POWER, POETICS AND THE POPULAR: AMERICAN REACTIONS TO 9/11 AND THE DISCOURSE OF REDEMPTIONISM

Some are said
to be holy but
there is a bit of
confusion about
the qualifications
of the judges.

Robert Hunter, Idiot's Delight

On September 11, 2001, a well-organized group of terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners and managed to crash three of them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and into the Pentagon in Washington, DC. Whatever this unprecedented attack will turn out to have effected in addition to the suffering of those who died in the rubble and those who were left behind, it was read first and foremost as an attack on the American way of life and on the position of the United States in an increasingly globalized world. Accordingly, the innocence and idealism or, as some would have it, the complacency of America’s national identity have been severely affected by the highly symbolic destruction of two highly symbolic targets, a destruction which could be witnessed on innumerable TV screens all over the world.1 What is more, the Islamist affiliations and motivations of the terrorists2 made the prominent religious com-

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2 For a rather shocking first-hand source from this context see the “Final Instructions to the Hijackers of September 11, Found in the Luggage of Mohamed Atta and Two Other Copies” as printed and discussed in Bruce Lincoln, Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) 1–18 (discussion), 93–98 (text), 109–113 (notes).
ponent of America's national identity stand out in even sharper relief, a component which seems at present to enjoy an astonishing resurgence that is, however, accompanied by symptoms of crisis. In what follows I will focus on this persistent but, as recent research has emphasized, at times rather disruptive dimension of the ongoing discursive Negotiations of America's National Identity. Taking my cue from the sociologist Will Herberg's observation in the 1950s that "American religiosity is that of a society in an acute stage of secularization" and from recent research into the "modernism of Puritan thought and its legacy", I will analyze political, poctical and popular reactions to the events of September 11, 2001 against the backdrop of the mixture of religion and politics that has been the hallmark of the dis-

3 Cf. the organisation of Roland Hagenbüchle et al. (eds.), Negotiations of America's National Identity. 2 Vols (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2000) into six parts, the first of which is called "The Religious Framework", followed by "The Political Edifice".


In this essay, I can only offer the outline of a larger project which will combine a historically far-reaching “archaeology” of the discourse of redemptionism (in the Foucauldian sense of an analysis of the “archive” of things said or rather written in this respect) with a historically embedded functional view based on Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory of modernity, i.e. a view focused on the various communicative social contexts in which specific “texts” can be located and on the historical emergence of these contexts within the evolution of modern society and culture. The affinities and occasional incompatibilities of Foucault’s historical discourse analysis and Luhmann’s sociological systems theory have been discussed occasionally in Germany throughout the 1990s and the most recent assessments are fairly enthusiastic about the potential of these approaches for a mutual illumination of their respective blind spots. In addition to these theoretical concerns, however, the project outlined in this paper could provide an occasion for a systematic combination of both theories in a descriptive framework based on the hypothesis that an “archive” of redemptionism cuts across various communicative spheres which provide different modes of realization. While such an “archive” of redemptionism hands down building blocks from a pre-modern tradition of Christian religious semantics and can thus be described as one of the most important re-traditionalizing impulses accompanying the emergence of cultural modernity, the communicative actualization of these semantic building blocks can only take place in the ever-evolving contexts of modern communication which are described by Niklas Luhmann as functionally differentiated social systems such as, for example, economy, science, law, art, politics, religion, and education. In and between these changing contexts with their various modernizing impulses, the notion of redemption combines both personal and collective dimensions of being and can thus serve as one of the most effective mediators between subjective experience and social processes. Short-circuiting the public and the private domains of modern culture as well as its re-traditionalizing and modernizing impulses in a semantic disposition that is predicated on a re-integrative vision or version of the future, the discourse of redemptionism as described from this doubled theoretical perspective could turn out to be a prime example of the workings of cultural memory in both its material and functional dimensions. What is more, its orientation towards the future empha-

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sizes the forward-directed orientation that cultural memory assumes when it is described from a functional systems-theoretical perspective in which historical semantics are drawn upon to facilitate the continuity of communication, and this re-orientation of the concept of memory towards the present or even the furtive chimes in with recent findings in memory research which insist that

[...] from a strictly biological point of view, the term memory is a misnomer. Brains are evolved not for retrospection and contemplation but for intention and anticipation – for looking forwards rather than backwards, outwards rather than inwards, for being selective rather than merely retentive.22

If this is the case, then the following preliminary case studies of examples from the spheres of politics, poetry and popular culture might serve to illustrate how, aesthetic and political differences notwithstanding, the discourse of redemptionism marks a fundamental communicative pattern in modern or even “postmodern” culture, a pattern which is particularly attractive and effective in times of crisis. Before I turn to these examples, however, a few words on the historical genealogy of redemptionism and on its basic semantic ingredients should be added.

The term redemptionism figures prominently in a recent piece in the Times Literary Supplement which states unequivocally that for the emergence of American national identity and policy “no theme was more important than redemptionism” and that in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks “[t]he United States is back in the redemption business.”23 In its broad sense the term covers both the religious and the political dimensions of America’s “civil religion.”24 In a narrower religious sense it covers the indi-


vidualistic and private dimensions of religious experience under modern conditions25 as well as longstanding theological traditions such as the providential theme,26 eschatology and apocalyptic thought,27 and millennialism and millenarianism.28 The discourse of redemptionism is the common ground on which these various strands of thought and experience meet and mingle, or rather where they are brought into being in communication and where they can unfold their relevance and impact in the public sphere. Its most important ingredients are

1. a deterministic view of the course of history conceived as a unitary process;
2. the assumption of a cosmic conflict between good and evil;
3. a deep-seated pessimism about the present and a belief in a final cataclysmic battle between the forces of good and evil;
4. a sense of the imminent end of time;
5. the hope for a millennial kingdom on earth, often in combination with the notion of a Second Coming of a Messiah; and 6. the expectation of life after death, including the belief in the Last Judgement.29

Bernd Engler, Joerg O. Fichte and Oliver Scheiding distinguish the more radical millenarianism which “took root in medieval and post-Reformation Europe” and is based on “the ardent expectation of a thousand year reign of peace after the apocalyptic cataclysm”30 from its more moderate, gradualist and preparationist counterpart


29 Bernd Engler, Joerg O. Fichte, and Oliver Scheiding, “Transformations of Millenial Thought in America, 1630–1860”, Engler et al. (eds.) 2002, 9–37, 10 (FN 1).

30 Engler/Fichte/Scheiding 2002, 13 (FN 8, my emphasis).
millennium which “developed in the non-millennial groups of religious non-conformists in the 18th-century Europe and gained firm ground in the 20th-century Europe and gained firm ground in the collective, enduring transformation of the human condition within history.” It is against the backdrop of these “obscures the Western concept,” that the following remarks are very preliminary, namely, trace the presence of a discourse of redemptionism in various religious contexts. The first of these will be policies.

From the founding of the United States onwards, the presidential rhetoric has been strongly influenced by that characteristic of the American civil religion. George W. Bush’s rhetorical crisis management of the Middle East and the War on Terror relies on the concepts of globalism, and preparation for war. The President’s speech at the University of Virginia (12, 2002) shows his explicit concern for the preservation of democracy and the maintenance of political stability.


Power

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the reference to the imminent "crusade" on September 16) to a careful acknowledgement of religious diversity and an insistence that "We don’t see this as a war of religion, in any way, shape or form." Calling on the faithful of all backgrounds for their support in the fight against terrorism becomes a staple of Bush’s rhetoric from September 15 onwards, and he visits the Islamic Center of Washington DC with the widely televised "soundbite"-message that "Islam is peace" on September 17 and extends greetings to the Jewish community on the occasion of Rosh Hashanah on that same day. On the other hand, however, this development, which, with its frequent invocations of freedom and democracy, would seem to indicate an alignment with tolerant, secularizing tendencies, is counterbalanced by the identification of terrorism and evil that is introduced by Bush in the same speech on September 12 in which he introduced the redenomination of the terrorist attacks as acts of war: "America is united. The freedom-loving nations of the world stand by our side," he states at the end of his "Remarks [...] in Photo Opportunity with the National Security Team", and adds notoriously: "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail."

From this point onwards references to the evil of the world, which has to be routed and extinguished, punctuate the president’s messages. It is this rhetorical construction of "a cosmic conflict between good and evil" which aligns his rhetoric with basic elements of the discourse of redemptionism and thus sacralizes the political in a typically American way. It also reveals "a deterministic view of the course of history conceived as a unitary process" which is the basis of American exceptionalism. This is most explicit in the president’s "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People" on September 20, which includes the following flourishes of America’s universal claim for worldwide power:

42 Cf. note 37.
43 Cf. the list of basic features of redemptionism quoted above.
tradition that is based on the first principle of freedom and a strict separation of church and state. These core ingredients of the firm link between modernization and secularization, however, induced a complementary process of de-secularization in turn, and this sacralizing impulse soon began to encroach upon public discourse from its firm location in the private sphere. Whether the recent resurgence of fundamentalist Christian doctrine indicates a breakthrough for these de-secularizing tendencies or marks just a phase in an ongoing negotiation remains to be seen, but it is clear that it strengthens the discourse of redemptionism as a resource for rhetoric in the public and secular sphere of wielding political power by means of communication, with all the reassuring and uncomfortable implications this entails for Americans on the one hand and non-Americans on the other. Politically, the functional focus is on consolidating present power with the promise of a better world in the future, and while there are always those who are opposed to present power structures there will not be many who are opposed to a better world. It is this common ground of hope which makes the discourse of redemptionism so effective and attractive, and the next string of examples will show how even those who are rejecting George W. Bush's politics on principle succumb to this lure.

Poetics

"Poets," a current saying goes, "Poets are like harmonica players. Terrific, but not much use in them." This assessment acknowledges the traditional exalted status of the poet and his or her artistic achievements, but at the same time it manages to tone down these aspirations by suggesting that poetry is what might be called a "generic" activity of limited reach, somewhat like playing the blues, but even less commercially viable. It seems that poetry has become a producer's art with not much of an audience left, so much so that even an established poet with a worldwide reputation like Robert Creeley writes: "If I am any instance, American poets will go to their respective graves still wondering just what they are doing, and why they were doing it, and, if for anyone, for whom." The anxious question which Creeley locates at the heart of his own and of many a contemporary poet's poetic practice - "Is that a real poem or did you just make it up yourself?" - is certainly shared by many readers of contemporary poetry. But even if the Romanticism-into-modernism legacy of free verse has frequently turned from "the exciting license it once was" into an "excuse to produce untidy, flat-footed poems", poetry still had enough of its traditional cultural prestige to play a significant role in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, when it seemed, for a brief moment, a suitable "means wherewith to find a common and heartfelt ground for sorrow," as Robert Creeley puts it.

As these words indicate, poetry is, when it comes to the crunch and in spite of all modernist innovations, still viewed in basically Romantic terms these days, i.e. as a medium for recording and constructing personal experience on the one hand and for expressing and sharing it on the other. So it does not come as a surprise that the various prefatory texts in the most comprehensive anthology of poems on 9/11, entitled An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind, reinforces these assumptions. The "Intro-

48 Creeley 2003, 28.
49 Creeley 2003, 28.
51 Cf. Creeley 2003, 27: "If the sad events of September 11, 2001, provoked a remarkable use of poems as a means wherewith to find a common and heartfelt ground for sorrow, it passed quickly as the country regained its equilibrium, turned to the conduct of an aggressive war, and one has to recognize, went back to making money".
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duction” by the editor Allen Cohen, for example, states programatically that the anthology represents a “different historical record of these monumental events […] [a] record based on the perceptions and feelings that can be uniquely mirrored in the poem,” and he goes on to state that “ninety percent [of the poems sent in] were good poems [because] [t]hey expressed deep emotions and profound thoughts with the severe attention to details that makes poems revelatory.”53 The “Preface” by co-editor Clive Matson hits the same groove when he views the anthology as “a forum for those voices [within us]” which are most effectively expressed by poets and goes on to state that in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks people attended poetry readings in droves because they felt the need “to be in the presence of poets, who were expected to approach the event in a real fashion, even if this meant expressing doubt and confusion,” because after all “contradictions and […] dissent are not unpatriotic, they’re real.”54 And the “Foreword” by Michael Parenti finally pits the “people in the White House” against “us”, the people, claiming in good Marxist fashion that

[when] our leaders continue to serve the special interests of those who control the land, labor, capital, natural resources, and markets of this and almost all other nations, when they continue to violate the humanity of everyone else at home and abroad, then it is time to raise our voices against the subterfuge, the hidden agendas, and the heartless imperatives of empire. And then it is time to turn to the poets.55

Poetry, it appears, is an intensely private medium that is expected to work as a kind of “true” and “authentic” corrective in an alienated and corrupt public sphere, and on a more theoretical note this understanding of poetry chimes in with the first two functions that Hubert Zapf identifies in his “Notes Towards a Functional Theory of Imaginative Texts”, i.e. the function of a cultural-critical metadiscourse on the one hand and the function of an imaginative counter-discourse on the other.56

It is striking, however, that in spite of its oppositional stance this kind of wishful thinking shows a great affinity with what I earlier called the discourse of redemptionism, albeit on a, except for slightly old-fashioned Marxist aspirations like Michael Parenti’s, more moderate and private scale. Accordingly, the “[i]ndependent and dissenting views” of the poets, who, incidentally, come from all walks of American literary life, from the mere amateur to the established professional, these views are to foster “a deepening of perception, of renewed seriousness about the human predicament and about the necessity to evolve into our full humanity,” as Allen Cohen puts it in his introduction, adding with explicit reference to Shelley’s “unacknowledged legislators of the world” that “the poets are singing and they are seeing a new world.”57 And in the spirit of this invocation of the prophetic and visionary tradition of Western poetry the anthology at large “is dedicated to all those who have given their lives in the wars that have held humanity hostage to the recurring nightmare of history and to those dreamers who can see and manifest a new world of peace and justice for all beings.”58 Again on a more theoretical note it is possible to relate these effusions to Hubert Zapf’s more sober third function of imaginative texts, i.e. the function of a reintegrative inter-discourse which complements the predominantly reflexive dimensions of the first two functions with a potentially constructive dimension, and it is clear that the “archive” of redemptionism figures prominently with regard to this “inter-discursive reintegration” of (post-)modern culture.59

57 Cohen 2003, i/iii.
58 Italics in original dedication.
However, as one might expect after the remarks on the current state of poetry quoted at the beginning of this section, the poems themselves fall well short of these aspirations. Most of them are in very loose free verse, and they either record personal experiences from that fatal day or project themselves into the minds and bodies of the victims of 9/11. Many are openly critical of the Bush administration and of all kinds of official or mainstream discourse, and they emphatically pit private perspectives against the official version(s) of the catastrophic events. And nearly all of the poems share a vague commitment to hope in the face of disillusionment, some even going so far as to mention Armageddon or the apocalypse, either directly or as a concept that gained prominence in the context of 9/11. On the whole, however, this kind of approach yields lots of comparatively shallow poetological self-inspection and only occasional flashes of insight such as the poignant question “What if the everyday is even more sacred now?” in Leza Lowitz’s subdued but defiant poem “Even Now”, or Eugene Ruggles’s injunction “Love your enemy, it will wreck his reputation...” or Clive Matson’s mordant exclamation “How wonderful! Finally we live in the same/fear we create”.

This kind of raisin picking seems to me justified in the absence of a sustained engagement with matters of form. Actually, the most formally disciplined poem is Mark Kuhar’s “10:45 A.M. SEPT. 11/WTC.”:

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However, one could point to a couple of poems by established poets which are highly focused on the metaphorical level. The first of these is the opening poem of the anthology, Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s “History of the Airplane”, which implies the discourse of redemptionism in its opening lines:

And the Wright brothers said they thought they had invented something that could make peace on earth (if the wrong brothers didn’t get hold of it) [...] (ll.1–3)

The poem then follows its chosen image through history right into the twin towers when

[... in a blinding flash America became a part of the scorched earth of the world
And a wind of ashes blows across the land
And for one long moment in eternity
There is chaos and despair
And buried loves and voices
Cries and whispers
Fill the air
Everywhere. (ll. 28–36)

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64 Cohen/Matson (eds.) 2002, 68.
65 Cohen/Matson (eds.) 2002, 15–16.
In these final lines the poem suggests in an outright redemptionist fashion that new “loves and voices” will emerge from the apocalyptic rubble, and it is quite striking that for the time being redemption is presented as exactly the kind of poetry featured in the anthology, i.e. a poetry of lost, buried and repressed voices that is, for once, even formally enabled by the anachronistic feature of rhyme (“despair – air – everywhere”).

A similar reflexive turn can be observed in Robert Pinsky’s “not quite blank verse” meditation “Newspaper”, which reflects upon the relationship between the media and reality. The poem opens with the following short-circuiting of medially and reality:

They manufacture newsprint with a grain,
So you can tear straight down a vertical column.
But if you try to tear it crosswise, it rips
Out of control, in jagged scallops and slashes,
Serrated chaos like the blocks of smoking ruins. (ll. 1–5)

At its end the poem recapitulates its title in the metaphor “the skin of days” (l. 45) after it has linked its theme to the discourse of redemptionism in an oblique way about half way through:

The craving for some redemption is like a thirst.
It’s in us as we open the morning paper:
Fresh, fallible, plausible. (ll. 18–20)

As this indicates, the discourse of redemptionism lurks everywhere in everyday life, but from the poet’s point of view writing is the best way of catering for these needs because, as Pinsky’s poem puts it, “Words broadcast on the air don’t seem as solid” (l.34). This, incidentally, is the point where poetry turns upon itself in order to claim its redeeming capacities in a strange mixture of modesty and megalomania. And this brings me to my third and final example.

**The Popular**

Who could be better suited as an example of “The Popular” than “The Boss” himself, Bruce Springsteen, the man who used to be rock ’n’ roll’s future and who, according to the most recent le-

gend, was redeemed from years of writer’s block by an ordinary guy drawing up in his car right next to him in the aftermath of 9/11 uttering the three words “We need you!”?67 To this injunction everyman’s hero responded by writing and recording the album *The Rising*, which has, on the whole, been received warmly as a moving and appropriate engagement with the September 11 attacks.68

So what is *The Rising*?69 It is perhaps best characterized as a slightly old-fashioned mainstream rock album that profits from Springsteen’s reputation as an authentic and honest performer and character. Some of the songs were actually written before 9/11, and among these is, astonishingly, the album’s closing track, a gospel-tinged ballad prophetically entitled “My City of Ruins”, a song that laments the absence of any kind of faith in inner city landscapes and exhorts the listeners to “Come on, rise up!” in a kind of rebuilding project of everyday activity “with these hands.” Of the remaining fourteen songs, six make no direct reference to 9/11 and may well have been written before the event, but it is striking that all are predicated on future innerworldly experiences of redemption or imminent doom, as even the titles indicate: “Waitin’ on a Sunny Day”, “Countin’ on a Miracle”, “Let’s Be Friends”,

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67 The quip about rock ’n’ roll’s future goes back to the critic John Landau who “discovered” Springsteen in 1974 and kick-started his career with the much-quoted sentence “I saw rock ’n’ roll’s future, and its name is Bruce Springsteen”. The “We need you!”-legend can be found, for example, in the *Rolling Stone*-Special “It’s Boss Time”, *Rolling Stone* (German ed.) 3 (2003): 51–66, 64.


69 All lyrics are quoted from the CD-booklet of Bruce Springsteen, *The Rising* (Columbia Records, 2002).
“Further On (Up the Road)”, “The Fuse”, and “(Meet Me at) Mary’s Place”. Musically, on the other hand, the songs are rather backward looking, evoking earlier genres such as 1950s rock ’n’ roll (“Waitin’”), 1980s stadium rock (“Countin’”), “The Fuse”), Motown (“Let’s”), blues/’n’/b/hard rock (“Further”), Sam Cooke (“Mary’s Place”). The 9/11–theme is, however, sounded right from the beginning of the record. The opener “Lonesome Day” moves obliquely from the comparative triviality of love lost in verse 1 to the impact of the September 11 attacks in verse 2:

Hell’s brewin’, dark sun’s on the rise
This storm will blow through by and by
House is on fire, vipers in the grass
A little revenge and this too shall pass

The lyrics end, however, with a plea for restraint and a statement of confidence based on a direct reference to the discourse of redemptionism:

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
Let kingdom come, I’m gonna find my way
Through this lonesome day

And the song’s signature, introduced as a bridge in the middle and then picked up again as a potentially open-ended coda, is the gospel-like repetition of the phrase “It’s alright” which sets the scene for the overall consolatory tone of the album and foreshadows the closing “Come on, rise up!”.

Within this framework many of the 9/11–songs interspersed with the “neutral” songs mentioned earlier sound a smoother, introspective tone on acoustic instruments, assuming either the perspective of those confronted with the loss of a loved one as in “Into the Fire”, “Empty Sky” and “You’re Missing”, or projecting themselves into the minds of those who were directly confronted with the horror such as the returning firefighter in “Nothing Man”. A stand-out track, which, however, smacks a little too strongly of an obvious PC-gesture, is “Worlds Apart”, the story of two lovers faced with seemingly unbridgeable cultural frontiers presented in a typical “world music”–setting drawing on quauwuwi, “the intense, God-conjuring, life-affirming vocal music of the mystical Sufi sect of Islam”70 as performed on the recording by Asif Ali Khan & Group.

All in all, then, tracks 1 to 12 on the album intermingle reflections on 9/11 with the consolations of classic rock music, and at least one critic points obliquely to the apparent datedness of Springsteen’s mode of communication by closing his review with the observation that “he’s still trying to cross that bridge – the one connecting people in commonality and shared experience – and at this point no one does it better.”71 It is clear that this combination introduces a sense of community and expectation that can easily draw on some stock elements of the discourse of redemptionism in its specifically American variety. Accordingly, The Rising seems at times to be in danger of suffering the same fate as Springsteen’s widely misunderstood 1984 song “Born in the USA”, “a troubled examination of Vietnam’s after effects [that] was misconstrued by fans, detractors and even Ronald Reagan as gung-ho chest-beating” because of its heroic musical setting which was presumably intended to be read as irony.72 On the album The Rising this tendency comes to a head in the anthemic title track which gathers Springsteen’s audience in a huge sing-a-long chorus just like “Born in the USA” did 19 years ago. The song “The Rising”, however, in a reflexive turn similar to the poetic examples quoted earlier, self-consciously limits its promise of redemption to the typical Springsteen concert situation: “Come on up for the rising tonight”. It is tempting to view this reflexive turn as a characteristic marker of the aesthetic under modern conditions, and the remaining tracks of the album illustrate this delimited reach of redemptionist prom-

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70 Loder 2002.
71 Pyndus 2002.
72 Petridis 2002. Springsteen was horrified by this and has played a sparse acoustic arrangement ever since. Cf. his comments in Bruce Springsteen, Songs (London: Virgin, 1998) 163–169 and Petridis’s biting retrospective comment: “If you set your troubled examination of Vietnam’s after-effects to the sort of fanfare last heard when an all-conquering Caesar returned to Rome, bellow it in a voice that suggests you are about to leap offstage and punch a communist, then package it in a sleeve featuring the Stars and Stripes and a pair of Levi’s, it’s no good gettinguffy when people seize the wrong end of the stick”.
ises in the aesthetic sphere. The penultimate song on the album is the pensive “Paradise”, which in a risky move pits the mind of a suicide bomber contemplating his own arrival in paradise in verse 1 against the mind of an American mourning a loved one and envisioning a reunion in verse 2. Verse 1 runs as follows:

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
I hold my breath and close my eyes
And I wait for paradise
And I wait for paradise

Verse 2, on the other hand, introduces an American perspective which may well be linked to the loss of a loved one in the 9/11-attacks:

The Virginia hills have gone to brown
Another day, another sun goin’ down
I visit you in another dream
I visit you in another dream
I reach and feel your hair
Your smell lingers in the air
I brush your cheek with my fingertips
I taste the void upon your lips
And I wait for paradise
And I wait for paradise

In an extension of the voice of verse 2 the third verse then follows these redemptionist fantasies through with the singer imagining arrival in paradise as a submergence in water while crossing a river on his way to the other side:

I search for you on the other side
Where the river runs clean and wide
Up to my heart the waters rise
Up to my heart the waters rise
I sink ’neath the water cool and clear
Drifting down I disappear
I see you on the other side
I search for the peace in your eyes
But they’re as empty as paradise
They’re as empty as paradise

Paradise, the song suggests at this point, is completely empty, a void, and it is certainly not mere chance that its melody is strongly reminiscent of Paul Simon’s “The Sound of Silence”. What remains is the here and now, and the song ends with the words

I break above the waves
I feel the sun upon my face

After this return to this world, the final song, “My City of Ruins”, entreats the audience to join what I called earlier a rebuilding project of everyday activity “with these hands”, and it is in the context of this ongoing struggle for immanent redemption (which includes the “esthetic” activities of writing and performing) that the singer prays to the Lord for the strength and the faith and the love.

This kind of double-coding, which secularizes the sacred and sacralizes the secular, is, as I hope to have shown with the range of my topical examples, a typically American phenomenon which makes the discourse of redemptionism a pervasive rhetorical and thematic resource in American culture.73 While many of its historical manifestations have been thoroughly studied, an integrative functional view which pays particular attention to the various communicative contexts in which this resource is drawn upon is still pending, and the approach outlined in this essay could be a first step in this direction.74

Tübingen

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