

“Come on and Rise Up:” Springsteen’s Experiential Art after 9/11.

By David Carithers

When Walt Whitman reacted to the assassination of President Lincoln by writing “Oh Captain, My Captain” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” he left us with more than just two great poems. His personal response to the tumultuous war and its aftermath provided a blueprint for transforming personal experience into art. Bruce Springsteen, a direct spiritual descendant of Whitman according to some genealogies,ⁱ achieved something similar in his album The Rising (2002). Although a few of the songs on the album elude neat categorization, The Rising was generally recognized and praised as one of the few lengthy, concentrated artistic responses to the attacks of September 11. One reviewer dubbed Springsteen the nation’s “poet laureate of 9/11” (Scott). The Rising can be viewed as a process that moves through feelings of hopelessness, grief, divisiveness, and hatred, before settling into renewed strength, faith, love, and hope for reconciliation. The process itself may help listeners to integrate the radically new experience (at least for Americans) of 9/11 into the fabric of the rest of their lives. Thus The Rising can be viewed as a work of romantic pragmatism.

The term “romantic pragmatism” is a version of Cornel West’s “prophetic pragmatism” and Roskelly’s and Ronald’s “romantic pragmatic rhetoric.” Combining the philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson, C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, romantic pragmatism posits the following tenets: “the significance of context, the need for the experimental, the realization of private and public connection, the role of communal effort, and the belief in truth as possible outcome” (Roskelly and Ronald 54). With a focus on the democratic nature of *process*, romantic pragmatism accepts both contingency and fallibility as important elements in a restless, hopeful method that seeks to unsettle past conclusions. Beliefs are contingent on the limited experiences and the fallibility of the humans who hold them—both individually and in groups—and thus are often in need of adjustment when new experiences prove them wrong. C.S. Peirce, late nineteenth century mathematician and philosopher who came up with the name “pragmatism,” argued that at the heart of pragmatism is a “scientific spirit” that requires a person “to be at all times ready to dump a whole cartload of beliefs, the moment experience is against them” (Collected Papers vol. I: 55). To admit as much is to accept the pragmatic anti-

foundationalist stance that knowledge and truth are essentially social constructs, and as such are always open to revision. However, a “romantic” pragmatism stops short of insisting, with Stanley Fish, that “interpretation is the only game in town,” or with Nietzsche that “facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations.”ⁱⁱⁱ Romantic pragmatism leaves room for the possibility of nondiscursive, experiential meaning (such as somatic experience) that lies outside the traditional realm of interpretation.

Springsteen’s The Rising shows the possibilities of such experiential meaning. Its optimism lies in the hope that these stories of real people (firefighters, widows of 9/11, suicide bombers, working men contemplating suicide) may be received as true “instrumentally,” in the words of William James, “true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience” (Pragmatism 58). The act of rendering the experiences of real people is a political act, and Springsteen has been mining such experience since the 1970s and continues today with his latest album Devils and Dust (2005). Before focusing on the way Springsteen transforms experience into art in The Rising, I will offer a brief introduction to his work and his importance to the singer/activist tradition in which I and others are placing him.

Background: American Icon

Born in 1949 in Freehold, New Jersey, Bruce Springsteen was a musician long before he was an activist, but his working-class origins had a lasting effect on both his music and his awakening to politics. His father showed him firsthand what unemployment and menial work could do to a person. Eric Alterman describes Douglas Springsteen as “an embittered man who struggled to find a place for himself in the local economy” (11). He worked intermittently in the local rug mill, as a jail guard, and as a cab and bus driver, and never encouraged his son’s musical efforts. “Bruce’s home life was dark and oppressive, filled with menacing authority,” writes Alterman (11). The father and son relationship involved little but discipline and rebellion. As one might imagine, the elder Springsteen had no friends. “Not one person, claimed Bruce, came to visit his father in twenty years” (Alterman 11). Such isolation would become an area of inquiry for the maturing Springsteen, especially on his album Nebraska (1982). “That’s one of the most dangerous things, I think—isolation,” he commented retrospectively in 1984. “Nebraska was about that American isolation: what happens to people when they’re alienated

from their friends and their community and their government and their job. Because those are the things that keep you sane, that give meaning to life in some fashion” (Marsh 339-340).

Springsteen’s first two albums, Greetings from Asbury Park (1973) and Born to Run (1975), were autobiographical celebrations exulting in the possibilities of individual escape—usually via the “suicide machines” of fast cars and motorcycles—from the despair and meanness of the kind that Springsteen himself must have experienced at home. But beginning with Darkness on the Edge of Town (1978), Springsteen’s themes began to move toward an awareness of the social injustices that created the situations out of which such meanness and despair arise. This slow transition to thinking along more political lines was accompanied by a loss of the earlier optimism. Most of the songs on Nebraska (1982) are full of despair, as when Springsteen has convicted murderer Charley Starkweather explain himself thus in the song “Nebraska:” “Well, sir, I guess there’s just a meanness in this world.”

Dave Marsh shows how Nebraska’s despair mirrors Springsteen’s own psychological struggles at the time that involved, among other things, his transition to superstardom. At any rate, the album’s tone reflects a transition in Springsteen’s career. “You could say that Nebraska’s story begins with ‘The River,’” writes Marsh, “when Springsteen finally imagines a character asking, ‘Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true / Or is it something worse?’ In Springsteen’s universe this is a very dangerous question because it dredges up an irreconcilable contradiction” (170). Nebraska’s clear departure from the optimistic temperament of the earlier albums indicates Springsteen’s evolving attitude that did not shy away from contradictions. “Maybe he could still stomp and shout, ‘It ain’t no sin to be glad you’re alive,’ each night during ‘Badlands,’ but now he also saw justice on the other side of the story” (Marsh 373).

It was Born in the U. S. A. (1984) that catapulted Springsteen into true superstar status, and it was also at this time that Springsteen found his prophetic voice and began to put his political ideas into action. Springsteen began to articulate his concern with the growing economic injustices resulting from Reaganomics. He had always been concerned in some ways with the human struggle against spirit-crushing forces, but during the Born in the U. S. A. tour, he found new ways of articulating this focus by working with specific organizations that helped people. At this time, one might say that Springsteen began to develop the characteristics of what Cornel West calls “prophetic pragmatism,” which he describes as

a form of tragic thought in that it confronts candidly individual and collective experiences of evil in individuals and institutions—with little expectation of ridding the world of *all* evil. Yet it is a kind of romanticism in that it holds many experiences of evil to be neither inevitable nor necessary but rather the results of human agency, i.e., choices and actions” (228).

“Human struggle sits at the center of prophetic pragmatism,” continues West, “a struggle guided by a democratic and libertarian vision, sustained by moral courage and existential integrity” (229). West calls his version of pragmatism “prophetic” because “the mark of the prophet is to speak the truth in love with courage” and “prophetic pragmatism proceeds from this impulse” (233). In the 1980s, Springsteen began to realize the difference he could make if he worked more purposefully with the movements of human solidarity such as labor unions and food banks.

Marsh maintains that Springsteen’s political goal during this time was “to link his wealth and fame with the sort of people who were living in the circumstances in which he’d originated” (488). Springsteen told Rolling Stone’s Kurt Loder in an interview, “I want to try and just work more directly with people, try to find some way that my band can tie into the communities that we come into. I guess that’s political action, a way to just bypass that whole electoral thing—human politics” (Marsh 489). During the second leg of the Born in the U. S. A. tour, Springsteen began to meet with local unions and food banks in the cities where he played. He told manager Jon Landau, “If I’m going around this country, I want to know what’s going on where I’m playing, and I want to leave something positive behind” (Marsh 493). At each stop, Springsteen would talk with leaders of the local organizations and present a check for \$10,000 (\$25,000 if it was a big arena show). The money was important for those who received it, but Springsteen’s intention was that the publicized interactions “would symbolize commitment and solidarity and perhaps serve as an inspiration to his fans” (Marsh 494). This endeavor to reach-out and make a lasting human connection through his art, links Springsteen to singer/activists like Woody Guthrie and to the original American poet of human solidarity, Walt Whitman.

Scholars have noted the line of influence that runs from Walt Whitman to the group of American songwriters known as working class heroes: Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. Guthrie was a Whitman aficionado and shared his predecessor’s concern with, and delight in, common people—although he eventually came to question Whitman’s ability to speak for the common man. “Does Whitman, Sandburg, and Pushkin,” asked Guthrie, “actually talk in the lingo ... of the kinds and breeds of working people I’ve met and dealt with?” (Pastures of

Plenty 179-180). Of course Whitman was writing in a different century, and while Guthrie succeeded in capturing the lingo of his own contemporaries in his songs, his prose retained a noticeable Whitmanesque flavor, so much so that in the late 1970s, students at the University of Michigan responded to Will Geer's reading of a passage from Guthrie's narrative "My Best Songs" by asking him "to locate the verse in Leaves of Grass" (Garman 111). Whitman had a noticeable influence on Guthrie, then, and Springsteen, like Dylan before him and Steve Earle after, was highly influenced by Woody Guthrie.

One thing that Walt Whitman, Woody Guthrie, and Bruce Springsteen share is the poet's observant eye. Robert Coles links Springsteen to Whitman via William Carlos Williams, and not simply because all three were residents of New Jersey (where Springsteen still makes his home). Coles writes that Springsteen and Williams are poets who continue "one aspect of what Leaves of Grass offers—the always interested observer of a nation still restlessly in formation rather than solidly settled, fixed in its social and political ways" (16). This restless, open-ended quality is a tenet of pragmatism in general and the vision of the United States as an *idea* still in the making, strongly links Springsteen to romantic pragmatism.

In his book A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen, Bryan Garman argues for an explicit connection between the Good Gray Poet and the Boss, a link mediated by the proto-American singer/songwriter, Woody Guthrie. Garman explains that after several inward-looking albums in the early 1990s (Human Touch and Lucky Town) that celebrated his personal recovery from depression, Springsteen performed at the Severance Hall Tribute to Woody Guthrie in 1996 and "unequivocally announced that he had returned to take up the cultural work of his predecessors" (236). He opened his set with "Tom Joad," Guthrie's lengthy ballad about the protagonist of Grapes of Wrath. And on Springsteen's album The Ghost of Tom Joad (1996), and during the tour that promoted it, Garman writes that:

Springsteen, as Whitman had done before him, constructed economic and racial oppression as a moral problem and tried to forge a culture that is not based on self-interest but that [which] will teach men and women to balance individual freedom with the public good, to value people over profits, to create an egalitarian society based on love and compassion rather than hate and greed. (236)

Springsteen dates his awakening to the political and cultural history of the United States to around the time of the Darkness on the Edge of Town tour of 1978-1979. After severing ties with his first manager in 1976, Springsteen found not only a new manager but a new influence in

Jon Landau, former critic for Rolling Stone, who encouraged him to read John Steinbeck, Flannery O'Connor, and John Ford. Ford's film version of The Grapes of Wrath particularly affected Springsteen, as did Henry Steele Commager and Allan Nevins's Pocket History of the United States. The latter was a narrative that, as Garman explains, "while professing an unwavering faith in the American experiment, enabled Springsteen to examine the social and economic forces that had shaped his life" (197). Springsteen wrote that it was around this time that "I figured out what I wanted to write about, the people who mattered to me, and who I wanted to be" (Garman 199-200). Garman summarizes the new focus in Springsteen's art from that point forward:

Since the release of Darkness on the Edge of Town (1978), Springsteen has consistently recorded material that not only examines the tension between individuality and community but also embraces his working-class roots and articulates a concern for social and economic justice. Inspired by the works of Woody Guthrie, as well as readings in American cultural and political history, he has gradually placed himself in the lineage of Whitman's working-class hero (Garman 197).

Like Whitman and Guthrie, whose observant eyes recorded the restless nation in formation, Springsteen finds truth in the common experience of ordinary people while holding out hope for a better life for them. The hope that was absent on Nebraska returned with Tunnel of Love (1987) Human Touch (1992), and The Ghost of Tom Joad (1996), and was resurrected powerfully with The Rising (2002). The rhetorical aim of Springsteen's art seems to be to lift people up and give them hope, or, as his forebear Woody Guthrie put it:

I am out to sing songs that will prove to you that this is your world and that if it has hit you pretty hard and knocked you for a dozen loops, no matter how hard it's run you down and rolled over you, no matter what color you are, what size you are, how you are built, I am out to sing the songs that make you take pride in yourself and in your work. (Bound for Glory ix)

It is Springsteen's hope in the people and his emphasis on experience as art that make his work—and indeed his life—an example of romantic pragmatism in action. And true to the nature of pragmatism, Springsteen's art makes a real difference in the lives of everyday people. In Robert Coles's book Bruce Springsteen's America: The People Listening, A Poet Singing, ordinary people—among them a student, a teacher, a truck-driver, and a police officer—write about the difference Springsteen has made in their lives. By lifting people up and encouraging them to be interested observers and participants in the world, Springsteen promotes democracy.

Cornel West explains that this connection between critical engagement and democracy is the main thrust of romantic pragmatism. “Prophetic pragmatism,” he writes, “with its roots in the American heritage and its hopes for the wretched of the earth, constitutes the best chance of promoting an Emersonian culture of creative democracy by means of critical intelligence and social action” (212).

Like Guthrie and Whitman before him, Springsteen has worked for democracy by giving the people reasons to believe and to act. He continued this work on The Rising by lifting people up through renderings of poignant experiences in the face of September 11, 2001. The thrust of this album is both personal and rhetorical because its stories connect the individual’s experience with the collective experience of the community. Dewey explained this relationship in Art as Experience: “Experience in the degree in which it *is* experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one’s own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events” (19).

Springsteen and 9/11

In The Rising, a fifteen song release, Springsteen takes his own and others’ experiences in reaction to 9/11 and turns them into art. Springsteen’s focus on the aesthetic quality of experience links him to John Dewey, who argued in Art as Experience that experience *is* art. “Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things,” Dewey writes, “it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience” (19). Since the release of his first album in 1973, Springsteen has consistently transformed the experiences of everyday people into art. Dewey claimed that there were really only two philosophies, and “one of them accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art” (34). This is the philosophy of Bruce Springsteen and romantic pragmatism.

Released in 2002, The Rising is one long prayer that asks a higher power for strength, faith, hope, and love in response to 9/11. Many of the songs depict realistic situations in which people who have lost loved ones in 9/11 try to come to terms with their loss. Like a jazz riff

repeated and revised throughout a musical composition, then, these key words (strength, faith, hope, love) are offered as solace for those experiencing the sudden loss of loved ones.

The key words are used to express a number of specific responses to the event, including but not limited to: praise for those who sacrificed their lives for others; vengeful anger directed toward the perpetrators; sadness both for the dead and missing and for the heart of the city itself (and America by extension); and finally, a suggestion that differences between people may be overcome. All of these responses are framed within what appears to be Springsteen's personal experience as well as the imagined experiences of other people in their immediate response to 9/11, particularly those who have lost loved ones. Whether or not Springsteen actually lost anyone particularly close to him during the attacks or knew anyone personally who suffered such a loss is irrelevant to my argument, for we know experiences *like* these did in fact happen.

Yet in a very real sense, Springsteen had a very specific audience in mind when he wrote The Rising: his own fans who were struggling to come to terms with the events of 9/11. Springsteen was called on to do something in direct response to the attacks. The now almost-famous story is that a few days after September 11, Springsteen was exiting a parking lot in the Jersey Shore town of Sea Bright when a fan rode by. The man slowed down, rolled down his window, and shouted, "We need you!" before driving on. For Springsteen, naming the struggles and passions of the common person is the force behind his art, and he felt particularly compelled after 9/11 to create a specific response to the situation. "It's an honor to find that place in the audience's life" (Pareles). Like Walt Whitman creating "Oh Captain, My Captain" after the death of President Lincoln, Springsteen was called on by the people to pronounce his judgment on the event. "I've been at my best when I'm connected to what's going on in the world outside," Springsteen stated in a rare interview at his home. "I have a sense of what my service to my audience is going to be. It's the true nature of the work in the sense that you're filling a place" (Pareles). If West is right that "human struggle sits at the center of prophetic pragmatism"(229), then perhaps Springsteen's lasting legacy in his response to 9/11 will be his unique depiction of such universal human struggle in the face of adversity. One thing that may set The Rising apart is the way that it eventually transcends nationalistic concerns to suggest instead an all-encompassing humanism.

With The Rising's truthful handling of the complex and often contradictory responses to 9/11, Springsteen adds an important chapter to the United States' collective memory of a

defining historical moment. But it is The Rising's focus on human experience as a test for belief and the album's attempt to mediate between some of the differences inherent in the contradictory responses that make it a work of romantic pragmatism.

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One dominant pattern in the discourse surrounding 9/11 is the idea that the event was a violent imposition of the “real” onto the dream-world, within which, the United States had lived until that point. “Welcome to the Desert of the Real!” proclaims the title of Slavoj Žižek’s book of essays on 9/11, a phrase from the scene in the popular motion picture Matrix in which the hero awakens into true reality to see a desolate landscape of post-war ruins. The ruins of ground zero similarly greeted the newly awakened United States, introducing the nation to the reality many countries experience on a daily basis. The motif of the “real” also appears throughout The Rising. From “Into the Fire” to “My City of Ruins,” Springsteen thrusts his listeners into the reality of the event, as if he wants us to see the blood of the victims and feel the dust of the ruins. This is a way for listeners to experience the event first-hand so to speak. Springsteen puts us on the street and in the towers, and—more poignantly—he places us in the minds of people who lost relatives, lovers, and friends in the attacks.

In the essay “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” Don DeLillo writes that 9/11

has no purchase on the mercies of analogy or simile. We have to take the shock and horror as it is. But living language is not diminished. The writer wants to understand what this day has done to us. [. . .]. The writer begins in the towers, trying to imagine the moment, desperately. Before politics, before history and religion, there is the primal terror. People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counter-narrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel. (39)

In the Rising, graphic reminders of the concrete reality of 9/11—blood, dust, sky, and fire are recurring images—provide a way into the various human experiences which find their expression in feelings of mourning, anger, and pleas for mediation. While The Rising concerns itself with all of these responses, the dominant mood created throughout the album is a profound sadness in response to both the loss of life and the wound to the city’s (and the nation’s) heart. In this sense the work serves as a sort of eulogy for those who died during September 11. The album as a whole is much like a prayer, with its repeated litany of the need for strength, hope, faith, and love. But along with this mournful mood, and perhaps a natural part of the experience of grief in

the face of violence, is an angry call for revenge: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This complicates what could otherwise be seen as a simple eulogy or testament to the American heroes of that day (the rescuers who sacrificed their lives in an attempt to save others). Finally, and most importantly, The Rising offers hope for mediation between some of these tensions that threaten to tear people apart.

Springsteen makes it clear that faith (along with hope, strength, and love) is needed as a means to bring about mediation between extremes after 9/11, both a traditional faith in a higher power and a humanist faith in the possibilities of human connection. The Rising highlights the agency of spirituality as an instrument that might lead one toward truth. His pragmatism is of the spiritual sort, then, in the tradition of Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism.

The following discussion of Bruce Springsteen's romantic pragmatic contribution to post 9/11 discourse will focus on these dominant patterns on the album: The reality of the event, our natural responses of sadness and anger, and a glimpse at mediation between extremes at this crucial juncture in the nation's history. All of these responses are presented in terms of realistic human experience, as well as in terms of a process. It is this focus on the process that makes Springsteen's response romantic/pragmatic.

“The Sky Was Falling and Streaked with Blood”: Reality and The Rising

While The Rising opens with an upbeat song in which the speaker vows to find his way “through this lonesome day,” the second song, “Into the Fire,” reminds listeners that 9/11 was a violent event marked by destruction of real bodies and real buildings:

The sky was falling and streaked with blood,
I heard you calling me then you disappeared into the dust.
Up the stairs, into the fire.
Up the stairs, into the fire.

The words dust and blood are repeated frequently throughout the album, with “dust” occurring in six songs a total of seven times, and “blood” appearing six times in three songs. The only words that occur with more frequency are the prayer-like repetitions of strength, faith, hope, and love. So while Springsteen emphasizes the reality of the event, graphic details like blood and dust are heuristic images that allow listeners to move to other issues, such as the suffering of real people. The Rising offers little analysis of the political climate that characterizes the scene after 9/11.

Springsteen instead focuses on actions of people as agents in response to the scene and, most importantly, the agency that enables them to respond. ⁱⁱⁱ

The speaker of “Into the Fire” addresses a loved one lost at ground zero. In this song, the experience of the destruction of flesh and steel quickly translates into a higher lesson for the community; the focus moves from an individual’s grief to what we can learn from the actions of those brave enough to run toward the burning towers to help others:

May your strength give us strength.
May your faith give us faith.
May your hope give us hope.
May your love give us love.

This chorus expresses the real message of the song, that those individual acts of bravery represent actions based on the best beliefs of the community: strength, faith, hope, and love. Their sacrifice should remind us of the validity of these beliefs, Springsteen seems to say, and they should reinforce our actions that put these beliefs to the test. This list of key terms is repeated again in almost the same order and in a similar context in the fifth song, “Countin’ on a Miracle,” as well as in the final song “My City of Ruins,” making it clear (to this listener at least) that these traits are key to Springsteen’s artistic response to 9/11.

“Into the Fire” moves back and forth between a speaker longing for a missing loved one in the verses and in the refrain “up the stairs, into the fire,” to a more universal message in the chorus about what the community of listeners can learn from the actions of such heroes. The chorus is, after all, not “may your strength give *me* strength,” but “may your strength give *us* strength.” Yet the song remains grounded in the personal narrative of someone experiencing loss after 9/11, specifically the loss of someone who chose to risk their life to help others. We may assume the person is a firefighter or some other type of rescue worker, although stories abound about civilians also going “into the fire.” The final verse describes the lovers’ last moments together:

It was dark, too dark to see.
You held me in the light you gave.
You lay your hand on me,
Then walked into the darkness of your smoky grave.

The song then repeats the chorus four times, prayer-like, and repeats the fourth line of the chorus a fifth time, with the effect of the following phrase echoing in the listener’s ear: “May your love

bring us love.” Springsteen seems to rely heavily on love as an antidote to the hate behind the attacks. “This is part of the counter-narrative,” writes DeLillo: “hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel” (39). Like C.S. Peirce’s “evolutionary love,” this love is a liberating force that offers listeners an alternative response to 9/11 radically different from the typical “eye for an eye” mentality that is more common. Although, as we shall see later, Springsteen also expresses the desire for revenge. The Rising, then, does not present a simple, unified response to 9/11.

“My Soul is Lost, My City’s in Ruins”: Mourning for America and Beyond

Like “Into the Fire,” “You’re Missing” speaks from the point of view of someone who has lost a loved one to 9/11. But instead of referring to the material reality of ground zero to evoke feelings of loss and sadness, “You’re Missing” evokes such feelings by listing all the physical things left behind and intact when one is taken so suddenly:

Coffee cup’s on the counter, jacket’s on the chair.
Paper’s on the doorstep, but you’re not there.
Everything is everything
Everything is everything.
But you’re missing.

And of course clothes and objects are not the only things that are left behind. There are people, too, and, in this case, children. Focusing in on the experience of a wife who must now face the reality of telling her children that their father is gone, the following lines are among the most heartbreaking on the CD: “Children are asking if it’s all right. / Will you be in our arms tonight?”

Unlike “Into the Fire,” which offered more than a glimmer of hope after 9/11, “You’re Missing” ends with the speaker offering nothing but the observation that God seems not to have noticed, and that the devil, perhaps in the form of new acts of terror such as sending anthrax in the mail, seems to be in control. Images of the devil and dust appear to hold special significance for Springsteen in his latest works; note the title of his 2005 release: Devils and Dust. At the closing of “Into the Fire,” the speaker is left with nothing but the ubiquitous dust on his shoes and futile tears for the dead:

God’s drifting in heaven, devil’s in the mailbox.
I got dust on my shoes, nothing but teardrops.

While the song ends after these lines, with only the melancholy rhythms of the F and D-minor chords as a musical dénouement, Springsteen clearly does not intend for his listener to linger in this state. The next song, an upbeat, electric guitar-driven anthem called “The Rising,” brings listeners back up to an optimistic plane as it invites us to believe in the hope of human solidarity with the lines “come on up for the rising / Come on up, lay your hands in mine.”

In “My City of Ruins”—a gospel song reminiscent of “People Get Ready” that Springsteen wrote before 9/11 to commemorate the closing of Asbury Park but that works well to voice the losses of 9/11—Springsteen links one individual’s experience of loss to the communal sense of loss experienced by Americans (and sympathetic people worldwide) as they faced the wounded landscape of New York city. The opening lines, “There’s a blood red circle / On the cold dark ground,” suggest that the recent traumatic event is like a stain on the earth. The physical ruins of the city mirror the emotional ruins of its citizens, and these feelings are intensified by Springsteen’s focus on a particular person’s loss. Here the personal is explicitly linked to the communal as the lyrics eulogize both a lost lover and a damaged city:

Now there’s tears on the pillow
Darlin’ where we slept.
And you took my heart when you left.
Without your sweet kiss
My soul is lost, my friend.
Tell me how do I begin again?
My city’s in ruins.
My city’s in ruins.

Unlike “You’re Missing,” “My City of Ruins” offers hope that a higher power will provide the strength, faith, and love needed to rebuild the city and to mend the wounded hearts of its citizens. “With these hands,” Springsteen intones, “I pray for the strength.” Thus Springsteen enacts his religious form of romantic pragmatism by naming the agency that may enable those dealing with losses after 9/11 to find the strength to move on. Unlike some other musical responses to 9/11 that urged immediate war—Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (Angry American)” is the best example—Springsteen’s response urges listeners to consider non-violent ways of responding to violence. A philosophy that asserts that one can rid the world of *all* evil is based on (moral) certitude, and as Oliver Wendell Holmes found out through his experience in the American Civil War, “certitude leads to violence” (Menand 16).^{iv} Springsteen’s approach here is pragmatic in the sense that it refuses to remain fixated on past beliefs. That would be a

philosophy based on certitude. Even Springsteen's apparent calls for revenge reveal, on closer inspection, a more complicated stance than what is implied on the surface.

“I Want an Eye for an Eye”: Anger and Revenge in The Rising

The lyrics of “Lonesome Day,” the first song on the album, suggest that revenge is also an appropriate response to 9/11, as if the United States is a sleeping giant that will soon awaken:

Hell's brewin,' dark sun's on the rise.
This storm'll blow through by and by.
House is on fire, viper's in the grass.
A little revenge and this too shall pass.

These lyrics echo a common reaction to 9/11 among both ordinary citizens and some high-ranking officials: the need for revenge. This is, then, another example of Springsteen's apparent aim in The Rising to record real experiences of people in response to 9/11. We all heard the angry cries for revenge that followed the event, a reaction captured in popular song by Toby Keith's “Angry American” in which the speaker warns: “You'll be sorry that you messed with the U S of A / Cause we'll put a boot in your ass, it's the American way.”

While the speaker in Springsteen's “Lonesome Day” suggests that revenge is in order, the idea is problematized by what appears to be the speaker's glib prediction that the U.S. will lash out quickly and then forget the implications of 9/11. “A little revenge and this too shall pass,” he says. The next verse includes a prescient warning that further complicates a simple reading of “Lonesome Day” as an angry call for revenge:

Better ask questions before you shoot.
Deceit and betrayal's bitter fruit.
It's hard to swallow, come time to pay.
That taste on your tongue don't easily slip away.

“Further On (Up the Road)” also suggests revenge, as the speaker seems poised to take some kind of violent action:

Where the road is dark and the seed is sowed,
Where the gun is cocked and the bullet's cold,
Where the miles are marked in blood and gold,
I'll meet you further on up the road.

The revenge factor figures most prominently in “Empty Sky,” the sixth track on The Rising. “Empty Sky” begins with the now familiar scenario of a person faced with the sudden death of a

loved one after 9/11. But this song takes a different turn when it explicitly expresses the desire for revenge in the first stanza:

I woke up this morning
I could barely breathe.
Just an empty impression
In the bed where you used to be.
I want a kiss from your lips.
I want an eye for an eye.
I woke up this morning to an empty sky.

The chorus then reiterates the image of the empty sky. While this opening verse refers to an ancient law shared by both Judeo-Christian and Muslim societies to express the natural urge for revenge, the second verse goes farther back in time to the pre-Greek era, evoking a similar kind of revenge in the form of the Furies who would rise up from the blood of the slain to avenge the perpetrator in an endless cycle. Naturally the human mind moves away from the limbic region in response to such an act of terror as 9/11 and reverts back to a more primal approach to justice than a fair trial by jury. Again, Springsteen expresses the experience felt by many in their immediate response to 9/11:

Blood on the streets,
Yeah blood flowing down.
I hear the blood of my blood
Cryin' from the ground.

At this point the speaker in the song becomes a kind of super-hero who prepares to mete out this justice that he has been describing: “On the plains of Jordon / I cut my bow from the wood / Of this tree of evil / Of this tree of good.” Again, as in the previous allusion to the “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” method of justice, traditionally practiced by Judeo-Christian and Muslim societies, perhaps Springsteen is reminding listeners of the shared humanity of all people of the world, even though it is easier to demonize strangers as the enemy and designate them as the evil “them” in the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy. This, then, is a moment of pragmatic mediation between extremes in The Rising.

As the chorus repeats and fades—“Empty sky, empty sky, / I woke up this morning to an empty sky”—the song meditates on the emptiness after 9/11, emptiness as absence of grounds for meaning in the face of something so completely new and unexpected as multiple attacks by jet plane on New York and Washington. “Unexpected” yet fantasized about in popular films for

years, as Baudrillard notes in The Spirit of Terrorism. At any rate, there is a need to make meaning out of this newness, to create some order out of the chaos. This is where the writer comes in, and this is what Springsteen achieves in The Rising. He is trying to give some semblance of meaning and memory to that event by focusing on the experiences of real people. On this note, Don DeLillo wrote about 9/11: “In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space” (39). Like Whitman recording his experience of the Civil War, Springsteen creates some meaning out of howling, empty space of 9/11 by depicting the humanity of those most directly affected by the event.

“There’s a Lot of Walls Need Tearing Down”: Pragmatic Mediation in The Rising

New walls, literal and metaphorical, sprang up immediately after 9/11, the most familiar one being the wall between “Us” and “Them.” A line was drawn in the sand and you were either on the side of the United States or on the side of the terrorists. In response to this Manichean outlook, a pattern of discourse has emerged that calls for increased dialogue between the opposing groups on each side of these walls. Music can be a mediating factor for those who are quick to turn their hatred on a real or imagined other, for music appeals to the limbic region of the brain: the mammalian part thought to be responsible for emotions. Emotions such as caring and empathy for others are what make us human and Springsteen suggests that we can work through our misunderstandings of others to arrive at a point of mutual respect, perhaps even love. This move is subtle in the song “Paradise.” Once we realize that the first part of the song depicts the actions of a suicide bomber, we at least recognize the person’s humanity: “Where the river runs to black / I take the schoolbooks from your pack. / Plastics, wire and your kiss, / The breath of eternity on your lips. / In the crowded marketplace / I drift from face to face / I hold my breath and close my eyes. / And I wait for paradise.”

The song “Let’s Be Friends (Skin to Skin)” more explicitly indicates that dialogue between people can move them beyond differences:

I know we’re different, you and me,
Got a different way of walking.
The time has come to let the past be history.
Yeah if we could just start talking.”

In this song Springsteen suggests that the only way to bring about positive change is to work together, taking on specific problems one at a time: “There’s a lot of walls need tearing down / Together we could take them one by one.”

The song with the most potential for suggesting the possibilities of mediation between oppositions such as “us” and “them” after 9/11 is “Worlds Apart,” which, like Steve Earle’s “John Walker’s Blues,” incorporates Arabic language significantly. Whereas Earle takes a verse from the Koran and places it in the chorus of “John Walker’s Blues,” Springsteen’s use of the Other’s language is more subtle. “Worlds Apart” begins with a prayer-like chant that sounds like it could be coming out of a mosque, and the voice is soon accompanied by an African-like drumbeat. The liner notes indicate that Pakistani singer Asif Ali Khan and Group collaborated with Springsteen on this song. After this rather exotic prelude, “Worlds Apart” then changes into a traditional guitar-driven rock tune, although the Arabesque intonations and African rhythms remain throughout.

Springsteen has shown how spirituality may work as an agency to enable listeners to respond meaningfully to 9/11. Love is the other dominant agency offered on *The Rising* as a means to move beyond apparently irreconcilable differences between people based on their cultures. In “Worlds Apart,” the lyrics repeat a familiar scenario in Springsteen’s work of a lover addressing another. Though the speaker seeks “faith in your kiss and comfort in your heart,” he admits that “when I look into your eyes, we stand worlds apart.” While most of the songs on the album place the scene of action in the city (presumably New York), “Worlds Apart” describes the scene as “this dry and troubled country” where, “‘Neath Allah’s blessed rain, we remain worlds apart.” My first impression was that the song referred to Afghanistan, but the exact location is probably inconsequential. It is enough to say that Springsteen is asking his listeners to consider the Other as a flesh and blood human with the same hopes and desires as his audience, with the implication that any apparent differences can be overcome once the pathways to understanding are opened.

In the third verse of “Worlds Apart,” Springsteen suggests that experience is always the test of truth, not the other way around, and this is a core tenet of romantic pragmatism. In a manner that is consistent with his earlier work, Springsteen indicates that the experience of romantic love may unite people no matter what their differences.

Sometimes the truth just ain't enough,

Or it's too much in times like this.
Let's throw the truth away, we'll find it in this kiss.

Here the speaker is prepared to throw away the “truth” if it does not fit with his experience in a move that invokes C.S. Peirce’s statement that a person should dump a whole cartload of beliefs the moment experience proves them wrong (Collected Papers vol. I:55). And yet, how difficult it is to dump that cartload! How much easier to deny our experience or that of others!

* * *

In his published response to 9/11, Don DeLillo names death as the one thing that unites all humans: “The dead are their own nation and race, one identity, young or old, devout or unbelieving—a union of souls” (40). Commenting on the pilgrims in Mecca, he points out that they recall, in prayer, “their fellowship with the dead” (40). Although Springsteen certainly honors the deceased in The Rising and thus admits our fellowship with the dead, he clearly encourages the living to work for a better world.

In your skin upon my skin, in the beating of our hearts,
May the living let us in, before the dead tear us apart.

For Springsteen, then, life—not death—unites us all as inhabitants of this planet, a romantic and optimistic notion to be sure. The song ends fittingly with the speaker trusting love to take him and his partner to a higher plane where their differences do not matter: “Let’s let love give what it gives. / Let’s let love give what it gives.” Accepting this hypothesis which passion seems to have whispered to him, Springsteen knows what he means by “true.” Truth is found in the human touch.

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ⁱ Springsteen was highly influenced by American folk-singer Woody Guthrie, who consciously affected a Whitmanesque style. All three lyricists have a talent for transforming common language and mundane situations into meaningful art. On the direct line of descent from Whitman and Guthrie to Springsteen, see Garman. On Springsteen as observant poet in the style of Whitman and William Carlos Williams (three New Jersey natives), see Coles. Larry David Smith offers a scholarly analysis of Springsteen's work in Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and American Song. Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2002. Another noteworthy book is Daniel Cavicchi's Tramps Like Us: Music & Meaning among Springsteen Fans. New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. The best biography is Dave Marsh's Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts; The Definitive Biography, 1973-2003 (2004), which combines his previous two biographies of Springsteen and adds updated material, including a commentary on The Rising.

ⁱⁱ Friedrich Nietzsche. The Will to Power. New York: Vintage Press, 1968. Stanley Fish. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.

ⁱⁱⁱ The terms Act, Agent, Agency, Scene, and Purpose are borrowed from Kenneth Burke's A Grammar of Motives. These terms make up a heuristic "pentad" that offers a way of exploring rhetorical moves.

^{iv} Louis Menand gives considerable space to Oliver Wendell Holmes in The Metaphysical Club as someone who was able to take some of the ideas of the pragmatists and put them into practice. "The lesson Holmes took from the war can be put in a sentence," Menand writes. "It is that certitude leads to violence" (61). People will fight for things they are certain about, such as slavery or abolition, because they are certain that their relative conceptions of "the way life should be" are the right ones. "What prevents the friction between competing conceptions of the way life should be from overheating and leading to violence is democracy" (64).