

The Brazilian Cow

In the middle of the 19th century, Sydney Dobell wrote a poem that contained the following line: "Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!" This excursion into the absurd c. 1850 is readily recognized by readers of American poems or novels c. 1950 as a cry of the soul in torment. The sources of the putative torment, qualitatively speaking, were as multifarious as they are irrelevant to the present discussion, ranging from Capitalism to Autocracy, from Woman to Machine, from Vivisection to Sapphism.

The relevant reading, which perforce places Dobell's decalogue of histrionic exclamation in an historical context, is the quantitative one. The literary epoch that had made him a writer was the habitat of the periodic sentence, as illustrated by a classic passage, c. 1800, from Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*:

While he was declaring the ardour of his passion in such terms, as but too often make vehemence pass for sincerity, Adeline, to whom this declaration, if honourable, was distressing, and if dishonourable, was shocking, interrupted him and thanked him for the offer of a distinction, which, with a modest, but determined air, she said she must refuse.

Against this background of rationalization, Dobell's bleating lapse into absurdity must be viewed as a rare event, roughly equivalent to an indecent misprint in a national newspaper or a midair collision in aviation.

Until very recently the absurd was a bedfellow of the irrational. As the air controller's unfaithful wife or the proofreader's repossessed motorcycle were responsible for the ensuing tragedy or the preposterous headline, so, too, were the inarticulate cry of the poet's broken heart and the playwright's

foul-mouthed diatribe against society at large the irrational products of profound emotional upheaval. Yet for the generation now living and reading, the absurd is the mouthpiece of reason.

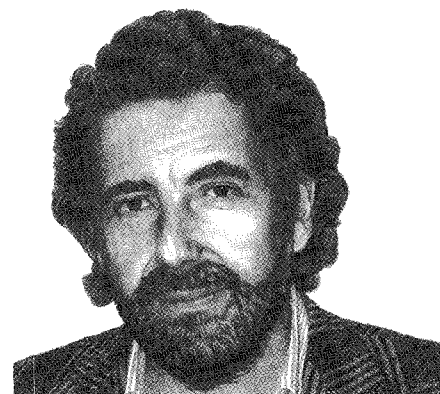
Evropa is a glossy arbiter of style for New Russians frequenting the spas and ski resorts of Old Europe. I hasten to assure skeptics that my translation of the following passage is scrupulously accurate:

"Never stay in one place and be creative," that is the credo of the young manufacturer of designer carpets KYMO whose collections bear the names of such music classics as Techno and House and whose products adorn the floors of HUGO BOSS and MONTBLANC boutiques. A new hit is the rug from the fur of the Brazilian cow.

You see? *Evropa* is a magazine for serious, worldly, rational people. Conservatively dressed thugs, impeccably realistic politicians, authors of plausible pyramid schemes, mobsters' abstemious spinster sisters, secret policemen's privately educated daughters, and swindlers' gold-digging wives are among its readers. These people keep their money in small unmarked bills under designer mattresses and rob widows and orphans as if human misery were going out of style and Bernie Madoff were Secretary of the Treasury.

They are tough, ruthless, and supremely rational. And yet the above passage, in a magazine fashioned expressly for them, like a bespoke pair of slippers, from the rarest cow fur that Brazil has to offer to the traders of Muscovy, would not be out of place in a futurist proclamation by Burlyuk c. 1920 or in an incomprehensible play by Beckett c. 1950. It reads like an homogenized parody of all rational utterance from Aristotle to Darwin.

When Molière parodied the ratio-



nality of a physician, his audience understood that he was satirizing a rogue, a pompous impostor, an insult to the medical profession, but above all a concrete exception. In Beckett, absurdity has been wed to mankind as a whole, with the result that for modern readers from the Adirondacks to the Urals, brought up on the dim echoes of what passes for high culture, any logic inherent in Radcliffe's exemplary sentence is just as puzzling and obscure as any outright nonsense from the pen of an *Evropa* hack.

"Cows haven't got fur?" exclaims the generic reader of *Any Magazine*, furious to be confronted with what is allegedly a fact of zoology. Then, fixing her makeup in a Chanel compact: "Well, maybe in Brazil they do! I mean, it's just a matter of how soft the hair is. Besides, this English lady, writing in that book of hers a hundred years before they had electricity, don't get me wrong, I love all those old things, my husband and I went to Morocco on our honeymoon, but anyway, this Adeline says that whatever her boyfriend was telling her, his declaration could be dishonorable.

"Now, what the hell does that mean? Because how can you say that some guy's declaration is dishonorable? I mean, he wasn't stealing from her, was he? And if this guy can say a thing that's dishonorable, why can't the other guy you're talking about, the guy from the magazine, why can't he be allowed to say that cows got fur? That's why I love America so much. It's a free country. Not like Russia."

Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!



MUSIC

Bruce Springsteen

by Christopher Sandford

For the life of me, I can't see why anyone under the age of, say, 55 would want to listen to Bruce Springsteen, never mind revere him as a deep and important artist, or pay upward of \$200 to be crammed into a football stadium to attend one of his concerts. Surely the only pertinent use for Springsteen was as an interim stage in rock music's passage from tuneful banality to today's relentless diet of screwed-up nihilism and phony salves. His 1975 album *Born To Run* was perfectly timed for those of us coming to terms with the fact that the likes of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan had all either broken up or succumbed to self-parody. Even then, it's sometimes forgotten that many of the more artistically pristine reviewers savaged the record. Springsteen was to earn the critical yappings and shin-bitings that invariably seem to greet a shamelessly commercial, and successful, product like *Born To Run*. "The album is as stiff as a frozen mackerel," said the supposedly influential trade magazine *Creem*. To one British publication, "Most of the songs are clichéd, as if he wrote them to suit the bank manager . . . Hideous . . . The strength, spontaneity and visceral rush of the early music are gone." This was a theory heard frequently among Springsteen's few but intensely loyal first-wave fans, who suddenly saw the masses coming up behind them, fast.

A third of a century later, Springsteen is out there again, stretching his stiff joints one more time into "Rosalita" and the rest, a synonym for nostalgia. The crowds still pack the shows out of residual respect, if not awe, much as they might visit an historical monument, whatever its cur-

rent state of disrepair. In the *Born To Run* era, Springsteen's live performances were famously free-form affairs in which he functioned as a sort of human jukebox, hustling out not only his own songs but a generous selection of covers of the likes of Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. Today, those moments of contingency and punch have long since been lost in what has become a tightly scripted recollection of youthful rebellion. A significant part of the audience now experiences the Springsteen phenomenon by parting with the equivalent of a week's salary for the privilege of aiming a pair of binoculars at a distant video screen. The accompanying marketing blitz is robust, even by rock-music standards, and customers are invited to supplement their ticket purchases by buying everything from machine-signed lithographs to shot glasses. With the exception of The Rolling Stones, nobody does decline-management quite like Springsteen does. Perhaps as a result, he remains one of the half-dozen most consistently popular attractions in the music industry. To put this achievement into context, one has perhaps to imagine how it might have felt if, in 1969, the year in which the young Springsteen burst onto the scene, the major box-office draws had been Rudy Vallee and other Jazz Age crooners who sang through a megaphone.

Springsteen was born on September 23, 1949, in Freehold, New Jersey, of Irish-Italian descent. By all accounts, he enjoyed the classic rock-star upbringing, with a musical and endlessly indulgent mother and an embittered, fitfully employed father who banged angrily on the wall whenever his adolescent son practiced the guitar in his bedroom. Springsteen survived rather than excelled at Catholic school and lasted only a few desultory months at the nearby community college. A crisis presented itself in the summer of 1968, when he was turning 19 and was summoned to an Army conscription interview, with the pros-

pect of an eventual posting to Vietnam. Springsteen later said that he had beaten the draft by pretending to be a homosexual, but this was perhaps to exaggerate his own role in the proceedings. According to the military archive, he was rejected because he was classified 4-F, physically unfit for service, as a result of having twisted his knee in a motorcycle accident. Within a year or two, Springsteen had both a group, the E Street Band (named after the Belmar, New Jersey, address of one of their rehearsal rooms), and a recording contract. Fame struck in 1975, with the release of the *Born To Run* album and single. That October, Springsteen simultaneously graced the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, making him the first nonpolitician to receive the American media's ultimate accolade, with much accompanying discussion elsewhere about his having singlehandedly saved rock music from its headlong decline into triteness and cultural irrelevance. The two concerts he played later that year in London (which I attended) had the British music press stroking their collective stubble and writing headlines such as "Re-mythologizing Americana." They were fairly good shows, too. I took to Springsteen because of his rather old-fashioned songs, his obvious sincerity, and his vulnerable, quirkily engaging look. (He was wearing a hat the size of a throw pillow). I felt that if I'd met him in school, I would have wanted to make friends with him. He seemed at that time a serious working musician rather than the ritualized "Boss" to whom presidents would later pay court.

As Springsteen was to remark, "it couldn't get any better" than was the case by late 1975, and it didn't. What it got, of course, was bigger. After an acrimonious change of management, Springsteen emerged as a commercially radio-friendly recording artist—with no less than seven hit singles culled from his 1984 *Born in the USA* album—whose live performances saw