

## University of Puget Sound Sound Ideas

---

All Faculty Scholarship

Faculty Scholarship

---

1996

# From Badlands to Better Days: Bruce Springsteen Observes Law and Politics

Bill Haltom

*University of Puget Sound*, [haltom@pugetsound.edu](mailto:haltom@pugetsound.edu)

Michael W. McCann

Follow this and additional works at: [http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty\\_pubs](http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/faculty_pubs)

---

### Citation

Haltom, Bill and McCann, Michael W., "From Badlands to Better Days: Bruce Springsteen Observes Law and Politics" (1996).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact [soundideas@pugetsound.edu](mailto:soundideas@pugetsound.edu).

## From Badlands to Better Days: Bruce Springsteen Observes Law and Politics

William Haltom and Michael W. McCann

Western Political Science Association  
San Francisco  
1996

Bruce Springsteen defines himself as a story-teller.<sup>1</sup> We agree that Springsteen is as talented a story-teller as rock and roll has produced.<sup>2</sup> He has written romances of adolescence and adolescents; lyrical tales of escapes, escapees, and escapists; and elegies on parents and parenthood. The best of Springsteen's song-stories deftly define characters by their purposes and artfully articulate the artist's attitude toward his "material." Not so Springsteen's songs that concern law or politics. In these songs the artist's attitude toward his creations is often lost in a flood of seemingly studied ambiguity and the characters' purposes are usually murky. Springsteen, in legal and political songs as well as in his other stories, almost always evokes emotion. Until recently, too many of his songs of law or politics have been rock-and-roll Rorschach blots: scenes, acts, and actors without clear purposes and attitudes.

In contrast, Springsteen's latest collection, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, offers reason to believe that Springsteen will be writing more complete political-legal songs. Esthetes who prefer understated lyrics that permit listeners to draw their own lessons may continue to admire the multiple interpretations Springsteen leaves unobstructed in most of his work, while aesthetes who like artists to tie up loose ends will probably celebrate Springsteen's recent "clarity" of political vision and reduced susceptibility to misunderstanding.

### SPRINGSTEEN'S STORY-TELLING

Springsteen's songs are sufficiently numerous and his themes sufficiently varied that we hesitate to characterize them briefly lest we do so superficially. However, we should be able, through a few examples, to suggest the best sorts of songs this story-teller sings. The essence of Springsteen's style, we argue, is to introduce familiar, often unsympathetic actors into ordinary, often urban scenes that lead to revelation.<sup>3</sup> The actors, acts, and even costumes and props reveal purposes, often purposes implicit in scenes. The interrelations of those scenes, actors, acts, props reveal the artist's attitudes. The artist's attitudes — and sometimes twenty thousand or more concert-goers — then transform what we thought we understood into something more that we understand more profoundly.

#### Elements of Story-Telling

In *A Grammar of Motives*, literary critic Kenneth Burke suggested that such transformations occur only when artists answer — or cause members of their audiences to answer —

---

<sup>1</sup> See Springsteen interview on CBS's "Sixty Minutes," January 21, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Susannah Hunnewell, "So Much Survives a Marriage," *The New York Times Book Review* January 24, 1993 p. 3, cols. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> "I set out to make sure something is revealed at the end of the song, some knowledge gained. That's when, I figure, I'm doing my job." David Corn, "Bruce Springsteen Tells the Story of the Secret America," *Mother Jones* (March/April 1996) pp. 22, 24, and 26. Corn quotes Springsteen on p. 24, col. 1.

customary questions of journalists: What? Who? Where and When? How? and especially Why? Burke then examined how dramatists and novelists created stories in which acts, agents, scenes, agency, and purpose suited each the other and each all of the others in a coherent definition of human motives.”<sup>4</sup> He labeled interrelations of these five elements “ratios,” a metaphor that nicely suggests that each element must vary — “dramatistically,” not linearly, monotonically, directly, or inversely — with every other element if stories are to seem internally consistent, socially authentic, and conventionally interpretable.

Burke hypothesized that purposes were most crucial to creating and maintaining esthetically and intellectually pleasing stories. In the best dramas, for example, the actions that constitute plots grow out of and thus suit the agents. These actions must make sense in context — they must be purposeful behaviors in which “that kind of person” would engage in “that kind of situation.” The means [props, dialogue, and costumes are examples]<sup>5</sup> that agents employ must not contradict scenes or the agents’ character lest audiences be confused. Configuring all these dramatic elements into a consistent sequence of action are purposes, the “dramatistic” elements that best foster audience identification with or disassociation from agents.

In *Dramatism And Development* [1972], Burke made his “pentad” a “hexad” by adding the attitudes of the artist. The attitudes of the artist toward his or her material can transmogrify the other five elements just as certainly as the five elements can alter or complexify the artist’s attitudes. Satiric attitude, for example, can direct the audience’s attention away from prominent, professed relations between acts and purposes [we usually call this “rationalization”] and toward less obvious but more telling purposes that are the ratios [“ulterior motives”] that the artist introduces to metamorphose acts in ways that audiences but not agents recognize. Incongruities between professed purposes and scenes, agency, and acts intensify audience-members’ awareness of contradictions. If the story-teller introduces purposes of which agents seem unaware, the satiric effect is heightened.

**Table One — Terms for Analysis**

Journalists’ Questions	Burke’s Terms	Our Terms Below	Components
What?	Act	Act, Action	Deeds, Movement, Change
Who?	Agent	Actor	Protagonist, Antagonists
When and Where?	Scene	Scene	Temporal, Spatial, Social Settings, Circumstances, or Contexts
How?	Agency	Means	Props, Tools, Methods
Why?	Purpose	Motive	Motivations, Goals
What’s the angle?	Attitude	Tone	Orientation, Perspective

In the analysis below, we search for Springsteen’s attitudes [which we shall label *tone*] and his characters’ motivations [hereinafter, *purpose(s)*] in the stories that Springsteen tells.

<sup>4</sup> For Burke, “motives” are the whole structure of human action. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke shows how dramatists “situate” the five elements of his pentad in “ratios” that make both sense and drama. All five elements and their interrelations are, in Burke’s terms, motives.

<sup>5</sup> Dialogue and costumes may, of course, be part of scenes or aspects of characters.

With Burke, we assume that complete, satisfactory, and revealing stories depend on *purpose* and *tone* more than other elements. We argue that Springsteen’s best stories feature the *purpose* and *tone* that constitute the highest art. We then show that Springsteen’s few treatments of law and politics tended, until very recently, to understress motivations and mask his own attitudes toward his materials. In concerts this artistic shortcoming matters less, for Springsteen weaves his best narratives *before* he sings. However, those unacquainted with Bruce Springsteen the performer are unlikely to get much from Bruce Springsteen the album-maker when law and politics furnish the themes. Only in his most recent work on law and politics has Springsteen approached his artistry in story-telling unrelated to law and politics. Let us begin from examples of Bruce Springsteen’s artistry.

### Acts, Actors, Purposes, and Attitudes

For originality and rock-and-roll artistry [which we do not regard as an oxymoron], we find it hard to beat “Growing Up,” an example of Springsteen in the first person on his first album.<sup>6</sup> Springsteen mocks adolescent contrarian acts with rollicking horse-laughes that make his attitude toward his “material” unmistakable. More, adolescent rebellion is so universal that Springsteen needs only to allude to proclaimed *purposes* to recall to every listener her or his teen years [or — poor boomers! — his or her children’s current years]. We cite the second stanza, in which Springsteen’s lyrics take off in deliberately mixed nautical and aeronautic metaphors:

The flag of piracy flew from my mast, my sails were set wing to wing  
I had a jukebox graduate for first mate, she couldn't sail but she sure could sing,  
I pushed B-52 and bombed 'em with the blues with my gear set stubborn on standing  
I broke all the rules, strafed my old high school, never once gave though to landing,  
I hid in the clouded warmth of the crowd but when they said "Come down." I threw up,  
Ooh . . . growin' up.

This song puts a typical adolescent male *actor* through his poses: rebellious *acts* romanticized by imagination, excess, contradiction of self and others, and other typically teen moments. Underlying *purposes* receive little explicit attention in this lyric, but the phases of adolescence are so familiar that discussing motives in a psychologically realistic manner would probably add little and subtract much. The contrariness of many teens has so many motivations that are experienced through so many different lenses that story-teller Springsteen probably believed that generic adolescent stunts would call forth their own motives. Thus, discussion of particular motives for common behaviors would add little. More, so myriad are individuals’ expressions of their contrariness and so varied are the cultural elements that teens counter that listing even a few would deny many more autobiographic associations for listeners than it would elicit.

“Jackson Cage,” in contrast, abounds with psychologically realistic *purposes* that reveal the actors behind seemingly ordinary actions. In this song, Springsteen compares a woman’s life to prison, a common allusion in his song-writing. We take this to betray Bruce’s attitudes toward many working-class women and men. He begins in the third person, goes to the second person, and ends in the first person — a wonderful way to move the story from one woman’s life to myr-

---

<sup>6</sup> While we worked from compact disks, we stick with the more common label for long-playing, multiple-song recordings.

riad lives of quiet desperation. We believe that the purposes of these actors are as unmistakable as they are poignant:

Driving home she grabs something to eat  
Turns a corner and drives down her street  
Into a row of houses she just melts away  
Like the scenery in another man's play  
Into a house where the blinds are closed  
To keep from seeing things she don't wanna  
know  
She pulls the blinds and looks out on the  
street  
The cool of the night takes the edge off the  
heat

In the Jackson Cage  
Down in the Jackson Cage  
You can try with all your might  
But you're reminded every night  
That you been judged and handed life  
Down in the Jackson Cage

Every day ends in wasted motion  
Just crossed swords on the killing floor  
To settle back is to settle without knowing  
The hard edge that you're settling for  
Because there's always just one more day  
And it's always gonna be that way  
Little girl you've been down here so long

I can tell by the way that you move you be-  
long to

The Jackson Cage  
Down in Jackson Cage  
And it don't matter just what you say  
Are you tough enough to play the game they  
play  
Or will you just do your time and fade away  
Down into the Jackson Cage?

Baby there's nights when I dream of a better  
world  
But I wake up so downhearted girl  
I see you feeling so tired and confused  
I wonder what it's worth to me or you  
Just waiting to see some sun  
Never knowing if that day will ever come  
Left alone standing out on the street  
Till you become the hand that turns the key  
down in  
Jackson Cage  
Down in Jackson Cage  
Well darlin' can you understand  
The way that they will turn a man  
Into a stranger to waste away  
Down in the Jackson Cage

We have chosen examples in which Springsteen has made *purposes* and his own *tone* unambiguous. When an artist unmistakably furnishes both *purpose* and *tone*, the likelihood of an unambiguous moral for each story increases. We do not assume that every story that fails to furnish an unambiguous moral, *purposes*, and *tone* is imperfect, except in the etymological sense of the term. Indeed, only by skimping on some elements and their implications can a story have a beginning and reach an end. We assume instead that *purposes*, before some point of diminishing returns, enrich characters and attract the interest of the audience and that poets who wish to communicate their *tone* had better adopt some clear stance(s) lest their poems be hostages to interpreters. We also offer the lyrics above as evidence that *purpose* and *tone* need not overwhelm other elements or obstruct the audience's view of those elements. With Burke, we seek perfection of the poem in proper measure, that measure which Burke aptly called *ratios*.

To be fair, Springsteen often “completes” his lyrics when he supplies underemphasized elements in his preludes to songs in concerts. One particularly poignant such story precedes Springsteen's song “The River” on the third CD of the 1986 issue of *Bruce Springsteen & the E*

*Street Band Live / 1975-85.*<sup>7</sup> Springsteen tells his audience how his father had Bruce’s hair cut when Bruce was laid up in the hospital, leading the adolescent Bruce to tell his father that Bruce hates him. Bruce’s father says he cannot wait until the Army makes a man of Bruce. Bruce purposely failed the physical for the draft in 1968. When his hated father hears that the Army will not have its chance to make a man of Bruce, his father says, “Good.”

Bruce Springsteen has more than enough art to convey complex purposes and multiple attitudes in his lyrical stories about sons and fathers even without such narrative prefaces. We know of no better example than “Independence Day:”

Well 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  
Cause the darkness of this house has got the  
best of us  
There's a darkness in this town that's got us  
too  
But they can't touch me now  
And you can't touch me now  
They ain't gonna do to me  
What I watched them do you

So say goodbye it's Independence Day  
It's Independence Day this time  
All down the line  
Just say goodbye its Independence Day  
It's Independence Day this time

Now I don't know what it always was with  
us  
We chose the words, and yeah, we drew the  
lines  
There was just no way this house could hold  
the two of us  
I guess that we were just too much of the  
same kind

Well say goodbye it's Independence Day

It's Independence Day all boys must run  
away  
So say goodbye it's Independence Day  
All men must make their way come Independence Day

Now the rooms are all empty down at Frankie's joint  
And the highway she's deserted clear down  
to Breaker's Point  
There's a lot of people leaving town now  
leaving their friends, their homes  
At night they walk that dark and dusty  
highway all alone

Well Papa go to bed now, it's getting late  
Nothing we can say can change anything  
now  
Because there's just different people coming  
down here now and they see things in  
different ways  
And soon everything we've known will just  
be swept away

So say goodbye it's Independence Day  
Papa now I know the things you wanted that  
you could not say  
But won't you just say goodbye it's Independence Day  
I swear I never meant to take those things  
away.

In “Independence Day,” social conventions supply familiar *purposes*. Springsteen adopts — in order — an overtly rebellious *tone*, an almost expository *tone*, and an explicitly apologetic

---

<sup>7</sup> For a verbatim account of one telling of this tale, see John Duffy, *Bruce Springsteen In His Own Words* (New York: Omnibus Press, 1993) p. 13, col. 2.

*tone*. The rebellious *tone* is clear in “They ain't gonna do to me/ What I watched them do you” at the end of the first stanza, albeit that the son rebels against a scene as much as against the paternal antagonist. We find Springsteen’s hypothesis — “I guess that we were just too much of the same kind” — to be an interesting if prosaic attempt to understand his conflicts with his father. Thus, we “read” the lyrics as moving the protagonist-son from denunciation [of the dark setting or the antagonist-father or both] to explanation and understanding. This shift of *tone* is completed in the final stanza when understanding dissolves at least some of the resentment and antagonism and yields to a touching apology for a thousand filial sins. Such realization is revelation. While we are hardly blinded by the light of such forgiveness and maturity, it is difficult not to feel the warmth.

### **Tone, Autobiography, and Working-Class Perspectives**

Because the lyrics seem to be written in a sincere first person, the three *tones* in “Independence Day” very nearly express Springsteen’s autobiographic bent as well. The artist is settling some old business through his story, perhaps using music to tell his own father what Springsteen otherwise cannot convey. As in “Growing Up,” in “Independence Day” Bruce Springsteen creates identification between his own life and the lives of his listeners by citing very common difficulties that persist past the teen years.

Springsteen’s working-class poetry and outsider’s perspective endow his lyrics with a political *tone* that, ironically, we find far fainter or missing when his songs concern law or politics. Springsteen has observed adolescence, urban flora and fauna, the strictures of family, school, romance, friendship, and parenthood, and chronicled the lives of would-be winners and has-been losers. He has provided running comment on baby boomers’ experiences. That commentary may be seen as political or not depending on the perspective the listener brings to the music.

Springsteen might explain his usual leeriness of broader themes and explicit *tones* by citing his own modest,<sup>8</sup> baby-boomer background:<sup>9</sup>

I kinda keep to myself. As a writer it’s where you’re from. You know, if you grew up in a slum, you just want it like that. You don’t show, like, that kind of emotion. To show too much was not the thing to do in those days. I sort of keep to myself as far as I can.

Springsteen has offered an explanation that is less about where he came from and more about he has managed to go. This more affirmative self-understanding suggests that Springsteen has concentrated on what has worked in his own life. Rock and roll, fierce individualism, romanticism, and escape have all worked for Springsteen. Neither law nor politics nor thoughts about law or politics have fueled Springsteen’s creative engine:

I looked at *Born to Run* and the things people were saying about it, that it was just a romantic fantasy and all that, and I thought, “No, this is me. This is my story.” And I really felt good about it. . . . But later, as time went on, I started to look around and see what

---

<sup>8</sup> Dave Marsh, *Glory Days: Bruce Springsteen in the 1980s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987) p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Duffy, *Bruce Springsteen In His Own Words*, pp. 72 (col. 2)-73 (col. 1).

other stories there were to tell. And that was really when I started to see the lives of my friends and the people I knew, and they weren't that way at all.

Taken together, Springsteen's self-examinations yield a tentative explanation for the irony that his *tone* is more explicit and perhaps even more political when he writes about everyday life but at most implicit and seemingly apolitical when he turns his hands to less mundane, more public themes. Keeping to himself and to what he was confident that he knew and understood, Springsteen could convey his own orientation to characters and stories. Beyond that which he was confident that he understood, Springsteen tended until his latest album to escape into ambiguity. We shall see that Springsteen tends to diffidence about legal or political matters beyond the grasp of a child of the Fifties and Sixties who was born when he discovered rock and roll and got a guitar.

*Purposes* and *tones* are, of course, neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for pleasing stories. If songs such as those above were the focus of this paper, we should love to draw attention to tropes and other devices that reveal the “dancing of attitudes” that Burke says is the essence of poetry. We hope that readers unfamiliar with Springsteen's music have reveled in his poetry from excerpts above. Our analysis is so focused that both the steps of that dancing and the music that the artist and his audience love have been played down. We have undertaken the above only to show the usual qualities of the best story-telling of Bruce Springsteen.

## SPRINGSTEEN'S POLITICAL STORIES

Evocative as Springsteen's music often is, the artist's very genius for *actors* and *scenes* can work against him as well. Bruce Springsteen brings to his political song-stories a style that disinclines him to stress characters' *purposes* and his own attitudes. In some songs, Springsteen stands back from acts, actors, and scenery and lets the listener react or respond without much guidance from Springsteen. While this distant or diffident style may broaden his audience and enhance marketing, leaving listeners to their own conclusions permits Springsteen to be understood in a ways wildly inconsistent with his expressed intentions. Many listeners find Springsteen's lyrics blowing in the wind, whether from political windbags or overwrought groupies.

### Springsteen's Political Style: Evoke and Evade

Springsteen recently characterized his song-writing to an interviewer who asked about *The Ghost of Tom Joad*:<sup>10</sup>

I don't like the soapbox stuff. I don't believe you can tell people anything. You can show them things. For this particular record, all I knew was that I wanted to write some good stories. . . . I don't set out to make a point. I set out to create understanding and compassion and present something that feels like the world. I set out to make sure something is revealed at the end of the song, some knowledge gained. That's when, I figure, I'm doing my job.

---

<sup>10</sup> Corn, “Bruce Springsteen Tells the Story of the Secret America,” p. 24, col. 1.



We leave undiscussed many of the philosophical issues buried in Springsteen’s analysis of his song-writing habits. Specifically, we choose not to debate whether one can create understanding or compassion without taking a perspective, whether one can present something that feels like the world without telling people anything political, and whether one can be certain that anything gets revealed by the end of the song unless one undertakes to push some values centerstage and other values backstage. For our purposes, it suffices that Springsteen is trying to “let the song speak for itself.” Before we read this interview, we saw in Springsteen’s work indeterminacy, apparently deliberate ambiguity. Many artists choose not to hit audiences over the head with the message. Bruce Springsteen is one of those artists.

More, Springsteen has said that he grew up in a very apolitical household.<sup>11</sup> He has prefaced such protest songs as “War” with concert-comments about childhood friends who were going off to Vietnam and knew not where it was. His opposition to the draft concerned survival rather politics or patriotism.<sup>12</sup> The most authoritative examination of Springsteen and his music frequently refers to Springsteen’s self-consciousness about the limits of his knowledge about politics and wariness of being used by trendy opportunists and politicians.<sup>13</sup>

Springsteen is an extremely cautious man, and he’d always been extra careful not to speak out about issues he didn’t fully understand. This was an admirable way to avoid becoming “the new Jane Fonda,” but it sometimes meant he sold himself short. At *No Nukes* [an anti-nuclear concert, recording, and film], for example, he was the only artist who didn’t make a statement on the issue in the concert program. Rhetorically, this was supposed to mean that he preferred to let his music speak for him, but the unavoidable implication was that he didn’t really feel that he knew what he was talking about (and as the unreleased song, “Roulette,” proved, that just wasn’t true).

Still, even the author of this appraisal was compelled to concede that years later Springsteen’s appreciation of class and poverty remained “profoundly *prepolitical*.”<sup>14</sup> Without explicit ideology, Springsteen was still groping about for what he thought of institutions, structures, and processes. The politics that Springsteen fathomed was profoundly personal politics.

To listeners seeking comment on larger political ideas, Springsteen’s diffidence and embrace of escape makes his lyrics evocative but almost immediately evasive. We believe that *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden captured the evasiveness of Springsteen’s style, albeit a bit obliquely:<sup>15</sup>

Springsteen recognizes rock and roll as a product of the working class culture he writes about . . . [T]his hard Saturday night party music for the common people wasn’t invented to help examine the hard realities of life but to find a release [from] those realities.

---

<sup>11</sup> Corn, “Bruce Springsteen Tells the Story of the Secret America,” p. 22 col. 2

<sup>12</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>13</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>14</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, pp. 59, 133.

<sup>15</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 202.

But on *Born in the U.S.A.*, Springsteen uses the music to do both. He has transfused rock and roll and social realism into one another, and the compassion and surging brawn of his music make his very despairing vision of American life into a kind of celebration.

We believe that Mr. Holden has defined an important aspect of Springsteen’s artistry. Few rockers paint pictures of the world as abject as some Springsteen’s “landscapes.” His hard realities are stark and often startling but he almost always releases the listener. At least before *The River* (1980), Springsteen “was as unfailingly optimistic in his songs as he was in his everyday interpretations of events.”<sup>16</sup> “The central tenet of everything Springsteen had ever done was hope.”<sup>17</sup> This is true both of albums and of particular songs.

Springsteen’s two darkest “solo”<sup>18</sup> albums each end with songs that, if not uplifting, at least promise escape or release from the misery Springsteen has shown his listeners. *Nebraska* ends with “Reason to Believe,” the last stanza of which *may* betoken a release through faith and hope.

Congregation gathers down by the riverside  
Preacher stands with his bible, groom stands waitin' for his bride  
Congregation gone and the sun sets behind a weepin' willow tree  
Groom stands alone and watches the river rush on so effortlessly  
Wonderin' where can his baby be  
Still at the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to believe

Springsteen tells us why *The Ghost of Tom Joad* ends with three deliberate changes of pace:<sup>19</sup>

I got to the end of the record, and there had been a lot of mayhem [in the songs]. I wanted to leave the door open, so I wrote “Across the Border.” That song is a beautiful dream. It’s the kind of dream you would have before you fall asleep, where you live in a world where beauty is still possible. And in that possibility of beauty there is hope.

Then I had the idea of writing a song [“Galveston Bay”] about the Vietnamese and the Texas fishermen, about a guy who makes a particular decision not to add to the brutality and violence. . . . He decides to let it pass on this night, to leave it alone, for whatever the reason. That’s a miracle that can happen, that does happen. People get to a certain brink, and they make a good choice, instead of a deadly choice.

Perhaps the most interesting “uptick” is the last song on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. “My Best Was Never Good Enough” deftly answers the mindless, escapist optimism of *Forrest Gump* even as it

---

<sup>16</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 149.

<sup>18</sup> *Nebraska* consisted of Springsteen playing guitar and harmonica and singing into his own four-track recorder. Thus, it was truly a solo effort. *The Ghost of Tom Joad* features Springsteen as the creator and main attraction assisted by “backup” musicians. We treat that as a solo effort here.

<sup>19</sup> Corn, “Bruce Springsteen Tells the Story of the Secret America,” p. 24, col. 2.

signals listeners that the artist suspects that this album and the artist’s portraits will satisfy neither his corporate marketers nor his usual fans:

"If God gives you nothin' but lemons then you make some lemonade  
The early bird catches the fuckin' worm, Rome wasn't built in a day  
Now life's like a box of chocolates  
You never know what you're going to get  
Stupid is as stupid does" and all the rest of that shit  
Come on pretty baby call my bluff  
'Cause for you my best was never good enough

### Political Escapism

If we direct our attention to songs rather than albums, we discover that most of Springsteen’s anthems are about escape or transcendence or transcendence through escape. Triumphant escape is the very theme of Springsteen’s first great anthem, *Born to Run*, as its first stanza reveals:

In the day we sweat it out in the streets of a runaway American dream  
At night we ride through mansions of glory in suicide machines  
Sprung from cages out on Highway 9  
Chrome wheeled, fuel injected  
And steppin' out over the line  
Baby this town rips the bones from your back  
It's a death trap, it's a suicide rap  
We gotta get out while we're young  
'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run

The highway and cars are only one way out that Springsteen celebrates in his lyrics, but they are the most common means.<sup>20</sup> These escapes can be seen as political, political-economic, sociological, psychological, or anthropological. Certainly, they have implications for a politics of everyday endurance or resistance, a citizenship in the land of “a runaway American Dream.”

Perhaps Springsteen’s transcendent escape occurs in “Rosalita,” a song on Springsteen’s second album. Released *before* “Born to Run,” this crowd-pleaser became a staple of Springsteen’s concerts. Thus, it is a sort of retroactive anthem, one recognized by concert-goers but less well known to others than “Born to Run.”<sup>21</sup>

Now I know your mama, she don't like me cause I play in a rock and roll band,  
And I know your daddy, he don't dig me but he never did understand,  
Your papa lowered the boom, he locked you in your room  
I'm comin' to lend a hand,

---

<sup>20</sup> In addition to escapes through cars and highways, Springsteen has chronicled escapes through dreams and fantasies, poses, hideaways, relationships and romance, street-life, and nostalgia [e.g., *Glory Days*]. *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, in contrast, “dwells” mostly in the sorts of traps from which Bruce used to escape: homeless-shelters, prisons and jails, and death.

<sup>21</sup> Liner-notes for *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* do not contain lyrics, so we used “The Lyrics Page” at “<http://ftp.uwp.edu/pub/music/lyrics/>” on the World Wide Web.

I'm comin' to liberate you, confiscate you, I want to be your man  
Some day we'll look back on this and it will all seem funny  
But now you're sad, your momma's mad,  
    and your papa says he knows that I don't have any money  
    and your papa says he knows that I don't have any money  
    and your papa says he knows that I don't have any money  
Well tell him this is his last chance to get his daughter in a fine romance,  
Cause Rosie the record company just gave me a big advance.

The concert-crowd always goes wild at the familiar resolution of this rock-and-roll fantasy. Springsteen sees rock and roll as a means of escape. It worked for him. Because his fans know it worked for him, Springsteen need not make very explicit his *tone* or his first-person character's *purposes*.

Springsteen's dramatizations and caricatures of desperate *scenes* make escape not only understandable but imperative. We find nothing ambiguous about such messages. Indeed, this motif in Springsteen may condition his audiences to expect him to drag them into valleys so that climbing out will be all the more heroic. Conditioned to such happy escapes, Springsteen's fans may decode his songs in ways utterly at odds with the artist's intentions.

### “Born in the U.S.A.” as a Lesson

Perhaps the most infamous example of the ambiguities of Springsteen's stories is his second [or, if one counts “Rosalita,” third] great anthem, “Born in the U. S. A.” Springsteen plainly resists the idea that the song is ambiguous at all.<sup>22</sup>

It's not that people aren't taught to think, but that they're not taught to think hard enough. “Born in the U.S.A.” is not ambiguous. All you got to do is listen to the verses. If you don't listen to the verses, you're not gonna get the whole song, you're just gonna get the chorus. What you do if someone doesn't understand your song is you keep singing it.

Here the artist is both right and wrong-headed. We, too, find *Born in the U.S.A.* unambiguous. Through the story of one Vietnam veteran, Springsteen directs listeners to the lives of noisy desperation that betray the American dreams about which Springsteen has always written songs and stories. However, we do not believe ourselves churlish to note that screaming the chorus “Born in the U. S. A.” draws the listener's ear and mind away from the verses and the despair. The chorus was intended, we do not doubt, to be cruelly ironic. However, Springsteen has often painted backdrops of despair in front of which he could strike poses of doomed defiance or exultant escape. If patriotic or hopeful or thoughtless consumers take the chorus not as protest but as persistence, will Springsteen overcome that “reading” by stubbornly singing the song over and over?

From a commercial standpoint, Springsteen protests too much. The ambiguity of *Born in the U.S.A.* undoubtedly contributed to its popularity and sales. The turn-away crowds of the *Born in the U. S. A.* tour waved Old Glory back at “the Boss” in 1984 in the same fervor with which they chanted “U . . . S . . . A” in that summer's Los Angeles Olympics. The verses of “Born in

---

<sup>22</sup> Duffy, *Bruce Springsteen in His Own Words*, p. 38, col. 2.

the U. S. A.” that the artist intended as lament too many in audience heard as jingoistic celebration in the face of disappointments.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Bruce, album-buyers are not haunted. Unlike Bruce, rock-and-rollers do not brood. They buy albums, listen to music, attend concerts, pay the freight, and understand what they may how they may. They think hard enough to understand “Born in the U. S. A.” They just thought along lines other than those Springsteen preferred. When he sang the song over and over, they thought about patriotism in the face of defeat and persistence in the face of despair, over and over.

Springsteen left open the doors to such misinterpretations of “Born in the U. S. A.” and two well known conservatives kidnapped his anthem. In Hammonton, New Jersey, President Reagan gave Springsteen’s exploding celebrity an “opportunity society” spin: “America’s future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts; it rests in the message of hope in songs so many young Americans admire: New Jersey’s own Bruce Springsteen.”<sup>24</sup> George F. Will chimed in with a celebratory column on Springsteen and the E Street Band that concluded that there truly was nothing like being born in the U. S. A.<sup>25</sup>

No doubt, these conservatives were being opportunistic in their interpretations. Still, Springsteen left himself and his song open to such opportunism by leaving open to misinterpretation the first-person character’s *purpose* and Springsteen’s *tone*. In “Born to Run” and in “Rosalita,” the lyrics track Springsteen’s own background enough that cognoscenti may supply his *purpose/ tone*. In such anthems, Springsteen *is* or is identified by many as the character whose words Springsteen supplies. For “Born in the U. S. A.,” in contrast, the narrative character is clearly not Springsteen. Springsteen got in no serious “hometown jams.” He never went to Vietnam. He had no brother, before or after Khe Sahn. The separation of singer from character and *purpose* from *tone* enables listeners to hear different stories.

Even when Springsteen tried to correct the record, he had only dramatically incomplete political resources with which to answer the President. Springsteen archly wondered which album must be President Reagan’s favorite. He then allowed that it could not be *Nebraska* and launched into “Johnny 99:”<sup>26</sup>

Well they closed down the auto plant in  
Mahwah late that month

Ralph went out lookin' for a job but he  
couldn't find none

He came home too drunk from mixin'  
Tanqueray and wine

He got a gun shot a night clerk now they  
call'm Johnny 99

Down in the part of town where when you  
hit a red light you don't stop

Johnny's wavin' his gun around and threaten-  
in' to blow his top

When an off duty cop snuck up on him from  
behind

Out in front of the Club Tip Top they  
slapped the cuffs on Johnny 99

Well the city supplied a public defender but  
judge was Mean John Brown

He came into the courtroom and stared poor  
Johnny down

“Well the evidence is clear gonna let the  
sentence, son, fit the crime

Prison for 98 and a year and we'll call it even  
Johnny 99.”

A fistfight broke out in the courtroom they  
had to drag Johnny's girl away

His mama stood up and shouted "Judge don't  
take my boy this way!"

<sup>23</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 248.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 259-260.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 256-257.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

“Well, son, you got any statement you'd like  
to make  
Before the bailiff comes to forever take you  
away?”

Now, judge, judge, I got debts no honest  
man could pay  
The bank was holdin' my mortgage and they  
was takin' my house away  
Now I ain't sayin' that makes me an innocent  
man

But it was more 'n all this that put that gun  
in my hand

Well your honor I do believe I'd be better off  
dead  
And if you can take a man's life for the  
thoughts that's in his head  
Then won't you sit back in that chair and  
think it over judge one more time  
And let 'em shave off my hair and put me on  
that execution line

The Burkean ratios of “Johnny 99” seem well crafted, viewed as we believe Springsteen intended. The *scene* is the Rust Belt — economic dislocation and unemployment desperation sufficient to make breadwinners believe that they would be better off dead.<sup>27</sup> The *actors* are ordinary Americans: Ralph fighting for subsistence and attributing his acts to *scenic* elements; Judge John Brown rendering a judgment more sympathetic to Ralph’s *acts* than to Ralph’s *scene*; Johnny’s girl and his mother *reacting* to the judge’s *act* and thereby creating a *scene*; and Ralph rejecting the new *scene* to which the judge has sentenced him and choosing an *act* of desperation. We can conclude from “Johnny 99” that desperate circumstances create desperadoes and desperadoes “escape” through *acts* and *means* within their meager capacities: drunkenness, violence, crime, and suicidal defiance.

The trouble with this riposte to Reagan is that *scene*, *actors*, *acts*, and *means* are so realistic that they admit of multiple morals to this story. Springsteen hopes his audience will see in this scenario a critique of Reaganomics when many fans were just as likely to get quite different messages. To many youthful supporters of the Reagan Revolution, “Johnny 99” is a morality play about the decimation of human lives worked by declining opportunity. Clearly, Springsteen wanted his listeners to consider Ralph “. . . a better man, if things went right, than most who sleep outside”<sup>28</sup> of prison. Springsteen errs in assuming that listeners need agree with him about what went wrong to lead Ralph to long for the electric chair. The religious right can note that Ralph must have lost faith in himself because he never had faith in God. The libertarian right would direct Ralph to Great Society giveaways and high marginal tax rates that made Mahwah uncompetitive and Ralph unemployable. The social right could score the decline of community and civility that misled Ralph into a life of crime.

Our point here is certainly not that most listeners cannot hear in “Johnny 99” the agony of a workingman driven mad by hopelessness. Nor do we insist that Springsteen bludgeon his audiences with propaganda. We listen to Springsteen in part because he is subtler and less pedantic than Oliver Stone. Instead, we advance the notion that an artist who does not forfend framings must live with his audiences’ interpretations.<sup>29</sup> If, as Springsteen insists, he is so reluctant to mount the soapbox that he renders realism and ends his songs, he can hardly profess surprise or protest opportunism when others complete his songs for him by filling in his blanks with their own *tones*, *purposes*, and other elements or ratios.

<sup>27</sup> Compare “Seeds” on the 1986 live compilation or “Highway 29” on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*.

<sup>28</sup> A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*

<sup>29</sup> As, for example, “Born to Run” as an anthem eclipsed *Born to Run* as an album and artistic statement. See Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 53.

## Personal Versus Political

Bruce Springsteen’s dramas of everyday life have always invited meditation on myriad themes of politics on a small and all-too-human stage. Please recall that Springsteen believed that his first songs sprang from his own life. The first three albums featured rebellions, delusions, and escapes at once sociological, psychological, and political. Call this a politics of counter-culture with an emphasis on ratios of heroic *actors* to urban *scenes*. The next two albums featured tales of hard *scenes*, working-class *actors*, and often-futile gestures and other *acts* of rebellion. Call this a politics of ordinary, mean existence. *Nebraska* was a Springsteen solo effort that pushed this meanness to extraordinary lengths. *Born in the U. S. A.* began to express Springsteen’s regrets over youth lost and hope forsaken. The next three albums from the studio concerns marriage, love, parenthood, betrayal, doubt, and rue. Is this a politics of middle age? *The Ghost of Tom Joad* may reveal a politics of the Gingrich age.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, Springsteen invests his songs and his shows with so much of himself that most of his song-stories must be understood as autobiographic. This is as true of his political and legal lyrics as of his other lyrics. This truth led us above to infer that Springsteen had “completed” his lyrics with *purposes* and *tones* when he dealt with subjects from his own life but seldom when he generalized his scope. Here we hazard a second inference from Springsteen’s autobiographic bent. As Springsteen has revealed himself to his audiences — and thereby his audiences to themselves — his changing circumstances and his appreciation of the worsening conditions of others from similar backgrounds have shone through.<sup>31</sup>

As Springsteen moved from his personal badlands to better days,<sup>32</sup> he reaffirmed his connections to those who had not been as fortunate.<sup>33</sup>

“I believe in the love and the hope and the faith,” he sang [in the song “Badlands”] at the beginning of 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, the sequel to *Born to Run* and the first album in which he began to portray and assess the living shambles around him. But as the Seventies wore on and more and more men of bright hopes and good intentions were discarded or destroyed, it became obvious that the tragedy of lives such as Doug Springsteen’s weren’t the result of individual failure at all.

Springsteen himself reiterates this point in characterizing *Darkness on the Edge of Town*:<sup>34</sup>

It was just an album about a lot of things in life and in the world for me, where you can see a lot in a lot of people’s faces. They’ve had the humanity beaten out of them. You see the guys on the street that are just mad, they’ll take a slug at anything, the guy with the crazy eyes . . . events just beat the humanity out of people till there’s nothing left.

<sup>30</sup> Corn, “Bruce Springsteen Tells the Story of the Secret America,” p. 22, col. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Financially, Springsteen did not have days much better until after *The River*, his fifth album. Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Duffy, *Bruce Springsteen In His own Words*, p. 46, col. 1.

Still, so poignantly personal<sup>35</sup> are Springsteen’s lyrics that he has had great difficulty expanding them to embrace political phenomena with global, structural, or other large-scale characteristics. In his early songs, Springsteen could be optimistic, ribald, and fun-loving against bleak backgrounds because he “solved” his young-adult problems through triumphant escapes. Parents, school, and responsibility could neither catch his car nor match his charm. With each new album, Springsteen has discovered new hauntings to escape. His bouffant first two albums gave way to defiant escapades and escapes in his next two albums [*Born to Run* and *Darkness at the Edge of Town*] as Springsteen dealt with fame and bitterness in his professional life. If critic Stephen Holden was near the mark, *The River* signified Springsteen’s enduring self-identification with and perhaps even absorption by rock and roll.<sup>36</sup>

Springsteen’s wholeness — the fact that he embodies rock and roll as no one person ever has, except Elvis — springs from his noble-savage persona. Such shocking innocence can’t be faked, but it also suggests that Springsteen scarcely exists outside the rock and roll world that created him. . . . Fifteen years ago, rock and roll music stormed the frontier of contemporary culture, and the major albums of the day addressed the moment. *The River* doesn’t — it addresses rock and roll. The product of one thirty-year-old man’s incredible exertion and faith, it conjures an American-provincial world of a guy, a girl, and a car hurtling into the night, fleeing time itself.

Critic Tom Carson agrees. He argues that Springsteen preaches rock and roll as redemptive escape from conventional society. Despite the rebellious stances and *acts* of his songs’ characters, Springsteen does not reject conventional society in the 1970s so much as use rock and roll to make conventional society acceptable or avoidable.<sup>37</sup> Biographer Dave Marsh saw good news and bad news in Springsteen’s self-referential examination of redemption through rock:<sup>38</sup>

In one sense, this reflected a brilliant and complete expression of Springsteen’s artistic vision. But in another way, it represented the frustration of his talents. Though he had grown immensely as a songwriter and recordmaker, his themes refused to expand. Pump them up as he might, they continued to revolve around the same small center.

Springsteen soon expanded that center. Amid concerts to promote *The River* and the presidential election of 1980 Springsteen began to connect his *actors’* and his own class-position to political and governmental *actions*. He was deeply impressed, for example, by Joe Klein’s *Woody Guthrie: A Life* at about this time. It cannot be entirely coincidence that Springsteen’s next album, *Nebraska*, emulated Guthrie’s style.<sup>39</sup> Still, the politics of *Nebraska* are almost en-

---

<sup>35</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65, 97.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> *Nebraska* also partook of rockabilly, Delta blues, bluegrass, and early Dylan. *Ibid.*, p. 128.



tirely personal and personalized.<sup>40</sup> Springsteen read in Klein’s book that Guthrie greatly regretted that the most radical verses of “This Land Is Your Land” had been forgotten and gone unsung as patriots commandeered the song for their own purposes.<sup>41</sup> Springsteen courted the same danger in his ambiguous songs.

*Nebraska* was much more about the savagery of the world than its nobility, but Springsteen reprised many of his themes in front of a larger *scene* as well. *Born in the U. S. A.* featured triumph on a much broader scale, as befit a commercial breakthrough that has become the third-greatest-selling album of all time. In concerts, Springsteen relied on folk classics such as “This Land Is Your Land” and protest-songs such as Edwin Starr’s “War” to punctuate his own anecdotes. However, reliving Vietnam’s homefront and explaining to the masses that Woody Guthrie meant his standard as an angry rebuke to Irving Berlin for “God Bless America” could not gainsay the fact that so little of Springsteen’s unequivocally political repertoire consisted of songs that he himself had written. Even when assured of his own political views, Springsteen veered into equivocation. He embraced the cause of Vietnam Veterans of America but regaled them with “Who’ll Stop the Rain?” and “Ballad of Easy Rider,” songs assuredly about the war only at a remove.<sup>42</sup>

The highway and rock and roll furnished Springsteen escape-routes from working-class death-traps but not from marriage, parenthood, and family. These new perils haunted Springsteen in the Eighties. The next three products of Springsteen’s studio-work concerned relationships, commitments, and parenting as Bruce’s “bitter days” became “better days.” These albums strike us as less evocative, more introspective [that is, centered on *actor-purpose* ratios], and less powerful. These better days were hardly unalloyed, however. Pessimism on *The River* and on *Nebraska* resurfaced in *Tunnel of Love* to reveal Springsteen as a man permanently haunted.

Only Springsteen’s most recent album, *The Ghost of Tom Joad* has consistently added a clearly political voice to his typically bleak, unyielding landscapes with escapes into dreams or slogans, onto highways or high seas. In this last album only, we contend, have politics and law become less personally and more culturally political.

## SPRINGSTEEN ON LAW AND POLITICS

We have sought explicitly and unequivocally political references to the law to contrast with Springsteen’s passing references to law or politics. Police and judges, for example, are prominent features of scenes in Springsteen songs, but seldom does Springsteen bring them centerstage in any of his productions. References to politics are, using the most expansive definitions of “political,” ubiquitous. Women trapped in loveless relationships, working people caged

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 148. Marsh believes that it would be “. . . misleading to suggest that the songs of *Nebraska* were primarily a political response. Undoubtedly, what Bruce was doing, as he wrote and then taped, was responding to the changing context of his own life.” *Ibid.*, p. 102. Mikal Gilmore of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* noted in his review that “When Springsteen tells Charles Starkweather and Johnny 99’s tales, he neither seeks their redemption nor asks for our judgment. He tells the stories about as simply and as well as they deserve to be told — or about as unsparingly as we deserve to hear them — and he lets us feel for them what we can, or find in them what we can of ourselves.” *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73-74. To be fair, the veterans had adopted those songs as anthems. However, Springsteen is talented enough that he could have adopted the songs to the present circumstance had he chosen to do so. The reader should also be aware that Marsh may err in reporting that Springsteen kept shouting “I wanna know!” through “Who’ll Stop the Rain?” That refrain actually appears in another John Fogerty song, “Have You Ever Senn the Rain?”

by their poverty and despair, sons bound to fathers whom they do not love and cannot respect all are political in some senses. Springsteen has crafted most satisfying examinations of such personal, familial, and sexual “politics,” in our view. He gets into song-writing trouble, in our view, when he believes that he is out of his depth. When his songs concern governmental or legal or other decision-making structures outside personal relationships or family, Bruce Springsteen has tended to shortchange his songs.<sup>43</sup>

We have identified from Springsteen’s repertoire a number of songs that comment on law or politics. We list them in Table Two. Many of these songs, we intend to show, are as evocative as Springsteen’s best stories, praise that we intend to be high praise. The burden of our argument is to show that even the best of this lot are merely evocative until *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995).

Table Two — Legal and Political Themes in Springsteen’s Songs

<i>Album</i> "Song"	Legal Allusion(s)	Political Allusion(s)
<i>Greetings from Asbury Park, N. J.</i> "It's Hard to be a Saint in the City"	police ["the heat"] jail ["that hole"]	
<i>The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle</i> "The E Street Shuffle"	police ["the heat's been bad since Power Thirteen gave a trooper all he had in a summer scuffle"]	
<i>The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle</i> "Fourth of July, Asbury Park"	police ["the cops finally busted Madame Marie for tellin' fortunes better than they do"]	
<i>The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle</i> "Incident on 57th Street"	police ["word is down the cops have found the vein"]	
<i>The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle</i> "New York City Serenade"	prostitution [". . . boogaloo down Broadway and come back home with the loot . . . She won't take cornerboys, ain't got no money, and they're so easy"]	

<sup>43</sup> To construct our “sample” of legal and/or political songs, we made many judgment calls of questionable reliability. Indeed, we cannot assert even *intra*-coder reliability in that each of us might consider this reference to be substantial and political today but not next week. For an example: Springsteen paints scenes of economic despair that have implications for political stances but are far more about personal circumstance and chance than about trends in political economy. We have tried to restrict ourselves to indisputably legal and undoubtedly political allusions, but we acknowledge that reasonable readers will disagree with some of our calls.

Born to Run “Meeting Across the River”	crime [“out on that line”] violence [“this guy don’t dance”]	
Born to Run “Jungleland”	police [“the Maximum Lawmen” “local cops” “Cherry Tops”] jail [“from the churches to the jails”]	anarchy [“street’s on fire in a real death waltz/ Between what’s flesh and what’s fantasy”]
Darkness on the Edge of Town “Badlands”		class domination [“Poor man wanna be rich/ Rich man wanna be king/ And a king ain’t satisfied till he rules everything”]
Darkness on the Edge of Town “Candy’s Room”	prostitution [“Strangers from the city call my baby’s number and they bring her toys”]	
The River “Stolen Car”	car-theft [“And I’m driving a stolen car”]	
Nebraska “Nebraska”	murder [“I killed everything in my path”]	
Nebraska “Atlantic City”	murder [“they blew up the chicken man in Philly last night”]	
Nebraska “Johnny 99”	armed robbery [“He got a gun shot a night clerk”] police [“Off-duty cop snuck up on him”] judge [“but the judge was Mean John Brown”]	economic despair [“I got debts no honest man could pay”]
Nebraska “Highway Patrolman”	police [“I’m a sergeant out of Perrineville”]	
Nebraska “State Troopers”	police [“Mister state trooper, please don’t stop me”]	
Nebraska “Open All Night”	police [“Underneath the overpass trooper hits his party light switch”]	

<p>Born in the U. S. A.          “Born in the U. S. A.”</p>	<p>crime or delinquency          [“Got in a little          hometown jam”]</p>	<p>victimization [“You end up like a          dog that's been beat too much/Till          you spend half your life just covering          up”]          economic despair [“Down in the          shadow of the penitentiary/ Out by          the gas fires of the refinery/ I'm ten          years burning down the road/ No-          where to run ain't got nowhere to          go”]</p>
<p>Born in the U. S. A.          “Darlington County”</p>	<p>arrest [“Driving out of          Darlington County          seen          Wayne handcuffed to          the bumper of a state          trooper's Ford”]</p>	
<p>Born in the U. S. A.          “Workin’ on the Highway”</p>	<p>elopement/abduction          [“We lit out down to          Florida, we got along          all right/ One day her          brothers came and got          her and they took me          in a black and white”]          imprisonment [“The          prosecutor kept the          promise that he made          on that day/ And the          judge got mad and he          put me straight away/          I wake up every          morning to the work          bell clang/ Me and the          warden go swinging          on the Charlotte          County road gang”]</p>	
<p>Lucky Town          “The Big Muddy”</p>	<p>immorality [“There          ain’t no one leavin’          this world buddy/          Without their shirttail          dirty or their hands          bloody”]</p>	
<p>The Ghost of Tom Joad          “The Ghost of Tom Joad”</p>	<p>police [“Highway pa-          trool choopers comin’</p>	<p>justice [“Waitin’ for when the last          shall be first and the first shall be</p>

	up over the ridge” and “... whenever there’s a cop beatin’ a guy”]	last/ In a cardboard box ‘neath the underpass” and “Where there’s a fight ‘gainst the blood and hatred in the air”]
The Ghost of Tom Joad “Straight Time”	prison [“Got out of prison back in ‘86”] outlawry [“Got a cold mind to go tripping ‘cross that thin line/ I ain’t making straight time” and “In the basement huntin’ gun and a hacksaw/ Sip a beer and thirteen inches of barrel drop to the floor”]	constraint [“Seems you can’t get any more than half-free”]
The Ghost of Tom Joad “Highway 29”	robbery [“It was a small-town bank it was a mess/ Well I had a gun you know the rest”]	
The Ghost of Tom Joad “Youngstown”		disillusionment [“These mills they built the tanks and bombs/ That won this country’s wars/ We sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam/ Now we’re wonderin’ what they were dying for”] exploitation [“From the monongahe- la valley/ to the Mesabi iron range/ To the coal mines of Appalachia/ The story’s always the same . . . Now sir you tell me the world’s changed/ Once I made you rich enough/ Rich enough to forget my name”]
The Ghost of Tom Joad “Sinaloa Cowboys”	outlawry [“Miguel and Louis stood cook- ing methampheta- mine”]	exploitation [“For everything the North gives it exacts a price in re- turn”]
The Ghost of Tom Joad “The Line”	police [“Went to work for the INS on the line/ With the Cali- fornia border patrol”]	
The Ghost of Tom Joad “Balboa Park”	prostitution [“Where men in their Mer- cedes/ Come nightly	

	to employ/ . . . The services of the border boys”] drug smuggling [“He swallowed their balloons of cocaine”]	
The Ghost of Tom Joad “The New Timer”	murder [“They found him shot dead . . . / Nothin’ taken nothin’ stolen/ Somebody killin’ just to kill”]	
The Ghost of Tom Joad “Accross the Border”	illegal entry [“We’ll meet on the other side/ There across the border”]	
The Ghost of Tom Joad “Galveston Bay”	arson [“Come to burn the Vietnamese boats”] acquittal [“A jury acquitted him in self-defense”]	nativism [“Soon in the bars around the harbor was talk/ Of America for Americans/ Someone said, ‘You want ’em out, you got to burn ’em out’”]

Table Two immediately inspires some observations. First, consistent with Springsteen’s self-analysis, his songs with substantial legal or political allusions tend to abound with scenes, acts, and actors but seldom with extensively examined purposes or expressed artistic attitudes. Most entries in Table Two are easily categorized as *acts*, *actors*, or *scenes*. Until *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, almost none of the entries partake more of *purpose* or *tones*.

Second, once we restricted “political” and “legal” to their conventional denotations, only two songs before *The Ghost of Tom Joad* seemed to us to carry indisputably and substantially political and legal meanings. This is not surprising since Springsteen did not pursue conventionally political topics much until after *The River* and Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980.<sup>44</sup> Springsteen often alluded to police and judges and other aspects of law and legal institutions throughout the 1970s, but legal allusions were not married to political allusions except on two songs. One, “Johnny 99” on *Nebraska*, we have reviewed above. The other, “Jungleland,” the last song on *Born to Run*, contrasts with the upbeat endings of *Nebraska* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Some excerpts illustrate this point:

Well the Maximum Lawmen run down Flamingo  
 Chasing the Rat and the barefoot girl  
 And the kids round there live just like shadows  
 Always quiet, holding hands

From the churches to the jails  
 Tonight all is silence in the world  
 As we take our stand  
 Down in Jungleland  
 The midnight gang's assembled

<sup>44</sup> Marsh, *Glory Days*, p. 29.

And picked a rendezvous for the night  
They'll meet 'neath that giant Exxon sign  
That brings this fair city light  
Man there's an opera out on the Turnpike  
There's a ballet being fought out in the alley  
Until the local cops  
Cherry Tops

Rips this holy night  
The street's alive  
As secret debts are paid  
Contacts made, they vanish unseen  
Kids flash guitars just like switch-blades  
Hustling for the record machine  
The hungry and the hunted  
Explode into rock'n'roll bands

That face off against each other out in the  
street  
Down in Jungleland

Outside the street's on fire  
In a real death waltz  
Between what's flesh and what's fantasy  
And the poets down here  
Don't write nothing at all  
They just stand back and let it all be  
And in the quick of a knife  
They reach for their moment  
And try to make an honest stand  
But they wind up wounded  
Not even dead  
Tonight in Jungleland

“Jungleland” ends pessimistically and passively. Its protagonists are ultimately ineffectual even at martyrdom. The depressed and depressing *scene* takes from them their dignity, their defiance, and, perhaps most political and impressive, the dignity of their defiance. “Johnny 99,” in a remarkable parallel, displays an anti-hero who seeks death over the indignity and meanness of his *scene*, although probably he will be just as ineffective at goading even Mean Judge Brown into meting out a dramatically or politically redemptive death. In the latest album, Springsteen’s latest haunts leave protagonists and anti-heroes dead or dying.

### ***The Ghost of Tom Joad***

If we are correct, *The Ghost of Tom Joad* supplies listeners more *purposes* and *tones* than Springsteen has hazarded in the past. Perhaps because Springsteen cared little about marketing on this album,<sup>45</sup> perhaps because the political scene has turned increasingly virulent in his view,<sup>46</sup> or perhaps because Springsteen’s confidence in his own political sensibilities has increased, *The Ghost of Tom Joad* seems a more openly “political” album. Certainly it invokes aspects of the legal system more overtly and repeatedly than previous albums. The scenes are still scary. Actors battle despair and try to dodge the hellhounds on their trails. Many of the acts are violent and the means perilous. In song after song on the latest album, however, Springsteen seems to us to supply more completely the purposes of his characters and to betray more unmistakably his own attitudes. He still offers dreams of escape from something in the night, but many Americans will be startled to realize both that they are part of that something haunting the vulnerable and that they may soon join the vulnerable and the haunted.

I don't think there is any such thing as an innocent man; there is collective responsibility. . . . Everybody knows there are the people we write off, there are the people we try to hang on to, and there

<sup>45</sup> Corn, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22 col. 2 and 24 col. 1.

are the people we don't fuck with . . . Everybody knows that, hey,  
maybe I'm just on the line. And maybe I'm going to step over  
from being one of these people to one of those people.

### “The Ghost of Tom Joad”

When Springsteen suggests that collective responsibility means that we are all part of the governmental and political circumstances in which we find ourselves, that we are *actors* creating this *scene*, he invokes anew the most moving speech of Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*. That speech is the centerpiece of the first song and title-cut on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. “The Ghost of Tom Joad” eases listeners into the album by reprising Springsteen’s style of unsettling but unsettled commentary on economic and political reality.

This song manages to embrace the visions of John Steinbeck and John Ford without choosing whether to believe in the hope and perseverance of Ma Joad. This failure to choose is not necessarily a flaw. This first song may “open up” songs that follow by asking listeners whether there is or should be hope for the future or terror at the present. Still, “The Ghost of Tom Joad” starts with a landscape eerily reminiscent of the Great Depression:

Men walkin' 'long the railroad tracks  
Goin' someplace there's no goin' back  
Highway patrol choppers comin' up over the ridge  
Hot soup on a campfire under the bridge

Shelter line stretchin' 'round the corner  
Welcome to the new world order  
Families sleepin' in their cars in the Southwest  
No home no job no peace no rest

The highway is alive tonight  
But nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes  
I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light  
Searchin' for the ghost of Tom Joad

Undoubtedly, this first part of the song is *scenic*. This “new world order” has little to do with military hegemony and much to do with homelessness, poverty, and anarchy. This “highway” is alive but, unlike “Thunder Road” or Highway Nine in “Born to Run” and exactly like the road down which the veteran had been burning for ten years in “Born in the U. S. A.,” this highway offers no escape because “nobody’s kiddin’ nobody about where it goes.” The narrator is seeking out Tom Joad for undisclosed reasons. The song continues:

He pulls a prayer book out of his sleeping bag  
Preacher lights up a butt and takes a drag  
Waitin' for when the last shall be first and the first shall be last  
In a cardboard box 'neath the underpass

Got a one-way ticket to the promised land



You got a hole in your belly and gun in your hand  
Sleeping on a pillow of solid rock  
Bathin' in the city aqueduct

The highway is alive tonight  
Where it's headed everybody knows  
I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light  
Waitin' on the ghost of Tom Joad

Springsteen deftly contrasts the spiritual world that religions promise with hell on earth. The preacher dreams other-worldly visions as temporal necessity and chaos drive others down the lively highway. Springsteen says that “Where it's headed everybody knows” is supposed to suggest that the dismantling of the Great Society threatens to send us back to scenes like those in Steinbeck. He has even dedicated the song in recent one-man shows to “the Gingrich mob.”<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, our narrator continues his peculiar search next to the campfire and maybe some hot soup:

Now Tom said "Mom, wherever there's a cop beatin a guy  
Wherever a hungry newborn baby cries  
Where there's a fight 'gainst the blood and hatred in the air  
Look for me Mom I'll be there

Wherever there's somebody fightin' for a place to stand  
Or decent job or a helpin' hand  
Wherever somebody's strugglin' to be free  
Look in their eyes Mom you'll see me."

Well the highway is alive tonight  
But nobody's kiddin' nobody about where it goes  
I'm sittin' down here in the campfire light  
With the ghost of old Tom Joad

The narrator has apparently found the ghost of Tom Joad. Perhaps new attacks on poor and working people have turned the narrator's eyes back to look for Tom. The narrator recalls Tom's speech but in a precarious context. The narrator is looking for and finding the ghost of Tom Joad. He seeks not the spirit that Tom Joad articulated nor even Tom Joad himself as another Joe Hill. The narrator sits at a campfire, alone perhaps except for the vestiges of fictional character who is as dead as the folk-protest genre that Springsteen has chosen for his album.

Do poets around the campfire, like the poets in “Jungleland,” just stand back and let it all be? More like James Agee than like John Steinbeck, Springsteen offers snapshots of a “new world order” that is neither new nor worldwide nor orderly. His *tone* thus seems to reproach us for the *scene* up to which he holds a mirror. The narrator first searches for [an active *act*], then waits for [a passive *act* that recalls Estragon and Vladimir], and then sits with [an *act* of uncer-

---

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22 cols. 1-2.

tain portent] Tom Joad but otherwise does nothing to change or to improve the *scene*. The narrator does not tell us his orientation toward Tom Joad’s universalist message. At most the narrator thinks we should think about it.

“The Ghost of Tom Joad,” in sum, recalls Bruce’s brooding on other albums. The song presents a disquieting *scene* and three *agents*. One *agent* preaches a future that redirects our eyes from our present. A second *agent* preaches a present that directs our souls toward hope. The narrating third *agent* does not even preach. He presents the present and recalls the past. Maybe the later songs tell us what the ghost of Tom Joad says or the conjurer of that ghost believes.

### “Straight Time”

In the second song on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Springsteen seems still to be on about tension and release. The song inverts ordinary values to show how prison-time might be preferred to time “outside.” By the end of the song, the ex-convict who narrates the song achieves the same release through his dreams that he might have obtained in prison:

Got out of prison back in '86 and I found a wife  
Walked the clean and narrow  
Just tryin’ to stay out and stay alive  
Got a job at the rendering plant, it ain’t gonna make me rich  
In the darkness before dinner comes  
Sometimes I can feel the itch  
I got a cold mind to go tripping ‘cross that thin line  
I’m sick of doin’ straight time

My uncle’s at the evening table, makes his living runnin’ hot cars  
Slips me a hundred dollar bill says  
"Charlie you best remember who your friends are."  
Got a cold mind to go tripping ‘cross that thin line  
I ain’t making straight time

Eight years in it feels like you’re gonna die  
But you get used to anything  
Sooner or later it just becomes your life

Kitchen floor in the evening tossin’ my little babies high  
Mary’s smiling but she’s watching me out of the corner of her eye  
Seems you can’t get any more than half free  
I step out onto the front porch and suck the cold air deep inside of me  
Got a cold mind to go trippin’ ‘cross that thin line  
I’m sick of doin’ straight time

In the basement huntin’ gun and a hacksaw  
Sip a beer and thirteen inches of barrel drop to the floor

Come home in the evening, can’t get the smell from my hands  
Lay my head down on the pillow  
And go driftin’ off into foreign lands

“Straight Time” abounds with allusions possible and plausible. Jesse Jackson has repeatedly claimed that many urban youth are better-fed and better-clothed in prison than in their underclass homes, if homes they have. Springsteen is not saying that for the homeless and hopeless of “The Ghost of Tom Joad” prison is a sound financial move. However, he may be positing a *purpose* that makes law-breaking and imprisonment rational for some men and a few women. Charlie’s suggestion that Mary eyes him like a guard or warden is redolent of pejorative views of marriage on, for example, “Married With Children” [as suits the subsequent song, which is about a shoe-salesman]. Far more to the point, Charlie devotes but thirty-two words to wife and children and “home-life.” This brief attention to “family values” suggests just how loveless and empty Charlie finds his lawful existence. It seems to us that again Springsteen paints a forlorn, loveless *scene* in which a protagonist wrestles with alternative *purposes*.

While Springsteen’s *tone* in “Straight Time” is hardly indisputable, we suggest that listeners would be moved to some sympathy. Compassion for Charlie is challenged by his creation of a sawed-off shotgun, but Charlie has not yet strayed and perhaps there is hope.

Nonetheless, “Straight Time” consists largely of a mere dash of *purpose* modifying the ratio between two *scenes* — inside and outside prison — and one major *actor*, Charlie. The song has little plot. Charlie, like the seeker of Tom Joad, does not do much. The only two *acts* are Charlie’s habitual rectitude and Charlie’s sawing. This pair of lawful and unlawful *acts* suggests the balance in which Charlie finds himself teetering.

“Straight Time” also sets up the outright outlawry of “Highway 29” and adds to the highways and fugitives mentioned in “The Ghost of Tom Joad.” It may even serve as a transition.

### “Highway 29”

The third song on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* reiterates Springsteen’s focus on highways and escapes. Indeed, “Highway 29” seems so familiar that we could label it a representative Bruce Springsteen song. Like “Hungry Heart” and “I’m On Fire,” the narrator burns with illicit passions. Like “Stolen Car” and “Nebraska,” the narrator tantalizes us with tidbits about the criminal mind. More to the point, “Highway 29” is a straightforward reprise of Springsteen’s formula: simple ratios between and among *scene*, *actor*, *acts* used to convey a plain plot and a dream-escape. Hints of the protagonist’s *purposes* are minimal. Only the song’s surrounding songs in the album suggest Springsteen’s *tone*.

Springsteen’s love of *film noir* is well known. “Highway 29” is stark and dark crime-drama that commences with sex:

I slipped on her shoe, she was a perfect size seven  
I said "There’s no smokin’ in the store ma’am."  
She crossed her legs and then  
We made some small talk that’s where it should have stopped  
She slipped me her number, I put it in my pocket  
My hand slipped up her skirt, everything slipped my mind  
In that little roadhouse  
On Highway 29

Springsteen then directs his plot into crime:

It was a small town bank it was a mess  
Well I had a gun you know the rest  
Money on the floorboards, shirt was covered in blood  
And she was cryin', her and me we headed south  
On Highway 29

The narrator's minimal self-reflection fills the next scene with dread and doom:

In a little desert motel the air was hot and clean  
I slept the sleep of the dead, I didn't dream  
I woke in the morning, washed my face in the sink  
We headed into the Sierra Madres 'cross the border line  
The winter sun shot through the black trees  
I told myself it was all something in her  
But as we drove I knew it was something in me  
Something that'd been comin' for a long long time  
And something that was here with me now  
On Highway 29

No sooner has the narrator arrived at such an inchoate insight than the vengeance of *film noir* washes over his accomplice and him with a tide of destruction and oblivion:

The road was filled with broken glass and gasoline  
She wasn't sayin' nothin', it was just a dream  
The wind come silent through the windshield  
All I could see was snow, sky and pines  
I closed my eyes and I was runnin'  
I was runnin' then I was flyin'

After “Straight Time” demonstrated that life outside the lines of the law could be a rational choice for desperadoes such as Charlie, “Highway 29” shows the desperation of the shoe-salesman turned robber [or robber disguised as shoe-salesman]. Replete with implications for law and illegality, this song serves its album mostly as depiction of an apparently legal laborer driven by lust to self-destruction. The shoe-salesman is so familiar that he provides a telling contrast with the aliens who hunger and cross lines in subsequent stories on the album. The shoe-salesman alludes to his psycho-sexual *purpose*. Compared to the straits of the homeless squatters in “The Ghost of Tom Joad” and the agonizing rectitude of Charlie in “Straight Time,” the impulses of a worker in sales and robbery seem feeble. Compared to the extremities of the illegals to come in the album, the life of a dying gunman in the Southwest was luxurious.

Thus, it is not difficult to deduce a *tone* — not an obviously political *tone* — from the album-context of this song. In contrast, “Born in the U. S. A.” led off its album and yielded to a series of narrators in distress. Needy lovers [“Cover Me,” the song after “Born in the U. S. A.”], nerdy losers [“Darlington County”], hopeful inmates [“Working on the Highway”], and hopeless laborers [“Downbound Train”] evoke concern or sympathy but no clear political associations.

“Sinaloa Cowboys”

This tender but tormenting song accomplishes so much more than most legal or political songs that Springsteen has penned or plucked. The moral of this story is clear. A father warns his sons that the economic attractions of the North come at a dear price, By the end of a short saga, the father’s warning has come true in an ending reminiscent of Greek tragedy. If Springsteen’s defenders object that Bruce would be unsubtle to drive home his *tone* in his songs, “Sinaloa Cowboys” refutes their point, for the song is sweetly devastating.

Miguel came from a small town in northern Mexico  
He came north with his brother Louis to California three years ago  
They crossed at the river levee when Louis was just sixteen  
And found work together in the fields of the San Joaquin

They left their homes and family  
Their father said "My sons one thing you will learn  
For everything the north gives it exacts a price in return."  
They worked side by side in the orchards  
From morning till the day was through  
Doing the work the hueros wouldn't do

Word was out some men in from Sinaloa were looking for some hands  
Well deep in Fresno county there was a deserted chicken ranch  
There in a small tin shack on the edge of a ravine  
Miguel and Louis stood cooking methamphetamine.

You could spend a year in the orchards  
Or make half as much in one ten-hour shift  
Working for the men from Sinaloa

But if you slipped the hydriodic acid  
Could burn right through your skin  
They'd leave you spittin' up blood in the desert  
If you breathed those fumes in

It was early one winter evening as Miguel stood watch outside  
When the shack exploded lighting up the valley night  
Miguel carried Louis' body over his shoulder down a swale  
To the creekside and there in the tall grass Louis Rosales died

Miguel lifted Louis' body into his truck and then he drove  
To where the morning sunlight fell on a eucalyptus grove  
There in the dirt he dug up ten thousand dollars all that they'd saved  
Kissed his brother's lips and placed him in his grave

In this tale *tone* overcomes *purpose*: Miguel Rosales took his brother North and exchanged him for ten thousand dollars in a grave market. The other elements of Burke's hexad are

in proper relation to *tone* and *purpose*. The song ends on the signal *acts* of Miguel’s kissing his dead brother goodbye and burying him. The sequence of *acts* could not be clearer. Emigration in pursuit of thankless but rewarding labor leads to lawless and dangerous but even more rewarding labor in manufacturing drugs, which in turn generates death too predictable to be truly accidental and the ultimate exchange, kiss, and burial. Miguel is the central *actor* in this *act*-dominated drama. The California desert, its profits, and its perils provide the primary *scene* in which wretched *actors* perform desperate *acts* for the most basic and most human *purposes* that the deadly exchange and the songwriter will frustrate.

“Sinaloa Cowboys,” we conclude, shows that we are not asking too much of Springsteen. In this terribly beautiful tale, Springsteen permits no doubts about his *tone* and the lesson his song teaches. He did not have to mount a soapbox. He did not have to bludgeon the listener. All he had to do was complete the hexad.

### “Galveston Bay”

Please recall that Springsteen wrote this song to provide a somewhat hopeful ending to *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Springsteen first sets a *scene* that promises immigrants the refuge that the United States long has symbolized:

For fifteen years Le Bin Son  
Fought side by side with the Americans  
In the mountains and deltas of Vietnam  
In '75 Saigon fell and he left his command  
And brought his family to the promised land

Seabrook, Texas and the small towns in the Gulf of Mexico  
It was delta country and reminded him of home  
He worked as a machinist, put his money away  
And bought a shrimp boat with his cousin  
And together they harvested Galveston Bay

In the mornin’ ‘fore the sun come up  
He’d kiss his sleepin’ daughter  
Steer out through the channel  
And cast his nets into the water

These first three stanzas have set up an American Dream that is not “runaway” [as in “Born to Run”] but a haven to escapees. Into this tranquil ratio of *actor*, *acts*, and *scene* Springsteen introduces a native antagonist with *actor*, *acts*, and *scene* in an identical ratio that suggests Springsteen’s intention to create an equivalence:

Billy Sutter fought with Charlie Company  
In the highlands of Quang Tri  
He was wounded in the battle of Chu Lai

Shipped home in '68

There he married and worked the gulf fishing grounds  
In a boat that'd been his father's  
In the morning he'd kiss his sleeping' son  
And cast his nets into the water

Springsteen then transforms this setting quickly into a *scene* familiar to too many immigrants. This *scene* portends the heartlessness and hatred, *purposes* that hardly become a nation of immigrants but reveal what a nation of immigrants has become. These *purposes* may strike many listeners in 1996 as eerily prophetic of primary politics:

Billy sat in front of his TV as the South fell  
And the communists rolled into Saigon  
He and his friends watched as the refugees came  
Settled on the same streets and worked in the coast they'd grew up on  
Soon in the bars around the harbor was talk  
Of America for Americans

Someone said "You want 'em out, you got to burn 'em out."  
And brought in the Texas Klan

*Acts* of violence and adjudication bring the protagonist and antagonist together and imbue the antagonist with *motives* that match this nativist *scene*:

One humid Texas night there were three shadows  
on the harbor  
Come to burn the Vietnamese boats into the sea  
In the fire's light shots rang out  
Two Texans lay dead on the ground  
Le stood with a pistol in his hand

A jury acquitted him in self-defense  
As before the judge he did stand  
But as Le walked down the courthouse steps  
Billy said "My friend you're a dead man."

Springsteen leaves his listeners with hope, albeit a hope unexplained by any *purpose* explicit in his song:

One late summer night Le stood watch along the waterside  
Billy stood in the shadows  
His K-bar knife in his hand  
And the moon slipped behind the clouds  
Le lit a cigarette, the bay was still as glass

As he walked by Billy stuck his knife into his pocket  
Took a breath and let him pass

In the early darkness Billy rose up  
Went into the kitchen for a drink of water  
Kissed his sleeping wife  
Headed into the channel  
And cast his nets into the water  
Of Galveston Bay

If our reading of “Galveston Bay” is plausible, Springsteen provides a dualistic *tone* in this legal-political song of hope. We may rejoice in the happy ending only if we overlook the unpleasant truth that the nativists’ hatred and Billy’s vengeance are far more familiar and explorable than Billy’s forbearance. Worse, this ending may be happy only in the short run. On another night, Le may meet another native with the same *purpose* and a similar *means* [some deadly weapon], in which case Billy has spared only himself and not his immigrant counterpart.

This precarious denouement is only minimally hopeful. Springsteen is haunted by ghosts who resemble the Joads’ tormentors. If we are sitting around the campfire with Springsteen, we may be with Tom Joad or Tom Joad’s ghost, but we end the album hardly certain that we are not among the malefactors making Tom Joad’s latest charges — Vietnamese, Mexican, or native — suffer injustice. Springsteen introduces us to the enemy and leaves us to wonder if the enemy is we.

### BETTER DAYS?

The last song on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* leaves listeners with the refrain that “My best was never good enough.” With his latest album, Springsteen shows that his best has become perhaps too good. If we are “reading” his album correctly, Springsteen has begun to imbue his songs with *tone* and his characters with *purposes*. If so, Springsteen may become more and more overtly and unambiguously political without last-mute escapes or evasions. He has on his last album maintained his splendidly “scenic” style.<sup>48</sup> His evocations are now matched by his exhortations, whether he means to mount the soapbox or not.

Too often Springsteen has sounded cynical and even nihilistic. He still sounds that note on the current album:

My Jesus your gracious love and mercy  
Tonight I’m sorry could not fill my heart  
Like one good rifle  
And the name of who I ought to kill

When Springsteen was first developing his perspectives on political phenomena broader than romantic and filial relationships, he identified with the Oklahoma farmer who tries to stop the tractor early in the film version of “The Grapes of Wrath.” In 1984 Springsteen stated, “I felt the same way he did: Where do I point the gun? . . . In the Seventies and Eighties, especially com-

---

<sup>48</sup> Marsh, *Glory Dyas*, p. 134.



pared to the Sixties, it became awfully hard to identify an enemy.”<sup>49</sup> Evidently, the Nineties have posed the question to Springsteen anew.

Still, the man who once wrote “Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true/ Or is it something worse?” seems to have answered his question for his personal life and seems now prepared to ask the question anew in our political life. No longer at war with his father, Springsteen portrays his latest album as taking up his father’s battles. The tramp who once claimed “I want to know if love is real” has found real love; now he wants to know if the least among us will find love or truth or justice. He suspects that he has found an answer that corrodes all the dreams, faith, hope, and celebration he poured into his lyrics:<sup>50</sup>

. . . we were the generation that was going to change the world.  
That somehow we were going to make it less alone, a little less  
hungry, a little more of a just place. But it seems that when the  
promise slipped through our hands, we didn’t replace it with noth-  
ing but lost faith.

We think that these are better days, for Bruce and for his fans, but the badlands are still out there, lying like a killer in the sun.

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

<sup>50</sup> Duffy, *Bruce Springsteen In His Own Words*, p. 92, col. 2.