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Moving Truth: Affect and Authenticity in Country Musicals

I

In a famous essay, William James describes an aesthetic blindness produced by the bias of our socially constructed taste. Driving through the North Carolina mountains to appreciate their natural beauty, he was shocked by the sight of crude farming homesteads that blotched the sublime mountain green like a "hideous ... ulcer." What seemed an intrusive eyesore, James later learned, was fondly viewed by its dwellers as an attractive haven of comforting cultivation, a stirring symbol of hard-won survival in a wild landscape they struggled to endure, not simply visit for a brief taste of nature before returning to sophisticated Boston life.¹

If James was blind to the aesthetic charms of these hillbilly homes, today's philosophers remain deaf to the appeal of the popular music with which such mountain homes have always been associated. Though country music has blossomed into America's most popular sound, it remains, among intellectuals, the most scorned and unexamined musical genre.² If studies repeatedly show that the higher a person is educated, the less likely she will be a country music fan, then country hits like Aaron Tippin's "Working Man's Ph.D." and John Conlee's "Common Man" strengthen this trend by blasting academics for "not pullin' their weight" and by charging that all "highbrow people lose their sanity."³

Because its *locus geni* is neither the cosmopolitan city nor the erudite campus but down-home rural America, because its values are far more traditional than transgressive, country music has none of rock's radical chic. Nor does

it sport the sort of modish multicultural cachet that attracts progressive intellectuals to music like jazz, rhythm and blues, rap, reggae, or techno. Indeed, country's old links to white trash and redneck racial prejudice might even threaten to demean any thinker who gave it any sympathetic attention. Nonetheless, we intellectuals *can* escape the Jamesian blindness and enjoy country music, sharing to some extent the appreciative pleasures of its lowbrow target audience, just as to some extent we share their concerns and life-experience.

This essay seeks to explain country music's enormous appeal, but also to appreciate the genre in intellectual terms. Since country's popularity is overdetermined by a complex cluster of reasons too elaborate to explicate in full, I shall concentrate on those reasons that are most philosophically interesting and involve intriguing doctrines about human nature, emotion, belief, and authenticity—some of them advocated by William James himself. These philosophical issues become especially clear in the film genre generated by country's great commercial success. I call this genre "the country musical," distinguishing it from the traditional "singing cowboy film" made famous by Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Tex Ritter.⁴ Before probing its philosophical import as revealed in its new musicals, we should begin by noting the socio-cultural factors that greatly contribute to country music's popularity, for the philosophy of any cultural form (including philosophy itself) is unwise to ignore the socio-cultural space that shapes the production and use of its products.

II

One crucial factor in the increasing popularity of country music is the demographic aging of America. Partly through its affirmation of traditional values, country music has always appealed to an older audience than rock and rap. While the latter pop genres focus on the teens and early twenties, country music's audience clusters between the ages of mid-twenties to late-forties. As the children of the postwar baby-boom moved into this age range, country music evolved from an eccentric, minor musical genre into a mainstream popular force. Song lyrics sometimes recount how rock radicals of the sixties evolved, by the nineties, into country fans advocating mainstream America and family values. But the correlation of country music's growth with the aging of the baby-boomers is perhaps more convincingly told in statistics. In 1961 there were only eighty-one full-time country music stations in the entire USA, but in 1974 the number had reached about a thousand, by 1992 it was rocketing over 2,200, by 1994 almost 2,400, and at the end of 1996 still climbing to 2,600.⁵

A second factor in country's new popularity is America's increased preoccupation with ethnic identity and multiculturalism. As traditional class identities and community identities lose their power to provide the individual an adequate social definition, there is a greater need to construct one's identity through cultural affiliation. Music has long been extremely significant in forming such cultural identity. But if the broad concept of American culture is too vague and bland to provide an attractively thick sense of cultural identity, then so is the notion of American music. As today's most exciting options for distinctive cultural definition are the emancipatory consciousness-raising movements of minority ethnicities (along with feminism and gay culture), so ethnicity now offers perhaps the most absorbing musical cultures (e.g., rap, reggae, salsa) that go beyond mere music by providing a comprehensive lifestyle for self-fashioning. But however attractive such musical cultures may be for white Americans, our racially divided society denies whites a trouble-free identification with nonwhite culture. Beset by the dialectic of reciprocal exclusion, where excluded minorities exercise their own exclusionary power, such attempts

at transcultural affiliation are often doubly rejected: they are as unsavory to the courted minority culture (who fear the plunder of their hard-won heritage) as to mainstream white society (who fear the loss of their cultural hegemony).

Where, then, can one find a specifically white American ethnicity expressed in a distinctive, ethnic popular music? Country music is the obvious answer.⁶ Like rap and reggae, it provides a complete cultural style replete with distinctive dance, fashion, food, and behavioral ethos. Here whiteness can mean more than a mere pale background of conformity that highlights nonwhite ethnicity. Indeed, country culture distinguishes itself by its defiance of the bland, corporate, white-collar establishment—not only by its cowboy fashion and down-home, twangy speech, but in its oppositional attitude. By invoking the cowboy image of rebelliously rugged individualism while also recalling its reputed roots in the South (land of the the Civil War Rebels), country music can project an image that is traditional, white, and all-American, yet also attractively distinctive and not blandly conformist. Thus, in his hit "Against the Grain," Garth Brooks circumvents his image as a country-mainstream crossover by claiming the nonconformist heroism of going "against the grain" to "sing a different song" and "buck the system"—portraying this nonconformism as being true to the "mav'rick" tradition of classic cowboy hero "John Wayne" and to Brooks's own "rebel blood."⁷

Though defiant of the white corporate establishment and intellectual elite, country music (partly through its traditional ties to working-class white culture) favors whiteness per se. It thus can recruit American whites from all different ethnic backgrounds, rallying them around a distinctive white image, whose cultural roots they may not have inherited but which they can adopt without the contradiction of color. Even an actor of salient Italian ethnicity like John Travolta can suddenly don honkytonk cowboy gear and be unproblematically accepted as the deep-rooted white Texan hero Bud Davis of *Urban Cowboy* (1980). For the millions of lower- and middle-class white Americans seeking a distinctive identity that simultaneously enables them to *stand out* from the nondescript blandness of white American mainstream culture while still *fitting in* as true to its traditions, country must be the music of choice.

A third factor fueling country's rocketing popularity is the dearth of competitive alternatives in the 1990s musical field. Rock 'n' roll's long swell of creative energy has largely waned, and the most exciting popular new genres developing out of its transgressive tradition—rap, techno, and heavy metal—are very unappealing to the vast majority of Americans. Their sound is too fiercely young, loud, and strident for most adult ears; their verbal message is not only hard to grasp over the blaring music but is also (in the words of *New York Times* culture critic Peter Applebome) “either inscrutable or off-putting” to white Americans over twenty, projecting values and lifestyles that they simply cannot share.⁸ Country's greatest new star, Garth Brooks, exemplifies this trend. Originally a hard rock fan and aspiring performer, he confessed that he moved to country partly by recognizing that he “couldn't stand that [rock] lifestyle longer than three minutes.”⁹

Always ready to profit by incorporating popular musical trends and crossover artists (even the Australian pop singer Olivia Newton-John),¹⁰ country could absorb the genres of light commercial pop and rock and folk music. Thus, with the rest of the pop field polarized and dominated by the more radical rap and heavy metal styles, country has been able to capture the largest demographic niche. Moreover, by skillfully deploying the newer genre of music videos to recruit attractive young performers as potential teenage hearthrobs (who seem far more “wholesome” and socially acceptable than those of rap or heavy metal), country has recently succeeded in also capturing a far greater teen and young-adult audience.¹¹

For most Americans, not only are country music's words easy to understand, but its truths are easy to believe, and its feelings easy to share and accept as real. More philosophically interesting, however, is that it is easy to accept the truths and share the feelings *because* one gets the words, while one believes the words because one gets the feelings. This reinforcing dialectic of affect, credence, and verbal narrative constitutes, I shall argue, the philosophical core of country music's aura of authenticity and its ability to sustain this appealing image of down-home purity that, paradoxically, clearly flouts and distorts the hard empirical facts of its real history. To clarify the detailed workings of this

persuasive dialectic, I now consider its concrete deployment in the narratives of country musicals, concentrating primarily on *Pure Country* (1992) but concluding with a brief comparative analysis of *Honeysuckle Rose* (1980).

III

As its title declares, *Pure Country* is devoted to affirming the enduring power of country music's authenticity and purity. Though partly a reply to highbrow critiques of country's commercialist fraudulence (paradigmatically in Robert Altman's biting satire *Nashville*, but also in Daryl Duke's earlier and more nuanced *Payday*), *Pure Country* is also a response to real commercializing pressures arising within the genre as a result of its recent mainstream success.

With adroit casting to combine authenticity and box-office appeal, the film stars the clean-cut and boyishly good-looking George Strait. Probably the most wholesome and commercially successful of the so-called neotraditionalist country singers, Strait rose to stardom in the early 1980s and has managed to sustain it and his neotraditionalist image until today.¹² Strait moreover perfectly embodies one of country's prime images of authenticity, the cowboy. In the words of premier country music historian Bill Malone, “Strait is a genuine cowboy who grew up on a ranch near Pearsall, Texas” and only began singing publicly while serving in the Army in the late 1970s.¹³

Urging its title theme of purity from the very outset, even before the pictures begin to move and the dialogue begins, *Pure Country* opens with a series of old-fashioned, orange-tinted stills—suggesting old photographs and glorious morning sunshine. Focusing first on a young boy's hopeful eyes and innocent face, the photos then show him with a guitar, alongside a barefoot boy drummer seated on a rustic porch, followed by other photo images suggesting innocent country childhood: an old “hanging-tire-on-tree” swing, a wood cabin, and a windmill.

Audibly reinforcing these images of traditional purity, the movie's soundtrack (simultaneously released as a George Strait album) begins with a child's voice (that of Strait's son, George Strait Jr.) singing *Pure Country*'s theme song (“Heartland”), which opens and closes both film and album. Confirming the message of purity

and authentic roots in the still uncorrupted heartland of America, the lyrics portray country music as the cultural home where the life and feelings of hard-working Americans find true expression.

When you hear twin fiddles and a steel guitar,
 You're lis'nin' to the sound of the American heart.
 And Opry music on a Saturday night
 Brings a smile to your face and a tear to your eye.
 Sing a song about the heartland,
 The only place I feel at home.
 Sing about the way a good man,
 Works until the daylight's gone.
 Sing the rain on the roof on a summer night,
 Where they still know wrong from right.
 Sing a song about the heartland,
 Sing a song about my life.

As the song moves into its second verse, the adult voice of George Strait takes over. The lyrics still praise country's heartland as a place of pure simplicity (where "you feel mother nature walk along with you/Where simple people livin' side by side/Still wave to their neighbors when they're drivin' by"). But the photo images grow ever farther from the original idyll of childhood innocence: the drummer boy, now sporting a thick moustache and cowboy hat, stands together with the adult George (also with cowboy hat) in front of a pickup truck: first with a sweet grandma type, who is replaced in later stills by a pretty young woman, and amongst what seem to be a small group of rural onlookers. We then see the three young adults, still rather simply dressed, but in performance poses inside a rustic-looking music hall; the nontalking sequence of stills concludes with the image of an up-turned hat filled with dollar bills—a hat passed around in that traditional (not yet slickly commercialized) form of paying entertainers.

Complementing the opening close-up of the boy's face, the camera next focuses (with zoomed enlargement) on the face of the dollar bill, till the eyes of George Washington dissolve. The next thing we see, as the movie suddenly launches into standard cinematic movement and color, are the bright blue eyes of George Strait, shifting worriedly and rapidly, through a thin smoky mist surrounded by a dark background and the din of a screaming audience. The film immediately turns to overview shots of this huge

stadium audience and the spectacular show of multiple moving spotlights and flashing colored strobes. As the camera zooms back and forth from audience to stage, George Strait makes his top-act entry (in a pillar of smoke) as country singing-star Dusty Chandler, wearing a smile of brave resignation, almost like a Christian gladiator entering the brutal arena of a Roman circus.

In tracing how a happy child blessed by Mother Nature's pure light devolves into a frightened adult surrounded by the smoky din and darkness of big-business entertainment, this two-minute opening title sequence already articulates *Pure Country's* motivating theme: the lucrative but dangerous path from innocent authenticity toward commercialized corruption, the ontogeny of the hero Dusty Chandler recapitulating the phylogeny of country music as genre. The movie's whole subsequent plot then argues that country's purity can nonetheless be sustained without sacrificing its commercial success, by returning to the music's alleged authentic roots.

This return to simple roots is symbolized by country star Dusty's flight from his high-tech road tour to make a secret trip back home. In this process of purification, he first sheds his fancy show-business clothes and trendy ponytail and stubble, then receives guidance from his Grandma Ivy, and soon falls in love with a wholesome rodeo cowgirl on whose family ranch Dusty stays to practice cowboy life and skills, unrecognized as a country music star because of his humble manners and unfamiliar clean-cut look.

The cowboy theme is so important that the film devotes two minutes to a ceremonious rodeo opening, where a galloping cowboy dramatically parades Old Glory to the tune of "America the Beautiful." Country's image of proudly authentic Americanism is linked to racial purity, since all the film's musicians, fans, reporters, bartenders, waitresses, etc., are clearly white. The only nonwhite (briefly shown and laughed at) is a pigmy-sized black valet who (with exaggerated breakdance movements) opens limousine doors at the Las Vegas Mirage Hotel, where Dusty makes his climactic return to performance and to the traditionalist "pure country" style.

Country music's identification with old-fashioned, rural, all-American purity could not be

claimed more clearly; and it is also affirmed in other country films (e.g., *Tender Mercies*, *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, *Sweet Dreams*, *Honky Tonk Man*). This pure rustic image is much more than a mere Hollywood convention. Resounding in the music's own lyrics, it is further reinforced by advocates outside the mainstream entertainment industry. Henry Ford, for example, supported early country music's image of old-time authenticity (partly by staging fiddling contests), because he held that "real" American culture "lies outside the cities." A similar quest for a native, "essentially Anglo-Saxon" music led composer, conductor, and music educator Lamar Stringfield to claim (with disturbing racist undertones) that country culture's remote location "has left [its] people in a natural state of human feeling and their music free from minstrelsy."¹⁴

Such traditionalist images of all-American purity are, however, very far from the truth. Though the fiddle was always central to the genre and part of its originating folk culture, the steel guitar also claimed in *Pure Country's* theme song was in fact an importation from Hawaii that did not become a trademark of country music until the 1940s. This allegedly all-American genre was first considered by music's leading trade magazine, *Billboard*, as part of its foreign music coverage, and later grouped with "race" music until finally achieving the label of "American Folk Music."¹⁵ Nor is country's cowboy image authentic. As historian Bill Malone maintains, "the cowboy contributed nothing to American music," but merely provided a romantically attractive (hence commercially effective) image that country music skillfully deployed in order to escape its narrow identification with the negative, far less marketable image of hillbilly culture.¹⁶

Finally, the image of country's all-white and noncommercial origins is pure myth. Malone and other scholars document how it always "borrowed heavily from the black" music culture. The banjo came from Africa, and black blues was such a strong influence on some country songs that they were sometimes falsely catalogued as "race" music. Jimmie Rodgers, called "the father of modern country music," developed his skills playing with black musicians in his Mississippi hometown, and began his professional career "as a blackface entertainer with a

medicine show"; Roy Acuff of Grand Ole Opry fame also began by doing blackface in a touring "physik wagon," and there were blackface acts of the Grand Ole Opry itself. As a twelve-year-old boy, Hank Williams learned guitar and singing techniques from a black street singer called Tee-Tot. Ray Charles cut a country album and also did songs with country star George Jones, while black singer Charley Pride won the Country Music Association's Entertainer of the Year Award in 1971.

As Malone concludes, if country music "was neither pure white nor 'Anglo' in origin or manifestations, neither was it exclusively rural or noncommercial."¹⁷ Most country singers grew up in close contact with cities, and many of country's early classics (e.g., "Lovesick Blues") were actually born in New York's "Tin Pan Alley." From its early links to traveling medicine shows and to vaudeville and blackface minstrelsy, complemented by its close ties to the pop music business of New York, country was never free from commercial motives. But today's country music (with its media hype, mainstream crossover strategies, and advertising uses) has acquired such a strong commercial image that it seems to render the notion of "pure country" a blatant chimera. Yet despite its factual incredibility, this myth of authenticity persists, perpetuated by country performers and fans who both clearly know better. If the above-noted impurities are not common knowledge to the average country listener, surely all must recognize the blatant historical falsity in Barbara Mandrell's song "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool," where she claims country authenticity for having enjoyed "Roy Rogers at the movies when the West was really wild."

IV

Given its obvious impurities, how does country music nonetheless convince its fans of its pure authenticity? What, indeed, are the basic sources for creating credence and for forming our standards of authenticity? These questions reach beyond the specifics of country music toward the deepest philosophical issues of belief and reality. To seek their answer, we return to William James.

Insisting on the essentially affective nature of human animals (a view inherited from both

Hume and Darwin), James argues that in the everyday practical sense in which “we contrast reality with simple *unreality*, and in which one thing is said to have *more* reality than another, and to be more believed, *reality means simply relation to our emotional and active life*. ... *In this sense, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real*; whenever an object so appeals to us that we turn to it, accept it, fill our mind with it, or practically take account of it, so far it is real for us and we believe it. ... *Every exciting thought in the natural man carries credence with it. To conceive with passion is eo ipso to affirm*.”¹⁸

Two central ideas that James expresses here can help explain how country music wins acceptance of its pure authenticity despite recognized evidence to the contrary. The first point is that credence comes through emotion. The second is that reality, and by extension, also authenticity and purity, can be conceived in comparative terms of more or less. Through this logic of relativity, country music can claim an all-American, rustic authenticity despite full recognition of its actual impurities and inauthenticities, by nonetheless affirming its contrast to the much greater impurity and commercialization of other pop music (and even of country’s own impure, degenerate forms).¹⁹

Extreme emotion or sentimentality is a trademark of country music, and a prime reason why intellectuals dismiss it as vulgar kitsch.²⁰ Yet both scholars and singers of country music see its “open display of emotion” as the key to its success and sense of authenticity. Jimmie Rodgers, for example, is described as compensating for his musical limitations by “the simple authenticity and intense emotion he brought to every performance,” emotionally singing “as if he’d lived every line and suffered every change.” Rodgers himself insists: “It’s gotta have pathos. Make folks feel it—like we do, but we gotta have the feelin’ ourselves first.” Despite his poor fiddling, Grand Ole Opry star Roy Acuff first won his job because his “emotional style” (“often crying openly while singing”) conveyed great “sincerity.” Even today’s mediatized megastars, like Garth Brooks, still claim their preference “for one song that was from the heart [more] than 80 songs that were clever and went to No. 1 on the charts,” a preference affirmed in so many song lyrics. The “utter sincerity” that scholars

see as crucial to country’s success is conveyed not by factual demonstration but by emotional conviction: pathos proving that the song comes so directly from the heart that no falseness is possible. Historians link country’s pathos to Southern traditions of pietism, where theological sermons took the form of emotional tales and appeals to mercy rather than judgment. “Sentimentality—the appeal to the heart, even in contradiction to the dictates of the head—had been raised to an ultimate principle.”²¹

Though it is incontestable that country music is strongly sentimental, it is equally incontestable that intellectuals and other critical listeners recognize the sentiment but remain immune to its appeal or contagion. They find it mawkish, unconvincing, commercialized kitsch: in short, the very opposite of authentic. How to explain such difference of reaction and belief? James himself saw this problem of the variability of emotional suggestiveness that the same ideas have for different people, and their consequent different powers to “prove efficacious over belief.” The causes of these differences, James argued, “lie chiefly in our differing susceptibilities of emotional excitement, and in the different impulses and inhibitions which these bring in their train.”²²

The exemplary intellectual attitude of cold, rational, critical thinking (so deeply cherished by philosophy) surely aims to supply precisely such an inhibition to emotional excitement and consequent facile credence. A prolonged habit of inhibiting emotional excitement in order to insure that it be subordinated to our rational and cognitive interests can become so deeply ingrained and automatic that it works unnoticed, becoming an unconscious reflex, an instinctive distaste for emotional gush. The disciplinary (and also social) training of philosophers and other intellectuals would tend to instill such habits of inhibition regarding the rapid surrender of self to strong emotions.

It is hardly surprising, then, that intellectuals prove less susceptible to country’s sentimental charms than do those “simpler” laboring folk less trained in the inhibitions of critical thinking.²³ Such working-class people, moreover, have far less leisure and energy to take a very selective or critical view of the positive emotional content that country music offers. Too tired and harried to be very discriminating, they seize and

savor enjoyable emotional fare (that indisputable spice of life) where they can readily find it. Moreover, the very fact that country's hard-stressed, hard-working target audience both needs easy emotional release and easily finds it in country music further strengthens the habitual link of this music with emotion, making the emotional trigger of country music ever stronger and surer.

At work here is a somewhat circular mechanism of emotional satisfaction and reinforcement. The habitual desire for enjoyable emotion and its proven past arousal in country music tend to reinforce the emotional suggestiveness of the music, creating in the target listener an anticipatory tension to emote at the hearing of a country song: an anticipation, tension, or tendency that in realizing itself reinforces still further the emotional liveliness of country music. This circularity is best understood not as a vitiating logical fallacy but as a psychological fact of habitual conditioning and reinforcement.

We must, of course, go beyond these theoretical generalities and examine more closely some particular cases of country's emotional creation of credence. We need to see examples of how pathos serves country music's claims to authenticity and how it dovetails with the comparative notion of the real and pure; how country exploits the psychological mechanism where perception of greater authenticity in (some form of) country music combines with a strong emotional longing for the pure and authentic, thereby generating a seductive sense of authenticity *tout court*—pure and simple. But before examining the deployment of such strategies in specific country musicals, we should note a third basic device that helps create credence and authenticity: the use of narrative. Since William James neglects it, we must turn to another (and still more “uncountry”) philosopher of experience, the cosmopolitan sophisticate Walter Benjamin.

In his famous essay “The Storyteller,” Benjamin mourns the progressive loss of storytelling through the fragmentation of experience (which thus “has fallen in value”) and the weakening of tradition. In contrast to history, the validity of a story is “not subject to verification” and does not depend on detailed explanation. Its belief-creating authority, Benjamin argues, depends on links to the powerful “chain of tradition” and to the invariant life-cycle of human experience that ends

in death. But what ultimately generates the story's conviction is its capturing the listener's interest. Benjamin employs the term “listener” because he insists on “the oral tradition” in storytelling, its link to the “living immediacy” and communion of oral exchange, in contrast to the book-dependent privacy of the novel.

Oral narrativity also implies the need for memory in preserving the story, which requires a more accepting participation on the part of the listener. Hence “the listener's naive relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what is told.” Finally, the storyteller's narrative commands credence because it claims to be based on personal experience, direct or witnessed: “his raw material is life, particularly his own.”²⁴

This is precisely the stance of the typical country song, a first-person telling of a love- or life-episode (often an entire condensed life-story), most typically that of the singing narrator. Though the singer's tale gains power from links to oral traditions of storytelling and balladeering and from the traditional values and stories it relates, its authority also comes from its sense of authentic life-experience. Most often the story is a painful one, involving the narrator's own error, loss, and regret. But precisely by virtue of this painful self-exposure, the singer can claim not only the authenticity of sincere confession, but even a measure of authority and distinction, as someone having the courage to share his painful lessons so as to instruct his public. Here the country singer approaches what Benjamin describes as the source of the storyteller's “incomparable aura” and affinity to “teachers and sages”: his ability “to relate his life,” to “let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story.”²⁵

Describing country music as a storyteller's art is no mere attempt to give it an intellectual Benjaminian chic. Its self-conception as “a storyteller's medium,” widely recognized by scholars, is even clear from the way that “other song elements are generally kept simple to highlight the story. The chord structure is simple and predictable, the melodic range is slight, the rhythm is regular, and the orchestration is sparse or at least clearly in the background so that the words can be understood.” In the words of one country singer-songwriter, “If you can't hear each word, it ain't country, son.”²⁶ Country's words get

their importance not from their specific poetry but from the stories they embody, stories that can capture an audience far beyond those who prefer country's simple melodies and rhythms. Challenged about his taste for country music, jazz great Charlie Parker replied that he simply loved the stories.²⁷

Country's narratives succeed not only through the elements of tradition, orality, and life-experience that Benjamin notes. Narrative form itself intensifies the pathos and comparative authenticity that country deploys. The progression, development, and anticipation that constitute all narratives contribute to the build-up of emotions. The archetypal commonality of country's stories (with their focus on fundamental feelings of love, failure, and mourning) serve to trigger emotional memories that reach both deep and wide. And this same archetypal, formulaic simplicity of story-line permits extreme plot condensation, thus promoting emotional intensity by forestalling fatigue of attention.

Condensation and credibility are further enabled by the fact that country's sung stories are often recognized by listeners as biographically linked to the singer, allowing them to imaginatively enrich the tales through details they know (e.g., George Jones's bouts of drinking and Garth Brooks's marital infidelity and reconciliation). To heighten its power of pathos, country thus productively blurs the presumed division between art and life, artistic persona and real individual. Finally, the narrative frame that country deploys is most useful for making contrasts of comparative authenticity that are emotionally charged and hence more convincing. Narrative temporality provides not only the retrospective memory of country's older days of purer authenticity, but suggests the ongoing struggle to develop or recover greater authenticity in the face of present corruptive pressures.

v

How do the credence strategies of pathos, comparative authenticity, and narrative reinforce each other in concrete cases of country musicals? Consider *Pure Country*. Its opening, title song "Heartland" more clearly suggests the presumed anatomical home of emotion than a specific geographical reference to rural America. Its lyrics affirm old "Opry" standards of musical authenticity as constituted by emotional reac-

tions (of "a smile" or "a tear"), reactions that the film's plot and music seek to evoke: right from the initial title sequence, with its tender sound of a child's singing voice and its subsequent sentimental suggestion of lost innocence. The pure authenticity of Strait's neotraditional yet commercially crossover brand of country is then hammered home by a narrative structured on comparative authenticity.

Dusty Chandler (the home-spun, rural Texan hero Strait portrays) has won huge stardom, engineered by the commercial strategies of his strict manager and former lover—the ambitious and vampishly attractive Lula (played by Lesley Ann Warren), whose far more innocent looks graced the title sequence. Exploiting country's crossover commercial potential through the style of high-glitz rock performance, Lula has modeled the Dusty show into a noisy, pyrotechnic, stadium extravaganza, while turning Dusty himself into a flashy rock-style heartthrob, replete with white-leather jacket, snakeskin boots, pony tail, and sexy "designer" stubble (à la George Michael). She even tells him what songs to sing and what words to use to close his concerts. Complaining to Lula that the glitzy show denies him authentic self-expression and true communication with his audience ("I'm tired of all the smoke and the lights. It ain't me. ... The people can't see me with all the smoke and lights and they can't hear me because the music's so loud"), Dusty is tempted "to drop the whole deal, including [his] stupid-looking outfit" of cowboy *haute couture*.

After Dusty's drummer-friend Earle confirms this critique,²⁸ we see Dusty walk off camera—and the next shot he is hitching a ride in a truck, where he exchanges his snakeskin boots for the trucker's "real" cowboy pair. Further rides lead him deeper into the Texas countryside of his youth (a return to innocence symbolized by Dusty's removing of his ponytail, beard, and his remaining fancy duds) until he reaches home, where Grandma Ivy also confirms his critique of Lula's showbiz aesthetic. Complaining of the concert's "smoke and lights" and amplified background "noise" that prevented her from really seeing and hearing Dusty at his concert, she underlines the message: "Without the words, there's no song."

The return to authenticity is further symbolized by Dusty's return to his old acoustic guitar and visit to his parents' grave (for death, ever a

symbol of life's basic realities, is, as Benjamin notes, an ancient source of storytelling authority). Dusty even goes back to the simple bar and dance hall where he first performed as a country singer. Getting drunk there, Dusty literally falls off his chair and gets beaten up because of his attraction for a sweet-looking redhead (named Harley) dancing a country line-dance. Pitying him but not recognizing who he is (apparently because of his transformed looks and simple ways), she takes him home.

Home turns out to be a real ranch, and Harley a real cowgirl who competes in the professional rodeo circuit in order to win enough money to save her family's no longer economically viable ranch, whose land has been steadily sold off to keep the family (Harley, two brothers, and her father) financially afloat. Dusty, who reverts to his original name of Wyatt, convinces the brothers to let him stay on at the ranch by paying them huge sums of money for room and board, a horse, and roping lessons. As the love story between Dusty and Harley blossoms, she confesses an earlier love for a stranger who turned out to be married and questions Dusty to learn that he was never married.

During Dusty's return to pure country realities, Lula has been desperately trying to locate him, while insuring that the show goes on without him: using a handsome stagehand (her current lover) as a Dusty impersonator who lip-synchs his songs in concert. Though this goes undetected through Lula's augmenting the concert smoke and noise, the band protests the fraud and threatens to quit. Dusty's loyal old friend and drummer Earle runs off to look for Dusty at wise Grandma Ivy's and is told "if you follow the roots you'll find him." Earle does, but so does Lula, who (unbeknown to Dusty) falsely tells Harley that Dusty is her husband before whisking him off to his next concert in Las Vegas, which also happens to be the site of Harley's next rodeo.

By now, the publicity-hungry stagehand has leaked his story to the media, inciting a raging controversy that country's authenticity has been corrupted by the fraudulent commercial tactics of pop music as notoriously exposed in the Milli Vanilli lip-synching scandal, which the film's dialogue explicitly cites. All the mass-media attention thus focuses on Dusty's Las Vegas concert as a crucial test case of country music's purity and authenticity. Dusty insists that Lula must let

him do the concert his way ("no more smoke, no volcano blasts, no light show") and that Harley and family be invited to the concert and be told of Lula's lies. After a short segment about Harley's rodeo (which focuses more on American flags and anthems than on her riding), the film reaches its climactic conclusion in Dusty's concert at the Mirage Hotel, at which Harley and her family, as well as Grandma Ivy, arrive in limousines (greeted by the laughable pigmy valet, an unwitting symbol of the shrunken, token recognition of black culture's gifts to country).

Holding his old acoustic guitar, Dusty walks on stage, this time with no smoke, no flashing lights, and no background noise. He tells the cheering crowd that tonight he's going to do something "a little different" and asks the stage director "Could you follow me with the spotlight right here in front, please." He sits on the edge of the stage opposite Harley and sings her a love song ("I Cross My Heart"), gazing tenderly at her through a very thin haze of smoke that seems merely the product of the club's smokers and the bright spotlight. As Dusty sings, Harley trembles with tears of happiness, whose flow continues to surge till the song's conclusion, when Dusty descends from the stage and embraces her to the emotional clapping, hoots, and whistles of the cheering crowd.

It should be clear from this plot description that the film's affirmations of purity, authenticity, and "the real" are only established by contrast, thereby suggesting (even to nonphilosophic viewers) the relativity of these notions. Though Dusty's opening concerts may be condemned as a commercial corruption in comparison to what we imagine were his youthful, innocent performances, they are still far more authentic than the fraudulence of his lip-synching stagehand or pop group Milli Vanilli. Again, while the fancy-dressed "show-biz" Dusty may not be the real Dusty, it is surely the real Dusty in contrast to his stage-hand impersonator.

Moreover, Dusty's withdrawal from commercial show-business values is only partial and temporary. To remain at Harley's ranch he offers not hard work but a fistful of cash to her money-hungry brothers, who need the money because the ranch—the film's paradigm of country cowboy authenticity—is no longer financially functional as a real ranch. Nor is Harley, strictly speaking, a real "cowgirl" who rides the range driving cattle. She is simply a rodeo or "show"

cowgirl, whose major shows include such impure venues as Las Vegas. Nor can she boast of virginal innocence, for we learn of other men in her past. Still, in contrast to Lula's business greed and casual sex, Harley shines with country purity and authenticity. In similar fashion, though the still unmarried Dusty is obviously no virgin, his essential (yet *relative*) purity is shown by contrast to his band of divorcés, including old friend Earle.

Finally, how pure is the film's climactic return to country authenticity in both music and courtship? Dusty's musical declaration of love to Harley is sung, not spontaneously in a country meadow, barnhouse, or honky-tonk, but staged as a show performance at Vegas's Mirage Hotel in front of hundreds of people. Though eschewing Lula's flashing strobe lights and smoke, Dusty still calls for a spotlight to make his singing more effective, a light that reveals the nightclub's own smoky haze.

In short, while country's purest music and authentic love confessions still involve artificial light, smoke-polluted air, and a commercial audience, they convince by their contrast to worse impurities and by their emotional appeal to our need to believe, an unavoidable need that pragmatism recognizes in defining belief as an essential (though not necessarily explicit) guide for action. So when Dusty sings "in all the world, you'll never find, a love as true as mine," Harley believes (and we know she believes), not because she has adequate empirical evidence, but because she has no conclusive proof to the contrary and because he seems truer than her last love and captures her emotions. Her smiling tears are presented as proof not only of her belief but of Dusty's sincerity. The ardently approving smiles of Grandma Ivy and Harley's family confirm this credence, as do the heartfelt cheers of the audience. In fact, so do the feelings of the film's real audience, who, having identified with the lovers and long awaited their long deferred first embrace, seek an emotional release from this tension of anticipation.

In introducing the film's audience, we reach another reality level (i.e., of real viewers and actors) that reinforces country narrative's sense of authenticity. Belief in the truth of Dusty's love and music gains power from country fans' knowledge that the "real" Dusty (George Strait) has proven true both to his neotraditional style

and to his one and only real-life marriage. The musically neotraditionalist but three-time divorced Willie Nelson could hardly make Dusty so credible. But Nelson, in *Honeysuckle Rose*, does succeed in portraying his own philandering, honky-tonk form of country authenticity, as singing star Buck Bonham, every bit the macho, goodtiming ham that his name suggests.

Already known for adultery and divorce, Buck betrays his still youngish wife and former singing partner (played by Dyan Cannon), despite their close relationship and much-loved young son. While Buck adores the country singer's road life (the film's title song and alternative title is "On the Road Again"), wife Viv insists that their Honeysuckle Rose homestead is the only proper place to have a family. When Buck's old playing partner Carlin retires and the prospective replacement fails to come through, Carlin's talented daughter Lily (who idolizes Buck and teaches his son music) joins the road tour. The emotional energy of their musical collaboration leads to a love affair that becomes increasingly evident on stage in their passionate duets: sensually kissing as they sing "There ain't nothin' sweeter than naked emotion/You show me your tongue and I'll show you mine." At this point, Viv (who is suddenly alerted to the danger) arrives and goes on stage, surprising Buck and Lily in the act, exposing Lily's status as a trusted family friend, and announcing to the entire public that she is getting a divorce. To the stunned cries of the crowd, Viv icily responds: "Isn't that the kind of things that country songs are all about?" The stunned Buck (much like Dusty) abandons both Lily and his show and disappears.

As the intimacy of adultery and marital breakdown are played out on stage, so is the couple's reconciliation, a week or so later at a celebrational concert for Buck's retired partner Carlin. While Viv does a song about forgiveness ("there must be two sides to every story ... come home and tell me yours"), Buck arrives from the back without her noticing and gives her instrumental accompaniment. Though relieved at last to see him, she remains visibly angry. Without stopping to exchange any purely private words, Buck treats the private publicly, launching into a love song of repentance, delivered very softly and almost a cappella, with just a few framing chords: "I'm living out my love on stages; ten

thousand people watching,” he sings, voicing the apology “I treated you unkind,” insisting there is “no one more important to me,” promising to remain close to her forever so that “when my life is over I want you to remember how we were all alone, and I was singing my song for you.”

Visibly moved by the passion of Buck’s musical message and by her own strong emotional need for his love, Viv’s tearful smile shows her faith in his sincerity and vow to reform, despite all past evidence to the contrary. Simultaneously sensing and sealing their reconciliation, Buck and Viv then spontaneously break into a duet of “Uncloudy Day.” Sung with impassioned “face-to-face” closeness (though in a style far more chaste than the Lily duets), this old gospel song of paradise signals to them and their cheering audience (including even a bravely smiling Lily) that their marital future is untroubled bliss.

Why should Viv (or anyone) believe Buck’s sincerity? Why should we give credence to her forgiveness and their future together? Apart from the mere openness of the future and the instinctive hope of us forward-looking creatures, it must be the irresistible sweetness of “naked emotion” expressed in Buck’s song and echoed by Viv’s strong emotional response and need to believe him. The sense of truth in their reconciliation is reinforced by the emotional approval of the audience of faithful fans, who represent (like an ancient Greek chorus) the authority of community and tradition.²⁹ Buck’s reform gains still greater credibility through strategic comparison. Even if he is still far from pure, he is surely purer than when he was on stage, or in bed, with Lily.

To enable the workings of this comparative strategy and the build-up of emotion, we need the structure of narrative. And country narratives can be especially quick at summoning up both comparisons and emotion by deploying traditional stereotypes whose simple familiarity tends to trigger habitual emotional response and concomitant credibility (unless checked by a habitual critical inhibition).³⁰ Through the same emotional logic of familiarity, Willie Nelson’s reputation as a real-life Buck Bonham struggling to finally make a marriage work renders the fictional Buck’s good intentions still more credible to country fans.

VI

Should belief that relies so much on feeling not simply be scorned as the feeble epistemology of country cretins? We critical, rational, empirical philosophers are very quick to make this condemnation, but William James (whose pragmatism embraced empiricism) would suggest otherwise. As practical creatures who must act, we human beings need to believe “ahead of the scientific evidence.”³¹ As affective creatures whose evolutionary survival has largely relied on our feelings, we justifiably believe with our hearts (and other muscles) before our minds, though such belief is not immune to error and revision. Love that we deeply feel is always taken as true, till it proves false. Pragmatism’s hopeful fallibilism extends to romance as well as to science.

From Walter Benjamin’s storytelling perspective, faith in country narratives may also find some comfort. Though damned by modernist standards of originality and cognitive discovery, their formulaic plots and stereotypes have not only emotional persuasiveness but even the aura of a deep, redemptive kind of truth. If we look past their banality, we may see the expression of a deep collective memory, recalling the sadly universal (archetypal) realities of lost innocence, corrupted values, betrayed love, disappointed hopes, the common failures of life, and the inevitable loss of death.

But what then becomes of country’s hopeful credence—the faith that music and love can, just like Dusty and Buck, overcome corruption to regain both purity and success? This may seem a credulous illusion that damns the genre philosophically. But for us striving creatures, hope is (and must be) as permanent a reality as disappointment. In such light, country’s emotional conviction of the possible triumph of good, its belief (in advance of the evidence and despite past error) that love can prove true and the corrupt be purified, could seem more than hillbilly folly. It can be seen not as blindly refusing to face the facts, but as wisely looking also beyond them so as to affirm the truth of ideals that both heart and mind embrace, yet repeatedly fail to achieve. Such ideals remain very real and redemptive, despite our failure to realize them in our imperfect lives.

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1. See William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *The Writings of William James*, ed. J. McDermott (University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 630–631.

2. Already in the March 2, 1992 issue of *Forbes* magazine, an article by Lisa Guberick and Peter Newcomb ("The Wal-Mart School of Music") took note of country commercial ascendance, not only in albums sold but also in live concerts, "pay-per-view" televised concerts, and, of course, radio. There are far more country radio stations than any other kind, so "in any given week, according to industry figures, 72% of the American public listens to country music on the radio." See Cecilia Tichi, "Editorial" in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94 (1995): 4.

3. See, for example, R. A. Peterson and R. B. Davis, "The Contemporary American Radio Audience," *Popular Music and Society* 3 (1974): 308; and R. A. Peterson and Paul DiMaggio, "From Region to Class, The Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis," *Social Forces* 53 (1975): 497–506. For a more recent and nuanced study, see R. A. Peterson and A. Simkus, "How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups," in M. Lamont and M. Fournier, *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 152–186.

4. In contrast to the "singing cowboy" films, the new country musicals are not stories about cowboys but about people deeply involved in contemporary country music culture, either as established or aspiring performers or songwriters or consumers. These films include the country star biographies of Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, and Patsy Cline in, respectively, *Your Cheatin' Heart* (1964, MGM, dir. Gene Nelson), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980, Universal, dir. Michael Apted) *Sweet Dreams* (1985, HBO, dir. Karel Reisz). But just as central to the genre are the fictional narratives of imaginary country performers in films such as *Payday* (1973, Zaentz, dir. Daryl Duke), *Nashville* (1975, Paramount, dir. Robert Altman), *Honeysuckle Rose*, also known as *On the Road Again* (1980, Warner Bros., dir. Jerry Schatzberg), *Honky Tonk Man* (1982, Warner Bros., dir. Clint Eastwood), *Sweet Country Road* (1981, dir. Jack McCallum), *Tender Mercies* (1983, Universal, dir. Bruce Beresford), and *Pure Country* (1992, Warner Bros., dir. Christopher Cain). These fictional stories and characters, however, borrow very heavily from real-life country histories. For example, *Payday's* hero's death through a drink-related heart attack while being driven in his car echoes the death of Hank Williams, while in *Honky Tonk Man* the hero's death from tuberculosis after a strenuous recording session in New York clearly appropriates Jimmy Rodgers's famous death. Less central but still within the ambit of country musicals are films like *Urban Cowboy* (1980, Paramount, dir. James Bridges), whose hero is not a performer but an avid fan whose life is devoted to country music nightclub culture. On the borders of the genre, we might even consider a film like

True Stories (Warner Bros. 1986), directed by the progressive rock star David Byrne of the Talking Heads. The film's hero is an amateur country singer-songwriter from a small Texas town, and the film's climax is his performance at the town's sesquicentennial show, a performance that finally wins him the love he's been searching for throughout the film.

5. This information is based on figures drawn from Richard Peterson, "The Production of Cultural Change: The Case of Contemporary Country Music," *Social Research* 45 (1978): 292–314; Curtis W. Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven* (University of Mississippi Press, 1995), p. 224; Clark Parsons, "Taking Stock of the Nineties Boom," *Journal of Country Music* 16, no. 2 (1994): 10–11; Don Cusic, "Country Green: The Money in Country Music," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94 (1995): 231–241; and Peter Applebome, "Hank Williams. Garth Brooks. BR5-49?" *The New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 1996, pp. 38–43.

6. Heavy metal, though typically white, can hardly claim a distinctively ethnic American character. Moreover, its sound and lifestyle remains too brash, young, and excessive for most young adults.

7. A similar strategy of appealing to the oppositional, non-conformist character of country traditionalism, while performing a very untraditional, crossover song can be seen in Barbara Mandrell's commercial hit "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool." Described by country music historian Bill Malone as having "a style that possessed no country flavor at all" (Malone, p. 376—see note 13), the song exploits a cameo appearance by authentic country icon George Jones and the general knowledge that Mandrell had deep family roots in country.

8. See Peter Applebome, "Country Graybeards Get the Boot," *The New York Times*, August 21, 1994, sec. H, pp. 27–28. As one Nashville music publisher and disk jockey explains, "The best thing that ever happened to country music was rap," because it pushed pop music toward a radical direction its mainstream audience could not follow. "I think you've got a young adult group that would have listened to pop music if they could have identified with it" (p. 28).

9. See Skip Hollandsworth, "Garth Brooks: A Megastar's Last Stand (For Now)," *TV Guide*, April 30, 1994, p. 14.

10. Newton-John even won the Country Music Association's Female Singer of the Year award in 1974.

11. On the new focus on music videos and their young "hunks," see Applebome, "Country Greybeards Get the Boot," and Parsons, "Taking Stock of the Nineties Boom."

12. At the 1996 Country Music Association Awards, the then forty-four-year-old Strait (described as "keeper of the country flame" and "country purist") proved the biggest winner, taking the major prizes of best single, best album, and male vocalist of the year. The descriptions are cited from *USA Today*, October 3, 1996, sec. D, p. 1, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 3, 1996, sec. C, p. 1. In 1997, George Strait continued to be a big CMA prize winner, capturing the best male vocalist and best album awards, while in 1998, he won the best male vocalist for the third straight year and became the most nominated performer in CMA history. See the reports in *The New York Times*, September 25, 1997, sec. A, p. 22, col. 1, and *The Washington Post*, September 24, 1998, sec. B, p. 10.

13. See Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, rev. ed. (University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 409.

14. See Richard Peterson, *Creating County Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), chap. 4; citations from pp. 59 and 64.

15. Malone, pp. 127 and 181.

16. See Malone, pp. 137–141 and 152. Malone relates how the famous singing cowboys Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Tex Ritter were far from authentic cowboys who took up singing, but rather professional musicians who only turned to the cowboy image when it proved fruitful for their careers. Anyone well acquainted with country music knew that the cowboy image of country authenticity was a hoax. Thus, to project real authenticity, The Grand Ole Opry's Roy Acuff (known as the King of Country Music), vehemently refused to wear the cowboy clothes assigned to him and his band by Republic Studio in their film *The Grand Ole Opry*, insisting that his mountaineer work clothes of check shirts and jeans or overalls were far more authentic. See Richard Peterson, "The Dialectic of Hard-Core and Soft-Shell Country Music," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94 (1995): 279–280, and *Creating Country Music*, chap. 9.

17. Malone, p. 5. The historical facts in this paragraph and the previous one are mostly drawn from Malone and Ellison.

18. William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1890) (Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 924, 936 (emphasis in original). "Coerciveness [over our attention—another common way of construing reality] is the result of liveliness or emotional interest" (p. 929).

19. Country musicals often thematize the notion that the real or authentic is a gradable and contextual category. In *Urban Cowboy*, the hero is accosted by a woman in a honky-tonk with the question: "Are you a real cowboy?" to which he responds, "Depends on what you think a real cowboy is." Her criterion of real is to "know how to dance a two-step." But the film goes on to suggest other criteria of cowboy authenticity: the ability to ride a mechanical imitation rodeo bull, to show stubborn grit and pride, and last, to perform well in bed. The latter, with its metaphor of riding, is a frequent criterion for being a "real" cowboy in contemporary country music lyrics.

20. This is because our dominant highbrow aesthetic (from Kant to T. S. Eliot) rejects raw emotional appeals as aesthetic vulgarity. For details see Richard Shusterman, "Of the Scandal of Taste: Social Privilege as Nature in the Aesthetic Theories of Hume and Kant," reprinted in Paul Mattick, *Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 96–119; and T. S. Eliot and the *Philosophy of Criticism* (Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 64–67.

21. For these details and citations, see Malone, pp. 242, 301; Paul Kingsbury and Alan Axelrod, eds., *Country: The Music and the Musicians* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), p. 49; Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler* (University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 75–76; Peterson, "Soft Shell and Hard Core," pp. 278–279; and Ellison, pp. 38, 40, 105, and 261. The quotation about Southern pietism (cited in Ellison, p. 105) comes originally from religion historian Peter Williams, *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), p. 233. Ellison also cites contemporary country singer Colin Raye, "I go for the songs that sound like the writer cut a hole in his heart and just let it pour out" (p. 256).

22. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1985), pp. 112, 261.

23. Yet in certain moods, at certain moments, or because of certain pressures that decenter the habitual self, the intellectual's inhibitory habits can be overcome and country music's emotionality can be deeply shared and not simply discriminated. This paper's appreciation of country is, of course, partly a result of my own rewarding moments of surrender to its sentiment, suggesting that we intellectuals may sometimes learn from releasing, even if only occasionally and momentarily, from our cherished critical inhibitions.

24. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 83–84, 87, 89, 97, 108.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–109.

26. See Richard Peterson and Melton McLaurin, "Introduction: Country Music Tells Stories," in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, eds. Melton McLaurin and Richard Peterson (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), p. 2.

27. See Nat Hentoff, *Listen to the Stories: Nat Hentoff on Jazz and Country Music* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 168.

28. Dusty's show is here compared to a phony "dancin' chicken" act they saw as kids: the stage chicken did not dance of its own free will but was controlled by the director, who both played the music and secretly stoked the stove under stage whose heat kept the chicken hopping. Earle's question "why didn't that chicken just run off the stage?" prompts Dusty's decision to run off.

29. Similarly, in *True Stories*, the amateur country singer hero is so powerfully emotive in his televised song asking for "someone to love" that he immediately receives a phoned-in marriage proposal. The next shot shows the subsequent marriage, whose success is intimated by the heartfelt approving joy of the wedding guests.

30. In *Honeysuckle Rose* such stereotypes include: the strong, faithful wife of the adventurous voyager (a topos dating back to *The Odyssey* and suggested in the film's hit song "A Goodhearted Woman in Love with a Goodtimin' Man"), the tender young temptress of the idolized older star, the duet as a model and means for love-making, the hero's disappearance into the wilderness to find himself, and the concluding public confession of sin and atonement, reminiscent of popular Christian evangelism. Country music's stereotypes and clichés can thus be seen as expressions of typical truths that are no less real or authentic for being common, and perhaps are particularly real for its audience of common people who cannot afford to imagine their lives as distinctively above the commonplace. For a perceptive study of country music's use of stereotypes and clichés, arguing that they should be understood as neither critically oppositional nor devoid of cognitive import, see Astrid Franke, "'The Broken Heart' and 'The Trouble with Truth': Understanding Clichés in Country Music," *Poetics Today* 18 (1997): 397–412.

31. For James's justification of this right to believe before having sufficient evidence, see "The Will to Believe," in *Pragmatism and Other Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 209. James identifies this attitude with empiricism's strategy of learning from experience, p. 205.

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³ **From Region to Class, the Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis**

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