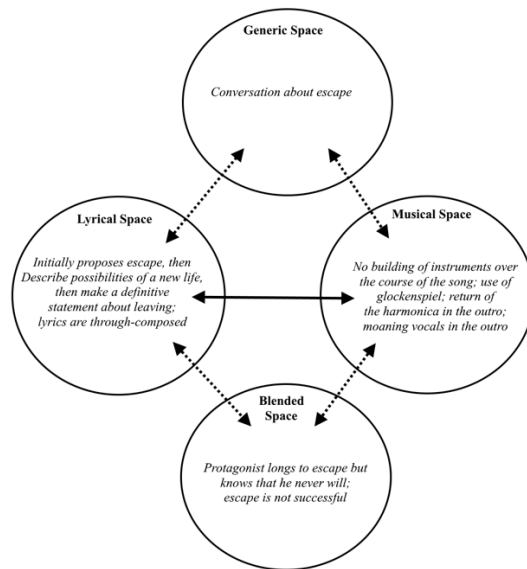


Figure 8: Persona CIN – *Live 1975-85*

Figure 9 gives the CIN for the narrative of this recording, which retains the lyrical content of the studio recording. The comparatively static texture, slower tempo, use of rubato, and more limited vocal range convey a sense of defeat. The use of the glockenspiel in this performance seems to highlight the difference between reality and fantasy through its absence at the beginning and presence as the protagonist describes the open road. Its reappearance in the outro makes it seem as though that dream might be fulfilled until the harmonica returns, suggesting that the protagonist ends the song in the same location he started. Though this protagonist longs to escape, he knows he never will.

Figure 9: Narrative CIN – *Live* 1975-85

Conclusion

It is clear that Springsteen is aware of the narrative flexibility of "Thunder Road" and the effect of different interpretations of the song. In a 1984 interview with *International Musician and Recording World's* Don McLeese, Springsteen said of songs like "Thunder Road," "I don't get tired of them, because they're different every time out. They don't mean exactly the same thing anymore."²⁶ According to the crowd-sourced collection of setlists available on

²⁶ Don McLeese, "The Bruce Springsteen Interview" in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters*, ed. Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 136. Even though Springsteen was meticulous about the words that he used, the song's meaning still changes both with the passage of time and with different instrumental accompaniments.

the Springsteen fan site *Backstreets*, Springsteen performed “Thunder Road” 1,147 times between 1975 and 2017.²⁷ The vast majority of these performances have been variations of the studio version, but fans have identified 95 performances in which Springsteen performs a different version of the song. The early “Wings for Wheels” version does not reappear after February of 1975. The piano version from *Live 1975-85* was performed several times in late 1975, and sporadically since then: twice at benefit concerts in 1990, twice at shows in early 2003, twice as part of the *Devils and Dust* tour in 2005, and once each in 2010 and 2012. In addition, Springsteen has performed the song solo (or with his wife, Patti Scialfa) on acoustic guitar 62 times throughout his career, usually when performing in smaller venues without the rest of the band. Other variations of the song have occurred when performing with guest artists like Bob Seeger or Melissa Etheridge. During his recent Broadway residency, Springsteen performed an acoustic version of “Thunder Road” on guitar that struck me as different from the three versions of 1975. It was almost lullaby-like: softer and slower, but without the bitterness or sadness that appears in the *Live 1975-85* recording. It seems like, for Springsteen, the meaning of “Thunder Road” continues to evolve, and his performance evolves to suit his understanding of the speaker and the speaker’s journey.

In a 2005 interview, Springsteen remarked, “When I go back and play ‘Thunder Road’... I can sing very comfortably from my vantage point because a lot of the music was about a loss of

²⁷ *Backstreets: The Boss Website*, <https://www.backstreets.com/>.

innocence. There's innocence contained in you but there's also innocence in the process of being lost."²⁸ It is, of course, understandable that a loss of innocence would occur for Springsteen in the thirty years between 1975 and 2005. What is remarkable about the three versions of the song discussed in this article, however, is that they manage to address the loss of innocence in such different ways, despite all being recorded in the same year. In the earliest performance of the song, a young man experiencing adolescent restlessness deals with his boredom by going for a drive. In the studio recording, a desperate man pleads with his lover to escape from their small-town life and—it would appear—is ultimately successful. In the later version, an older man reflects on how he would like to escape, but he knows that he cannot. These three performances show how, from the outset, Springsteen's "empathetic imagination" enabled him to embody vastly different, but equally resonant interpretations of "Thunder Road."

More broadly, these three versions of "Thunder Road" from 1975 provide insight into Springsteen's creative process at a pivotal moment in his career. Not only was *Born to Run* Springsteen's first true commercial success, but it could be argued that this album marked the birth of his true authorial voice. While there are certainly elements of this voice present in *Greetings from Asbury Park* and *The Wild, The Innocent, and The E Street Shuffle*, both earlier albums differ significantly from his later work. The lyrics of

²⁸ Nick Hornby, "A Fan's Eye View," in *Springsteen on Springsteen: Interviews, Speeches, and Encounters*, ed. Jeff Burger (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 318.

Greetings are arguably the most Dylan-esque of Springsteen's work, perhaps reflecting what the young Springsteen thought his record label wanted to hear. *The Wild, The Innocent* contains several long songs, ranging from 4:29 to 9:55 that reflect the influence of several different musical styles, most notably jazz, in a way that is different from his later work. Around the release of *Born to Run*, the personnel of the E Street Band solidified, allowing the group to find its distinctive sound. The transformation of "Thunder Road" from the February 1975 "Wings for Wheels" recording to the August studio album may reflect Springsteen learning how to write for and work with this particular group of musicians.

In addition, the transformation of the protagonist in "Thunder Road" may mirror Springsteen's own journey through 1975. Towards the beginning of the year, he's having fun touring and making music with the band. Things do not feel terribly serious, and his mental state may be most in line with the February recording at the Main Point. As he begins recording the new album in earnest, however, the reality of his precarious position at Columbia Records may have started to sink in, allowing him to tap into the focused desperation that is palpable on the studio recording. Then, as the record becomes a hit, Springsteen may have realized that making it big in the music industry was not everything that he thought it would be and did not instantly fix all the problems in his life or the trauma that he had experienced. The stripped down, slower October 1975 recording may reflect that realization.

Autobiographical or not, the three versions of "Thunder Road" analyzed here reflect a view of the popular song as a flexible entity that changes with time and in each performance. Unlike a classical orchestral work thought to be embodied in a score and evaluated by its adherence to written specifications, part of the value of popular music is its ability to grow and change and communicate new things to new audiences through reinterpretations. Often, this happens through cover performance. At other times, as here, the original artist takes the opportunity to reinterpret his own work. By reinterpreting "Thunder Road," and many of his other songs, throughout his career, Springsteen reiterates the creative value of his work.

Reviews

American Lonesome: The Work of Bruce Springsteen, written by Gavin Cologne-Brookes (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018, 228 pages).

Gavin Cologne-Brookes' *American Lonesome: The Work of Bruce Springsteen* does not attempt to present traditional literary analysis of Springsteen's work, although it contains numerous allusions to primary American texts to demonstrate common themes among these works. Cologne-Brookes guides us through his personal considerations of Springsteen, both as an artist and a presenter of personae, and at the same time offers both autobiographical and associative insights as he considers perceived kindred thought between Springsteen and both American and European creators. As a result, this unconventional volume provides something different than the focused literary analysis one might expect.

Cologne-Brookes often needs to complete his argument, in that he frequently presents an assertion, offers a reference, and then moves on to his next point when the reader needs for him to draw his connections and offer a more definitive, convincing indication of his line of thought. For example, he states that "Perhaps the best evidence of Springsteen's dialogue with his era is in the patterns that interconnect his work with Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*"¹. Mason has gone on record as saying that *Born in the USA* "belonged in the novel" (see her interview with Hillary Devries for The Christian Science Monitor), but Cologne-Brookes does not offer a

convincing demonstration that this influence has been reciprocated. After offering a brief summary of Mason's novel, particularly where surviving members of a family go to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Cologne-Brookes notes that Springsteen's "The Wall" (High Hopes, 2014) depicts a surviving family of a veteran as they consider the memorial "small recompense It's a long way from the record that saw Springsteen become a household name as a pop icon. . . . [I]t nods to Mason's 1985 novel," Cologne-Brookes concludes, offering a citation to an interview where Springsteen says of Mason only, "I like her work."²

Cologne-Brookes leads us to expect that he will trace those "patterns that interconnect," but he does not do so, merely rephrasing his vague assertion "'The Wall' shows how his work came to participate in a conversation" and leaving us either to accept that assertion or find the evidence to substantiate this open-ended assertion for ourselves.³

At the close of *American Lonesome*, Cologne-Brookes offers a reverie where he is a twenty-something fan surprised when Springsteen halts a concert, leans from the stage, and asks Cologne-Brookes to autograph the book we have just finished reading, handing it back to the young author with the admonition, "I'm a mere catalyst. It's your life. Make something of it."⁴ The dust jacket of the book asserts that *American Lonesome* "dissolves any imagined

barriers between the study of a songwriter, literary criticism, and personal testimony," and this closing passage confirms that focus.

¹ Gavin Colonge-Brookes, *American Lonesome: The Work of Bruce Springsteen* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 180.

² *Ibid.*, 200 n. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 162-63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.