Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

Jeff T. Johnson

Published by Punctum Books

T. Johnson, Jeff.  
Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics.  

For additional information about this book  
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66804

For content related to this chapter  
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2332038
If I Stay Here, Trouble Will Find Me

Renfield says to Harker concerning the latter’s forthcoming trip to Transylvania: “And, young as you are, what matters if it costs you some pain — or even a little blood?” A warning that occults the real danger, even when it seems a prophesy revealing the worst that can happen. It is exactly when the character has a hint that something so terrible that it goes beyond anything he could have expected (or can expect) may soon happen to him that he tells himself If only I had listened then, precisely not to heed what the present situation should disclose to him: that the warning was misleading since it says that the worst that can happen is that he will lose a little blood, or even, since one can negotiate how little is little, that he will die from losing too much blood. The warning hides that the danger is not the cessation of life but madness and undeath; hence it was an exaggeration hiding from him that no exaggeration could disclose the danger threatening him.

— Jalal Toufic, (Vampires)

I was afraid / I’d eat your brains leads, naturally, to I’m evil. Or, more properly, vice versa. On record, it sounds mock-gothic, a light moment for a heart of darkness. Cuz I-I-I’m eeevil. Live, it implicates the crowd, which moans along, barks at the moon. An army of the undead.

Pittsburgh, Stage AE. June 11, 2013. The National is touring for Trouble Will Find Me, dipping into its previous release. Matt Berninger paces the stage like a less disheveled Professor Mark

---

11 Or Trouble, With White Girls; Or Jenny Jenny I’m Seeing Double
12 or, as it were, un-naturally
13 or, as it may be, logically
14 High Violet (2010), by The National
15 and, perhaps, a leitmotif
16 whether they are self-aware zombies in (Romero’s) Pittsburgh, or bleeding-heart vampires in The National’s own Brooklyn backyard
17 that is, American Eagle’s stage; just past PNC (Bank) Stadium, where real-life Pittsburgh pirates take the streets for a Bucs game
E. Smith, heading stage left, then changing his mind, and direction, etc. Oh, there's my water, then. It's feelingly contrived, a necessary pose. Later, after he has stalked through the crowd, roadies and techs holding the endless microphone cable aloft, and again stands, a bit more disheveled now, he will compulsively pour his heretofore charmed water on the stage, then spike the cup. He will then confess, as stage hands clean up after him, That was my fault, an accident.

“Trouble” finds two songs on the following album. One verse begins, Jenny I'm having trouble and goes on to confess Jenny I'm seeing double just as Jenny is doubled in sound and vision. In another song, I was a white girl in a crowd of white girls in a park. The trouble with white girls is apparently not only in telling them apart, but in telling oneself apart from them. In another distinction in his general bearing being that he does not put the band through its paces, rather seems to indulge himself in its ambient embrace (or embrace himself in its ambience) or sequence (of poses) that is, ever-flowing Trouble Will Find Me (2013) or is it a chorus? or continues all of this moments before the leap between records one and two of the gatefold vinyl a Trouble Song without “trouble” Here as elsewhere, The National cites its own lyrical universe (just as its sonics are instantly recognizable, and it can be difficult to remember, if one cares to, on which album a particular song resides), portalled as it is to the one we share. Or here again is where The National revises or re-versions its script. I was a white girl in a crowd of white girls in a park (“Pink Rabbits”) is a brother to a sister to I used to be / carried in the arms of cheerleaders / I'm the new blue blood / I'm the great white hope (“Mr. November”) and I'm a birthday candle in a circle of Black girls (“All the Wine”). In each case a limit is tested and buttons are more or less gently pushed. The singer/speaker is audibly masculine and male, but makes claims to (and (up)on) femininity and the female (generalizations are inevitable here, and are very much in play). All this is built on a house of race cards. There's always a crowd of girls (public or intimate), and an I is always there, only apparently with (or without) a fixed gender or race. All of these lyrics are problematic, but are they belligerent or marginalizing, and who is subject and object in these
sympathy, the album is full of other people’s troubles, like “Sea of Love,” an original with a cover for a title, a “Hey Joe” refrain, and the sense to realize If I stay here / Trouble will find me and/or I will never leave. On an album that admits If you want / to see me cry / Play Let It Be / or Nevermind and I wish that I could rise above, contamination anxiety is not the trouble, though trouble is invited.

Meanwhile, and all the while, the Crescendo Twins Dessner hold up the sky. Since Berninger, in a band of musical overachievers, does no more than sing, one assumes he provides all vocals. The show puts the lie to this view, as there are backing vox all around—most prominently, and cherub-like, from the twins.

27 or other people’s Trouble Songs
28 Line break indications added to indicate pauses in cadence (if not visible caesura): appropriately, the lyrics are printed in unlined blocks on the slip cases. Even after multiple listening, Berninger’s well-placed breaths are inscrutable.
29 or, perhaps, I wish that I could Rise Above, as Berninger suggests in the moments he screams like Rollins (or Black Francis) over the mic
30 All the white girls in the house say yeah!
31 Aaron and Bryce, who wave the black flag Carl Wilson burns in his Slate piece “Why I Hate the National,” as he compares their band to the “Crescendo Rock” of U2, Radiohead and, ouch, Coldplay (for whom Wilson may harbor a bit of pity for its (unlikely) underdog status).
32 though nothing they can do—and they do a lot—can do anything but bring down this guy, though magistically so
33 or, admittedly, from one or the other of them
If only I had listened then is our refrain, as trouble comes knocking, and as we trip over the floor at the door. Or, as we recall the easy invitation we gave: Trouble, come on in. We danced, we sang along — I’m evil! — and we were forever without end roped in.

34 Toufic distinguishes between the false threshold and the threshold itself, though our recognition of the false threshold might not help us, as he coins it, since it may in actuality be our last chance to turn away from The Castle, from The Count. After that, we’re (always) already in.