Bruce Springsteen's America

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A Dream Deferred

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-2793-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2793-5

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

(Langston Hughes)

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INTRO

GROWIN' UP

"For the first time, I can really imagine rock and roll at 40."
—Miami Steve Van Zandt[1]

Bruce Springsteen has been around for almost fifty years now. His music was the soundtrack for a couple of generations, and addressed the memory of at least two generations more. We all encounter Bruce Springsteen at different times in our lives, with different vibrations.[2]

"For every Bruce Springsteen fan," writes music critic Christopher Phillips, "there's an origin story… the story of how each discovered our passion is as integral a part of our personal story as a first kiss."[3] "My first concert," recalls Italian music journalist Marina Petrillo, "was the one at San Siro [arena in Milan] in '85. I had been listening to him since I was thirteen, but my baptism to his music (which, as all know, can only take place live) coincided with his first mass commercial tour."[4] Daniel Cavicchi notes that fans are very much aware of the moment of their "conversion" to the "cult" of Bruce Springsteen, so much that an early date of discovery is almost a status symbol. A friend writes me: "I was in early high school at that time [1974], and my dearest friend (had just moved up to Mass. from New Jersey) played his albums constantly. We knew every word. Then *Born to Run* came out, and we had to share him with everybody."[5]

I am one of those latecomers: I had never heard Bruce Springsteen until I discovered *The River* in the early eighties. As a consolation, I may note that others, much more qualified than I am, came in even later. Tom Morello, who joins Springsteen on guitar on his later albums, recalls: "I was a latecomer. I grew up on metal and then punk and then hip-hop, and I didn't really get it until, it was probably '86 or '87. When I first thought there might be something there for me, it was the Amnesty International tour, there was a live special from Buenos Aires, and I watched that because I was a big fan of Peter Gabriel and was surprised that someone named Bruce Springsteen was headlining the event. It was an epic show,

and I realized the depth and the power—it was smart and it was moving and it was stadium-rocking, and I got the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* cassette the next day and realized I was in for a treat digging into the catalog."[6]

I, too, explored Bruce Springsteen backwards, working my way upstream through the catalog. Unlike other fans, I did not experience his early albums as a revelation but rather as a prologue. By the time I bought *The River* at the Harvard Coop in Cambridge, Mass. in 1983, I was well over forty, I was a professor of American literature, I had been through the Sixties and was steeped in political activism. Had I been 16 years old, *The River* and its title track would have affected me perhaps the way Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis or Roy Orbison did when I was that age, with the same exciting discovery that I was different from grownups. But in the 1960s I had discovered Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, the early Bob Dylan, and, while I still cherished my old 45s, yet my interest had shifted from rock and roll to American and later Italian folk and protest music. I wrote my dissertation on Woody Guthrie at the University of Rome, and it was later published in Italian, the first full-length study of Guthrie anywhere.[7.] Folk music, it seemed, was the sound of real lives, work, conflict, resistance… Thus, what first attracted me in *The River* were the painful and problematic ballads: "The River," "Independence Day," "Point Blank"…. The dark side of the force, as it were. But it was also a re-discovery, so many years later, of the power of rock and roll.

What clinched it was the five-record live set, *Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band Live / 1975-85*. The opening of the third disc stunned me: "There's a book out right now…" I had never heard a rocker mention a book from a concert stage. What was more, the book he talked about was Joe Klein's *Woody Guthrie. A Life.*[8] Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," Springsteen explained, was "an angry song," not a mere patriotic anthem but an answer to the sugary nationalism of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." Springsteen would later perform that song on the Lincoln Center stage along with Pete Seeger, including all the censored or forgotten protest verses, to celebrate the election of the first African American president.[9] But already back then he was exploring an idea of patriotism, of love for his country, that was alternative to the chauvinism of the Reagan age. The problem would surface again shortly afterwards, with *Born in the U.S.A.*

As for me, Springsteen's encounter with Guthrie brought back home all the music I had listened to and loved until then—rock and roll, folk music,

protest song—and placed it in a common history. Rock and roll at forty, indeed. Springsteen had already issued *Nebraska*, which however I only heard after *Born in the U.S.A*; much later, of course, it was *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Bruce Springsteen had been listening to Woody Guthrie and such country artists as Hank Williams and Jimmie Rodgers—somehow the same path I had followed, discovering the seriousness of country music through Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard, and even Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975). I was one of the very few in Italy who liked country music and didn't superficially label it as fascist.[10] Perhaps, even before I heard *Nebraska*, I had responded in a subterranean way to the folk and country elements in Bruce Springsteen (such as the Roy Acuff and Hank Williams references in "Wreck on the Highway" and "The River").[11] Years later, when Springsteen brought out *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, everything fell in place—Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams, John Steinbeck, John Ford, Elvis Presley, and Bruce Springsteen.

However, when I did a program on American political music on Italian public radio in 1983[12], I did not choose the darker and more socially engaged tracks of *The River,* but one of the lightest and sunniest: *"*Sherry Darling," a youthful party rocker with all the canonic ingredients, the car, the girl, the sun, the beach …[13] And yet, there was something in "Sherry Darling" that had been missing in my earlier rock idols.

In an interview with Robert Hilburn, Springsteen asked: "How could a happy song like 'Sherry Darling' coexist with 'Point Blank' or 'Darkness on the Edge of Town'?"[14] The fact is that "Sherry Darling" is indeed a happy song, which is why I like it, but up to a certain point. Of course, the car, the girl, the beach… Yet—wait a second: it's Monday morning (not Saturday night) and before they get to the beach the narrator and his girl must take her mother to the unemployment agency. The *unemployment agency*? Who ever heard of such a thing in a rock and roll song? The obnoxious voice of the mother in law in the backseat sounds like a metaphor for all the voices and experiences that are pushed to the margins of discourse and yet are insuppressible and bothersome, and insist on being heard with all their uncouthness even in the sleekest contexts. It is the voice of an elderly woman, unemployed, living in the ghetto and therefore possibly Black or Puerto Rican.[15] Can the subaltern speak, Gayatri Spivak famously asked[16]—and indeed they do, from the backseat of a car on its way to the beach on a Monday morning. How often does rock acknowledge such things, employment and unemployment, the everyday life of people who are older and work, or try to work and make

ends meet till next payday or the next welfare check?[17] Rock and roll, even in its most youthful form, had grown up and had retrieved the working-class, common-people environment in which it was born.[18]

In fact, both "Sherry Darling" and "The River" are about unemployment and its impact on lives and relationships. Samuele F. S. Pardini, to whom I owe several good exchanges of ideas on Bruce Springsteen, has written that there are two possible responses to the failure of the economy: "you can go back together to the river, which still represents hope though it may be dry; or you can drive a mother to the unemployment office."[19] Critic Nicholas Dawidoff writes that Springsteen injects a grown-up perspective in the songs of his youth. Indeed, Springsteen's songs are always the same age as he is at the time of the writing. He keeps learning and educating himself; he grows older and, unlike many other rock stars, he is not ashamed to let it show: "I've always been trying to write about what it's like to be my age in this particular point in history," he explains; and, in 1992, "I wanted to make the characters grow up… I said, Well, how old am I? I'm this old, so I wanna address that in some fashion." "I want to get up on stage and sing with all of the forty-two years that are in me […] I look forward to being sixty or sixty-five and doing that." *High Hopes*, indeed. On stage on Broadway, in 2018, he referred to himself, unabashedly, as "an old man." But he was still born to run.[20]

However, as is the case with any canon that is worthy of its name, diachrony does not abolish synchronicity. New songs do not cancel out the old: "Thunder Road" ("these two lanes can take us anywhere") is no less real than "The Ghost of Tom Joad" ("The highway is alive tonight, but no one is kidding no one about where it goes"); and in between is the desolate epiphany of "Cautious Man" ("down to the highway he strode / When he got there he didn't find nothin' but road"). The road can take us anywhere, or nowhere, and ultimately it means nothing but itself. It represents the symbolic stage for the pursuit of the runaway American dream—elusive and runaway also because its definition and content are uncertain and blurry and ultimately the dream also means nothing but the dreaming itself.

"The release date is just one day. The record is forever," Bruce Springsteen says, and he is right.[21] In this book, I treat Springsteen's work thematically as if it were all contemporary. This is due partly to the fact that, like many others, I did not come to it in chronological order; and partly to the fact that it remains all relevant to our time: in the Rome, 2013 concert, material from *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ* (1973) coexisted

with material from *Wrecking Ball* (2012). I do have a rough periodization in mind, yet within each theme I draw from all the Springsteen canon. Indeed, the songs themselves have grown and changed with time, and acquired or revealed different shades of meaning. Looking back to all of Springsteen's work from the point of view of his more recent production, what had been exhilarating in his early songs remains very much so, but takes on, even in his own eyes, also a more somber and critical hue; the darker side that was always there is brought to the fore by the reverberations of his later work.

Furthermore, I read the canon from a specific, focused, problematic point of view: the themes of work and class, and their relationship with the "American dream." There is much more in Springsteen—including the most important thing, the music itself, and fortunately it has been explored by specialists better qualified than I will ever be. But this is what I know how to do, and this is what I do here.

A story by the Mexican-American author Sandra Cisneros begins: "What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one… Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one."[22] All your past ages are inside your current age, you are what you are, you cannot deny "the ties that bind" and, like Outlaw Pete, you cannot erase all that you have been. Springsteen, again: "I have a metaphor. I say, 'Look, you're in a car, your new selves can get in, but your old selves can't get out. […] The child from 1950, he doesn't get out. The teenager, the adolescent boy, no one can get out. They are with you until the end of the ride.'"[23]

Just as *Thunder Road* is still inside *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, within the connection between "Sherry Darling" and "The River" coexisted all the rings of my tree: inside the academic, the activist, the scholar still lived the adolescent who had discovered the keys to the universe in three minutes of rock and roll. And all of them are still, hopefully, inside the person who is writing now, more than thirty years later.

CHAPTER ONE

THE WORKING LIFE

1. Factory

"You did what your father did, and so on for generations—but, it's a matter of survival. Yet, if you think about it, it didn't seem right"
(Becky Ruth Brae, wife, daughter and wife of coal miners, Harlan County, Kentucky)[24]

I come from down in the valley
Where mister, when you're young
They bring you up to do like your daddy done.
(Bruce Springsteen, "The River")

In his book *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*, historian Jim Cullen writes: "In its most powerful and durable formulation [the American dream] was a hope that one's children would enjoy a higher standard of living than oneself." The consensus around this notion is virtually unanimous. In his "cultural history" of the American Dream, historian Lawrence R. Samuel confirms: "The notion of upward mobility, the idea that one can, through dedication and with a can-do spirit, climb the ladder of success and reach a higher social and economic position [is] the heart of the American Dream." A 2005 *New York Times* series on the subject opened with this statement: "Social mobility is the promise that lies at the heart of the American Dream." In 2014, *New Yorker* commentator James Surowiecky noted: "Since at least the days of Horatio Alger, a cornerstone of American thinking has been the hope of social mobility."[25] If one googles "American dream social mobility," one gets the same answers: "One of the most important principles underlying the American dream is upward mobility—the ability to move up the income ladder"; "the ability of people across the country to climb the economic ladder [is] the quintessential American dream."[26] We could go on forever.

In recent years, though, many Americans have come to believe that, as Barack Obama acknowledged in his 2014 State of the Union address,

"upward mobility has stalled": "After four years of economic growth," he went on, "corporate profits and stock prices have rarely been higher, and those at the top have never done better. But average wages have barely budged. Inequality has deepened."[27] This was the official recognition of the crisis of the American Dream for the many Americans who, even in the midst of economic recovery, are "working more than ever just to get by—let alone get ahead," while "too many still aren't working at all." Economists and politicians were just waking up to this fact, after the crisis of 2008. But, as James Surowiecki notes, social mobility in the U.S. has been stalled for at least forty years, and has been lower than in most parts of Western Europe: "the American dream has become increasingly untethered from American reality."[28]

Bruce Springsteen had known this for at least one generation. There was no need for words or statistics. Like many working-class children, he had only to look in his father's eyes (or, like Merle Haggard, in his mother's)[29] as he entered the factory gates, to understand the unvarying cycle of the "working life":

> Early in the morning factory whistle blows
> Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes
> Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light
> The working, the working, the working life
> […]
> End of the day, factory whistle cries
> Men walk through these gates
> With death in their eyes...

"Factory" condenses in three lean verses three very hard realities. First: the factory takes your life to give you a living. Second: factory time never changes, it's always the same, cyclical, repetitive. Third: the myth of social mobility has nothing to do with these lives, except as a myth.

Yet, while the story of "Factory" describes a time that never changes, the text suggests a development: from "man" in the first verse to "men" in the third. One man's deadly solitude is part of the solitude of all. Nobody springs out of this death trap. The nightmare that haunts Bruce Springsteen's work is the fate of repeating one's parents' life: none of his characters rise in the world and break this cycle thanks to hard work or can-do spirit. Forget the Puritan work ethic and the mythology of merit: the character in "Ramrod" has been working hard all week and is still "up to [his] neck in hock."

As sociologists Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb have shown, the

"hidden injuries of class" are not limited to economic insecurity. Caught in a cycle of frustration and self-blame, many workers only retrieve a sense of dignity and meaning by re-imagining their lives as a sacrifice for the future, for their families, for the country.[30] These are frequent themes in the country music that Bruce Springsteen knows well; as Springsteen critic David Masciotra notes, "From Merle Haggard to Brooks & Dunn, many great country singers have often paid tribute to their listeners by glorifying the routine of the worker, instead of wrestling with the complex and often disturbing implications of the 'working life.'"[31]

A little-known but interesting country song by George Jones, "Small-Time Laboring Man," traces the same drab cycle of the working life as many of Bruce Springsteen's songs: "A dollar an hour, eight hours a day / Will soon make a young man wither away." Week after week "[his] life stays the same"; but he finds pride in the knowledge that with his "calloused hands" he raises a family and keeps it away from the "starvation plan" and finds consolation in the fact that "On Sunday my family gives me comfort and rest."[32]

There is no such family comfort in the lives of Bruce Springsteen's working-class characters.[33] Springsteen has listened to the hidden injuries of class in country music, but offers no consolation or compensatory pride. As Sennett and Cobb write, the consolation of sacrifice opens even deeper wounds of resentment, hostility, and shame—the same attitudes that Springsteen evokes in his songs on working-class generational relationships. The basic difference lies in the fact that in country music the point of view is mainly that of the fathers; in early Springsteen, the sons': "Pa's eyes were windows into a world so deadly and true," and only his mother's keep him from "crawling through" ("The Wish").

In Springsteen's "Adam Raised a Cain," a father who worked all his life for nothing but pain walks the empty house searching in vain for someone to blame: a reference to toil and pain as the sanction for the original sin (Genesis 3:17–19).[34] The endless cycle of lives of toil extends from generation to generation; each Adam raises a Cain because they pass on the resentment and violence generated by having to pay for sins committed before they were even born, and for the sins that they commit in reaction to this fate. The original sin never goes away: as soon as you are born you are put in your place and handed the "keys to your dad's Cadillac" so you can ride a second-hand life on the same road that he did before you.

Rather than recognizing the generosity of sacrifice, the sons in these

stories perceive their fathers' lives as meaningless, and resent the thought that their own lives might be the same. In less painful terms, the same cycle is suggested in "My Hometown": generation after generation, fathers take sons on their knees, drive them around, and tell them that "this is your hometown"—and will always be, unless they break away from both father and town to seek independence elsewhere ("I ain't gonna let them do to me what I watched them do to you": "Independence Day"). The narrator of "My Hometown" and his wife talk about packing up and heading South; but it's probably too late.

Mobility is often a road to liberation or salvation, and the automobile is its vehicle and symbol. Redemption or the key to the universe may be found beneath a car's dirty hood ("Growin' Up," "Thunder Road"). Often, however, cars represent a mobility that has stalled. What sends the young man in "The Promised Land" on the road chasing miracles and promised lands by night is the anger and frustration built up working by day in a garage where not only does he repeat what his father does but actually works under him.

The most painful and humiliating parable about this dream denied is "Used Cars." Buying a car might signal a step forward in the family's fortunes, but that frightful oxymoron—"our brand-new used car"—designates the contradiction of a used life barely hidden beneath the veneer of improvement. Riding a used car is a sign of (relative) poverty, and poverty means humiliation, as the child narrator perceives looking at the way the white-collar salesman looks at his father's blue-collar hands, and listening to the man's unctuous and paternalistic words. Used car sales are a standing metaphor for swindle and scam; John Steinbeck dedicates a whole chapter to this in *The Grapes of Wrath*.[35] "Would you buy a used car from this man?" asked a famous 1960 political poster, displaying Richard Nixon's shifty face. In Springsteen's song, they stand for the rigged game society plays against the poor. Humiliation generates frustrated anger. The child fantasizes, wishing that his daddy would step on the gas and bid adieu to all; but the reality is that, like their car, their second-hand lives will, in George Jones words, "stay the same": the father works at the same job day after day and the child walks the same dirty streets where he was born.

There is no way out of here. In "Car Wash," Catherine LeFevre gets up every morning, drops the children at a neighbor's and goes to work at the car wash where she is "doing [her] time": a job like a life sentence, working under a boss she hates. Nothing happens at the car wash but the

rain ("Downbound Train"): there is no moving up, no self-improvement, no career opportunities at the car wash, even though it stands at the corner of Sunset and Vine, the heart of Hollywood, factory of imaginary dreams. The only way out Catherine LeFevre can imagine is a fairy tale: a handsome show-business prince charming who tells her it's all been a mistake and hands her a contract to sing in a night club and a million-dollar break.

"The day my number comes in," says the child in "Used Cars," "I ain't never gonna ride in no used car again." As Lawrence Samuel notes, the 1980s, when this song was written, saw a sharp increase in gambling and sweepstakes as shortcuts to the American Dream.[36] Only a Prince Charming with a contract, the lottery, some kind of lucky break will free us from the daily humiliation of doing time in a second-hand life. Bruce Springsteen, in fact, did have his well-deserved multimillion dollar singing break. But stories like his, one in ten million or more, mainly serve to feed the illusions of all those who are stuck behind. Bruce Springsteen never worked at a car wash or a factory, but saw the eyes of his neighbors and kin who did. Perhaps, this combination of familiarity and distance is what enables him to sing about other people's lives with a realism unattainable to those who are caught inside.

2. Car Wash

"I like the one about the car wash—where it rains all
the time and he lost his job and his girlfriend. That's the saddest song.
That song really scares me"
(Bobbie Ann Mason)[37]

Toward the end of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, two characters discuss matters of life and death. Would death be less frightening, one asks, if you'd accomplished all you'd ever hoped to accomplish in your life and work? And the other replies: "It's an elitist idea. Would you ask a man who bags groceries if he fears death less not because it is death but because there are still some interesting groceries he'd like to bag"?[38]

"As she bags the groceries, her eyes so bored / And sure she is unobserved" ("Queen of the Supermarket"). There is something wonderful and rare in the Queen of the Supermarket, but it certainly does not come from her job. One smile from her is enough to blow up "this whole fucking place"; but her secrets and beauty are hidden beneath her company apron and cap, and the consumers shuffling in the aisles are blissfully unaware of her true being.

In the same way, there is something sacred in Teresa, the waitress in "I'll Work for Your Love," but it certainly doesn't show as she dusts the glasses and serves the drinks. There is a tragic hiatus between the sacredness of these persons, the bleakness of their work, and the blind moral void of the consumer addicts—as if it was them, rather than the groceries, who are bagged and sold in the end.

Bruce Springsteen once fantasized about an America in which all may find satisfaction and life meaning in their work.[39] This, however, is hardly ever the case in his songs. In a verse that he added to Tom Waits' "Jersey Girl," the lover finds his girl all dressed to go out and asleep on the bed: she is tired and sad, because, he says, "that job you got leaves you so uninspired." Out of all of James Taylor's repertoire, in a concert in his honor, Springsteen selected "Millworker," a song based on Studs Terkel's oral history, *Working*.[40] Once again, the theme is the repetitive meaninglessness of an uninspiring, "boring awful job." All the millworker can do is while away the time daydreaming until her coffee break; but after that "it's me and my machine for the rest of the morning, and the rest of the afternoon, and the rest of my life."[41]

You get your back burned working in the fields, sings Springsteen in "Badlands"; you toil on the wheel until you get your facts learned… Yet, what makes work unbearable is less that it is hard than that it has no meaning. "Factory" skips from the moment in which the "man" walks into the factory gate in the morning to the moment he and the others come out at night, as if there were nothing but emptiness in the eight hours they spend inside. The factory takes the man's hearing and gives him life, as though he had to cut himself off from everything in order to survive. Thus, even in the hardest physical toil, the problem is less the physical effort than the psychological toll it takes. The narrator in "Out in the Street" loads crates on the dock five days a week, but his one complaint is that it's a waste of time that keeps him away from the night and his girl. The character in "Working on the Highway" is literally doing forced labor, paving the road, blowing up rocks; but all he thinks about is the young girl who was the cause of his sentence, and the illusion of a better life someday. They all escape mentally from these jobs, into reveries of something else: "I lost my job at the Texaco station / 'Cause instead of pumping gas I'd dream of you" ("I Wanna Be with You"); "Monday when the foreman calls time / I've already got Friday on my mind" ("Out in the Street").

James Taylor's millworker complains that she may work at her job all her life but never see "the man whose name is on the label": a textbook

definition of working-class alienation. Springsteen's laborers are alienated twice: not only because they are separated from the product of their work, but also because their work generates no meaningful product at all. It is the unskilled small-time service labor, with no trace of individuality or inspiration: the gas station ("I Wanna Be with You"), the car wash ("Car Wash," "Downbound Train"), the supermarket ("Queen of the Supermarket"), the laundromat ("Mary Queen of Arkansas"), the hamburger stand ("From Small Things"), the shoe store ("Highway 29"), the diner where Shaniqa serves coffee ("Girls in Their Summer Clothes"), the bar where Teresa dusts the glasses ("I'll Work for Your Love"), the Big Boys Fried Chicken stand where Wanda works all night ("Open All Night").

The only person in Springsteen's canon who seems to find meaning and pride in her work is his mother ("The Wish"). Compare his mother's pride and happiness as she walks home from work with the death in his father's eyes as he walks out of the factory gates.[42] She, however, is the only character who works at a white-collar office job. Often, Springsteen's characters are seen in the act of taking off their working clothes and changing for real life at night ("Racing in the Street," "All that Heaven Will Allow"); the mother in "The Wish" is the only one whose job has a dress code that includes lipstick, perfume and rustling silk.

The disenchantment over uninspiring jobs, however, does not entail lack of respect for those who work at them, nor lack of self respect on their side: Teresa, Shaniqa, Wanda and the Queen of the Supermarket are holy, whether they know it or not. Some people, says Springsteen, "get a chance to do the kind of work that changes the world, and make things really different. And then there's the kind that just keeps the world from falling apart. And that was the kind that my dad always did […] I never knew anybody who was unhappy with their job and was happy with their life. It's your sense of purpose. Now, some people can find it elsewhere. Some people can work a job and find it someplace else."[43]

Some place else: that's what many of Springsteen's classic songs are about: the night, the cars, the rides after a mirage or a runaway dream, love… Yet, the meaning of all these things is defined by the fact that they are the other face of uninspired working lives that weigh heavily on his characters' souls. We may be born to run, but what makes us run is that we are "cage[d]" in a "death trap," and are reminded every night that we have been "judged and handed life down in the Jackson Cage."

Episode 1
On Account of the Economy

It was clear from the beginning that Bruce Springsteen was to be taken seriously not only because he was "the future of rock and roll," as his future manager Jon Landau famously dubbed him, but also because his was a thoughtful and sensitive critical voice on American life and society. Free of ideological baggage, yet he presented a clear and eloquent view of the condition of the working class, the everyday fate and burden of his father and of his characters—workers by trade as by trade he is a musician, women and men who visit the unemployment agency every Monday morning, take a union card as their rite of passage into adulthood, and dance at the union hall because that is their intrinsic space of sociability.

This default identification with the point of view and experience of working people enables Springsteen to evoke a whole state of mind with a few simple words. "Lately there ain't been much work on account of the economy": as though "the economy" were some kind of arcane, abstract force, as ineluctable as the weather. "Economy" is a polysyllabic word in a mostly monosyllabic language: the register shift between the colloquial "on account of" and the latinate "economy" stands for the gap between what the common man knows and the incomprehensible laws that dominate his life. There's more about class relations and working-class subjectivity in that one line than in heaps of essays and editorials, because it represents the point of view, non-ideological and yet class-based, of a flesh-and-bone working-class person.

Bruce Springsteen achieves this with the tools of his trade: music, words, and how they are put together. Nicholas Dawidoff has written that Bruce Springsteen has the self-taught person's fascination for big words. I would argue that he is attracted to them mainly because of what he can do with them in terms of rhythm and sound. Listen to how he utters "restlessness" ("Stolen Car"), "expendable" ("A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Roulette"), how he scans "ball\er\i\na" in "Thundercrack*"* (here, he does sound like Dylan!) or "vi\sion\ar\ies" in "Jungleland."

Let us take another unforgettable line made of only one, tragic polysyllable: the river that flows on "effortlessly" in "Reason to Believe*"* (he had already used the same word in the same metrical position in "Stolen Car"). The implacable fluidity of the river is embodied in the sound: the liquid *l*'s, the prolonged breathing of the *f*'s and *s*'s, the complicated musical articulation and the delicate balance of a four-syllable

word springing out of a forest of monosyllables. Once again, the rhythm and sound of one word evoke a sense of destiny, a forlorn gaze on the indifference of the world—the river, the natural world, the economy—toward the fate and solitude of one forlorn character.

Both "The River" and "Reason to Believe" are about rivers. Ever since Bruce Springsteen began to be the object of dissertations and scholarly articles, the connection of his images of rivers to Mark Twain's Mississippi in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been an inevitable critical commonplace. Many critics found other literary and cultural parallels in his work: for instance, James Cullen writes that when Springsteen sings of finding the key to the universe in the engine of a parked car, "he unwittingly fulfills Emerson's prescription in 'The Poet' of finding transcendental meaning in the stuff of everyday life." The key word here is "unwittingly": Springsteen is not referencing Emerson but rather moving ("effortlessly"?) in the same flow of tradition and experience. On the other hand, when Cullen says that the Exxon sign that "brings this fair city light" ("Jungleland") belongs in "the Whitmanic tradition that endows ordinary objects with grandeur," I am reminded rather of the looming giant image of Dr. Eckleburg's eyes over the valley of ashes in *The Great Gatsby*, gothic and perturbing rather than luminous and romantic.[44]

Now, it is true that Mark Twain, Emerson, Whitman, Fitzgerald can help us understand Bruce Springsteen (and vice versa); yet, he belongs in a different story: "I'm a song writer, not a poetry man," he said back in 1975.[45] There have been, especially after the Sixties, any number of rock artists with tangible literary backgrounds: one thinks of the Doors and William Blake, Bob Dylan and Rimbaud, the Cure quoting Camus; or musicians who are also poets of the written word, like Patti Smith or Leonard Cohen. Bruce Springsteen, however, stands as a representative of the category of the common reader: normal people who read for pleasure or knowledge, without making a profession of it—the people for whom books are ultimately written, or ought to be. He reads, learns, and uses what he learns in his own work. Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager's *Pocket History of the United States* (a book I caused to be replaced in my department's American studies syllabus because it seemed too much of a nationalistic consensus narrative) opened Springsteen's eyes to the distance between the ideal American story and the experience of his own family and neighbors. *Journey to Nowhere*, by Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, inspired "The Ghost of Tom Joad," "Youngstown" and "The New Timer"; Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United*

States is a source for the history of labor and social struggles; Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* motivated his work and his music in support of veterans, homeless people and labor rank-and-filers; Joe Klein's *Woody Guthrie. A Life* introduced him to the artist that was to become one of his inspirations.

Yet, the worth of his words and music must be gauged according to an aesthetics other than the literary one, an aesthetics of multimedia communication that uses words, sound, the physical and ritual presence of the body in concert and live appearances, the aesthetics of a collective work in which the band and the audience are necessary co-protagonists. We must bear in mind that this is an industrial form of unabashedly commercial art that does pay some price to this fact but that draws precisely from its "vulgar" nature an irrepressible power and vitality. Bruce Springsteen fulfills the role of an icon of mass imagination (and consumption) by discovering his own public voice, taking responsibility for it, and creating a complex narrative gallery of American lives.

In a famous line, Bruce Springsteen says that a three-minute record taught him more than all he learned in school. Those three minutes have the power to absorb and reverberate a deep and complex cultural memory that is much more than mere generational identity. Great popular art and popular culture, which include the best of the rock and roll tradition, consist precisely in the distillation, in basic and socially shared forms of expression, of an implicit plurality of elements and an intrinsic historical depth. We do not need to recognize Africa and slavery in twelve bars of Robert Johnson's blues in order to draw pleasure and emotion from his music; but if we do, then the pleasure and the emotion become richer, deeper, more complex and conscious. We may recognize the Great Awakening, the frontier, the industrial revolution and its demise in "Born in the U.S.A." or "My City of Ruins" (together with the music's own history, Roy Orbison, Mahalia Jackson, James Brown…). Yet, this recognition only comes after the direct intrinsic power of the sound and rhythm of "a revolution that can also be danced," as a critic–labor organizer once described it[46], and enriches it with the pleasures of memory and intelligence, the bitter and uneasy pleasure, filled with resonances and connections, that is the ultimate end of any music and poetry endowed with some degree of self–respect.

CHAPTER TWO

THUNDER ROAD

1. Getting Out

I was going up, I hoped, or at least out
(Bruce Springsteen)[47]

In his keynote speech to the South by Southwest Festival in Austin (2012), Bruce Springsteen explained the origins of his class consciousness: "Then for me, it was The Animals. For some, they were just another one of the really good beat groups that came out of the 60s. But to me, The Animals were a revelation. The first records with full blown class consciousness that I had ever heard."[48] "We Gotta Get Out Of This Place" had "a great bass riff," but for once it was the words that counted:

> See my Daddy in bed and dying.
> See his hair turning grey.
> He's been working and slaving his life away,
> Yes, I know.
> It's been work—every day
> Just work—every day
> It's been work, work, work, work.
> We gotta get out of this place
> If it's the last thing we ever do… [49]

There is a clear connection between these lines and Springsteen's "Factory": the father's listlessness, the heartless cycle of the "working life"… We need to spring out of this cage, get out of this place: we are not going to let them do to us what they did to our fathers, we will take a train from St. Mary's Gate and go chasing mirages in suicide machines. If the American dream of upward mobility has stalled, there is an alternative American dream we can turn to: that of horizontal mobility outward, on the road, into the night, toward the West.

The alternative to the American Dream as upward social mobility is the American Dream as "the inherent right to be restricted by no barriers," as

James Truslow Adams, the inventor of the phrase, also put it.[50] Paradise, as the old gospel song says, is where you have "fifty miles of elbow room." Everybody, from Gene Autry to Bing Crosby, from Ella Fitzgerald to Roy Rogers, has repeated Cole Porter's 1934 plea: give me lots of land under starry skies, "don't fence me in."[51] And Bruce Springsteen: "I want to sleep beneath peaceful skies in my lover's bed / With a wide open country in my eyes and these romantic dreams in my head" ("No Surrender").

Space, the "wide open country," is one of the things that used to make the United States different from Europe. Throughout a history of territorial expansion (and of supposedly unlimited economic growth), the ideal in the United States has been less the equal sharing of limited resources than the limitless expansion of available wealth, so that, no matter how unequally distributed, there shall to be enough for all. As Frederick Jackson Turner claimed in 1893, incessant expansion has set the tone for American democracy, and the availability of "free lands" on the expanding frontier functioned as a "safety valve" to defuse social conflict.[52] While Turner's thesis has been at least partly discredited as history, it remains a cornerstone of the national imagination. "America was founded as an escape," Louis P. Masur writes, commenting on "Born to Run," "and its open geography has provided every generation from the first with an opportunity to experience mobility."[53] For the young man in "Independence Day," becoming independent means leaving home and getting *out*. The road may be dark and empty, yet he is not going back. The American Dream is always a little further on down the road: go West, young man, and grow with the country. There is a connection between the open road and youth's vision of an open future. Thus, for Springsteen, too, going away is a generational gesture: "All boys must run away" ("Independence Day") because "We gotta get out while we're young" ("Born to Run").

2. Magic in the Night

The alternative dream of escape hinges on three exciting and yet ambiguous figures: the night ("there's magic in the night") the road, and the loving couple.

"Night" appears in at least six songs titles. It is an image of elation, possibility, liberation, but is also ambiguous and problematic. "*Born to run*," writes Luis P. Masur, "is a night album, a meditation on the promise of the night as a window of escape, but also a potentially fearful, even deadly place."[54] While early Springsteen represents the night as a liberated

generational space (“Rosalita,” “Growin’ Up,” “Spirit in the Night”), yet the night would not feel so liberating if we weren't constantly reminded of the workaday world (“you work all day…”) to which it represents the alternative (“… to blow ’em up in the night”: “Night”). Tramps like us run by night in suicide machines *because* they sweat by day in search of the runaway American dream (“Born to Run”); they chase mirages at night *because* they work all day in their dad's garage (“The Promised Land”); and they go racing in the streets at night after they come home and shed their work clothes. “Blinded by the Light,” the first track in Springsteen’s first album invites to “dethrone the Dictaphone,” the symbolic machine that rules (dictates?) the 9-to-5 day.

Indeed, the boundary between night and day, darkness and light, is uncertain. In the first place, nights are seldom entirely dark. Greasy Lake may be a mile on the dark side of Route 88, but the night is bright and the stars throw light (“Spirit in the Night”). Urban spaces are illuminated by the artificial lights of commerce and business: the sidewalk is bright with “the light of the living” (“Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out), the giant Exxon sign glitters above the “Jungleland,” neon lights glow on the night party (“Out in the Street”). Escape into the night does not always represent an escape from the social relationships of a profit-oriented “economy,” but also often a shift within them, a time for the reproduction and regeneration of the work force toward the return of the working day. The relationship is reversible: we blow’em up in the night so that we can go back to work all day.

On the other hand, while the lights of commerce and business paint the night, “darkness” spreads from “the edge of town” into the everyday world of work and homes. The first line in the first track in *Darkness on the Edge of Town* announces: “Lights out tonight” (“Badlands”). The album is influenced by film noir, a genre in which darkness indeed looms inward from the edges of the frame; thus, the “pitch-dark night” oppresses the narrator who drives a “Stolen Car” “along an avenue “on the edge of town”; even in “The Promised Land” a dark cloud looms over the desert’s horizon. Night streets may be right for racing—that is, empty but not pitch dark; but at the end the narrator comes back to the deep darkness of a home in which his lover is crying herself to sleep. Of course, “tonight” both of them will go down to the river and wash their sins off their hands, but by now the darkness has taken over and changed the meaning of their lives.

From the streets, then, the scene shifts increasingly toward the interiors. The drawn blinds shut out the light in the "Jackson's Cage"; you inherit the keys to your dad's Cadillac in the darkness of your room ("Adam Raised a Cain"); you must go through the darkness of Candy's hall before you reach her room. Even "Streets of Fire" begins with the silence of the night in the claustrophobic walls of the house, and there is no euphoria of liberation in the streets and the tracks outside. This, however, is less a linear process than a tension between two ways of looking at the night. The line "Slow dancing in the dark" is a romantic and sensual image in "Backstreets"; it becomes also a figure of loneliness and confusion in "Dancing in the Dark."

3. Wheels

Much the same can be said about the automobile. In *Born to Run*, in *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, and *The River*, cars rise to a mythic dimension: "the key to the universe" is hidden "in the engine of an old parked car" ("Growin' Up"), redemption lies under a dirty hood ("Thunder Road"). "Born to Run" takes us to the utopian place where we will walk in the sun, which may or may not be the sunny beach to which we are driving in "Sherry Darling." Indeed, "cars and girls" has been a commonplace in Springsteen criticism, often an excuse for not taking him seriously.[55]

Samuele Pardini writes that the automobile is a perfect symbol of male escapism masked as freedom. "There is an aspect of that" in *Born to Run*, Springsteen says, "but I always felt it was more about searching." After all, as J. R. R. Tolkien argued, there is a difference between the escape of the prisoner and the flight of the deserter.[56] For those who are doing time in a death trap, in Jackson cage, at the car wash, the night ride on the suicide machine can be a metaphor for some kind of pursuit of happiness.

On the other hand, as "Used Cars" teaches us, the automobile can also stand for the opposite. Already in *The River*, car images are steeped in an aura of nostalgia. As Springsteen explained, songs like "Ramrod" or "Out in the Street" may sound festive but are really "sad," "anachronistic" celebrations of things that no longer existed by the time he evoked them in his songs. As Eric Alterman noted, the automobile epic of *Born to Run* takes place at the apex of the oil crisis, when the price of gas skyrocketed and thousands of gas stations closed down "taking a whole way of life with them." [57]

In “Backstreets,” the last Kings of Duke Street are “huddled” inside their cars, as in a fetal position with the car as uterus. Automobiles are inhabited, interior spaces, often in motion but just as often stalled. Often, what is inside is more important than the road they are on or where they are headed. Some cars are erotic spaces (“Born to Run,” “Fire,” “Life Itself”); many, however, are lonesome and claustrophobic, “huddled” and oppressed by the night. The characters in “State Trooper” and “Open All Night” are haunted by the night radio voices of talk shows or gospel stations, by the fear of being pulled over by the police or not reaching Wanda on time across New Jersey. There is always a radio on (“Promised Land,” “Something in the Night,” “Stolen Car,” “Radio Nowhere,” “Open All Night”…), as if to underline the solitude of the lonely rider. The metal shell of the car in the night as a metaphor of isolation: “You can ride this road ‘til dawn / Without another human being in sight,” so you “turn the radio up loud so [you] don’t have to think” (“Something in the Night”). “The turnpike sure is spooky at night / When you’re all alone” (“Living on the Edge of the World”); the radio is “jammed” with “lost souls calling for long-distance salvation,” the lonely driver pleads “radio, radio, hear my tale of heartbreak” and sends out a “last prayer” to “mister deejay”: “hey, hey, rock and roll, deliver me from nowhere.”[58]

Often, on the other hand, cars become almost substitutes for the home, inhabited by father-son dyads (“My Hometown,” “Mansion on the Hill”) or by whole families: the children asleep in the backseat in “The Last to Die,” the sister with the ice cream cone in “Used Cars,” the families sleeping in the cars in “The Ghost of Tom Joad” and in “Seeds”—an automobile at the dead end of the journey, home to a homeless family and the unemployed narrator:

> Parked in the lumberyard freezin' our asses off
> My kids in the back seat got a graveyard cough
> Well I'm sleepin' up in front with my wife
> Billy club tappin' on the windshield in the
> middle of the night
> Says "Move along man move along.”

“Thunder Road” is the epitome of all the images of liberation, hope, love tied to the automobile. Yet, it is sobering to remember that its title comes from a Robert Mitchum film (and song) about bootleggers in Harlan County, that Bruce Springsteen saw when he was beginning to work on *Darkness at the Edge of Town.* At the end, the hero dies in the crash of his car as he tries to get away from the police: “He left the road at 90; that's all there is to say / The devil got the moonshine and the mountain boy that

day."[59] Indeed, those two lines can take us *anywhere*—the promised land, or the devil.

As we already noted, Springsteen's cars are not even always in motion. The "Highway Patrolman" stops alone by the road as he watches his fugitive brother's tail lights disappear in the night; even the car in "Thunder Road" is sitting in front of Mary's house, and we don't really know whether Mary will accept the invitation and join the narrator on the road. The Cadillac "sits, just a-gleamin' in the sun, there to greet a working man when his day is done" ("Cadillac Ranch"). Just sitting there, however, cars can radiate light from their black and shiny bodies and glittering chromed wheels ("Night," "Born to Run"). They are all kin to the most glorious car in American literature, Jay Gatsby's automobile in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: "It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel […] and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns." [60]

Gatsby's automobile ranks along with Springsteen's cars as mythic objects in the American imagination. Yet, Fitzgerald suggests an ominous opposition between the car's immaterial brightness and its metallic heft. Springsteen's Cadillac greets the working man at the end of his day; in *The Great Gatsby*, "workmen" barely escape being run over by Jordan Baker's "bad driving." There is heavy metal underneath all that light. In the end, Gatsby's automobile turns from object of desire into a deadly weapon that comes out of the "darkness" to crush its victim: "The 'death car' as the newspapers called it, didn't stop; it came out of the gathering darkness, wavered tragically for a moment and then disappeared around the next bend."[61] Springsteen's automobiles, too, can turn into "death cars." In "Rockaway the Days," Billy heads out on the road with his brain on overload from a pocketful of pills, panics at the sight of lights coming from behind, and wraps himself on a telephone pole on highway 101.[62] All the stories of *The River* flow toward the tragedy of "Wreck on the Highway," the song that pulls it all together: another working man, driving alone in the rainy night at the end of his working day, comes to the scene of a deathly car wreck on the highway. Perhaps, the "two lanes" of "Thunder Road" stop here, with blood and glass spilt on the road under a hard and cold rain tumbling down.

As Springsteen acknowledged, the title of "Wreck on the Highway" is derived from a classic country song, written by Dorsey Dixon and popularized by Roy Acuff. [63] In *The Great Gatsby*, being a "bad driver" is a symptom of irresponsibility and egocentrism. Both Roy Acuff and Bruce

Springsteen also draw a moral conclusion from the tragedy. In Roy Acuff's song, whisky suggests a moral fault that leads to self destruction: "I didn't hear nobody pray." The character in Springsteen's "Wreck on the Highway," however, learns a different lesson: an epiphany on the intrinsic fragility of our lives. He "drives home," Springsteen explains, "and lying awake that night next to his lover, he realizes that you have a limited number of opportunities to love someone, to do your work, to be part of something, to parent your children, to do something good."[64]

At least one line in Springsteen's song is a direct quote from Dixon and Acuff: blood and glass all over, says Springsteen, and "Whisky and blood all together / Mixed with glass where they lay" sings Roy Acuff. The confusion of heterogeneous things on the road is always the sign of a shattered order. The dark blood of Myrtle Wilson, killed by Jay Gatsby's automobile, mixes with the dust on the road[65]; in "Highway 29," broken glass and gasoline mix on the road as the narrator dies after a robbery that ends with murder and a mad run to the border. We have known all along that these are "suicide machines," but they can turn into homicide machines as well. In "Nebraska" the narrator and his girl go for a car ride that ends in massacre; in "Balboa Park," in the night-side underworld of drugs and sexual exploitation, a child of the border tries to run from the police only to be crushed by a car that, like Gatsby's, does not stop, and leaves him to die on the road listening to "the cars rushin' by so fast."

4. Two Hearts

"At the end of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), John Wayne's character has some realization as he reconstitutes that family that he can't join it [...] His inability to do that resonated with me," says Bruce Springsteen: "I spent 20 years playing on the road with no real home life or connections except when I played at night."[66] The end of *The Searchers* is a standard scene in Western movies: one need only think of Alan Ladd walking away alone toward the wilderness at the end of *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) after bringing together a family that can never be his. Or Clint Eastwood's Harry Callahan at the end of Dan Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971).

The lonesome departure of the male hero is also a canonic literary motif, epitomized by Huck Finn's escape to the territories at the end of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As Leslie Fiedler pointed out, from Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" to Saul Bellow's Augie Marsh, through Melville's Ishmael, James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking and Ernest Hemingway's Nick Adams, the American hero escapes from a