

On *The Ghost of Tom Joad* by Bruce Springsteen

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This little essay is an *homage* to *The Ghost of Tom Joad*,¹ Bruce Springsteen's 13th album released in November, 1995. This album which has evoked much controversy as regards its subject matter since its release helps clarify or reconfirm the quintessential theme inherent in his other works.

1

Bruce Springsteen has been known for singing of the exasperated young people seeking after the American Dream only to find themselves continuously betrayed. His third album *Born to Run*² was released in 1975, one year before the Bicentennial. In this album he uses for the first time the phrases "the American Dream" and "the Promised Land". The heroes of his songs sweat it out in the daytime, and drive around wildly hoping to reach the promised land.

In *Born in the USA*,³ his seventh album released about ten years after the fall of Saigon, he also sings of the dreams unfulfilled. The song which shares the title with the album is a song about a Vietnam War veteran's life full of trials and tribulations. He has been living back in America for ten years feeling beguiled and frustrated. He was

discriminated at birth, had a hard time growing up, was sent to Vietnam and could not find any job after coming back serving in the war. He asks "Where has the American Dream gone? You know I was born in the U.S.A."

Songs of Bruce Springsteen often reflect the social conditions of America. As he sings, "We learned more from a three-minute record than we'd ever learned in school,"⁴ we can learn a lot what is happening in America now from his songs.

The Ghost of Tom Joad depicts tenaciously the shadowy aspects of America — the unemployed, the homeless, illegal aliens, problems with drugs and guns, marooned Vietnam War veterans, bleak steel towns once prosperous. It is almost a flashback of the world of Tom Joad, the hero of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, who struggled hard to get away from the dust storms in Oklahoma in a jalopy into California.

Pete Seeger once said, "I learned so many things from Woody that I can hardly count them. His ability to identify with the ordinary man and woman, speak their own language without using the fancy words and never be afraid — no matter where you were."⁵ It is obvious that Bruce Springsteen identifies himself with the heroes of his creation in this album, or at least stands on their side "speaking their own language," which is clearly shown in the words of Tom Joad quoted in the album title song.

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 a decent job or a helpin' hand
Wherever somebody's strugglin' to be free
Look in their eyes Mom you'll see me

Some songs in this album were written based on the articles in Los Angeles Times. One is the article on illegal production of methamphetamine in the issue of March 13, 1995 titled *California's Illicit Farm Belt Export* by which Bruce Springsteen was inspired and wrote a song called "Sinaloa Cowboys".

The article reads, "And some of the profits are literally buried in the ground, agents said. In Porterville, one ring had stashed \$4.5 million in cash in trash cans three feet underground."⁶

When Miguel and his brother Louis leave their small Mexican town trying to smuggle into America, their father tells them saying:

My sons, one thing you will learn
For everything the north gives
It exacts a price in return

In the last verse of this song we find out that what was the price they had to pay.

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 in his grave

2

The two themes clearly seen in Springsteen's albums up to *Born in the U.S.A.* are the American Dream and the car as a symbolic vehicle to realize that dream. There is another theme in all of these albums, not so explicit as the above-mentioned but it is still there. And it is an important theme in the sense that it gives his songs another dimension and depth which distinguishes his songs from some of the sterile works done by other contemporary artists. It has something to do with his father, or the prevailing image of a father figure in America.

This theme surfaced for the first time in his fourth album *Darkness on the Edge of Town.*¹ In "Adam Raised a Cain" he sings:

Daddy worked his whole life for nothing but pain
Now he walks these empty rooms looking for something to blame

And in "Factory":

I see my daddy walking through them factory gates in the rain
Factory takes his hearing, factory gives him life
It's the working, the working, just the working life

From these lines we can tell he is definitely not snubbing his father coolly. But he is not affirming his way of life, either. He just cannot forgive him for living like a dead man. He does not want to turn into

his father who is "looking for something to blame" trying to ascribe his failure to something or somebody else.

The son may not be aware of it, but hidden deep in his father's heart is the burning fury for the American Dream never delivered. This fury his son inherits:

We were prisoners of love, a love in chains
He was standing in the door, I was standing in the rain
With the same hot blood burning in our veins
Adam raised a Cain

Like Cain driven out of the Garden of Eden, his son leaves home compelled by some inner compulsion. It is not so much the denial of his father, but the denial of what mutilated his father. It is not the denial of his father he knew when he was little, but the corpse-like father existing as nothing but a loser reflecting the shattered American Dream. It is a challenge, it is a war declared against the American Dream. He sings in "Independence Day" in *The River*,⁸ his fifth album speaking to his father:

They ain't gonna do to me
What I watched them do to you

And he leaves home after saying to his father:

Nothing we can say is gonna change anything now
I'll be leaving in the morning from St. Mary's gate

But he feels guilty deep inside about deserting his father, which can be incontrovertibly seen in "My Father's House" in *Nebraska*,⁹ his sixth album, whose first line "Last night I dreamed that I was a child" shows the psychotherapeutic nature of the song.

He saw in his dream his father's house shining in the dark. He ran and ran through a forest scratched by twigs and thorns hoping to meet his father. Finally they met and his father embraced him who could not help trembling with joy and fear. When he wakes up, he ruminates over some of the things that separated them in a bitter way. And then he gets dressed, gets into the car and goes to see his father for the first time in many years.

However, in the house his father is supposed to be living, lives a strange woman, who says, "I'm sorry son but no one by that name lives here anymore." The last verse of the song shows the son's guilty feeling toward his father, to his past deeds that could not be redeemed:

My father's house shines hard and bright
It stands like a beacon calling me in the night
Calling and calling so cold and alone
Shining 'cross this dark highway where our sins lie unatoned

In these songs we can discern the son's indignation, pity and guilt toward the father — completely prostrated as a loser in the race to win the American Dream — as well as his longing to reconcile with his father.

American history, from the outset, was the history of resistance against authority. The first immigrants came against all odds to this land of freedom resisting all kinds of authority hoping to build a country with more equality and less oppression. They knew at the same time that they would be eventually opposed and resisted by their successors. Children could get closer to "the ideal American" only when they denied their parents. The ideal America or American has always been in the future.

In that sense the various movements by the young people in the late 60s in America, the most conspicuous of which was the movement against the war in Vietnam, can be said to have been characteristic of the American spirit. However, around the middle of the 80s in many works of American popular culture the theme of "reconciliation with father" began to frequently appear, the most persuasive example of which is *Field of Dreams*, a movie in which the son by building a ball park in the middle of his corn field conjures up his father's favorite ballplayer, Shoeless Joe Jackson and eventually his father, John Kinsella himself.

In "Walk like a Man" in the album *Tunnel of Love*¹⁰ released in 1987 Bruce Springsteen also sings of his reunion, his reconciliation with his father. From the first line of this song — "I remember how rough your hand felt on mine on my wedding day" — we can sense the son's warm-hearted regards for his father. He holds the hand of his father, the uncouth hand of a laborer which he used to disdain. And he reminisces of his days gone by. His reminiscence goes back past the period when he

rebelled against him, driving and racing wildly every night, all the way to the days when he deemed highly of his father, almost as a hero:

Well so much has happened to me that I don't understand
All I can think of is being five years old following you at the beach
Tracing your footprints in the sand
Trying to walk like a man

His father looked an impeccable hero in the eyes of a five-year old. The son was young and so was his father. And "the Dream" seemed to be within their reach. But gradually the father got entrapped in the routine of daily life, which was "the working, the working, just the working life."¹¹ And the son began to spurn the father, though deep inside he felt guilty for doing so.

But the path that the father had walked on was also the path the son had to tread. He says:

Well now the years have gone and I've grown from that seed you've
sown
But I didn't think there'd be so many steps I'd have to learn on my
own

Here, the son and the father are reunited, reconciled forgiving each other.

Now I'll do what I can
I'll walk like a man

And I'll keep walking

What the last three lines of this song seem to suggest is that he achieved independence not by denying and leaving his father but by reconciling with him.

In America which was founded by the people who resisted and denied the authority, and in America where one could become more "American" by denying his parents, the theme of "reconciliation with father" has been prevalent for the past decade at least in the area of popular culture, which may show that some of the basic values of the American society are changing. Maybe America is getting old, or maybe it is getting more mature and, unlike the 60s when confrontations were rampant, America now seems to be looking for reconciliation and harmony, which can be seen in the words of Bill Clinton after his re-election asking the Republicans for the bipartisan cooperation.

4

The songs included in *The Ghost of Tom Joad* all depict tragic lives of people with various backgrounds — the homeless, ex-convicts, illegal aliens, refugees, jobless Vietnam War veterans, clandestine drug dealers to name a few. It is easy to conclude after listening to the songs in this album that Bruce Springsteen has lost all hope for the future. But careful listening reveals that he has slipped a bit of hope like a seed into the song called "Galvelston Bay."

Le Bin Son was a South Vietnamese soldier who fought along with the American soldiers against North Vietnam. After Saigon fell in 1975 he

immigrated with his family to "the promised land." After settling in a small town in Texas, he worked hard as a machinist saving enough money to buy a shrimp boat. And together with his cousin he harvested Galveston Bay. But Billy Sutter, a Vietnam War veteran, had been harvesting shrimps, too.

With the number of refugees from Vietnam increasing there was talk around town of "America for Americans." One humid night Le's boat was set fire on and burnt down. In his fury Le shot two men to death. He was brought to trial. The judge acquitted him in self-defence but as he came down the steps of the courthouse, Billy was waiting and threatened that he would kill him. And:

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

America, where people of different races and backgrounds have to live together, may be said to be taking the future condition of mankind in advance. For the sake of coexistence the bigotry that "America for Americans" must be overcome. Wasn't America the country which was founded by immigrants to begin with? Wasn't it the country which was created by the people who crossed the borders believing that somewhere across the border "love and fortune will be mine"?

Tonight we'll sing the songs
I'll dream of you my corazon
And tomorrow my heart will be strong

And may the saints' blessing and grace
Carry me safely into your arms
There across the border

For what are we
without hope in our hearts
That someday we'll drink from God's blessed waters

And eat the fruit from the vine
I know love and fortune will be mine
Somewhere across the border¹²

Coexistence with the people with different backgrounds is a crucial problem not only for America but for the rest of the world. If we reject or kill each other just because we are different, the prospects for the

future of mankind will be dismal.

Robbie Robertson says, "The songs Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie wrote celebrate the American spirit while denouncing greed, racism, and abuses of power. They are the first singer-songwriters that gave American music conscience."¹² When we listen to the songs in *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, we know that Bruce Springsteen inherited the finest part of these two great predecessors. *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, though it may not be commercially successful, will eventually be appraised as one of the greatest works of Bruce Springsteen.

FOOTNOTES

1. *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, SRCS7891
2. *Born to Run*, Columbia PC33796, 1975
3. *Born in the U.S.A.*, Columbia QC38653, 1984
4. "No Surrender" in *Born in the U.S.A.*
5. Pete Seeger, *THE INCOMPLEAT FOLKSINGER*, (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1993), p.58
6. "California's Illicit Farm Belt Export," by Mark Arax and Tom Gordon, *The Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1995
7. *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, Columbia JC35318, 1978
8. *The River*, SRCS7858-9
9. *Nebraska*, Columbia QC38358, 1982
10. *Tunnel of Love*, Columbia OC40999, 1987
11. "Factory" in *The Darkness on the Edge of Town*
12. *A VISION SHARED: A TRIBUTE TO WOODY GUTHRIE AND LEADBELLY*, FOLKWAYS, CBS/SONY RECORDS 42ZP 114