

bruce springsteen and the dramatic monologue

alan rauch

The 1980s have seen Bruce Springsteen emerge not only as an important figure in rock music but also as a significant cultural icon. With the release of the album *Born in the U.S.A.*, a record that contemplates life in America rather than celebrates it, his image and musical style have been appropriated by virtually every commercial and political faction in America. In most cases, as in Ronald Reagan's attempt to capitalize on Springsteen's popularity in the 1984 campaign, the ideas in Springsteen's music have been misrepresented. For many, Springsteen's "message" was a patriotic one, a "message of hope" as Ronald Reagan put it.¹ It was clear that the working class voices, so carefully crafted in Springsteen's lyrics were not being listened to closely and Springsteen suddenly found himself in the strange position, as he diplomatically put it, of having "to dissociate myself from the president's kind words."²

Springsteen's ability to create authentic working class voices whose appeal seems both direct and immediate has, ironically, been at the heart of the problem. In the process of moving from the more playful and cryptic lyrics that characterized his first album, *Greetings from Asbury Park*, to the more sparing

and personal style of his later works, Springsteen adopted a lyric form—suited to a more intimate style—called the dramatic monologue. The move represents an effort to get away from abstract lyrics that resist easy interpretation (and in the process alienate the listener) toward lyrics that seem straightforward and familiar. The narrative form of the dramatic monologue has clearly been very important in shaping all of Springsteen's music and has undoubtedly played a role in his enormous popularity. In this paper I would like to take a look at Springsteen's use of the dramatic monologue and examine how it has been used in his lyrics and also how it has changed. By looking at Springsteen's technique, I hope to be able to provide some insight into his popularity and into the American temperament.

The dramatic monologue, which is usually associated with nineteenth-century poets in general and with Robert Browning in particular, has been defined as a "lyric poem which reveals 'a soul in action' through the conversation of one character in a dramatic situation."³ As readers of the monologue we encounter that character—who is in the process of speaking to an identifiable but silent listener—in a dramatic moment in his or her life. During the course of the monologue the speaker reveals, often unwittingly, deep personal traits.

The classic example of the dramatic monologue is Browning's "My Last Duchess" in which the Duke of the poem, in eulogizing his late or "last" duchess, reveals his own Machiavellian temperament. The language of the poem insists on the presence of another individual, an auditor (here an emissary from an unnamed count), who though silent, is a clearly drawn out presence. The Duke, having successfully maneuvered the unwitting emissary into a pre-nuptial agreement, leads him away from the portrait in triumph with an invitation that is full of irony. The Duke's use of the work "sir" completes the monologue here by clearly distinguishing both speaker and auditor and suggesting the relationship between them:

Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!
[ll. 53-56]⁴

The casual, even deferent, "sir" directed toward the emissary at first seems merely polite, yet it reveals the Duke's smooth manner and his casual attitude toward manipulating people.

Stigmatized by its nineteenth century roots and its association with "serious" poetry, the form may seem all but petrified. We tend to forget that the form can be used in a way that is still vibrant, interesting and useful—if not staid and dignified.⁵ The music of Bruce Springsteen provides an excellent opportunity to observe a contemporary version of the dramatic monologue in action. I do not want to make any claims for the "seriousness" of the music, nor do I want to suggest that Springsteen's lyrics are the work of a "studied" poet. There are, as John Orman has suggested, many pitfalls for those who try to "overintellectualize the perceived relationships between rock and society."⁶

But a close analysis of this kind can be useful in trying to understand the temperament of the American people as it is articulated by a Rock “spokesman.”

The dramatic monologue appears so frequently in Springsteen’s lyrics that it would be impossible to deal with every treatment of it; it is worth noting in passing, however, that Springsteen’s first “great” hit, “Born to Run”, in which the speaker asks “Wendy” to run with him, is in every sense a dramatic monologue. But the more typical Springsteen monologues, and the ones that I am particularly interested in here, are those where the relative hierarchical positions of speaker and auditor are clear. What we see in these situations is that Springsteen, in a reversal of Browning’s use of the form, generally makes the speaker subordinate to the auditor. In “Independence Day”, for example, a son leaves his father, asserting his independence yet explaining at the same time that “all boys must run away.” The powerfully intimate opening lines of the song are a perfect example of the suggestive power of the dramatic monologue.

Papa, go to bed now; it’s getting late.
Nothing we can say is gonna change anything now.
I’ll be leaving in the morning from St. Mary’s gate
We wouldn’t change this thing even if we could somehow.⁷

The intimacy and directness of the monologue heighten the listener’s sense of the tension and frustration that separate father and son.

The dramatic monologue forms a triangle composed of the speaker in the poem, the individual to whom he is speaking and the reader, who is observing, at something of a distance, the relationship that exists within the context of the poem. The dynamics of the relationship between speaker and auditor, combined with the special distance of the reader is what give the dramatic monologue its peculiar energy. In his extensive study of the dramatic monologue, *The Poetry of Experience*, Robert Langbaum points out a number of features in the dramatic monologue that are particularly appropriate to Springsteen. Langbaum argues that the dramatic monologue allows the poet to develop a speaker whose utterance is seemingly a spontaneous or gratuitous outpouring; in fact, Langbaum compares it to breaking out in song.⁸ Reference to an auditor within the context of the monologue, though common, is not a necessary part of the form. In Springsteen’s “Highway Patrolman,” for example, the monologue is established by the tightness of the narrative, the length of the story, and the song’s confessional tone. The incidental, almost casual, nature of the monologue permits what appears to be a candid and unwitting revelation of the self, in a way that distances the songwriter or poet. “The use of the dramatic monologue,” Langbaum writes, “allows the poet to dramatize a position, the possibilities of which he may want to explore.”⁹ Because the position being dramatized constitutes a separate voice, from which the poet has dissociated himself, a wide variety of voices can be adopted; often, as with Browning’s Duke, the voices are reprehensible, or at the very least, unattractive.

The advantage of the dramatic monologue is that it avoids didacticism by putting the listener in the context of the song. The lesson that is learned from

the monologue comes out of immersion in the context of the scenario, rather than from direct explication; thus its primary disadvantage is that it demands a great deal from the reader or listener by way of attentiveness. The form requires that the listener understand that the voice of the speaker is not the voice of the poet/songwriter and, as Alan Sinfield has put it, that "there are other possible, even preferable, perspectives."¹⁰ In that sense the dramatic monologue is a very active and intellectually demanding genre.

The dramatic monologue is, therefore, a challenging form for songs that have a "message" since there is no direct explication of an idea. Unlike the protest songs of the 1960s, Springsteen's music does not preach. We are not told, for example, that we are on the eve of destruction or even that all we need is love. The 1970s and '80s have made Springsteen's audience and perhaps Springsteen himself too cynical to accept wide-eyed moralizing and preaching. "In the sixties," Springsteen himself has said,

moral lines were drawn relatively easily. The process of changing things actually tends to be unromantic and not very dramatic. In fact, it's very slow and very small, and if anything, it's done in inches.¹¹

Earlier rock music leaned heavily on a prescriptive style of song-writing that in some ways was refreshingly idealistic in its efforts to reform the world, but was simplistically naive in so many others. What is more, it has become fairly clear that audiences, perhaps because they are more cynical, or perhaps because they are more sophisticated, are less interested in being preached to.¹²

In some ways Springsteen's use of the dramatic monologue is characteristic of the times. Ronald Reagan's use of the anecdote has been a very effective device during his presidency, and has, perhaps, reflected an interest in listening to a narrative rather than in a critical examination of issues. Reagan's success, according to Garry Wills in *Reagan's American*, stems from his ability to become, through his story-telling, "the ideal past, the successful present, and the hopeful future all in one."¹³ The American public, says Wills, has made a "tacit bargain . . . not to challenge Reagan's version of the past" rather than face "the challenge of complex or contradictory evidence [or] any test of evidence at all."¹⁴ The effectiveness of Reagan's anecdotes has depended on the willingness of Americans not only to accept his interpretation of events, but to accept wide generalizations drawn from very narrow examples. And this strategy *has* worked.¹⁵ Following his lead, politicians have become very fond of telling us about individual achievers whose accomplishments are supposed to reflect an ability in everyone to overcome similar circumstances. The myth that all situations are analogous to that of the anecdote, though troubling, has proven to be a successful way of reaching an American public that is apparently no longer willing to be lectured to by politicians or musicians.

Springsteen, like Reagan, has sensed that America is most receptive to ideas wrapped in a narrative package. But Springsteen is interested in challenging the validity of the narrative that Reagan would have his audience take for granted. Having expressed concern about "the casualness with which people are getting used to being lied to,"¹⁶ Springsteen's music demands not that stories be taken

at face value but that the listeners apply some measure of critical judgement. His use of the monologue transforms the audience into active rather than passive listeners who are required to make a judgement that depends on a fairly complex appreciation of the narrative.¹⁷ The possibility that this degree of appreciation may be lacking, is something that has clearly troubled Springsteen. "I don't think people are being taught to think hard enough about things in general—," he suggested in a recent interview. "If you do not learn to do that—if you do not develop the skills to interpret the information—you're going to be easily manipulated, or you're going to walk around simply confused and ineffectual and powerless."¹⁸ Springsteen's concern that his audience apply the same kind of skills and understanding to music was made clear on his *Live* album when he prefaced his rendition of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" by reminding the audience that "it was originally written as an 'angry song' written in response to Irving Berlin's 'God Bless America.'"¹⁹

It is not surprising, then, that Springsteen keeps returning to the dramatic monologue as a way to introduce themes that he believes should interest and challenge his audience. The challenge is made stronger because the narrative voice of Springsteen's lyrics seems to be so familiar and so authentic. The challenge for the audience is to penetrate the credibility of the narrative voices, and hear exactly what they are saying: in short, the challenge is to resist the seductive appeal of tone in order to analyze content. For a moment, we become participants in the crisis that exists within the song; and having been conscripted, however briefly, we must actively think through the situation rather than simply observe it. Often, as I will try to suggest, the situations are more complex than they originally appear to be. We are forced to measure the acceptability of the narrator of the dramatic monologue within the context of the reality that he has generated around himself. The scenario created by the monologist is very much on trial, and our judgement is necessary to determine its validity in *our* world.

Although the dramatic monologue is present in most of Springsteen's work it is the most striking in the album *Nebraska* where Springsteen demonstrates a clear pattern that involves interjecting a designation for an auditor into his lyrics, which, more often than not is the term "sir" or "mister". The designation of an auditor *per se* is not unusual in rock music, the terms "baby," "girl," and similar expressions are commonly used in rock lyrics and they appear quite frequently in Springsteen's music. But Springsteen also uses a special kind of designation, which in conjunction with very personal and confessional lyrics, distinguishes both the voice we are hearing and the individual to whom the song is being addressed. We hear something like that in the colloquial "Jack" to whom the song "Hungry Heart" is supposedly addressed:

Got a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack.
I went out for a ride and I never went back.

The familiarity of the "Jack" almost catches the listener off guard and is riveting because of the way in which it insists on a listener. The generic quality



of "Jack," like the colloquial "Bud" or "Buddy" implies that the voice in the song, lacking a specific individual interested enough to listen, is trying to recruit anyone within hearing range.

In many of the songs on *Nebraska* the individual being spoken to, the judge in "Johnny 99" for example, is someone who is *obligated* to listen because of his official capacity. But even when the role of the listener is not explicitly stated, we are left with a sense that the auditor is not only someone of importance to the speaker, but also someone of "rank" in society: a parole officer, a police officer, a newspaper reporter, or even a psychiatrist. It is essentially an awareness of this that comes through in the following excerpts, all taken from songs on *Nebraska*:

"Nebraska":

They declared me unfit to live.
Said into that great void my soul'd be hurled.
They wanted to know why I did what I did.
Well, sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world.

"Mansion on the Hill":

There's a place out on the edge of town, sir,
Risin' above the factories and the fields,
Now, ever since I was a child, I can remember
That mansion on the hill.

“Johnny 99”:

Now, judge, judge, I got debts no honest man could pay.
The bank was holdin’ my mortgage and they was takin’ my house away.

“State Trooper”:

Mister State Trooper, please don’t stop me. . .

“Used Cars”:

Now, Mister, the day my number comes in,
I ain’t ever gonna ride in no used car again.

“My Father’s House”:

I awoke and I imagined the hard things that pulled us apart
Will never again, sir, tear us from each other’s hearts.

“Reason to Believe”:

It struck me kinda funny.
Seem kinda funny sir to me.
Still at the end of every hard day, people find some reason to believe.

The social position of the auditor is clear in only two of the songs, “State Trooper” and “Johnny 99” and in “State Trooper” the dialogue is in fact imagined rather than real. But what is important is that in all of the songs, the status of the voice speaking in relation to the individual listening is clearly subordinate. The deferent, yet confrontational tone that is implied immediately when Springsteen’s speakers refer to “Mister” is unmistakable and can often be, as it is in “The River,” completely absorbing:

I come from down in the valley
Where, mister, when you’re young,
They bring you up to do
Like your daddy done.

What we hear in a Springsteen song—and this, of course, has been said many times—is the voice of the working man (Springsteen’s voices are virtually all male) overwhelmed by a sense of alienation, or what Springsteen called the “spiritual breakdown” that comes with the loss of a “sense of community.”²⁰ The deferential narrative voice, in its effort to make sense of a life experience to an unsympathetic auditor, reflects a wide sense of helplessness and subordination. According to most interpretations of Springsteen’s music—or, more accurately, his popularity—the loss of a sense of community is a feeling shared by virtually all Americans in the 1980s. Springsteen, according to this line of

thinking, has struck a common nerve and, as a result, every listener is able to identify with the speaker of the song.

As familiar as the songs sound, however, the narrative voices used by Springsteen in *Nebraska* and *Born in the U.S.A.* are not in fact similar to our own. Not only is there almost always an unsettled quality about the narrator that adds distance to his voice, there is a deferential quality that implicitly recognizes the auditor (over whose shoulder we seem to be looking) as a superior. A typical character in a Springsteen song indicates his position of inferiority, as I have already suggested, by specifically identifying the person to whom he is speaking as “Mister” or “Sir.” When singing, Springsteen frequently accentuates that feeling of subordination by lowering his voice substantially at important moments in the monologue—moments when the speaker is at his most confessional. The important point in understanding Springsteen’s lyrics, if we read them closely, is that the voice that we hear—no matter who we are socially, economically, or politically—is somehow removed from us. Springsteen lets us hear the voice of someone who has been humbled far more than we have, even in the wide range of most of our experiences. What makes this successful is that it doesn’t describe *us* as much as it does some manifestation of the way we see ourselves at our absolute worst. So intensely personal is the monologue of the narrator that it forces even the most sympathetic listener to step outside of the context of the monologue in order to see whether there are any valid connections with his or her own life.

Nebraska provides the best example of that strategy at work. It is almost always acknowledged as Springsteen’s bleakest album, and many find the title song, about Charles Starkweather, the mass murderer, wholly unacceptable as the topic for a popular song. Nevertheless, the narrative technique in the song “Nebraska,” perhaps because of the sensitive nature of the material, demonstrates very clearly the eerie relationship that Springsteen’s sets up between the speaking voice, the auditor within the song and ourselves as audience. As an audience we share the listener’s uneasiness in being subjected to an intense monologue that the speaker seems compelled to relate, but our discomfort must be even greater because of the clear implication that we are, in fact, eavesdropping. As eavesdroppers we are in a relatively powerful position where both the speaker and the listener are subordinate to us, yet at the same time we are also participating in an illicit activity that subordinates us—or at least makes us uncomfortable—in this complicated relationship.

I saw her standin’ on her front lawn,
just a twirlin’ her baton.
Me and her went for a ride, sir
And ten innocent people died.

From the town of Lincoln, Nebraska
With a sawed off .410 on my lap
Through to the badlands of Wyoming I killed
everything in my path

I can't say that I'm sorry
For the things that we done.
At least for a little while, sir
Me and her, we had us some fun.

The jury brought in a guilty verdict
And the judge he sentenced me to death.
Midnight in a prison storeroom
With leather straps across my chest

Sheriff, when the man pulls that switch sir,
And snaps my poor head back,
You make sure my pretty baby
Is sittin' right there on my lap.

They declared me unfit to live
Said into that great void my soul'd be hurled
They wanted to know why I did what I did.
Well, sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world.

This song is as bleak as anything Springsteen has written and is far less appealing than his other songs, which though despairing, deal with more acceptable concepts such as unemployment, unrequited love, and family discord. "Nebraska" might well be overly dramatic, but the intensity of its lyrics clearly illustrates that there is virtually no room within the context of the song for even the most passive kind of identification.

The song begins as a confession and moves very quickly and powerfully into a narrative that is at once both fascinating and appalling. Springsteen provides a subdued tone in the song (as he does in many of the songs on the album) and his use of "sir" alerts us quickly and unmistakably to the fact that the social position of the speaker is much lower than that of the auditor. And if the sense of "sir" is ironic, as it may well be, it is because the character in the song has been brought so low, that irony is the only outlet available to him. The voice not only allows for rich colloquialisms and "street" grammar, but also for a kind of descriptive detail, sometimes seemingly peripheral, that is full of raw honesty. The speaker here, as is the case elsewhere in Springsteen's lyrics (particularly on *The River*, *Nebraska*, and *Born in the U.S.A.*), is preoccupied with telling a story. There is no internal debate or soul-searching here, nor is there any sense of a need for introspection or auto-analysis; it is as if the speaker senses the futility of speaking at all but somehow realizes that the simple act of telling his sad story is *all* that is available to him.

To hear so intense a story is to allow oneself, however briefly, to participate in that dramatic episode in the speaker's life. Assuming that we are not murderers ourselves, and don't condone murder, we are compelled to suspend judgement, at least temporarily, simply to listen to the speaker. As a technique, the dramatic monologue, allows our sympathy to be conscripted initially (often, as in "Nebraska," at the expense of judgement); but finally, when we have

heard the entire song and can no longer empathize, judgement remains available to us in order to distance ourselves from the speaker. It is chilling enough to make even the briefest association between ourselves and the murderer/narrator of "Nebraska," without going one step further and identifying with that character. Far from being the kind of music that "dignifie[s] passivity," as Mary Harron has suggested in her critique of the song and the album, *Nebraska* is a call to self-awareness and action.²¹ The subject matter of "Nebraska" is, of course, highly unusual and thus offers the listener a simple and clear choice between sympathy and judgement. But other songs, which speak to experiences and situations that are in fact common to us all, are more ambiguous.

In "I'm on Fire," we listen to a speaker who is consumed by an intense desire for a woman married (or attached) to another man. While it could be argued that the song is simply a passionate romantic ballad about forbidden love, the speaker's monomania for the woman seems uneasily compulsive. That the speaker's obsession may border on the pathological seems to be what Springsteen wants to evoke in the suggestive and easily misread opening line: "Hey little girl, is your daddy home? Did he go away And leave you all alone?" The ambiguous colloquialisms, "little girl" and "daddy," are allowed to confuse the listener; but child molestation, though initially very real, is only an issue as far as the mind and, of course, the attitude, of the speaker are concerned. However those lines are read, it is certain that the mind of the speaker is far from stable:

Sometimes it's like, someone took a knife,
baby, edgy and dull, and cut a six-inch
valley through the middle of my soul.
At night I wake up with the sheets
soaking wet
And a freight train running
through the middle of my head.
Only you can cool my desire.
Oh, I'm on fire.

Springsteen, through the dramatic monologue, connects the listener with the very raw emotions articulated by the speaker. But the listener, although at first transfixed by the passionate drive of the speaker, simply cannot allow him/herself to be swept away by the emotional and possibly irrational force that compels the speaker.

Far more innocuous is the speaker in "Highway Patrolman" whose song is a soft and lilting ballad of fraternal protectiveness. The speaker, Joe Roberts, a highway patrolman, acts as his brother Franky's guardian angel. Joe describes their relationship in this way:

Now ever since we was young kids
Its been the same come down.
I get a call over the short-wave:
Franky's in trouble downtown

Well, if it was any other man,
I'd put him straight away,
But when it's your brother sometimes
You look the other way.

The song itself is fairly straightforward in the way that it presents a complex sibling relationship, as described by one narrator. But what makes it strong is the way that Joe Roberts' simplicity allows him to tell a story that implicates him and raises the issue of his reliability as a narrator. Joe, for example, can reveal without hesitation that he got a farm deferment, and settled down with Maria, the woman they both were drawn to, while Franky was sent to Vietnam. What at first appears to be a story that demands our sympathy, becomes, after consideration, a story that very much requires our serious consideration and critical judgement. "Highway Patrolman" skillfully addresses revisionist attitudes towards Vietnam, not by having us identify with one constituency or another, but by acknowledging our ambivalence toward those who fought and those who avoided the war.

Springsteen demonstrates in "Highway Patrolman" that he can control irony with a light hand. His touch is somewhat heavier in *Born in the U.S.A.*. The title song, as everybody now knows, is not the patriotic anthem that many in Springsteen's audience conceived it to be. What we hear is the story of someone who has always had a tough life, who avoids the consequences of getting caught in a "hometown jam" by enlisting, and who is sent to fight in a country—"a foreign land"—that he had never heard of. His brother is killed in the war, but he survives and returns home only to be greeted by uncomfortably polite dismissals from both employers and the government. Whether you take the speaker's final description of himself literally or figuratively, there is little question about his own sense of imprisonment:

Down in the shadow of the penitentiary,
Out by the gas fires of the refinery;
I'm ten years burning down the road,
Nowhere to run, ain't nowhere to go.

Lost in his own America, the speaker's insistent repetition that he was "born in the U.S.A." is full of the ironic bitterness inherent in the fact that he has to say it at all. As a dramatic monologue the song is probably Springsteen's strongest attempt to create an authentic voice which is not tempered by the distancing that is typical of the form. Much of that strength comes from the fact that there really is no specific auditor in the context of the song. The simplicity of the language and the constant repetition of the refrain, "Born in the U.S.A.," commands the attention of *whoever* is listening. While there is no question that the song was written to represent the voice of Vietnam veterans who are unemployed or who have been alienated, it is by no means an anthem. The purpose of this monologue is not to solicit our praise for or our loyalty to either the speaker or his plight—as a real anthem might—but to engage our interest and our concern. If the song rouses our indignation and our action it is precisely

because we feel that no individual should find that monologue an appropriate one.

When the song "Working on the Highway" was first released on *Born in the U.S.A.*, it was generally received as the "anthem" of a working class hero who can somehow celebrate living in a working class world, even while aspiring to something better. The heavy beat that accompanies the refrain "working on the highway, blasting through the bedrock, working on the highway, working on the highway" reinforces the image of a construction worker imbued with the kind of rugged individualism that allows him to thrive.

The song, nevertheless, indicates a different set of circumstances if we actually listen to the confessional monologue of the highway worker. Most obvious is the irony underlying his clever presentation of the facts; the worker tells us that he "works for the county" when in fact he is a prisoner of the country. But more interesting is the worker's brief, but telling, confession of what he actually does out there on the highway:

I work for the county out on 95.
All day I hold a red flag and watch
the traffic pass me by.

Not only is the speaker's job the least demanding of all the crew, it is also the most humiliating; paralyzed by both his job and his imprisonment, he is constantly on view to the passing traffic. The metaphorical prisoner motif—i.e. the prisoner as symbol of our own status within society—is not unusual in Springsteen's music²² and he uses it admirably here by putting it in a highly syncopated song with a speaker who, once again, unwittingly tells us much more than he realizes in his tale. What we seem to be hearing from the highway worker then is an unmediated story which, because of its immediacy, is seemingly without allegorical or metaphorical apparatus. The monologue, which is both interesting and absorbing, is transformed, as the speaker subordinates himself and inadvertently reveals his own shallowness, into a tale of mistaken decisions and self-deception. No matter how comparable the state of the listener is to the state of the speaker, only the speaker would open up so artlessly, ingenuously, and most importantly, embarrassingly. What the dramatic monologue does, as Springsteen is using it, is strip away the dignity from the speaker, and in the process, preserve it for the listener.

This effect is perhaps best illustrated in "Glory Days," which focuses on the universal experience of nostalgia and empty reminiscences. The reunions described in the song must ring true in one way or another for all of us, as must the pathos the speaker feels for his prematurely washed-up high school companions who must live in the past to find meaning for their existence. (A situation, the narrator seems to suggest, that he has avoided.) But in telling us how he plans to escape the paralyzing self-pity and nostalgia that he has just described and dismissed, he actually reveals how much a part of it he feels. In fact, it even appears that *his* lack of glory days leaves him no alternative but to get drunk:

Think I'm going down to the well tonight,
and I'm gonna' drink till I get my fill.
And I hope when I get old I don't sit around
thinkin' about it, but I probably will.
Yeah, just sittin' back tryin' to recapture
a little of the glory of,
But time slips away and leaves you with nothin', mister
but boring stories of . . . glory days.

Thus while all of us can initially sympathize with the narrator of "Glory Days," it becomes painfully clear that he is a pathetic character who survives by parasitizing other people's reminiscences. Under the guise of his disdain he has deluded himself into believing that he can avoid the very reliance on the past on which his life (and his song) depends. The speaker's monologue is so lacking in self-consciousness and pride, and is so superficial in its attempt to cover a sense of depression, that as listeners, it becomes difficult to imagine a comparable monologue of our own.

The tremendous popularity of "Glory Days," however, has had more to do with the fact that it is dynamic rock music, than with the way in which the lyrics undermine the song's title.²³ The term "Glory Days" seems to be taken at face value by audiences, and the point that the song is no more a nostalgic celebration of glory days than, say, *Death of a Salesman*, is something that most listeners have not understood.²⁴

Tunnel of Love, Springsteen's most recent album at this point, may reflect Springsteen's concern that the ironic detachment, so much a part of the dramatic monologue in songs like "Glory Days," may not be having the proper effect. The monologues on the *Tunnel of Love* are, as a result, far less complex. The voices that we hear in this album have a much better sense of themselves, their limitations and their expectations; and much less is required of the listener in terms of comparing the claims of the narrator against the facts that they provide. Again he uses the dramatic monologue, but on this album he creates narrators who seem to be making different choices. It is clear that Springsteen wants to make positive action explicit, and rather than have his audience try to understand the ambiguities inherent in word and action, he sets them out in a more direct manner. Perhaps the songs do in some sense preach more, but that's because *Tunnel of Love* works much harder at providing a clearer voice with a more straightforward narrative. In "Two Faces," for example, Springsteen sets out that dilemma faced by the speaker by using the monologue format that, down to his invocation of a "mister," is very familiar:

I met a girl and we ran away.
I swore I'd make her happy every day.
And how I made her cry.
Two faces have I.

Sometimes, mister, I feel sunny and wild.
Lord I love to see my baby smile;

Then dark clouds come rolling by.
Two faces have I.

The language here is simple, clear, and seemingly honest—much like that of Springsteen's other monologists. But this is a speaker who points out, in a self-conscious way that is new to Springsteen's monologues, his own duplicity. Lest there be any ambiguity, Springsteen shifts out of the monologue in the last verse so that the listener can hear the speaker address his lover directly, thereby underscoring the commitment he has made both to her and to his positive side:

Last night as I kissed you 'neath the willow tree,
He swore he'd take your love away from me.
He said our life was just a lie,
And two faces have I.
Well go ahead and let him try.

The conventional image of a kiss beneath a willow tree, though perhaps a bit hackneyed, locates the action of the song and makes the nature of the relationship explicit.

The relationship between speaker and auditor, which in Springsteen's earlier monologues made the speaker subordinate to the listener, has changed substantially in *Tunnel of Love*. Rather than listening to a bitter voice, we hear a voice that is full of self-doubt and the spirit of reconciliation. In songs like "One Step Up" and "Brilliant Disguise," from which the following excerpts have been taken, the issue of self-doubt is placed squarely on the table and the speakers are very much aware of the need both to rehabilitate and to take charge of themselves:

When I look at myself I don't see,
The man I wanted to be.

God have mercy on the man
Who doubts what he's sure of.

Thus Springsteen's monologists are becoming very much aware of their own inadequacies and of the fact that they have to become more aware of what their actions mean.²⁵ They are, in effect, telling the listener what the earlier monologists would or could not. The focused desire of the speaker in "Ain't Got You", who tells his lover that in spite of wealth, fame and adulation,

. . . I'm still the biggest fool, honey, this world ever knew,
'Cause the only thing I ain't got baby I ain't got you.

is coming to grips with the fact that personal relationships have nothing to do with individual achievement. He seems to be able to understand, and more importantly, to be able to control his own emotions in the way that the speaker in "I'm on Fire" could not. The matter-of-fact speaker in "Tougher than the

Rest” labors under no illusions about himself, or even in his gruff way, about the difficulties inherent in romance

Some girls like a sweet-talkin’ Romeo.
Well ‘round here baby,
I learned that you can get what you can get.
So if you’re rough enough for love,
Honey I’m tougher than the rest.

The road is dark
And it’s a thin thin line,
But I want you to know I’ll walk it for you any time.

That the speaker, whose voice is reminiscent of some of Springsteen’s earlier working-class voices, is willing to make concessions for the sake of a commitment to his potential lover is significant. Here is a speaker who, though he sounds like he wants control, is aware enough to recognize and respond to standards set independently of himself. By making his speakers a little more introspective and a little more interested in taking some kind of positive action in their lives, Springsteen has eliminated some of the ambiguity of his earlier monologues.

The upbeat voice in “All that Heaven Will Allow” belongs to what must be one of the most positive characters created by Springsteen, and his monologue evokes an innocence and sprightliness that is very attractive in its unabashed expression of love and optimism:

I got a dollar in my pocket,
There ain’t a cloud up above.
I got a picture in my locket
That says baby I love you.

This speaker’s outlook on life has nothing of the bleakness of the speakers in “Born to Run,” “Born in the U.S.A.,” or even “Glory Days.” There is no drive in this character either to avoid commitment or to pursue the open road in search of some undefined goal:

Now some may wanna die a young man,
Young and gloriously.
Get it straight now, mister,
Hey buddy that ain’t me.
‘Cause I got something on my mind,
That sets me straight and walkin’ proud.
And I want all the time
All that heaven will allow.

Although our temptation is to read “all that heaven will allow” in terms of hyperbole, there is no indication that object of the speaker’s affection is super-

lative by any standards. For him, all that heaven will allow can be read simply as all that he has any reason to expect. While there is a conservative element to this kind of message—in that it promotes pragmatism rather than complacency and suggests that working within reality is better than relying on false hope—the dramatic monologue, here as elsewhere, prevents it from being a simple validation of the *status quo*. Springsteen has made the song something of a compromise by creating a speaker whose love, optimism and determination will seem, to many, worthy of emulation. Yet the speaker, however pleasant, will strike others as almost too comic in his absent-mindedness:

Say hey there mister bouncer,
Now, all I want to do is dance.
But I swear I left my wallet,
Back home in my workin' pants.

and too naive in his optimism

Rain and storm and dark skies,
Well, now they don't mean a thing
If you got a girl that loves you,
And who wants to wear your ring.

In either case, the speaker shares none of the ominous traits that marked the speakers in songs like “Nebraska” and “I’m on Fire.” As a result, the critical distance needed to separate ourselves from the speaker, though still important (since this is a dramatic monologue), is no longer absolutely crucial.

Bill Horton, the subject of Springsteen’s “Cautious Man” does not, like his precursor in “Hungry Heart,” tell his own story. We learn about Bill Horton’s “restless heart” from a narrator who is not only observant but an analytical judge of human nature:

Bill Horton was a cautious man of the road,
He walked lookin’ over his shoulder and remained faithful to its code.
When something caught his eye he’d measure his need,
And then very carefully he’d proceed.

Billy’s urge to leave his wife and home behind is overcome by his desire to stay behind, with her. He makes an attempt to leave but when he arrives at the highway, the false hope of so many other Springsteen characters, he sees “nothing but road.” The answer to Bill Horton’s kind of uncertainty and anxiety is not found, Springsteen seems to be telling us, by mythologizing the road and what it can possibly lead to. By rejecting the essentially nostalgic impulse to hit the road, Bill Horton has committed himself to his own, well-defined, past and future. In keeping with the tone of “Cautious Man,” Springsteen, as John Rockwell has observed, offered a “starkly revisionist version” of “Born to Run” in his most recent concert tour with an introduction that suggests

“that maybe what his youthful protagonists were really running toward was a mature, responsible self-awareness.”²⁶

Though “Cautious Man” often sounds like a monologue, Springsteen has moved away from the form in this song in order to write a narrative with a very clear moral. But the clarity of the narrative, in this song at least, comes at the expense of nuance and subtlety:

On his right hand Billy'd tattooed the word love
and on his left hand was the word fear
And in which hand he held his fate was never
clear.

The fairly simple story-line of “Cautious Man” makes it easier to follow and easier to understand than it would have, had it been a dramatic monologue. The result is a very different kind of lyric, which may at times seem more strained than some of Springsteen's other work, but which is much clearer in its intention. Perhaps by looking beyond the monologue to a purer narrative form, Springsteen is trying to ensure that the content of his songs will be clearly understood by as wide an audience as possible.

The artful reinterpretation of the past as a convenient way to suit the needs of the present is very much at the heart of what many cultural critics tell us is happening in contemporary America. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch laments “our culture's denial of the past”²⁷ and warns against the seemingly therapeutic self-interest that results in “the momentary illusion of personal well-being.”²⁸ Lasch's warning has been picked up by Fred Davis in *Yearning for Yesterday* who on the one hand is concerned about “nostalgic displacement,”²⁹ in which nostalgia becomes history, and, on the other hand, believes that nostalgic sentiment can not only serve as a “brake on the headlong plunge into the future” but play an essential role in a culture's attempt to “conserve and recover its past.”³⁰ Neil Postman has argued that television and the way in which it has influenced every aspect of our culture has made us “unfit to remember.” “For if remembering is to be something more than nostalgia,” Postman writes, “it requires a contextual basis—a theory, a vision, a metaphor—something within which facts can be organized and patterns discerned.”³¹

Springsteen's music is a response to what he has seen as “a nostalgia for a mythical America . . . where everything is just right.”³² The use of the dramatic monologue in his music is important in his attempt, as he describes it, to “try to reflect people's lives back to them.”³³ The form, rather than deny the past or romanticize it, actually tries to set a context of reality in which the monologist must act. If the speaker himself, like the speaker in *Glory Days*, cannot see through his false hopes and nostalgic dreams, we as listeners certainly can. The monologue puts the listener in an active ongoing situation where there are important decisions to be made. The comfort of a nostalgic narrative is replaced by the anxiety felt by the speaker who must confront his own decisions, and the anxiety that we feel as listeners in trying to decide where our sympathies lie.

Springsteen's songs, then, are not really about any one identifiable group. They are songs about people remarkably similar to us, but who have been stripped of self-respect. Through the dramatic monologue we can listen to them and even identify with them, but only up to the point where, through the unwitting sacrifice of their personal dignity, they subordinate themselves to us. We can listen with enthusiasm to the bravado of the speaker of "The Promised Land" when he says "Pretty soon little girl I'm gonna take charge," but must back away when it carries into a naïveté that is at once defensive and insecure:

Mister, I ain't a boy, no I'm a man,
And I believe in a promised land.

That our instincts are right about this character and others must, of course, make us feel better about ourselves even in some very small way. But I don't mean to suggest that Springsteen is manipulating us for the sake of winning us over as an audience or trying to promote the "superficially progressive and optimistic" outlook that worries Christopher Lasch.³⁴ The situations that Springsteen depicts are harsh and real, and they are described for us by voices that really seem authentic. The dramatic monologue permits the complementary experience of being able to empathize with the plight of the speaker, while remaining critical of the circumstances that generated that plight. For Springsteen it is a kind of invitation to action, or more accurately, to assume the kind of individual responsibility that beings by simply taking a thoughtful and critical look at the speaker in the monologue.

The accomplishment of Springsteen's lyrics is that they sensitize listeners to very real contemporary problems. Rather than glorified heroes, the characters of Springsteen's songs, are models of flawed, but understandable, behavior. As we hear them tell their very personal stories, we not only learn about the social dilemmas that have brought them down, but about the way that we might, by recognizing their flaws in ourselves, avoid being defeated by similar circumstances. To identify with the characters of Springsteen's lyrics would be to admit defeat to a system that the activist Springsteen knows very well can appear insurmountable. Rather than offer songs with messages that are hollow in their optimism, Springsteen offers hope in the form of the dramatic monologue of the kind of improvement that requires personal initiative, discipline, and a sense of self.

Rutgers University



Photographs courtesy of CBS Records © 1987.

notes

1. Reagan's comment is excerpted and discussed in an article on Springsteen in *Newsweek* (August 5, 1985), 48. See also Jefferson Morley, "Darkness on the Edge of the Shining City," *The New Republic* (March 23, 1987), 20-23, and Jim Fouratt, "Rock 'n' Ron: The President Moves on the Music," *The Village Voice* (October 30, 1984), 51.

2. Bruce Springsteen, "The Rolling Stone Interview: Bruce Springsteen," Kurt Loder, Interviewer. *Rolling Stone* (December 6, 1984), 21. Hereafter cited as Loder interview.

3. W. F. Thrall, A. Hibbard, and C. H. Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York, 1960), 155.

4. Robert Browning, *Poems of Robert Browning*, ed. Donald Smalley (Boston, 1956), 49.

5. Alan Sinfield, *Dramatic Monologue* (London, 1977) looks at the origins of the dramatic monologue as well as its more recent applications. See also Linda K. Hughes, *The Manyfaced Glass: The Tennysonian Dramatic Monologue* (Columbus, Ohio, 1987) which provides an excellent review of the theoretical aspects of the dramatic monologue in the context of a more focussed study.

6. John Orman, *The Politics of Rock Music* (Chicago, 1984), x.

7. Lyrics quoted in this essay are from *Bruce Springsteen Complete* (Miami, Florida, 1986), or from those provided with Bruce Springsteen albums. All lyrics have been used by permission of John Landau and CBS records. All Rights Reserved.

8. Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York, 1957), 183. Langbaum writes that "the speakers of dramatic monologues burst into utterance in the same sense that the verb is used in connection with song."

9. Langbaum, 104.

10. Sinfield, 32.

11. Bruce Springsteen, "Interview with Bruce Springsteen," Mikal Gilmore, interviewer, *Rolling Stone* 512 (December 10, 1987), 23. Hereafter cited as Gilmore interview.

12. In fact even the straightforward "War" which was added to the "Live" tour by Springsteen in order "to reshape . . . part of the show to make it as explicit as I could without sloganeering" was, according to him, frequently "misunderstood."

Whether Springsteen's problem of being misunderstood is due to any kind of conservative trend in his audience is not clear. Conservatives do seem to want to make sense out of Springsteen and find an appropriate context for him. In a now famous essay, George Will reassured his readers (and himself) that the "hard honest work" of a Springsteen is "vivid proof that the work ethic is alive and well." Not only is Springsteen "no whiner," according

to Will, "but his recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: "Born in the U.S.A.!" (George F. Will. "Bruuuuuuce," in *The Morning After: American Successes and Excesses 1981-1986* (New York, 1986), 9-11. Norman Podhoretz is a far less sympathetic fan; he accuses Springsteen of trying to "reinforce the delusion that the Reagan era has plunged us back into the '30s." Podhoretz, in a polarized effort to make sense of Springsteen, warns us that Springsteen's "message is addressed not to any believers in Reaganite values but to people who are praying of a resurgence of the radical activism of the '60s." (Norman Podhoretz, "Springsteen Is Not in Tune With a Patriotic Vision" *Los Angeles Times* [August. 29, 1985], 2, 5.)

13. Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York, 1987), 387. See also Robert Dallek's *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984), and David Shi's *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York, 1985).

14. Wills, 386.

15. For a discussion and examples, of Reagan's rhetorical style see Paul D. Erickson, *Reagan Speaks, The Making of an American Myth* (New York, 1985). "Our response to Reagan's rhetoric," according to Erickson, "suggests that we are not an especially thoughtful or analytic nation of political readers, but a people seeking eagerly for answers rather than questions." Erickson also states that "Reagan's rhetoric has appealed to and encouraged one of our worst habits, the desire to believe, which goes beyond even gullibility."

16. Gilmore interview, 26.

17. Sinfield identifies the need for a complex appreciation of the narrative in Browning. "Browning's favourite device," according to Sinfield, "is to write so uncompromisingly from the speaker's perspective that it is hard for the reader to perceive what is happening." The result, says Sinfield, was that "Browning's first readers accused him of obscurity."

18. Gilmore interview, 24.

19. In spite of the spoken introduction, the *Live* album only includes the shortened form of "This Land." Springsteen may have felt that it would have been straining the political sympathies of his audience to include the more radical verses of the song in his performance. The full song can be found in Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York, 1980), 141.

20. Quoted in Robert Hilburn, *Springsteen* (New York, 1985), 168.

21. Mary Harron, "No One's Fault." *New Statesman* (November 19, 1982), 30.

22. See, for example, "Drive all Night," "Adam Raised a Cain," and "Downbound Train." One of the most interesting variations on this theme is the speaker in the song "Stolen Car" who feels imprisoned by his inability to get caught.

23. John Paresles's excellent analysis of *Born in the U.S.A.* raises the important question of whether Springsteen's "populist message" can actually be made popular. ("Bruce Springsteen - Rock's Populist," *The New York Times* [August 18, 1985], 7.) The problem is that his lyrics are accompanied by, as Paresles puts it, "triumphant anthem-like melodies bolstered by ringing guitars and a walloping rhythm section." Springsteen's talent for composing the kind of rock and roll that asks for a physical rather than intellectual response may well work against the more delicate structure of his lyrics. Yet if that is the case, all that can be said about Springsteen is that he has found a way to reach an audience that is so large that the lyrical content of his music cannot be ignored.

24. Informal surveys of Springsteen fans (see Merle Ginsberg, "The Fans" *Rolling Stone* [October 10, 1985], 31 and George Will's essay) and of rock fans in general (see the surveys conducted by John Orman) suggest that it is common for audiences to misunderstand or misinterpret rock lyrics. The problem of audiences, meaning and the rock and roll medium has been addressed by a number of authors. "It would appear that the protest song," observes R. Serge Denisoff, in *Sing a Song of Social Significance* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983), "is primarily seen as an entertainment item rather than one of political significance." Robert G. Pielke (*You Say You Want a Revolution* [Chicago, 1986]) attributes a more revolutionary impact to rock music. In his article "Rock and Roll in Search of an Audience" (in James Lull, ed., *Popular Music and Communication* [Newbury Park, California, 1987], 175-197), Lawrence Grossberg sees too close a tie between musical performance and meaning, particularly in Springsteen, to artificially separate them.

25. In an essay that describes Springsteen as a "Catholic meistersinger," Andrew M. Greeley identifies Springsteen's "Catholic imagination" as the source of the self-conscious narrative voice in *Tunnel of Love* and points to the "symbols of the Catholic liturgy" that, for him, define the album. ("The Catholic Imagination of Bruce Springsteen," *America* [February 6, 1988], 5, 110-115.)

26. John Rockwell. "Bruce Springsteen has a Grown-Up Way With a Song." *New York Times* (Sunday, June 12, 1988), 32. See also Jon Paresles' "Springsteen Looks at Love," *New York Times* (Sunday, October 4), 1987, Sect. 2, 1, 29.

27. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1978), xviii.

28. Lasch, 7.

29. Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York, 1979), 110.

30. Davis, 116.

31. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, 1985), 137.
32. Loder interview, 21.
33. Kurt Loder, "BRUCE!," *Rolling Stone* (February 28, 1985), 23.
34. Lasch, xviii.