

**Deakin University**

**Zoe Dzunko**

**Meet me in the land of hopes and dreams: utopian illusions versus quotidian experience in blue-collar poetry**

Abstract:

A prevailing friction underlies a majority of contemporary American poetic works that attempt to allegorise blue-collar experience; many such texts grapple with an overarching sense of ideological stasis, their focuses fixed upon a perpetual collision of illusory utopianism and inescapable quotidian experience. This paper proposes to investigate the ways in which blue-collar allegory is delineated in contemporary poetic works – ranging from artists who have long been associated with representations of the blue-collar experience, such as Raymond Carver, to extreme proliferators of working-class parable, such as Bruce Springsteen – and the inherent friction that is engendered by a utopian American dream that often proves to be an ungraspable abstraction for those whom it seeks to inspire.

This paper extends upon the work of Rhodes & Westwood (2007), Anne Marie Mikkelsen (2011) and Perry Meisel (1998) in its considerations of the way such a myth is manufactured; how it is perpetuated in distinction to the literal experiences of the artists themselves – or, more specifically, the way in which myth and legend of the ‘blue-collar’ in poetry distinguishes itself from the actual experiences of the blue-collar worker – and in relation to contemporaneous sociopolitical factors such as American labour history and the American dream.

Considering the work of Bruce Springsteen, Philip Levine and, to a lesser extent, Raymond Carver and James Wright, this paper will employ a narratological analysis of poetry and the song lyric, in the tradition of Jim Cullen (1998) and Bryan K Garman (2000), in its attempt to determine how such blue-collar myth is constructed in creative works. It is crucial to note that this research will attempt to demarcate lyric from song and, thereby, will not specifically interrogate elements such as musical composition, nor will it explore the protean nature pertaining to the means of consumption that invariably exists between the written word and a performed artwork, such as the song or spoken-word poem. Instead, the concern of this project lies, primarily, with the examination of ‘blue-collar myth’, as a discrete concept, the way it is propagated in multitudinous creative works, and its seemingly interminable drive toward an idealistic ethos that can neither be destroyed nor easily fulfilled.

It could be argued that the coalescing feature in what is an undeniably multifarious genre is this apparent fixation upon the imagining of, and associated lamentations concerning an event that does not, and cannot, ‘happen’; an ideological incident which, by its very nature, symbolises the act of fiction as being concomitantly delusive and self-fulfilling. It is by way of these two oppositional constructs colliding – the pervasiveness of myth versus the quotidian experience that simultaneously fuels and dispels it – that the often monomaniacal focus of blue-collar allegory is sustained; the necessity of harbouring an archetypal dream, which, despite its promise of liberation, is one of potential imprisonment in its realisation.

Biographical note:

Zoe Dzunko is a writer from Melbourne, Australia and a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Deakin University. She holds a Masters degree in Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing from the University of Melbourne. She has widely published poetry and short fiction in numerous print and online journals worldwide, some of which can be viewed, or is forthcoming, in *Softblow*, *NAP*, *Rabbit*, *Glass: a journal of poetry*, *Tide*, *Otoliths*, *The scrambler* and *fwriction: review*. Her chapbook, *All of the men I have never loved* (Dancing Girl Press) is forthcoming in 2013.

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## **Introduction**

To identify the customarily harsh, unadorned verse of Philip Levine and his grim allegories of factory life in an economically impoverished Detroit – or, for that matter, Bruce Springsteen’s acerbic portrayals of American nationalism and institution – as exemplifying anything short of dystopian imagery might be surprising. Nevertheless, while these poets have endeavoured to graphically represent the harsh realities of working life, their allegories are, arguably, subject to a pervasive utopianism. Considering four iconic blue-collar poets – Philip Levine, James Wright, Bruce Springsteen and Raymond Carver – and their depictions of labouring-class America throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it will be argued that three prominent sites of friction can be distinguished in their oeuvres: the friction between illusory utopianism and quotidian experience; between urban and bucolic landscapes; and between mobility and stasis.

It must be noted that while Bruce Springsteen has historically allegorised the blue-collar experience by way of a different creative medium, I would argue for his assimilation into the coterie of the aforementioned poets on the basis of his dedication to representing working life and the often perpetual monotony that accompanies it. Furthermore, the nature of his customarily unadorned verse form and its parity to poets such as Carver, especially – solidifies his place among other, more traditional poets discussed herein.

Although the demographic these poets sought to represent cannot be said to universally subscribe to its precepts, the archetypal American dream, in its straddling of reality and utopian unreality, remains a taunting ideology for its adherents, those ‘workers [who] typically believe that their position in the class structure is of their own doing’ (Halle 1984,170).

Utopian concepts of opportunity are further perpetuated in the friction between ‘real’ and imagined environments – these poets reinvigorating the dichotomy between oppressive industrial-scapes and their greener surroundings; their prosaic depictions of working life sitting in distinction to often euphoric descriptions of the sense of promise that the natural world inspires. Furthermore, a fixation upon the automobile as more profound a symbol than can be attributed to fiscal iconography alludes to another site of friction, arising between stasis and mobility. Herein, the car can be seen as emblematic of the gap between reality/unreality, utopian/quotidian, where the task is not to resolve the problematic relationship between utopian dreams and quotidian experience, but rather to deal with its actuality (Rhodes & Westwood 2007).

## **Necessary evils: good-for-nothing in a meritocracy**

‘Is a dream a lie, if it don’t come true. Or is it something worse?’

(‘The river’, Bruce Springsteen)

When, in ‘Blasting from heaven’, Philip Levine (1982) remarks that ‘everyone’s been out all night trying’, he alludes to a pursuit that is at once deeply rhetorical and immediately tangible. This notion of a desperate quest, so endemic as to theoretically

include ‘everyone’, but of which its object is decidedly opaque, if extant, seems counterintuitive – nevertheless, this apparent non sequitur is generally consistent with a greater understanding of work (labour) and opportunity in Western society. Indeed, Levine’s evocation may be seen as allegorical of an ideology that is deeply ingrained in the collective imagination of the American working class; an arguably synchronised struggle toward unimaginably better ends. For Josep Ramoneda (2012, 115) that predisposition toward the ideation of superlative existence – the fabrication of notions of utopia – informs the praxis of existence, where ‘human life is made of two mistakes: reason and truth, or, in other words, the capacity to establish goals and to choose the paths to reach them’.

Certainly, the quest for meaning might be distinguished as a defining characteristic of humankind’s attempt to shape itself, and the cultivation of utopian idealisation is no different. The uniqueness of utopianism, however, and especially that variation which has come to constitute the archetypal American dream, is its tenuous straddling of reality/unreality. ‘Utopia does not simply set up its non-place in the imaginary, but, rather, in a polemical negation of the real,’ asserts Jean Luc Nancy (2012, 7); often indissolubly linked to our conceptions of requisite experience, ‘utopia is the impossible, not rendered possible, but shown as necessary’. The particularity of the American dream then, if conceived of as a utopian vision, is that it tangibly occupies both dimensions – fantasy and reality. Thus, when the youth of James Wright’s eponymous poem, ‘never heard how Sherwood Anderson / Got out of it, and fled to Chicago, furious to free himself / from his hatred of factories’ (1992) he simultaneously represents this friction between urban and fiscal entrapment, and the fables of those who manage to escape such realities. The dream herein is possible – those who realise it are regaled to affirm its promise – but if we are to believe Levine, in that ‘everyone’ is endeavouring to bring it to fruition, then it cannot universally be realised in the manner that its myth necessitates. Nevertheless, this precept, upward mobility fuelled by hard work and launched from a supposedly equitable station, is what the dream promises:

There are poor and rich in the United States, of course, the argument goes; but as long as one can become the other, as long as there is something close to equality of opportunity, the differences between them do not add up to class barriers. (Scott & Leonhart 2005, 2–3)

This pervasive notion of opportunity collides with an underlying sense of futility in much blue-collar poetry. Ideological stasis arises in a place between hopelessness and promise, where an ungraspable American dream proceeds to operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy – taunting, but necessary. For Levine, ‘One day’ (1996) fatalistically tackles a dream that, for many, may be perceived as a pernicious, almost folkloric conception of opportunity in post-industrial society, where ‘I felt my eyes slowly closing. / You smoked in silence. / What life / were we expecting?’

These are the anecdotes of the downtrodden; those pariahs’ many such poets, especially Philip Levine and Bruce Springsteen, sought to give a voice. Often, they express an overarching sense of hopelessness, recounting a conclusion that sits in stark opposition to the message delivered by an optimistic American dream. Effort

does not equate to success, espouses Springsteen (1980) in 'Jackson Cage', where, 'you can try with all your might / but you're reminded every night / that you been judged and handed life / down in Jackson Cage'. Similarly, Raymond Carver, a poet whose aspirations of upward mobility were at variance with the often menial labour he undertook, would not find it difficult to empathise with the attendant in 'Woolworths 1954' (1986c) who 'Had worked his way / up to nothing. / But grateful / for his job, same as me.'

For these poets, and their protagonists, the experience of upward mobility is not as fluid as the dream may have promised, the downward drag of industrial labour often proving a more powerful force. Indeed, this illusion of equal advantage is the myth that many blue-collar poets seem compelled to demystify, and as Alfred Lubrano (2005, 4) suggests, rightfully so, for 'in America, we sing a hymn of equality, one that says that everyone has the same chances to get ahead. But that's not true and never has been'.

Nevertheless, such asceticism cannot dissuade some from their pursuit of the dream, and certainly, many of these poets from implementing it as an ideological compass. The friction in these texts does not arise, after all, from a sheer sense of futility, and instead from the impression that the myth has not entirely been debunked. As Daniel Cavvichi suggests:

Springsteen inspires devotion because he obstinately reinvigorates this old – and in many ways, fantastical – notion of participatory democracy. His is a view of an America that has never really existed, but it's also a view of an America that many people don't want to lose. (Cullen 2005, xxii)

### **Blue-collar myth: romanticism in the face of harsh realities**

'Working all day in my daddy's garage, driving all night chasing some mirage.'  
(*'The promised land'*, Bruce Springsteen)

Just as these poetic works are routinely poised in a tug of war between hope and futility, rupture further arises in relation to their positioning as categorically realistic texts. While Springsteen, Carver and Levine, especially, are regarded for their graphic, purportedly uncompromising depictions of working life, their preoccupation with quotidian experience is frequently offset by a highly subjective utopianism. Sitting in distinction to the realist tradition they may appear to belong to, these renderings of quotidian reality are often affected, inasmuch as they suffer from a perceptible – if not necessary – act of romanticism. Be it the imagining of labour as artful or a pedestaling of the natural world, these blue-collar allegories often present an almost fallacious realism, not dissimilar to the dream that informs them.

However, to infer that all blue-collar poetry negates the graphically mundane, or fails to address the harshest realities of working life would be an erroneous claim; Springsteen, despite his partiality for optimism, parades many jaded heroes, few more so than the homicidal 'Johnny 99' (1982b) who will bellow, 'let 'em shave off my hair and put me on that execution line'. Similarly, much of Levine's work proves

decidedly austere and divorced from any notion of hope. The sense of inevitable stagnation, the complete lack of mobility, is at work in 'The present' (1985), where the many sites of labour mutate into a singular oppressive landscape:

I began this poem in the present / because nothing is past. The ice factory, / the  
bottling plant, the cindered yard / all gave way to a low brick building / a block wide  
and windowless where they / designed gun mounts for personnel carriers.

Labour, then, if it is not to be typified as relentlessly purgatorial in the manner of Levine's past and present industrial-scapes, is inherently subject to literary romanticism. The premise of work as a means to any kind of superior end inevitably imbues that act of labour as immediately less treacherous than it may be were there no allusion to escaping from it. 'Tonight I got dirt on my hands but I'm building me a new home,' insists Springsteen's protagonist in 'Lucky town' (1992), embodying this notion of dirty work rewarded by future promise; for Wright (1992b), 'the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel, / Dreaming of heroes' find their own salvation amongst the hardships of the factory. For Carver, the reward of labour is financial, but vitally to do with the freedom that solvency engenders, it being necessary, 'in order to live / on the right side of the law. / To always use his own name / and phone number.' (1986b)

For these poets, work is an inevitability, and one that is often ennobled by what it is imagined – or hoped – to afford. While this sentiment, in effect, romanticises the act of labour as a journey towards mobility and enlightenment, these poets, moreover, adhere to tropes of high romanticism – namely, in their juggling of a misanthropic worldview with veneration of the natural world. Blue-collar poetry often paints a decidedly cynical view of humanity; Levine (2011) will describe his fellow workers as 'filling / the twin bodies they've disguised as filth' and Springsteen further laments the ruthlessness of society – especially the law and the bank, both of which are vilified in 'Johnny 99' (1982b) – embodying the Romantic assumption that the natural world is virtuous, while human society is brimming with corruption. It should be unsurprising, then, that the reinvigoration of a paradisiacal natural landscape is eminent in these poetic texts. Where romanticism sought nature as the antidote to rampant industrialisation, it is of little coincidence that the imagined blue-collar promised land is often rooted in pastoral tradition, sitting as a counterpoint to the oppressive, man-made industrial-scapes of working life. In this conception, nature stands in as proxy for promise and riches. 'We're going out where the sand's turnin' to gold', muses Springsteen in 'Atlantic City', his obituary to last chances, in a town whose very survival hinges upon people visiting to try their luck.

That the grass outside that urban milieu would, as the saying goes, appear greener in contrast, is allegorical of the friction between realism and romanticism in these blue-collar texts – the illumination of a utopian space in response to intolerable realities. In Springsteen's (1980b) vision – 'you ride to where the highway ends and the desert breaks' – the open road can be imagined as a revitalisation of utopian promise, and the idyllic pastoral setting its inevitable destination. In 'The river' (1980c), it represents the luxury of youth and freedom, where 'we'd ride out of that valley down to where the fields were green'. Later, in what will be a fatalistic turn – being a song

that sees to the categorical dismantling of ‘the dream’ – we learn that ‘the river is dry’, linking the deterioration of the natural world to the state of the protagonist’s morale. The imagined bucolic paradise inspires both notions of escape and personal triumph; outlying the trappings of daily life, ‘the pastoral was and always has been about conceptions of the ideal self and citizen’ (Mikkelsen 2011, 3).

The journey towards richer ends, an impetus that could be said to inculcate much labour poetry, often intrinsically links the value of nature to its assumed financial recompense. ‘Atlantic City’, a somewhat unsavoury utopia where losers may become winners, is, after all, where sand turns to gold. The transmutation of nature to riches herein evokes the insidious precept concerning the abundance of opportunity ‘other’, often unconquered, spaces may promise – or that possibility is on the horizon, waiting to be journeyed towards. The possibility of this idealised migration, then, deeply rooted in the rhetoric of manifest destiny, presents itself as the ultimate luxury. The utopian landscape does not necessarily afford greater opportunities, as evidenced by the disquieting culmination of ‘Atlantic City’ – ‘So, honey, last night I met this guy and I’m gonna do a little favor for him’ – except those of diminished proximity to working life and the manifestation of mobility. Just as ‘in American Romanticism and its typological tradition, it is the West, the country that is free, and the East, the city that is bondage’ (Meisel 1998, 33), the heavily romanticised natural milieu in blue-collar poetry represents little more than an imagined utopia elemental to the American dream and, thereby, at conflict with the quotidian experiences of those protagonists who may conceive of it.

### **When the dream is fuel: stasis and heterotopic spaces**

‘At the end of every hard earned day people find some reason to believe’

(‘Reason to believe’, Bruce Springsteen)

Migration is an underlying concern in the work of these blue-collar poets and justifiably so, given that it sits in opposition to a perceivably looming fiscal and existential stasis. Where the promise of unequivocal upward mobility taunts those whom it eludes, and the promised land is cultivated in distinction to the austere industrial environment, the car, a recurrent emblem in blue-collar poetry, stands in as the imagined intermediary between present and future; luck and misfortune.

The car represents many things in blue-collar poetry, but the unifying concern is that of mobility. For Levine (1996), the distinction between the haves and have-nots is demarcated by the car speeding past his static protagonists who fatalistically recount, ‘how long we have waited / quietly by the side of the road / for someone to slow and ask why’. Contrarily, Springsteen (1975b), in the driver’s seat, recounts the sense of possibility that accompanies an engine and open road where ‘these two lanes will take us anywhere’.

It is no coincidence that the car is deeply embedded in the imagination of these blue-collar poets. It represents a neutral space – a literal place that may be occupied, and a fantasy site, where the outrunning of prosaic obligation is momentarily tangible. The desire to occupy such a territory and that necessity for perceived movement is

understandable; the essence of migration is intrinsic to conceptions of success and progression, where ‘from the very beginning, moving had been a very big part of our national drama. Happiness, Jefferson said, must be *pursued*.’ (Cullen 2005, 37).

In many ways the car, as a theoretical space, is emblematic of the American dream – it proffers unfulfilled promise before it is found to be static; dangles the possibility of escape before the harsh inevitability of dropping a U-turn and returning to the daily grind. As a concept, it represents the underlying stasis that permeates much blue-collar poetry – that of reality and unreality – the ultimate friction between a tightly held dream and its eventual expulsion when paradise proves to, figuratively, float only as a mirage on the horizon. If the American dream can be considered as utopian in nature, and quotidian reality – its antithesis – as the site of objective truth, then the car, the vehicle that may be seen to bridge the two, could perhaps be seen as a heterotopic space. Not dissimilar to the mirror image Michel Foucault (1986, 24) claims ‘exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy’, the car, in this iteration, straddles a real and imagined ideological plane. Indeed, mobility is an innate attribute of the heterotopic space, which often bestrides the tangible and the illusory. Like the car:

The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (Foucault 1986, 27)

This may be key to the seemingly unshakable delineation of the car as something more inscrutable than a means of literal transport, or commodity object. Rather than a mere denotation of financial means it is, perhaps, the mutable nature of the automobile that serves to satiate the peripatetic yearnings of the stationary worker. The car, until the destination is reached – or found to be inaccessible – generates unbridled promise for the immediate future.

‘Shiftless’ (1985), Carver’s exploration of class division, sees the car as representative of status and moral servitude, where those individuals who heeded the importance of mobility ‘drove cars whose year and make were recognizable / the ones worse off were *sorry* and didn’t work. / Their strange cars sat on blocks in dusty yards.’ In this vision, the unemployed were not only in possession of inferior vehicles, but also subject to blatant immobility, their unmanned cars *sitting*, in contravention of their purpose. As Maria Damon points out, when considering the often reductive representations of marginalised demographics, what once may have been a detail pertaining to circumstance, over time, transmutes into a derogation:

The evolution of the word ‘shiftless’ points toward the same pattern in English: what begins as a description of poverty – too poor to own the most basic undergarment – becomes a moral judgement: too lazy to work. (1993, 15)

To accept immobility is to confront the pious indictment of a deeper personal unwillingness or failure; the morality of mobility is evoked in much blue-collar poetry, and that existing friction between hopelessness and opportunity augmented by this ethical obligation:



A harsh logic dictates a hard judgment: if a person's diligent work leads to prosperity; if work is a moral virtue; and if anyone in the society can attain prosperity through work, then the failure to do so is a fall from righteousness. (Shipler 2005, 6)

Herein, the American dream is not merely paradigmatic of a more abundant future, but is also a morally loaded necessity. The sense, then, of inestimable others competing for the same prize, as bemoaned in Levine's 'Blasting from heaven', is little better envisioned than in the evocative image of a traffic-jammed highway. Many vie for escape – chasing the imagined freedom beyond the horizon – but the sheer force of the masses delimits any individual from realising it. Such is the case for Springsteen's characters in 'Born to run' (1975) who, by nature, are compelled to chase the promise of mobility in a world where, 'the highway's jammed with broken heroes on a last chance power drive / everybody's on the run tonight'.

If the car is to represent the promise of mobility, a moment of unsuppressed opportunity, then it can also be seen to denote what is a more existentialist reading of the 'journey' as paramount. The car, that faith in arriving at richer ends, may also suggest that the illusion of the American dream, while threatening to taunt its exponents, may also be instrumental to their survival:

The Dream is neither a reassuring verity nor an empty bromide but rather a complex idea with manifold implications that can cut different ways. Some of those implications involve the oft-overlooked costs of dreaming...on the other hand, simply *having* a dream has sustained, even saved, lives that otherwise might not be deemed worth living. (Cullen 2005, 7)

When presented with the rupture between perceived necessity and inherent futility, belief may well be survival. As these texts evidence, the protagonists have not, despite scenes of apparent futility, given up. This may very well be due to the fortitude of the American dream, its deep roots in the blue-collar imaginary, but as these poets often suggest, unmitigated belief in that dream is thwarted, at best. It is almost a flawed hope, to perpetuate its morale, but it is a hope that may reinvigorate the static lives of those that need it most, regardless. In Springsteen's imagining, there are two choices: to repudiate a potentially hollow dream, or to chase its horizon – 'some guys they just give up living / and start dying little by little, piece by piece / some guys come home from work and wash up / and go racin' in the street' (1978). Just as for Carver (1986), that human predilection for progress is as ancient as those visions of the founding fathers, and one that sees us, 'moving toward whatever ancient thing / it is that works the chains / and pulls us so relentlessly on'.

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