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All Country Roads Lead to Rome: Idealization of the Countryside in Augustan Poetry and American Country Music

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

ALL COUNTRY ROADS LEAD TO ROME: IDEALIZATION OF THE
COUNTRYSIDE IN AUGUSTAN POETRY AND AMERICAN COUNTRY MUSIC

SUBMITTED TO

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AND

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AND

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BY

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FOR SENIOR THESIS

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In Rome: An Example

Now I could live content with only a little,
 Not always devoted to the long road,
 Avoiding the rising of the Dog star in summer
 In the shade of trees, passing to streams of water.
 I might be a farmer, planting tender vines at the right time
 And orchards with an easy hand.
 Let hope not abandon me, but let it always
 Offer heaps of crops and rich wine in a full barrel.
 I pray, whether at the pole alone in the fields
 Or at an old rock in the crossroads, with fresh flowers.
 And whatever fruit the new year ripens for me,
 It will be placed before a god as a farmer's offering.
 Golden Ceres, there will be a fruitful crown for you
 From the farm, a crown that may hang before your temple doors;
 And may a red guardian be placed in our blooming gardens,
 So that Priapus scares away birds with his fierce sickle.

.
 I do not require the wealth of my fathers or the profits
 That a great harvest brought to my old grandfather.
 A small field is enough if I can rest
 On my bed and ease my limbs on my dear couch.
 How lovely it is to hear the rough winds outside,
 As I lie down and hold my mistress safe in my lap!

--Selection from Tibullus I.1 (translation my own)

In Country Music: An Example

I'm gonna live where the green grass grows,
Watch my corn pop up in rows,
Every night be tucked in close to you.
Raise our kids where the good Lord's blessed,
Point our rocking chairs towards the West,
Plant our dreams where the peaceful river flows,
Where the green grass grows.

Well I'm from a map dot
A stop sign on a blacktop
I caught the first bus I could hop from there
But all this glitter is getting dark
There's concrete growing in the city park
I don't know who my neighbors are
And there's bars on the corners and bars on my heart.

I'm gonna live where the green grass grows,
Watch my corn pop up in rows,
Every night be tucked in close to you.
Raise our kids where the good Lord's blessed,
Point our rocking chairs towards the West,
Plant our dreams where the peaceful river flows,
Where the green grass grows.

--Selection from Tim McGraw's "Where the Green Grass Grows"

Introduction

Tibullus I.1 and Tim McGraw's "Where the Green Grass Grows" come from two very different times and cultures, but they share a few remarkably similar features. The first is a poem written over two thousand years ago in Ancient Rome, while the second, a popular country song, was released in 1997. The rise of Christianity, the discovery of the New World, and the Industrial Revolution are only three significant events that shaped the world between these two works, yet both are describing a similar situation; each narrator imagines escaping to the countryside to live a life of modest farming and religious devotion in the arms of the woman he loves. These two works are not merely flukes; each is characteristic of a type of literature of its time, literature that imagined a picturesque life in the countryside.

This "country life" shares many features in both the poetry of Augustan Rome and modern American country music, and these two examples demonstrate most of the typical country features. Chapter I will investigate how certain symbols of life in the countryside are used in both the Roman and American sources. Rural life is depicted generally as life on the farm, with agriculture a significant part of country life. The farmers in these works often live a "simple life," content with limited material resources and a happy home in which family plays a vital role. Threaded throughout these poems and songs are references to religion, sacrifices to rustic gods in the Roman poems and Sunday morning church in country music.

These literatures both utilize the image of the country life as a representation of an ideal world, and their utopian visions provide an opportunity for better understanding the

hopes and values of the people producing them. The fact that there is tremendous overlap in the features of these two countrysides indicates that there may be similarities among the values of the two societies, as well. Analysis of each literature's use of similar imagery may shed light on what two cultures have in common, and it may demonstrate that, perhaps, Augustan Rome and modern America are not as distant from each other as they seem. This paper seeks to understand why the Augustan poetic countryside and the American country music countryside appear so similar by asking *how* they are similar, how each countryside functions as a reflection of ideology, and how similarities in the ideologies might reveal similarities in the vaster historical contexts of the two literatures.

The Sources

An analysis of the sources requires understanding of what, exactly, they consist. This paper mainly considers two types of sources, Roman poetry from the Augustan era and recent popular country music. The countryside plays a less prominent role in Augustan poetry generally than in country music, and thus it is fruitful to use poems from various genres and by several poets. Poems that praise the country life are the most useful in this discussion, though poems treating other themes may also be used for understanding the mindset of the times, for there is a limited number of passages completely devoted to the countryside in Augustan poetry.

It is worth noting now that one of the most famous works describing the Roman countryside is in fact less relevant to this paper than may first appear. Vergil's *Eclogues*, famous for their dreamlike world of shepherds and poetry in the Roman countryside, describe a different sort of Roman countryside from that of other poems from the same era. The setting of the *Eclogues* is more pastoral and poetic than that of other sources

considered, and the poems are so extremely multi-layered with irony, paradox, and metapoetics that it would be problematic to include their countryside along with the countryside found in other Augustan poetry. Thus, though the *Eclogues* appear occasionally as support for an argument if a passage is relevant, they are generally passed over in this discussion.¹

The parameters for country music used here are more narrowly defined than those for poetry. Firstly, the country music with which this paper is concerned is “Nashville Country,” as opposed to “alternative country.”² Most of the artists featured have had Billboard hits, and many of the songs themselves were high-ranking hits on the country charts. The artists included in this paper tend to be those who both have widespread popular appeal and demonstrate the phenomenon of this idealized countryside in their songs. The artists examined are generally those who flourished from the mid-nineties until today, so the time period covered begins in 1994 and continues until 2011.

When considering which songs specifically will be analyzed, it is important to understand that country music songs usually fit neatly into subgenres, with each subgenre treating a different popular theme.³ There are songs about beach vacations,⁴ songs about children and parenthood,⁵ even songs about post-paycheck parties.⁶ Many songs fit into

¹ Further discussion on the difference between “country life” poems and pastoral poems can be found later in this introduction, and there is a more in-depth discussion of the *Eclogues* in Chapter II.

² For more on this distinction, see Kurt Wolff’s chapters on each genre (pp. 502-508 and 539-555) or Tony Byworth’s discussion of each (pp 239-243 and 275-279).

³ As Bill Malone puts it in *Country Music, U.S.A.*, “country lyrics have remained profoundly topical” (299). This phenomenon is further exemplified by the organization of songs by theme (different from but related to subgenre) in Curtis Ellison’s *Country Music Culture*, Malone’s *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’*, Dorothy Hortsman’s *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy*, and Part II of Rogers’s *The Country Music Message: Revisited*.

⁴ For example, the Zac Brown Band’s “Toes” (2008), Toby Keith’s “Good to Go to Mexico” (2002), and Blake Shelton’s “Some Beach” (2004).

⁵ For example, Rodney Atkins’s “Watching You” (2006), Lonestar’s “Mr. Mom” (2004), and Buddy Jewell’s “Help Pour Out the Rain” (2003).

more than one subgenre, but nonetheless most songs conform to a few *topoi* of at least one subgenre. The relevant subgenre here is that of the country life. There are multiple sub-subgenres within this—farming songs, love songs, small-town songs, and the list continues—but all of them are united by a decidedly non-urban⁷ setting and generally a positive depiction of this non-urban setting. These songs tend to include the themes of agriculture, poverty, marriage and family, and piety discussed above. Although when initially examining these symbols, it is important to limit consideration to songs within the “country life” subgenre, in further analysis, songs across subgenres may shed light on how such symbols and themes function within a broader “country music” ideology.

The Countryside and the Pastoral

The countryside is often a rural country used for farming, yet in both literatures “the countryside” may also entail a wild countryside of forests or a pastoral countryside inhabited by herders. In the Latin poetry especially, these settings are separate, often with different characteristics and uses. The features of a wild countryside differ drastically from those of a cultivated one, but the differences between farming and herding are not so immediately obvious, especially because these two activities are often considered in tandem in country music.⁸ Yet, as mentioned above, the *pastoral* genre of poetry has a different origin and different purposes from poetry about the farm. There is some overlap in the use of symbols and there are similar themes in both, but the relevant genre here is that of an agricultural countryside.

⁶For example, Alan Jackson’s “Good Time” (2008), Toby Keith’s “Get Drunk and Be Somebody” (2006), and Brian Davis’s “Pull Up a Tailgate” (2010).

⁷ Usually a rural setting, though sometimes a version of suburbia marked by country traits

⁸ As will be discussed in Chapter I.

In country music as well, songs about the wild countryside are usually different from the types of songs considered here. The link between the wild and the cultivated countryside is a bit closer in country music, and hunting and fishing in the wild are often used, like agriculture, to denote a country lifestyle.⁹ However, the purpose of these activities is a bit different, for they may signify idleness and laziness,¹⁰ while agriculture is associated more with hard work.¹¹ The use of herding in country music poses similar problems; though herding is a part of farm life,¹² the associations with herding in country music are different from those of tending the land. Cowboys, the quintessential herders of country music, make up their own subgenre, and it is one defined by themes of lonesomeness and wandering, while the agricultural country lifestyle is characterized by community and stability. Though herding and even cowboys may occasionally appear in songs about the virtues of the countryside,¹³ the cowboy vision of the country life is a different vision entirely.

Differences Between the Roman and Country Sources

Despite the many similarities between the Roman poetry and the country songs, there are also important distinctions to be mentioned. The general differences that separate the two cultures result in many divergences in terms of ideology and symbols in their literatures, but such variation is to be expected in works separated by both temporal

⁹ For example, Luke Bryan's "We Rode in Trucks" (2007), Josh Turner's "Lord Have Mercy on a Country Boy" (2006) and "Backwoods Boy" (2003), Little Big Town's "Boondocks" (2005), Justin Moore's "Good Ole American Way" (2009), and Craig Morgan's "Redneck Yacht Club" (2005)

¹⁰ For example, Luke Bryan's "Drinkin' Beer and Wastin' Bullets" (2009) and Brad Paisley's "I'm Gonna Miss Her" (2001)

¹¹ The tension between idleness and work is a prominent one in country music, and the tension between *inertia* and work is present in the Roman sources as well.

¹² For example, the "cows need bringing round" in Rodney Atkins's "Farmer's Daughter," (2009).

¹³ For example, in Rodney Atkins's "Farmer's Daughter" (2009) and Blake Shelton's "Country Strong" (2008).

and spatial distance. Differences between the writers of the poetry and songs have a special impact on how the countryside functions in each. The Roman poets were educated, ran in the elite circles of their society, and though they may not have been rich, they most likely were financially comfortable. They also may not have had much actual experience with the countryside or at least the types of farmers they described. The background on these poets is usually spotty, so it is possible that some of them did spend time in the countryside,¹⁴ but it would have been a countryside of the elite, not the life of labor they described in their ideal images.

On the other hand, country music as a whole originated with poor farmers in rural areas, and this has been an important part of its background since then. Even today, despite major changes in the American economy and in country music, singers and songwriters still often come from homes in the country, even from farms. The biographies of many are rags-to-riches stories, or Kmart-to-couture stories, and though they might sell a million albums, maintaining their authenticity as working-class is important. Furthermore, even after becoming platinum artists, many country singers move back to the countryside with which they feel a real and tangible connection (McLaurin 30). Whereas the Roman authors were always, to some extent, writing a dream countryside, a vision of the elite, country artists often describe the working man in the countryside from their own experience as or with working men in the countryside.

A significant technical difference between the two is the difference in volume; there is a great deal more music about the countryside than there is Roman poetry about the countryside. There is much more material at all on the modern side; whereas there are

¹⁴ In fact, it is clear that the poet Horace spent much of his time on his Sabine farm (“The Cambridge Companion to Horace” 11).

only a few extant Roman poets from the Augustan age, hundreds of country artists have released thousands of songs in the past fifteen years. Furthermore, country music, a genre with a decidedly rural background, tends to have more works explicitly about the countryside than Roman poetry, of which it is an important but not defining aspect. As a result, throughout this paper, the balance of evidence lies heavily on the side of country music.

It is also important to observe that most of the poets and artists featured in this paper are male. Again, this is partially due to the nature of the sources; female poets were rare in Augustan Rome, and female singers are not as common as males in country music.¹⁵ Yet even accounting for the scanty presence of women, there seems to be less of an idealized countryside in the works that do exist by female poets and artists. The Roman poetess Sulpicia does not want to go to the “*molestum rus*” for her birthday and indeed rejoices when she is permitted to remain in Rome.¹⁶ Though female country singers do sometimes sing songs in praise of the countryside, a few of which are discussed in this paper, the dearth of such songs recorded by females seems to be disproportionate to the dearth of female artists in general. Thus it may be that the “country imagery” discussed here is actually the country imagery of men in male-dominated genres, but an exploration on gender and the countryside is out of the scope of this paper.

¹⁵ In Wolff’s chapter on Nashville country, twenty-seven of the thirty-nine artists featured in the “Artists” section are either men or entirely male bands; in Byworth’s chapter on “New Country,” forty-four of the sixty-seven artists featured are men or entirely male bands, though it is important to note that Byworth includes many non-American artists in his treatment. In a particularly recent example of the gender disparity, Billboard’s Top Thirty Country Songs for the week of April 30th 2011 (accessed on April 23rd) includes twenty-two songs by male artists and eight songs by female artists or coed bands.

¹⁶ According to Tibullus III.14.2 and III.15.

With these considerations in mind, an analysis of the idealized countryside in these literatures yields fruitful results. Despite differences between the two, the imagery of idyllic rural life in Augustan poetry and country music function in similar ways. The countryside in both cases is articulated through established symbols, coming together to establish a utopian vision that reflects specific ideologies. The ideologies common to both eras potentially spring from similar circumstances. Thus, the examination of works that exhibit these ideologies may allow those living in the later historical context to understand their own world through the world of another.

Chapter I: Symbols

Despite the millennia separating contemporary country music from Augustan poetry, their descriptions of the countryside and their images of an idyllic rural life share many aspects, themes, and even specific details, though tractors have replaced the *iuncti boves* of Latin poetry, and steeples and hymns have replaced Priapus and the Lares. Both the poems and the songs identify a country life as one centered on agriculture and marked by poverty, family, and piety. These specific themes are often presented together in one work, as in Tibullus I.1 and “Where the Green Grass Grows,” though they occur in different combinations as well.

Agriculture

The most prominent aspect of a rural life, and, indeed, the linchpin of country life imagery is agriculture. Rural life revolves around agriculture, as it is the source of sustenance and income, and the needs of the crops and herds dictate life on a daily and seasonal basis. These routines and agricultural activities are central to poetry of the countryside because they are central to the existence of the countryside. Even country music about an ideal life in which agriculture is not a central theme nonetheless typically pays homage to it by featuring suburban manifestations of cultivation such as gardens and mowing the lawn,¹⁷ indicating how important agriculture is in images of the ideal country life. Despite the different technologies and methods of farming in Ancient Rome and modern America, both include similar imagery of agriculture in their works.

In Rome

¹⁷ This point will be expanded on below.

The agricultural imagery and themes in some Augustan works are almost too obvious to mention, such as in the *Georgics*, essentially a prolonged ode to farming. It is nonetheless necessary to examine specific agricultural images in Augustan poetry, especially those that occur in descriptions of the country life. In Roman sources, though the *genres* of the agricultural country life and the pastoral country life are distinct,¹⁸ in poems about farm life, the category “agriculture” includes both farming and herding. Tibullus frequently places images of farming and herding side by side,¹⁹ and Horace’s *Carmen Saeculare* mentions the “*fruges pecusque*” all at once (ln. 29). Tending both the crops and the flocks, forms of rural production, was the central focus of the country life in Augustan poetry.

Agriculture might provide the core topic of a poem, (as in the *Georgics*), or it might be part of a passing reference in a poem dedicated to something else entirely. Even within Vergil’s *Georgics*, there is a particular country scene in which agriculture is not being discussed in its own right, but as part of the idyllic country life. The end of Book II describes a “*felix*” farmer, who worships the country gods (ll. 490-530). The farmer’s work, with its “*incurvus arater*,” interrupts a description of the evils of urban life, and he turns the earth, picks fruits, and cares for the “*fetus pecorum*” (ll. 513-518). It is only after these details of his life that the narrator moves on to the farmer’s happy home and holidays (ll. 523-529). In this case, agriculture is not only part and parcel of rural life, it is the foremost facet. Similarly, the “*beatus*” country man in Horace’s second epode is introduced while he “*paterna rura bubus exercet suis*” and spends the first twenty lines participating in various aspects of farm life (ln. 3). His agricultural work is

¹⁸ As discussed in the Introduction

¹⁹For example, in Tibullus I.1.29-32 and I.2.71-72.

complemented by the later images of his helpful wife, who herself is marked by her contributions to the farm, and his dear children (ll. 39-40).²⁰ In both the scene of the *felix* farmer in the *Georgics* and the *beatus* farmer in Epode II, the men are first described in their roles as farmers, and the agricultural imagery is a major part of the passages.

Both the *Georgics* and Epode II are centered on agriculture, but other poetry that is not directly dedicated to farm life also utilizes agricultural imagery; even the love elegists Tibullus and Propertius bring agriculture into some of their works. Tibullus refers to agriculture extensively in his elegy, even establishing it as a key theme in his first book by making it a major part of I.1.²¹ Though few of his poems take place in the country, the *idea* of the countryside looms, and Tibullus's narrator imagines it as the setting of happiness and love. Thus when he daydreams about being with his love Delia in I.5, his daydream is as much about country living as it is about his mistress, and this happy life is introduced not through *amor* but through agriculture: "*rura colam, frugumque aderit mea Delia custos / area dum messes sole calente teret*" (ll. 21-22). The first facet of his daydream is not Delia, but his own work on the farm. Delia is named for the first time in the poem in these lines, and even in the descriptions of her, as she treads the grain and the grapes and counts the flocks, her agricultural actions feature most prominently (ll. 21-25). Many of Tibullus's poems contain agricultural features revolving around love,²² and agriculture is found outside of amatory context as well.²³ Though Tibullus writes love elegy, his work is often also an homage to the countryside, and *rura* is as important a theme in his poetry as is *amor*.

²⁰ The literary role of a spouse and children will be discussed further below.

²¹ For more on the establishment of *amor*, *rura*, and *militia* as key themes in Tibullus, see Julia Gaisser's article "*Amor, rura, and militia* in Three Elegies of Tibullus: 1.1, 1.5, and 1.10."

²² Tibullus I.1 and II.3 are examples.

²³ Tibullus I.7.29-36, I.10, II.1, II.5 are examples.

Propertius, on the other hand, focuses more on city life, and though his references to agriculture are few and far between, he nonetheless includes descriptions of farm life in his works. In II.19, though Cynthia has left him, he insists, “*laetor quod sine me devia rura coles*” (ln. 2). There she will find not the sins of urban life, but rather the “*pecus et finis pauperis agricolae*” (ln. 8). Life in the city is contrasted with the routines of the countryside, the plowing, pruning, and crude country worship. Though Propertius is primarily an urban elegist, even he includes agricultural imagery in this poem, and he depicts the countryside as a not unpleasant alternative to his city.²⁴

In Country Music

Agricultural imagery occurs throughout contemporary country music as well, across song types and artists, and as in Augustan poetry, it might make up the primary theme of a song or be in a single line. Craig Morgan’s “International Harvester” (2006) is an example of the former, a song completely dedicated to farming. In it, the narrator sings about driving down the road in his “international harvester” while the regular commuters behind him complain. A life of agricultural production is contrasted with that of the “late to work road-raged jerks” who are hurrying to their jobs (see fig. 1); the farmer works slowly and mocks the other folks who are hurrying and becoming pointlessly angry. The chorus emphasizes the agricultural nature of most aspects of the narrator’s life:

Cause I’m a son of a third generation farmer

I’ve been married ten years to a farmer’s daughter

I got two boys in the county 4H

²⁴ It is important to note here that Propertius’s poems about the countryside are heavily ironic. Propertius’s narrator is at home in the city, and his idealized country life is not one that he or Cynthia would ever truly enjoy living. That being said, even though he may be mocking the conception of the countryside as a paradise free from vice, he is acknowledging and utilizing this conception, indicating that it was a familiar trope of this period. For more discussion of Propertius’s irony, see Chapter II.

I'm a lifetime sponsor of the F.F.A.
Hay! That's what I make
I make a lotta hay for a little pay
But I'm proud to say
I'm a God fearin' hard workin' combine driver
Hoggin' up the road on my p-p-p-plower
Chug-a-lug-a-luggin' 5 miles an hour
On my International Harvester

This song has agriculture as its main focus, but it also uses agriculture to depict other aspects of a country life, such as a wife and children, financial hardship, and religion, all facets of rural life that are discussed further below.



Figure 1: The narrator in a harvester and a “late to work road-raged jerk” in a BMW²⁵

Luke Bryan’s “Rain is a Good Thing” (2009) is another song that describes the country life through agriculture. The song is an homage to the importance of rain in rural

²⁵ Source: Morgan, Craig. “International Harvester.” Broken Bow Records, 2007. Web. 21 April 2011.

life because rain is necessary for food production; whereas “up in the city, the weatherman complains” about rain, in the countryside people understand its value. The lyrics begin with the narrator’s father “looking up at the sky” and hoping for rain, then continue to the narrator and his girl making love during the rain, and the final verse describes how the whole community enjoys the rain. The rain is not praised because it brings profit and money; rather “rain makes corn, corn makes whiskey, whiskey makes my baby feel a little frisky.” Rain brings a good harvest, but it also brings romance and entertainment to farming communities, and the song ties these all together using the imagery of rain and corn. The music video is especially telling, as it features Bryan giving a “Welcome to the Farm” concert on a plantation (and of course, in the rain) and girls running through fields of crops, and it includes interviews with veteran farmers at the beginning. Though the agricultural theme of the lyrics could be lost in the focus on romance and fun, the video relates these back to the farm.

Many country songs use a substitute for agriculture in their depictions of country life: the garden. Rhiannon Evans describes how Roman gardens can “create the effect of cultivated countryside” even within an urban environment (302); gardens may represent key features of rural life in an urban setting, and the same seems to be true in country music. Small-town life is not as dependent on farming as rural life is, yet agriculture is nonetheless included in the image of the simple life that country songs often describe, so references to gardens are a useful way to invoke features of agriculture in a suburban rather than a rural setting.

In John Michael Montgomery’s “Good Ground” (2004), the narrator mentions both farming and gardening together. In the first verse, the narrator’s father brings him

and his siblings to their “new home,” described as “an ocean of fields” with “rich farmland.” Even though the chorus refers to the narrator’s roots in this “good ground,” cultivation itself is not described. In the second verse, however, the narrator finds an arrowhead “diggin’ in [Mama’s] flower bed.” This verse contains the crucial observation that “seasons change and childhood goes” and leads up to the narrator’s marriage and children, yet rather than using a description of corn or cotton to describe the cyclical nature of life, the narrator mentions his mother’s garden.

Other songs completely supplant agriculture with gardening imagery, as does Josh Turner’s “In My Dreams” (2003), in which the narrator finds his wife “in [her] garden, pulling weeds between the rows” and ends the verse with “watch what love can grow.” This miniature version of agriculture, complete with a reference to “rows,” is a useful symbol for yielding fruits, just as crop agriculture can be. Carolyn Dawn Johnson’s “Simple Life” (2004) , a song that serves as an ideal image of small-town life does not mention farming, but the narrator does want to “watch [her] garden grow” and plans to “cut [her] grass after church every Sunday,” turning the mowing of lawn into a routine that may be symbolically equivalent here for the routines of farm life. This substitution is important for songs in which the life described is a suburban rather than a rural country life, a response to the changing reality of what entails a “country life” in America, and it is also an agricultural alternative for women in particular. It is often, as demonstrated in these examples, the woman who gardens rather than farms. Actual crop production seems to be associated strongly with men, and whereas in Roman poetry, wives did help with certain farm tasks, in country music the garden is where women are able to access agriculture.

The role of agriculture in both Augustan poetry and country music is pervasive, and even in poems and songs that have little to do with farming, agricultural imagery appears. It might set a scene, as the “*pastor cum grege languido*” does in Horace’s Ode III.29.21, and “daddy’s farm” does in Brooks and Dunn’s “Proud of the House We Built” (2007). Often it is used as an analogy in poems and songs about love, such as the comparison between Cornutus’s wife and everything a farmer can harvest in Tibullus II.2.12-14. In country songs this trope is especially common; for example, in Trace Adkins’s “I Can Dig It” (1999), the narrator tells his love, “if you’re holding onto seeds you’ve been wanting to sow, if you want to break ground, I’ll break out the hoe, if want a little garden where some loving can grow, I can dig it.” Agriculture is not merely part of songs about the countryside, it is an important literary tool across Roman poetry and country music.

Poverty

With the life of the farmer comes not only hard work, but also meager rewards. Yet authors do not shy away from this aspect of rural life in their works; rather, they embrace it, so much so that they turn poverty into a virtue. Wealth is not a good thing, they say, and there are more important things in life than money. Wealth and luxury are often associated with immorality and/or the city, and the writers are happy with only a little because their life is so fulfilling even without material gain.²⁶

In Rome

Roman poets frequently adopt a persona marked by poverty; this is a standard poetic device. Most likely, the poverty they claim was solely part of their persona, though

²⁶ Chapter III will expand upon the theme of wealth versus poverty.

scholars have argued over to what extent poets truly were poor.²⁷ Elegists, in particular, plead “a poverty that is voluntary” in their poems, especially when addressing their expensive mistresses (James 227).²⁸ Yet poverty occurs as an aspect of life in the countryside as well. Poets nostalgically refer to a Golden Age in which people’s wealth “*messis et arbor erant*.”²⁹ Propertius contrasts this explicitly to modern Rome in III.13, and insists that “*aurum omnes victa iam pietate colunt*” (ln. 51); whereas the Golden Age was a time of simplicity and poverty, right worship and loyalty, now money conquers all.

Poverty and virtue were associated in the Roman world, and the virtuous poor man was a oft-invoked figure. He was the hard-working man who was devoted to his duty, be it farming or soldiering, and he was happy getting by on just enough.³⁰ Tibullus’s narrator adopted this image, claiming in I.1 that he hates wealth (ln. 78) and that “*parva seges satis est*” (ln. 43). This theme pervades his work, as he prefers a hard bed with his mistress to a soft one alone.³¹ For him, the life of happy country life is not one of *divitias* but of *paupertas*, and he claims to be content with that.

In Country Music

Poverty, in the form of being working-class, is so important to country music as to be almost an implicit theme in all of it. Country music is meant to be about the working man; its roots are in the lives of working-class people, often farmers but also poor factory

²⁷ See Margaret Atkins and Robin Osborne’s *Poverty in the Roman World* for the assertion that “there is no real sense in which these men were poor” (97), or P. M. W. Tennant’s “Poets and Poverty: The Case of Martial” for the opposing viewpoint that in certain cases poetic poverty was based on genuine want.

²⁸ James’s article discusses this relationship in depth. The expensive mistress is another trope that occurs occasionally in contemporary country music. For example, Tim McGraw’s “It’s a Business Doing Pleasure With You” (2009) reads much like parts of Tibullus II.4 and Propertius III.13.

²⁹ Propertius III.13.26. See another example from elegy, Tibullus II.5.40-41

³⁰ Atkins and Osborne describe this development (13), and William Fitzgerald discusses “*labor* as a form of *virtus*” (320-393).

³¹ A sentiment expressed in I.2.77-78 and echoed at the end of II.3, and one strikingly similar to that of Aaron Tippin in “I’ll Take Love Over Money” (2002) discussed below.

workers, and these working-class roots continue up to the current day,³² when the themes of hard work and living hand-to-mouth consistently pervade country music, even though the hands of “today’s working middle class... are probably on a computer keyboard” (Cusic 2). Songs often refer to the problem of mounting bills and “just gettin’ by,”³³ and though a lack of wealth can be a sign of a good life, not all country songs glorify poverty. For decades poverty was a complaint; though songs praising simplicity, and especially songs minimizing the detriments of poverty, are common today, there are still songs that turn an ambivalent or even critical eye onto the life of the poor.³⁴ Singers might sing that they are content with their lot, but often they lament their hardships as well. This difference between the attitude toward poverty in the Roman sources and the country sources may be related to the fact that Roman poets likely did *not* experience poverty, while many country singers and songwriters have.

Yet just as was the case with the claims of poverty by Roman poets, there is a potential conflict between what country singers sing and their actual income; hearing a platinum-selling artist sing about either the glories or the downfalls of poverty hardly rings true. However, singers and songwriters find ways around this.³⁵ Singers often refer to working class backgrounds,³⁶ and a singer’s biography may be a crucial part of his or

³² See *Country Music, U.S.A.* (pg. 43) and Don Cusic (pp. 1-2). Also see Fox’s *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*, which documents the author’s fieldwork exploring “country music as a working-class culture” (ix).

³³ For example, Brooks and Dunn’s “Proud of the House We Built” (2007), Luke Bryan’s “Chuggin’ Along” (2009) and “Pray About Everything” (2007), Van Zant’s “The Hardest Thing” (2007), Montgomery Gentry’s “My Father’s Son” (1999) and Brad Paisley’s “Cloud of Dust” (1999)

³⁴ Ambivalence toward poverty and rural life will be discussed further in Chapter II.

³⁵ For more on the art by which country singers portray themselves as “working class,” see Peterson’s *Fabricating Authenticity*, a detailed look at the way everything from an artists voice to his clothes is part of making a “real” working-class image.

³⁶ For example, Luke Bryan’s “We Rode in Trucks” (2007), Trace Adkins’s “A Working Man’s Wage” (1999), Montgomery Gentry’s “Something to Be Proud Of” (2004), and Rodney Atkins’s “My Old Man” (2003).

her story. Sometimes, in order to balance the reality of a star's life with an appeal to his or her audience, songs avoid the question of poverty altogether and refer to other joys of a country life, carefully making no mention of the trappings of wealth.³⁷ Yet there also exist plenty of songs that refer to a life of poverty that clearly is not the singer's,³⁸ and audiences seem to have no problem with this. They appreciate that they feel the song relates to their lives and accept the fact that the singer is adopting a persona. Despite the actual income level of singers or audience, the appeal of "blue collar" extends to songs about the countryside, of which limited financial means is a common component.

Country songs often glorify "the simple life," and they either view wealth as not important or specifically tout the benefits of being working-class. Narrators without luxuries or wealth are often very happy with their lives; the narrator of Josh Turner's "Everything is Fine" (2007) insists that he has "peace of mind" and "can't complain" even though he "ain't never been rich." In Van Zant's "I'm Doin' Alright" (2005), the narrator is content with his old car and his lady who is "good at stretchin' a dime" because his life "is simple and it suits [him] fine." The narrator of Montgomery Gentry's "Lucky Man" (2007) is lucky for reasons other than wealth; though sometimes life gets him down, he has his family, his "old truck," and "supper in the oven." He sings, "God's given me a pretty fair hand, got a house and a piece of land, a few dollars in a coffee can," and these modest means are enough for him. The twice-platinum hit "Chicken Fried" (2008) by the Zac Brown Band also focuses on the non-material aspects of life,

³⁷ For example, Luke Bryan's "Welcome to the Farm" (2009), Blake Shelton's "Home Sweet Home" (2008), Josh Turner's "In My Dreams" (2003), Trace Adkins's "I'm Goin' Back" (2001), Van Zant's "Things I Miss the Most" (2005), and Carolyn Dawn Johnson's "Simple Life" (2004).

³⁸ For examples, see Josh Turner's "Everything is Fine" (2007), Brooks and Dunn's "Proud of the House We Built" (2007), Sara Evans's "These Four Walls" (2005), and the obvious distinction between the narrator in Kenny Chesney's "Never Wanted Nothing More" and "Wife and Kids" (both 2007).

and the narrator's house is "not much to talk about, but it's filled with love that's grown in Southern ground." "Chicken Fried" expands on the insignificance of wealth and the importance of other blessings in the second verse when explains, "it's funny how it's the little things in life that mean the most, not where you live, what you drive, or the price tag on your clothes. There's no dollar sign on a piece of mind—this I've come to know."

Aaron Tippin's "I'll Take Love Over Money" (2002) makes a more explicit jab at wealth, in which lonely riches are compared with fulfilling poverty. In the song, eating McDonald's "underneath a big oak tree, snuggled up to the one you love" is better than a gourmet meal, a state fair with a kiss is better than a Parisian vacation alone, and an old pickup truck with your love "singing in your ear" is better than a Ferrari with an empty passenger seat. Just as Tibullus longed for an earthen bed snuggled up to Delia in the place of a lonely but sumptuous "*Tyrius torus*" (I.2.75), the narrator of "I'll Take Love Over Money" would be happy with a lower-class lifestyle and lower-class love.

These songs all exhibit a preference for living simply, with little material wealth but other emotionally fulfilling assets. Country music replaces wealth with love and community, placing a family-oriented and neighborly countryside in opposition to the isolated city. This attitude explains why the narrator of "International Harvester" could sing that even though he did not make much money, he was "proud to say" he was a farmer. He had his heritage, his wife and kids, and his tractor, and that was satisfying enough for him.

Family

The "wife and kids" are a vital part of the ideal life country singers espouse, just as family often is a feature of country life for Augustan poets. In the Roman sources, the

wives are helpful companions on the farm, while many modern songs about the countryside make reference to a spouse as a significant contributor to the narrator's happiness. In both, the wife may also be a mother, and children often complete the picture of a fulfilling rural life. Even ancestors are included, and the descriptions of family that demonstrate this imply a pattern that characterizes both family development and agricultural change.

In Rome

The image of the happy country farmer across Latin literature often includes a wife, offspring, or both. In Epode II, they are mentioned in the same couplet, the "*pudica mulier... atque dulces liberos*" (ll. 39-40), and the wife's tasks are listed for eight lines; she gathers firewood, pens and milks the flock, and prepares the evening meal. Though children (and even marriage) are not an important part of the narrator's country life in Tibullus, Tibullus I.10's praiseworthy man³⁹ is introduced into the poem through his children. Both his wife and his children help with the daily tasks, the son watching the lambs and the wife heating water (ll. 41-42). In the *Georgics* as well, the wife works along with the farmer; in one evening scene, for example, the wife weaves or cooks while the husband carves (I.291-296). Thus the wife and family are frequently linked with the farm; both are important in its management and effectiveness.

Even apart from their work on the farm, love and family bring joy to the farmer. Tibullus's poems, though usually not explicitly describing marriage, do emphasize that the narrator can be happy as long as he is with his love; in II.3, for example, he states that he would not mind the hard farm work as long as he might gaze upon his mistress (ll. 5-

³⁹ Described as "*potius laudandus*" (ln. 39)

8). A wife and children are mentioned together as a source of great happiness in II.5, in a tender scene between father, children, and grandchildren:

fetus matrona dabit, natusque parenti
oscula comprehensis auribus eripiet,
nec taedebit auum paruo aduigilare nepoti
balbaque cum puero dicere uerba senem. (Tib. II.5.91-94)

No one is at work here; there is nothing to be done here except to enjoy one's family. The farmer at the end of *Georgics* Book II does work, but he, too delights in time with his family. Not only are the care and keeping of his progeny motivation for him to work (ll. 514-515), but they are also his comfort at home, as his "*dulces pendent circum oscula nati*" (ln. 523). Though many poems explain the practical services a wife and children can provide on the farm, the emotional fulfillment gained from marital and filial devotion are also acknowledged.

Love and the countryside seem to fit seamlessly together in the Latin sources, so much so that in love elegy the harsh passions and rejections of love are tempered by rural settings. This contrast is stark in Tibullus; in the countryside, Delia's role as cheating mistress is transformed into that of unofficial but loving wife.⁴⁰ The difference between the country Delia and the city Delia is made clear especially in I.5, when the narrator inserts the imagined picture of Delia as a farmer's wife and gracious country hostess into a poem about his disappointment that "*non frustra quidam iam nunc in limine perstat*" (ln. 71). In his urban life, Delia has betrayed him, so he retreats into his fantasy in which

⁴⁰ Gilbert Highet describes how "love means the deep affection of husband and wife... when he speaks of sleeping peacefully with Delia in his farmhouse" (115), and Gaisser's "*Amor, rura, and militia*" claims that in the countryside, "*amor* is transmogrified into domesticity, and Delia is presented as a wife" (69).

she is a dutiful mistress of the farm. The understanding of the countryside as the setting for secure love continues into Tibullus II; in II.3, even though he expresses a resentment toward farm life, the farm is nonetheless where he can be with his love Nemesis. In the city she is the “*saeva puella*” whom the narrator must win with gifts (II.4.6), but when she moves to the countryside, though she is separated from the narrator at first, he can at least follow and plow “*ad imperium dominae*” (II.3.81).

Even Propertius, whose poetry is almost entirely urban, refers to the countryside occasionally as the place where love can be fulfilled. Though Cynthia’s love may be bought by others, and her life is marked by dinner parties and luxury,⁴¹ when she goes to the countryside, the narrator is convinced that there, she will be faithful. In II.19, her rural location takes her far from the temptations of the city, and so the narrator does not think that she will be unfaithful. Propertius also contrasts the city where “*avidis nox sit pretiosa puellis*” to the ancient countryside, in which love was bought not with spices and gold but with fruits and flowers (III.13.1). Though he describes a nostalgic countryside and claims that such a place no longer exists, he nonetheless situates impoverished love in a rural setting. Even in elegy generally marked by harsh love, unfaithful women, and the importance of money, in the countryside, love becomes simple and pure.⁴²

Not all focus on family life in the Roman countryside revolves around marriage and children; ancestors also play a role. They are closely tied to the farm, and the “*paterna rura*” make an appearance almost immediately in Epode II (ln. 3), while Tibullus II.1 begins with an invocation to crops and fields and to the “*ritus a prisco*

⁴¹ See, for example, I.15 for her infidelity and luxury, II.16 for her infidelity and love of wealth.

⁴² As mentioned above, this image of love is not actually what the narrator desires; he prefers love in the city precisely because it is harsh rather than pure. He explains in I.1.5 that he has learned “*castas odisse puellas*.” Yet, according to these poems, he still does associate fidelity and simplicity with the countryside, which explains, perhaps, why he remains in the city.

traditus... auo" (ln. 2). These inheritances extend not only backward, but also into the future, and many poems emphasize this cycle. Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*, though not about the country life, is an example of a poem that demonstrates this pattern, as it repeats the importance of fertility and progeny while also mentioning the ancestors of Rome. This corresponds to the circumstances of its performance; it was sung at the *Ludi Saeculares*, celebrations marking the beginning of a new rotation of Rome's history.

Vergil implies such a cycle of posterity when he describes the farmer whose annual labor⁴³ "*patriam parvosque nepotes / sustinet*" (*Georgics* II.514-515). Sustaining both the fatherland and grandchildren demonstrates in a single clause the progression of society; from *patris* and *patria* to *nepotes*. Tibullus, too, illustrates the succession of generations of farmers when he mentions that Peace made wine "*funderet ut nato testa paterna merum*" (I.10.48) and when he brings posterity into a domestic scene in which a man becomes a father and then a grandfather (II.5.91-94). This scene demonstrates the importance of family at both the domestic level and the societal level. Just as a wife and children are important throughout descriptions of rural life because they help with farm work and provide comfort to the farmer, they are also necessary for Rome as a whole, because they represent how Rome will carry on to new generations, as it has from the old.

In Country Music

Family in country music is an even more pervasive theme; it appears frequently through spouses,⁴⁴ children, parents, grandparents, and grandchildren. Depictions of an ideal country life include love and children, often in tandem like the Epode II couplet

⁴³"*hinc anni labor,*" *Georgics* II.514.

⁴⁴ Usually the spouse is a wife, for, as explained in the introduction, male artists dominate this type of music.

mentioning “*pudica mulier... atque dulces liberos*” (ll. 39-40). Rodney Atkins’s “Simple Things” (2009) celebrates the wife and baby together as part of the country life, singing, “it’s the simple things that strum my strings; the baby cries and momma sings her back to sleep—oh, it sounds so sweet.” Another of Rodney Atkins’s songs, “Got it Good” (2009) has a stanza dedicated to praise of family life, introduced by the image, “Oh it’s amazing—that boy in my yard is half of my wife... the other half is every last bit of me.” This image thus uses a child as a symbol for the Christian⁴⁵ ideal of marriage, in which man and wife “are no longer two, but one,”⁴⁶ so that matrimony and family appear and converge in only a few lines.

Josh Turner’s “Everything is Fine” also features a child and her mother together, and its music video clearly demonstrates the role of love and family in a country life. The song invokes both a daughter and her relationship to the narrator’s wife in a single image when he sings, “got a little girl that looks like her mama.” Both the “woman of [his] dreams” and the “girl that looks like” her are important parts of what makes his life so praiseworthy. Though the lyrics themselves devote only a portion to love and marriage, the official music video returns to these themes in the final renditions of the chorus, though the chorus itself is unrelated to love and family. The video emphasizes love in the countryside by including an image of couples dancing in a field of wildflowers. Two of the couples are young, but one is older, potentially pointing to the life cycle mentioned earlier. As this image fades into the background, a father and son with a fishing pole and a small child learning to read in an armchair fade in, followed by a woman smiling down

⁴⁵ The importance of Christianity in country music will be expanded on below, but “Got it Good” establishes itself as in a Christian milieu in this song by the chorus that says, “Oh, I pass good prayer to the man upstairs,” and by the conclusion to this particular stanza in which the narrator is so thrilled at his good fortune that he says it “makes you fall down on your knees.”

⁴⁶ *NIV* Matthew 19:6, Mark 10:8

at an infant in her arms. Though the song itself does feature marriage and family, the music video makes these themes even more pervasive.

The songs mentioned so far have all included a wife and children as part of rural life, but the image of marital bliss is not confined to men singing about wives. When female singers describe their ideal countryside, they, too, include love and children. Carolyn Dawn Johnson's "Simple Life" expresses a desire to "always have someone to hold" and to "watch [her] babies grow." Though these are not the focus of the song, they are nonetheless enumerated as aspects of the simple life. Sara Evans devotes the entire song "These Four Walls" (2005) to marriage and motherhood; in it, a woman has discarded her dream of stardom to live content taking care of her children. She explains that she has no regrets:

I'm not famous but my kids think I'm a star
 I'm not rich, but I've made a million memories so far.
 I may not be a model, but my man thinks I could be.
 I may not be from royalty, but in these four walls,
 I'm the queen.

The narrator's life is not glamorous or luxurious, but her husband and children keep her happy, just like the wife and children of male narrators do.

Though romantic love and offspring often appear together in songs about the country life,⁴⁷ love without offspring appears to fit in the countryside just as naturally.

⁴⁷ For example, Josh Turner's "In My Dreams" (2003), Trace Adkins's "My Heaven" (2005), Van Zant's "Things I Miss the Most" (2005), Brooks and Dunn's "Proud of the House We Built" (2007), Toby Keith's "My List" (2001), Montgomery Gentry's "My Town" (2002), and Craig Morgan's "I'm Country" (2005).

The songs “Cotton Pickin’ Time”⁴⁸ and “Farmer’s Daughter”⁴⁹ both tell stories about young men who found love when they were (or were supposed to be) working on the farm. These songs refer to past events from when the narrators were young, and both have sexualized descriptions of love. In “Cotton Pickin’ Time,” the narrator is on his way to the cotton patch when he sees “Becky Morgan, skinny dipping nude” and after a moment of staring, he rapidly undresses to join her. That summer he spends so much time with Becky Morgan that he loses his job, though he insists “you don’t need too much money when you’ve got a Tupelo honey keeping you cool in the Mississippi hot sunshine.” The themes in “Farmer’s Daughter” are similar, although unlike Becky Morgan’s boy, the narrator works hard despite his romantic escapades. He begins a job working on a farm until sundown, and the work is so hard that he considers quitting until he sees the farmer’s daughter. Though their activities are not quite as explicit as those in “Cotton Pickin’ Time,” the sexual element is clear in the chorus when the narrator says, “just when I thought it couldn’t get no hotter, I caught a glimpse of the farmer’s daughter.” Both songs bring together agriculture and romance in their descriptions of the narrator’s youth.

These songs have a “twist” ending, however, when they end not with a nostalgic reminiscence back to the fleeting love of youth,⁵⁰ but with enduring love. The narrator of “Cotton Pickin’ Time” has “come a long way since then,” but he bought both the cotton gin and the mill where the couple used to swim and now they still go skinny-dipping. The triumphal final chorus that states, “every cotton pickin’ morning, I wake up with Becky

⁴⁸ Blake Shelton (2004)

⁴⁹ Rodney Atkins (2009)

⁵⁰“Cotton Pickin’ Time” does end with a reminiscence, but it is the joint reminiscence of the narrator and Becky Morgan, “in the days of [their] December” rather than the narrator looking back to long-lost love.

Morgan” declares that this is a lasting love rather than a summer fling. “Farmer’s Daughter” echoes this sentiment, explaining, “we got married last spring, and there ain’t no better life for me.” A teenage crush has matured into marriage, and the final chorus is in the present tense as it claims, “just when I think it can't get no hotter, I come home to the farmer's daughter.” In both songs, agriculture and romance complement each other, and romance beginning with sexual impulses ends with a happy marriage.

Just as love and marriage can exist in country songs with no indication of children, the image of children may be brought up independently of love. Children that are not necessarily related to the narrator may turn up in a song as an aspect of rural life, and the potential romance that gave them life is either implicit or irrelevant. In Bryan’s “Rain is a Good Thing,” for example, a song primarily about agriculture and romance, children appear in a scene of country celebration; while everyone is dancing and cuddling, there are “kids out playing in a big mud puddle.” In this case, the children do follow a line about romance, but there is no implication that the children are the result of this particular romance. Rather, the kids seem to be just part of the country scene; they are a sweet demonstration of how everyone in the countryside enjoys the rain that helps the corn grow. Children also play a crucial role in the title track from Rodney Atkins’s album *It’s America* (2009). They are not the narrator’s children, and neither their parents nor love generally show up in the song. The song begins by explaining that while driving, the narrator saw a lemonade stand with “the cutest kids [he]’d ever seen.” After taking his lemonade he thought, “Man, what a picture perfect postcard this would make of America,” and this leads him to sing a song praising America, focusing almost entirely on

suburban and rural America.⁵¹ Children in these cases are not explicitly related to marriage or love; rather, children in their own right are associated with country life.⁵²

Children may have another purpose in country lyrics; they may be mentioned along with their grandparents to demonstrate the ever-renewing cycle of generations. It is worth noting, before describing this process, that unlike in Roman rural poems, where parents rarely appear, parents and grandparents play a significant role in country music. Many songs are exclusively devoted to describing the grandparents or parents of the narrator.⁵³ These songs often celebrate the beauty of the country life as well, such as Blake Shelton's "My Neck of the Woods" (2003), which uses descriptions of the narrator's father and grandfather to praise agriculture, hard work, God, and the neighborly helpfulness of rural people. Such songs may also have the nostalgic tone that Roman poems describing the ancestors of the Golden Age do,⁵⁴ looking back, lauding, and lamenting the disappearance of a better time.

Yet parents and grandparents often also serve to attest to the repetitive course of life, in which children become parents become grandparents, and so on. Certain songs make use of this trope by telling a story involving the narrator's parents, and then replacing the parents and narrator with the narrator and his children in a following verse. John Michael Montgomery's "Good Ground" connects this familial cycle to "rich farmland" and "good ground," a bit like the *paterna rura* of Roman poetry. In the song, the narrator's father drives all night and finally stops at "an ocean of fields" that will be

⁵¹ Though he does mention "cities and farms" in the chorus, the song describes nothing else distinctly urban and instead lauds aspects of the United States associated with the country life.

⁵² For more on the association of children with the countryside, see Chapter IV.

⁵³ For example, Van Zant's "Help Somebody" (2005), Tim McGraw's "Home" (2002), Rodney Atkins's "My Old Man" (2003), Justin Moore's "Grandpa" (2009), Montgomery Gentry's "Something to be Proud Of" (2004), and Craig Morgan's "God, Family, and Country" (2003).

⁵⁴ Discussed in Chapter II and Chapter III.

his family's new home. The chorus praises this environment as a place where the narrator could grow up happily and where his "roots run deep." The second verse marks the narrator's transition from his childhood to adulthood when he "laid down [his] homemade bow for a brown-eyed girl," and in the final verse, the narrator takes the place of his father. In this case, it is he who "drove all night... stopped the car, [and] said, 'Wake up, kids, here we are. This is our new home.'" "Good Ground," an ode to rural lands as ideal for raising children connects agriculture to the cyclical nature of posterity, in which each generation takes the place of the previous one.

This trope is used in many songs about the countryside, and it appears in different ways. In Rodney Atkins's "About the South" (2006), for example, it is a single line that states, "[I] grew up down here, and it's where I'll raise my kids." Montgomery Gentry's "Daddy Won't Sell the Farm" (1999), connects agriculture and the generational cycle, like "Good Ground" does. Despite the development surrounding him, the narrator's father refuses to sell his lands and continues to farm. In the final verse, one generation replaces the other:

One day he's gonna leave it all to me,
 And I'll start my own branch of the family tree.
 They'll get the message written on the roof of the barn:
 Daddy won't sell the farm.

Though this song puts a somewhat positive spin on living an agricultural life amidst urban development, another Montgomery Gentry song from the same album has a discontented take on the farm life. In "My Father's Son" (1999), the son replaces the father but rather than enjoying a country life, his bones are tired and he requests, "Lord,

help me guide this plow beneath my feet, and turn this earth over one more time.” In this case, the narrator is part of more than “three generations” of farming, yet the endless cycle is that of “just barely getting by.” Thus country songs often use family to discuss, whether positively or bittersweetly, how history repeats itself from generation to generation, especially in rural life.

Though family may serve many functions in both Latin poetry and modern country music, the theme of the pattern of generations is especially fitting in works about rural life. Changing cycles, death, (re)birth, and repetition characterize both agriculture and family development in the long term. This might be why love, marriage, and children are seen as so fitting in the countryside; not only are they important in the work and joys of daily routine on the farm, but they are also part of the changing but repeating life cycle that defines agricultural life. Yet there may be another element that explains why the countryside is the setting for fulfilling marriages and raising children. Rural areas are depicted as naturally more virtuous⁵⁵ than urban areas in both Roman poems and country songs, in part because they are more pious.

Piety

Proper worship and respect for gods/God are a significant aspect of country life in both Augustan poetry and country music, even though the form that proper worship takes has changed drastically between the two genres. The countryside in Augustan poetry is marked by rituals, sacrifices, and festivals, generally devoted to agricultural gods, while

⁵⁵ It is not always so straightforward as this, especially considering that there are country songs describing the indulgence and laziness of people in the countryside, for example Josh Turner’s “Trailerhood” (2007). Country music is characterized by the “conflicting impulses of Puritanism and hedonism” (*Country Music, U.S.A* 28), and there is certainly tension between the image of the virtuous small towns and the less virtuous people who may inhabit them. This tension would be the topic for another paper entirely, but for now it is worth noting that not all descriptions of rural life are completely positive, but that many songs about the joys of the “simple life” focus on piety and virtue as characteristics of this life.

country music often emphasizes the important role of God in rural life. In both cases, piety tends to be represented symbolically and in passing; though it is a significant part of the country life, it is not the defining aspect.

In Rome

Roman poems about the countryside often mention the devotion its inhabitants have for their gods and the rituals that demonstrate this devotion. When Alfius imagines the life of the happy man on the farm, he imagines that the man gives back some of what he harvests to the rustic gods Priapus and Silvanus (ll 21-22). The household gods are also part of the scene; Alfius's description of the country life ends with the image of the "*renidentes Lares*" (ln. 66). The characters in Tibullus's countryside show their devotion to the country gods as well; even Delia, when transformed into the mistress of the farm, dutifully offers "*deo... agricolae pro vitibus uvam / pro segete spicas, pro grege... dapem*" (I.5.27-28). Tibullus even begins his second book of poems with farmers purifying their crops before the narrator asks for blessings from both Bacchus and Ceres (II.1.1-2). He insists that today is a holiday, a time when "*requiescat arator*" and work may be suspended (ln. 5). In only a few lines, the farmer demonstrates his piety by ritual, by supplication, and by honoring a holiday.

The idealized country farmer in the *Georgics* is also portrayed participating in festival and making offerings to the gods. He uses his holiday to rest, lying on the grass, and also to pour out sacrifice to the god of wine (II.527-529). These rituals and festivals in honor of agricultural gods were an important part of the poetic rural life. Because they coincide with agricultural cycles, the frequent inclusion of rituals in descriptions of the countryside may be another way to emphasize the rhythmic nature of farm life.

These rituals and festivals were part of urban life as well, but poetry especially associates piety with rural people. Both Propertius and Tibullus contrast the piety of country life with the distorted forms of religion that occur in the city. In Propertius II.19, Cynthia participates in the rustic worship of country gods, just as Delia does in Tibullus I.5. Cynthia's offerings at "*incultum sacellum*" and "*agrestes foci*" are considered preferable (for the narrator) to the urban temples and their "*peccatis plurima causa.*"⁵⁶ Tibullus compares urban worship to rural worship more subtly in I.5, in which the narrator's daydream of Delia caring for the farm and making the appropriate offerings to the gods is framed in a scene of urban ritual. This urban ritual involves not pious worship but "*carmine cum magico... anus*" and when the narrator abandons his daydream, he instead imagines Delia succumbing to "*sagae praecepta rapacis*" as she "*currat et inguinibus nudis ululetque per urbes*" (ll. 12, 59, 55). Though the contrast between impious urban worship and appropriate rustic ritual is not as explicit here as in Propertius II.19, nonetheless Tibullus does imply that the country life is marked by a more proper form of religion than city life.

In Country Music

The countryside of country music, too, features religion as a fundamental aspect of the ideal rural life. The religion is always Christianity, and just as gods and rituals are used as symbols of piety in Roman poems, country songs invoke God and church to describe the religious devotion of people in the countryside. Christianity is an important part of the history of country music generally⁵⁷ and many singers include songs of

⁵⁶ Propertius II.19.13-14, II.19.10

⁵⁷ For more on Christianity in country music, see Curtis Ellison's chapter "Salvation" (pp. 102-160), Dorothy Hortsman's discussion (pp. 32-37) and Cusic 164-167.

worship on their albums. Yet religion is important even in songs that cannot be classified as “songs of worship,” and God and Christianity make frequent appearances in songs about the country life.

The piety of country folk is usually depicted through symbols of Christianity, such as church, devotion to the Bible, baptism, or prayer. “Church” might be church service or the presence of the physical building, and it has become a trope so standard that even the phrase “Sunday morning” connotes piety. In Johnson’s “Simple Life,” the narrator wishes for the routine of mowing the lawn “after church every Sunday,” and in Montgomery Gentry’s “My Town” (2002), not only the narrator, but also the entire community is described as pious, for “come Sunday morning service at the Church of Christ, well, there ain’t an empty seat to be found.” Justin Moore’s chart-topping “Small Town USA” (2009) considers “a Sunday morning that’s full of grace” to be one of the blessings of small-town life. Church might also be part of nostalgic memories of childhood, as in Brooks and Dunn’s “Red Dirt Road” (2003), in which the narrator recalls how he and his friends would “walk to church on Sunday mornings.” Kenny Chesney’s “I Go Back” (2004) similarly remembers “back to a pew, preacher and a choir, singing about God, brimstone and fire, and the smell of Sunday chicken after church,” so that not only religion but also the routine associated with Sunday is important. The church building may also be used to imply piety, as in the narrator’s “need to go where the stained glass windows glow” in Tim McGraw’s “Still” (2009), or in Brad Paisley’s “Too Country” (2001), in which amazing grace and a tall steeple are used to refer to

Christianity. Whether explicitly mentioned or implied, church is an integral and oft-mentioned aspect of rural life in country music.⁵⁸

Some songs choose to invoke Christianity through other symbols, such as the Bible or baptism. “About the South,” Rodney Atkins’s song describing everything the narrator loves about the South, includes the line, “we believe the Book of John and we drive John Deeres.” Belief in the Bible signifies religious devotion, and in this case it is connected through a pun to agriculture. Justin Moore uses regular reading of the Bible as descriptions of piety in both “Country Boy” and “Good Ole American Way” (2009), and he twice refers to baptism as an important aspect of his life in “The Only Place That I Call Home” and “Grandpa” (2009). He is not the only artist to do so; Luke Bryan describes his childhood friends as “baptized and still wanting to sin” in “We Rode In Trucks” (2007), encapsulating the tension between piety and sin that recurs throughout country music. Thus specific facets of Christianity may stand in for religious devotion as a whole.

Another common way to invoke the importance of Christianity in the narrator’s life is to mention prayer. The prayer may be personal, as it is in Toby Keith’s “My List” (2001), in which the narrator says that he should make time to “say a little prayer.” It may be communal and routine, as in Van Zant’s “My Kind of Country” (2007); in this song, the narrator includes “say[ing] grace at suppertime” as an important part of the good

⁵⁸ For more examples, see Josh Turner’s “Way Down South” (2006), Blake Shelton’s “Home Sweet Home” (2008), Kenny Chesney’s “Never Wanted Nothing More” (2007), and Craig Morgan’s “Sweet Old Fashioned Goodness” (2006).

country life. Often the prayer is one of gratitude; Atkins's "Got it Good" and Turner's "Everything is Fine" both include prayers "to thank the Lord"⁵⁹ for his benefits.

Many songs use more than one of these symbols, and "Everything is Fine" uses almost all of them, while also referring to the importance of routine more generally. In it, the narrator describes the entire experience of a Sunday routine:

Sunday morning, hear the church bells ringing.

Let's go and see who's getting baptized,

We're gonna take us a Sunday drive,

'Cause everything is fine.

Both the holy rituals of church and baptism are important to the narrator, but just as in Johnson's "Simple Life" and Chesney's "I Go Back," a non-religious ritual is also part of what makes him happy. Furthermore, baptism is expressed as commonplace occurrence, a ritual that potentially invokes the rhythms of life, just as Roman references to festivals invoke agricultural rhythms.

In both the poetry of Augustan Rome and country music in modern America, religious ritual is seen as an important facet of the country life. In Rome, the religion of the city was tainted by sin and superstition, while the country people performed proper rites that went back generations. And though modern America is becoming increasingly secularized, a fact that country songs both acknowledge and lament,⁶⁰ Christianity is still alive and well in small-town and rural America, according to country music. In both

⁵⁹ This quote is from "Everything is Fine"; "Got it Good" includes the line "I pass a good prayer to the Man upstairs just to thank Him like I should."

⁶⁰ For example, Brad Paisley's "This is Country Music" (2010) and Toby Keith's "American Ride" (2009).

cases, writers use symbols of religious life and particularly references to ritual in their descriptions of ideal rural life.

Two Examples

Having now examined the use of agriculture, poverty, family, and piety in depictions of an idealized country life, the similarities between Tibullus I.1 and “Where the Green Grass Grows” are even more obvious. Agriculture is a central aspect of the works, and this section of I.1 establishes the farm and farm work as important themes not only of this poem, but also of the entire first book.⁶¹ The narrator plants vines and trees and emphasizes agricultural cycles⁶² in his portrayals. This agricultural imagery pervades the poem, and he uses it to render other aspects of rural life. Poverty is represented by the narrator’s “small field” and meager herds. Even wealth is measured not in gold, but in “the profits that a great harvest brought.” Piety, too, is understood as generally agricultural; Tibullus uses agricultural gods and offerings as illustrations of religious life, as the narrator mentions Ceres and Priapus specifically, and the rituals shown are grounded in farming. The narrator prays “at the pole alone in the fields,” Priapus is “in our blooming gardens,” and he offers “fresh flowers,”⁶³ “a fruitful crown,” and a lamb to the Lares. All these aspects of rural life are not only mentioned in the poem, they are described and understood *through* the essence of rural life, agriculture. The final facet, love and family, is the exception; the *domina* here is not explicitly related to the farm, though she features in the narrator’s life on his farm. Yet in some ways his love is tied to the country life, for *amor* makes up the final section of the poem, as both are major topics

⁶¹ See Gaisser’s “*Amor, rura, and militia* in Three Elegies of Tibullus: 1.1, 1.5, and 1.10.”

⁶² In vocabulary like “*maturum tempus*” (ln. 7) and “*novus annus*” (ln. 13). See Miller 116-117.

⁶³ Literally translated, “*florida sarta*” is “flowering garlands.”

of the poem. Thus Tibullus I.1 serves as an example of almost all⁶⁴ the facets of the country life discussed here, and, significantly, it relates most of them back to agriculture.

“Where the Green Grass Grows” also neatly sums up these aspects of the country life in its chorus. Just as the narrator of Tibullus I.1 would plant fruit trees and vines, the narrator of this song wants to “watch [his] corn pop up in rows,” and while Tibullus’s narrator wanted to “*cubantem... dominam tenero continuisse sinu,*” McGraw’s narrator sings that he hopes to “every night be tucked in close to you.” Along with mentioning his love, McGraw’s narrator (unlike Tibullus’s) also includes children in his description of his ideal life, and he implies that the countryside is a good place to raise them because it is “where the good Lord’s blessed.” Thus in three lines, McGraw has neatly encapsulated how agriculture, love, family, and religion converge in rural life. The theme of poverty, which is significant in Tibullus I.1, does not explicitly appear in this song, though the “glitter” of the city that the narrator rejects might connote urban wealth.

In addition to the references to these specific characteristics of the country life, these two works have another feature in common: Both are fantasies. Tibullus I.1 is mostly in the subjunctive, and he does not describe his real life and activities, rather he asserts what he thinks would make him happy. In “Where the Green Grass Grows,” too, the narrator is explaining a contrary-to-fact dream. He is still dragging himself through urban life, dealing with the traffic and troubles of his life in the city. The chorus that describes the country life so well follows the words “I’m gonna” and thus describes a potential future. These two celebrations of the country life do not claim to be the reality of their narrator’s lives; rather, they represent an ideal.

⁶⁴ Marriage and family are absent from this poem, though love does make an appearance, as described.

Chapter II: Idealization and Reality

This idealized country life is often, as in Tibullus I.1 and “Where the Green Grass Grows” depicted as unreal. In Augustan sources, the ideal country was generally considered only that: an ideal that has not yet, or cannot be, achieved. In country music, there is more diversity of mood and tense, and sometimes the ideal pastoral scene *is* depicted as a reality.⁶⁵ Yet there is a particular cache of songs that, like the Augustan poems, refer to the country ideal as a future possibility, a fantasy, or a nostalgic remembrance. Furthermore, there are plenty of songs about rural life in country music that also show the real side of it, filled with hardship and heartache. Though the artists may romanticize the pastoral life, they also may admit that such a life is not their reality at present, leaving an audience to wonder if such a life is even truly possible.

Hopes and Dreams

In Rome

Tibullus’s poetry is a prominent case in which the country life is written in a significant subjunctive. In I.1, for example, the narrator “*serat teneras vites*” (ln. 7) and he asserts that the simple life is enough for him “*si licet et solito membra levare toro*” (ln. 44); throughout the poem, many details of his ideal life are phrased as potentials or jussives. The poem is a prolonged request to the gods, for he claims, “*nam veneror,*” and he desires his prayers to be answered in the form of a country life of simplicity (ln. 11). Yet there is little sign that this is an expected reality, rather than a fantastic daydream.

⁶⁵ For example, Luke Bryan’s “Rain is a Good Thing” (2009), Josh Turner’s “Everything is Fine” (2007), Blake Shelton’s “Green” (2008) and “My Neck of the Woods” (2003), Van Zant’s “I’m Doin’ Alright” (2005), and Zac Brown Band’s “Chicken Fried” (2008).

Later appearances of the country life are explicitly a daydream, as in I.5, in which the narrator “*fingebat haec*,” with *haec* being his images of Delia tending the farm, playing with the servants’ children, and serving his friend Messalla (ln. 35). This romantic interruption contrasts the rest of the poem, the reality filled with superstition, jealousy, and illness, a world in which “*dolor in lacrimas verterat omne merum*” (ln. 38). In I.2, the narrator’s sad reality of separation from Delia, marked again by magical rites, transforms for a brief scene into a fantasy of pastoral life with Delia. It is marked as unreal by both a *si* and a subjunctive: “*ipse boves mea si tecum modo Delia possim / iungere et in solito pascere monte pecus*.” Even II.3, which acknowledges some hardships of country life (ll. 10-11), is still set primarily in the subjunctive. For Tibullus’s narrator, the countryside is a fantasy, a location where he can place his love and where it might thrive. Yet it is not realistic; the idea of taking either elegiac mistress to the countryside is clearly absurd and the countryside is merely his imagined escape.

The countryside serves the same function in Horace’s Epode II. Most of the poem depicts an idyllic country life, but this image turns out to be only the fantasy of Alfius the moneylender. After imagining this life, he continues with business, calling in debts and re-lending money; he will never actually have the life he describes (ll. 67-70). In this case, the poetic countryside is not reality, for it is merely an urbanite’s vision of what the country life would be like.

In Country Music

This phenomenon reappears in country music as well; as Bill Malone explains in *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’*, country music sometimes “appeals to us through nostalgia or fantasy, the desire to go back to ‘the little cabin home on the hill’ where we never

lived” (13). Many country songs admit that this cabin is unreal in their very lyrics, by portraying the country life as a fantasy, just as the Latin poems do. The idealized country life is often what the narrator aspires to or looks back on, rather than the life he lives.

The former is the case in Carolyn Dawn Johnson’s “Simple Life” (2004), a song about a girl who wants to escape her life on the road in exchange for peace in the countryside. In it, the narrator who has “seen too many city lights” reminisces about small town life. The image begins as a reality, as “there’s nothing like coming home,” but the next line transforms it into an unfulfilled wish: “I wanna sit on my front porch and drink my lemonade.” The rest of the song proceeds like this, with all the manifestations of the “simple life” as clauses dependent on “I wanna.” This type of song, because it desires a life with which the narrator is familiar, but which s/he is not living at the moment, is a hybrid of nostalgia and fantasy. Another example of this is Trace Adkins’s “I’m Goin’ Back” (2001) in which, disenchanted and disgusted with L.A., the narrator is going “back to the farm.” In this song, his desire to return is stronger than “I wanna,” as he states, “I’ve *got* to get back” (emphasis mine). This farm life purportedly exists; he left it and can return to it at will. Yet the song never actually depicts his homecoming. Though he asserts, “My truck is gassed up and I’m packed—I’m goin’ back,” the song ends with this still in the works, and the daydream remains a only a dream for the time being. Van Zant’s “Things I Miss the Most” (2005) also supposedly refers to a real situation, yet one which the narrator is not living at the moment. In the song, the narrator, who is a singer, recalls how throughout his life as a star, he looks forward to:

That last half mile of dirt road
And that tractor on the hill,

To those dogs out barking in the yard
 And that tractor in the field,
 And those kids up on the front porch
 Screaming, “Mama, Daddy’s home!”

The singer describes these as remembered features of his life, but they are significantly absent from his present reality. Though the country life is depicted as real in this case, the song is based on longing for a life that the narrator must leave behind.

Other songs base the lyrics on longing, explicitly portraying the country life as a daydream. Josh Turner’s “In My Dreams” (2003) is one such example, describing a life with a wife in the country as the narrator’s goal. The “little sky blue house beside a small stream” is not only the narrator’s dream, it is his love’s dream, too: “In my dreams, your dreams come true.” This country life is a potentially attainable fantasy, but as it stands, it is only in the dreams of the narrator. In a similarly titled song, Mark Wills’s “In My Heaven” (2001),⁶⁶ the country life is hyper-idealized and then described as the narrator’s “heaven.” This countryside is even more unreal than the typical countryside, as there is “no lying, crying, or dying young” along with plenty of other fantastic characteristics, many related to the countryside. The lyrics mention “football with no referees,” yodelling angels, and fish that “bite most anything” rather than prominent characteristics of the city. Furthermore, the song uses the standard country trope of a handshake as a contract, and considers it as part of heaven. Whereas many songs use this trope to portray their vision of life in the countryside,⁶⁷ this song describes this as fictional, for it is only in the

⁶⁶ Later re-released by Blake Shelton in 2003 on his album *The Dreamer*.

⁶⁷ For example, Rodney Atkins’s “Famer’s Daughter” (2009), Justin Moore’s “The Only Place that I Call Home” (2009), and Lonestar’s “Little Town” (2005)

narrator's heaven that "folks do business like they oughta," only there that "a good firm handshake works just fine." These songs use "dreams" and "heaven" to show that a picturesque life in the countryside may only be an invention.

Nostalgia

In Rome

Many poems and songs place the idealized country life in a daydream, while other works show the unreality of this life by making them part of a nostalgic past. In Roman works, the concept of a Golden Age from times past recurs frequently. The understanding of the "Golden Age" in Augustan literature is so complex as to be an area of study unto itself, and scholars have many opinions on the nature and evolution of the Golden Age. The Golden Age is associated both with a period in which the world provided for men without work (as in Tibullus II.3.67-70), and with a time of happy farming (as in *Georgics* II.513-540). Many scholars examine the changing faces of the Golden Age,⁶⁸ and some argue that Golden Age nostalgia extends to more than one stage of human development ("Tibullus 2.3 and Vergil's Tenth Eclogue" 138). Generally, regardless of the role of *labor*, the Golden Age is depicted as a time in the distant past before cities, war, and weapons, and in this period Rome's ancestors lived peaceful, simple lives in the countryside. The Golden Age permeates many descriptions of the country life; it is the Golden Age that Propertius and Tibullus refer to when describing the simple gifts men in the countryside used to woo women,⁶⁹ and the farmer at the end of *Georgics* II is compared to men of the Golden Age. His life is the kind that the ancient Sabines lived once, and Romulus and Remus lived as well (II. 532-533); before Jupiter's reign, before

⁶⁸ For example, see some differing opinions in Smolenaars (pp. 399-400) and Perkell (pp. 3-8).

⁶⁹ In Propertius III.13 and Tibullus II.5

gluttony, impiety, and war, “*aureus hanc vitam in terris Saturnus agebat*” (ln. 538).

Though the life of the farmer himself is not explicitly described nostalgically, it is compared to and associated with a time long past.

Yet the Augustan Age is also associated with the Golden Age, for poets expressed hopes that the Golden Age was being ushered back in with the rise of Augustus. Romans were concerned that their nation was absorbed by vices such as decadence and vice,⁷⁰ and they desired a return to an age of morality and simplicity, a return that Augustus’s rise indicated might be, at some level, possible. This desire permeates Augustan poetry, and, as Stephen Harrison puts it, “the idea that the Golden Age has now returned is a key feature of Augustan art and literature” (“Decline and Nostalgia” 291). Thus the Augustan vision of the countryside is influenced by a Golden Age countryside and articulated as a hope that the poets’ own era would revert to this simpler, purer time.

In Country Music

Many country songs describe idyllic rural life through times past as well, by situating it either in the narrator’s adolescence or in the era of the narrator’s parents or grandparents. Luke Bryan’s “We Rode in Trucks” (2007) uses many standardized characteristics of the countryside to describe the setting in which the narrator grew up. The song explains that there, “you either lived on a farm or wished you did, and Jesus always walked close by our side.” Though the life he describes is “a part of [his] soul,” it is no longer his reality. The song is mostly in the past tense, and there is no indication

⁷⁰ Decadence versus simplicity will be discussed in Chapter III.

that he will return to a life of “hauling hay in the field with the radio on.” The country life he describes is his past, and it exists as part of his present only internally.⁷¹

Some songs portray the childhood home in the country as a place to where the narrator *can* return, an isolated location where the values of rural life remain strong. It is a place of retreat, as in Blake Shelton’s “That’s What I Call Home” (2001), a song describing the narrator’s childhood home, where his mother and father still live out old-fashioned values. When the narrator walks “through that old screen door, the world can’t touch [him] anymore,” and this world “where [he] grew up” remains a world of peace, maintained by his parents, to which he can return. Tim McGraw’s “Home” (2002), and Justin Moore’s “Grandpa” (2009) have similar scenes, in which the countryside where the narrator grew up serves as a refuge. For the narrator of Sara Evans’s “Missing Missouri” (2005), a childhood home is only nostalgia. Though she thinks of back home as a potential place of refuge, unlike the narrators of the other songs, she does not return there. When she is on the road, she might “close [her] eyes and say a little prayer,” and in the chorus she describes how she can tell when she is “almost home,” but her joyful homecoming and escape from a life of fame are not portrayed as they are in the other songs. The childhood home is an idyllic setting apart from and isolated from the real lives of the narrators; they can imagine it, and perhaps even spend some time there, but they cannot truly inhabit such a place.

Throughout both Augustan poetry and modern country music, the countryside is often idealistically portrayed, but writers often acknowledge that the countryside they

⁷¹ For more examples of songs describing the countryside as the narrator’s past, see Josh Turner’s “Way Down South” (2006) and “Lord Have Mercy on a Country Boy” (2006), Brooks and Dunn’s “Red Dirt Road” (2003), Kenny Chesney’s “I Go Back” (2004) and “Back Where I Come From” (1996)

describe is not real, or at least is not real for them. Sometimes they describe the ideal country life as fantasy, a life they seek or desire, while other times they use nostalgia to portray it as a life someone once lived, in both cases maintaining that this life might be only an illusion.

Other Portrayals of the Countryside

In Rome

Though many poets wrote idealistic portrayals of rural life, Roman literature also includes more realistic depictions of the countryside. Vergil's *Georgics* draws from at least two prose agricultural handbooks, Cato's *De Agricultura* and Varro's *De Re Rustica*.⁷² Both were written earlier than the *Georgics*, Cato's work around 160 B.C.E. and Varro's shortly before the *Georgics* were published. Though both praise the country life, neither idealizes it as the poets do. Piety and family do not make as prominent an appearance, though *De Agricultura* has a section on ritual (138-141), and *De Re Rustica* is written for Varro's wife. Both texts do include these as aspects of rural life, but they are neutral characteristics rather than sources of great peace and joy. Certainly poverty is not associated with the characters of these tracts; *De Agricultura* even describes farming as one of the best ways to make money. The farm life in both is praised as virtuous,⁷³ and it is claimed that "*ex agricolis et viri fortissimi et milites strenuissimi gignuntur,*" but it is also characterized by work and careful adherence to rules like those described in these handbooks (*De Agricultura* preface, ln. 4). Later poets took aspects of the life described in these tracts and used them to idealize the country life. Though Vergil includes many of

⁷² For more on these sources in the *Georgics*, see Janet Lembke's Introduction. (xxi-xxiii).

⁷³ *De Agricultura* (preface) And *De Re Rustica* III.1-5

the rules listed and borrows to some extent from prose works' ideology,⁷⁴ he turns the handbook into poetry, thus turning the farmer's *life* into an image.

Not all portrayals of rural life in the Augustan era were positive, and many works were marked by irony and tension in their depictions. Propertius, as shown above, utilized common ideas about the countryside, and though he described it as preferable to the city in some ways, such a description was certainly tongue-in-cheek. A world full of prudish women, crude ritual, and simple joys was hardly one that Propertius's narrator would be comfortable in, much less enjoy. Propertius's poems are generally subtly critical of the vision of domestic life Augustus was attempting to encourage. Thus, though Propertius might use the same poetic tropes of the countryside that Tibullus, Horace, and the *Georgics* do, he used them more ironically. He did not deny that the countryside might be a place of simplicity, family values, and piety, he just did not see why those would be desirable characteristics.

Another depiction of the country life that does not wholeheartedly endorse it can be found in Vergil's *Eclogues*. The *Eclogues* are in many ways the quintessential Augustan bucolic poems, with their poetic shepherds, lush natural imagery, and descriptions of simple joys. They often include the rural characteristics enumerated in this paper, referring to agriculture, poverty, love and family, and religion; however, like Propertius's poems about the countryside, though they often characterize it through standard symbols, the merit of those characteristics is held to be in question. They also have even less grounding in or relationship with reality than other Augustan works about country life. The *Eclogues*, which draw heavily from Theocritus's *Idylls*, are arguably

⁷⁴ Yet Vergil also undermines the ideology of the farmer/soldier, as will be discussed in Chapter III.

more about poetry than they are about the pastoral, and they are riddled with tension, contradiction, and irony regardless of the subject at hand.⁷⁵

Nothing can be certain with regards to the *Eclogues*, but it does seem clear that they are characterized by ambivalence. Eclogue I begins the collection with a dialogue that already embodies ambivalence toward the countryside in many ways. On the one hand, it includes complaints about how nature can be cruel (ll. 14-15), about sending one's works to the "*ingrata urbs*" (ln. 34), and about land confiscations (ll. 67-71), yet it also ends with a hesitant endorsement of the country life. In the last few lines, one participant invites the other to rest for the night and dine on simple country fare (ll. 79-81), thus endorsing the vision of the countryside that the poem also attempts to confound. Eclogue III also includes competing visions of the countryside; the "*iniusta noverca*" and the "*anguis in herba*" are as much a part of rural life as are the "*mollis herba*" and blooming plants.⁷⁶ A discussion of ambiguity in the *Eclogues* would be (and has been) an article or book in its own right, yet it is undeniably worth mentioning in passing here. Because of the nature of these poems, which are rife with different sorts of complexities than those in other rural Augustan poems, and because of their reliance on metapoetics and their relationship with the *Idylls*, these pastoral poems cannot be classified along with the other poems discussed in this paper. Though they are about the countryside and their vision of the countryside often intersects with this vision in other Augustan poetry, they are a category unto themselves.

In Country Music

⁷⁵ For a good overview of interpretations of the *Eclogues*, see Joy Connolly's "Picture Arcadia."

⁷⁶ Eclogue III, ln. 33; ln. 93; ll. 55-58. For more on tension in this Eclogue, see Celia Schultz's discussion.

Ambivalence, tension, and paradox are also characteristics of country music, and there is a longstanding tradition of songs with negative descriptions of the countryside, as opposed to (though occasionally intersecting with) idealization of rural life. Even the small town anthem, Justin Moore's "Small Town USA" (2009), begins with the admission that "a lot of people called it prison when I was growing up." Those people seem to learn their lesson, for the narrator explains later, "people leave and then come right back," and the song is generally positive, but it is significant that the song included these unfavorable opinions of the countryside.

This ambivalence is commonplace in songs about small-town life, and Kenny Chesney's "In a Small Town" (2005) embodies such tension. The song describes the drug use, isolation, and legacy of strife in the narrator's hometown, yet it also expresses his longing to return. Like the people who left and returned in "Small Town USA," the narrator himself left "as soon as [he] could," but now he is surprised to admit: "now I can't believe I wanna go back there." The song explicitly points out the dual nature of small towns by claiming, "sometimes it was heaven, sometimes hell, kind of like church, kind of like jail," epitomizing the attitude toward the countryside of country music as a whole.

This dichotomy also characterizes specific characteristics of rural life. Though agriculture is often idealized in the subgenre of the happy country life, the harshness of farm life could be a subgenre unto itself. Luke Bryan's "Chuggin' Along" (2009), from the same album as "Rain is a Good Thing," shows the other side of farming, the consequences when, perhaps, rain does not come. In it, the farmer must "keep chuggin' along, keep singing [his] song, put the plow in the ground till the daylight's gone." Even

though he cannot pay his bills, he finds comfort in his girl; the song describes the downside of poverty, while also urging the subject to meliorate them with good times. Many songs, however, have a more unforgiving understanding of farm life. In Brad Paisley's "Cloud of Dust" (1999), an old farmer chugs along through misfortune but is unable to find long-term comfort. Because it has not rained, his crops have died, and "it won't be long before the bank finally places a lien on the farm." Despite his imminent ruin, the farmer is "holding his ground" and refuses to give up even though "it's getting tough." Though "he's keeping his faith in the Lord up above and praying for rain," it is clear that he will have to give up his way of life, and rather than ending with redemption, the lyrics end with the dooming weather forecast: "Sunny and mild, with no chance of rain." This song showcases the hard side of a life based in agriculture, and perhaps this is the more realistic view.

Van Zant's "The Hardest Thing" (2007) depicts the downfall of a farm, yet it also includes negative portrayals of another characteristic of country life, marriage. The song begins with a story similar to that of "Cloud of Dust," with a third-generation farmer who has "a mountain of bills." His grandfather's ghost tells him that it might be time to give up, "to do the hardest thing [he'll] ever have to do." The second verse deals with another common theme of country music: domestic abuse. In this verse, a woman "can't stand the fear in her little boy's eyes—daddy's come home acting crazy too many times." Yet she does not yet have the will to leave, and her mother must tell her to do "the hardest thing." This song, though it includes institutions that other country songs cherish, agriculture and marriage, it also describes situations in which they are not positive aspects of life; rather, they are hardships that must be abandoned.

The erosion of family life is not only acknowledged, it is even singled out in other songs. John Michael Montgomery, the artist who sang “Good Ground” (2004), a portrayal of a happy childhood and a positive case of generational repetition, had also sung previously about failed marriages and their effects on family life. “No Man’s Land” (1995) is the story of a woman “sifting through the ashes of a love that’s been and gone,” and who must now “be Mama and Daddy all by herself.” In the later song “Little Cowboy’s Cry” (1998), the child of a failed marriage is the primary subject, along with the pain he and his parents feel. In these two songs, the adversity of single parenthood and the heartbreaking effects of divorce are in contrast to typical songs about the countryside in which marriages endure. Yet even enduring marriages can be depicted negatively, as is the case in Little Big Town’s “You Can’t Have Everything” (2010). This song uses the idealized vision of country life to undermine it, for it features the beauty of nature and “the family photograph, the house, the life, the dream” as the backdrop for marital discord. Though the life of the narrator seems like a picture-perfect country life, she and her husband “don’t talk anymore,” and she laments that, though her life seems mostly complete, she still cannot have this one item of great importance. Chapter III will examine what it is that these marriages do not have that makes them failed marriages, as opposed to the healthy marriages in other songs.

Some country songs describe the downside of rural life, potentially undermining the subgenre of the idealized countryside, yet one recent release, James Wesley’s “Real” (2010), both praises and undermines typical country values. “Real” uses agriculture and marriage specifically to show that though country people might truly be virtuous, they also suffer as the result of their lifestyle. Though country wives are chaste, (at least in

comparison to TV housewives), and one marriage described lasts fifty-seven years, that marriage ends with “a band of gold trembling with fear,” as a husband watches “his angel slipping away.” The song also praises those involved in agriculture by claiming, “where I live... the survivors are farmers in John Deere hats,” yet it portrays the hardship of farm life simultaneously, lamenting too much rain, not enough rain, and other setbacks. The lyrics tear down to reality the dream of “a little sky blue house beside a small stream”⁷⁷ found in some country songs by describing “a little dream house with a big old foreclosed sign.” This particular song cherishes rural institutions, such as agriculture and farming, yet it also describes the hardships and risks involved in such a life. Thus it serves as a bridge between the subgenre of the idyllic country life and the subgenre that focuses on the adversity inherent in such a life.

What is perhaps most significant about these types of songs, which criticize aspects of rural life, is that they are always described as the reality. Unlike songs about the ideal, which may be categorized as daydream or nostalgia, these songs are purportedly telling real stories of America, (as “Real” explicitly states). One such song, Blake Shelton’s “Same Old Song” (2001) even criticizes country music for its idealization and demands that songs depict a more realistic vision, showing that country music is capable of metapoetics as well. The narrator claims that although he likes country music, he is “tired of the same old guy with the same old song about the same old love,” and he asks “Mr. Songwriter” to spend a day with him as he drives his old car to his job with his unpleasant boss and “then write me a song about sunshine and flowers.”

⁷⁷ These lyrics from Josh Turner’s “In My Dreams” (2003); for other similar visions of dream houses, see Trace Adkins’s “I Came Here to Live” (2006) and “My Heaven” (2005), and Brooks and Dunn’s “Proud of the House We Built” (2007)

This song recognizes the trend in country music to idealize, and its narrator wants a more truthful vision. That this song comes from the same artist as “My Neck of the Woods,” and from the same album as “That’s What I Call Home” demonstrates the tension between the ideal and the real, each competing with and complementing the other.

The poets and songwriters who write their visions of blissful country life write an invented countryside, and they are often aware of its unreality. They understand that their cherished institutions and values are called into question by reality, and they construct a pastoral world where these institutions and values remain intact. Though the idealized country life of farming, blissful poverty, family, and piety is a utopian vision, in both Augustan poetry and country music, this does not mean that it is not significant or meaningful. The writers write their fantasies, and in those fantasies can be seen their desires and values, and potentially even the collective desires and values of their era. Analysis of these idealized images is educational, for, as Ruth Levitas explains, we can come to understand a society through its desires and fantasies (8). The poetry that depicts the countryside as blissful and serene and the songs that strip the countryside of its vices and hardships both remove what is harmful and wrong with the real world. Not only in Golden Age idyllicism, but in any idealized representations “is the potential for putting into question the values of the great world, or the world of power,” as Sarah Spence asserts (27). Thus an examination of these works allows one to understand what is considered wrong or harmful in the society, for it is removed, and what is considered beneficial a desirable, for it is emphasized. This can provide a clearer look into the fears and hopes of each era, and what Augustan Rome might have in common with modern America.

Chapter III: Ideology

In order to discover what in particular these works are reacting against, it is useful to turn away, momentarily, from the hopes embodied in the idealized countryside to the values writers seem to be rejecting. Both Roman poetry and country songs use foils for the idyllic country life, contrasts that embody why, exactly, rural life is preferable to these other lifestyles. The anti-values of the countryside are most explicit in songs about the ideal countryside's opposite: the city. By understanding what is considered to be wrong about the city, one can better interpret what is especially praiseworthy in the countryside, and potentially, the aspects of society to which the idealized countryside is a response.

Contrasts to the Countryside

In Rome

The Augustan world was one partially defined by the distinction between the city of Rome and the countryside of the Roman world, and this contrast appeared throughout the literature of the era. Though the city is often the setting of Roman literature, with no judgments being made about it in relation to the countryside, poetry about rural life often explicitly contrasts the city of Rome with the countryside. The latter depicts some aspects of Roman life, while the former is the seat of others. In particular, the luxurious life of a Roman aristocrat is generally an urban life, and this contrasts it to rural life.

Horace's invitation to Maecenas to join him at his farm in Ode III.29 emphasizes the simplicity of the countryside as opposed to the riches of the city of Rome. Maecenas is encouraged to desert his "*fastidiosa... copia et moles*" (ll. 9-10), and the "*opes*" of

Rome is mentioned in tandem with the more overtly negative “*fumus*” and the “*strepitus*” (ln. 12). Wealth is not a blessing, since it is subject to fickle Fortune and accompanied by uncertainty; a merchant toward the end of the poem worries that his boat will sink, so he makes “*miseræ preces*” to the gods that his imported goods might not enrich the sea (ln. 58). Thus Rome’s epithet “*beata*” which is often a positive descriptor meaning “blessed” or “happy,” seems better translated as “rich” in this poem, and in this context it takes on a more sinister connotation (ln. 11). The countryside is defined in part by how unlike the city it is, for it is “*sine aulaeis et ostro*” (ln. 15), and the country life is simple and carefree. Even in Horace’s Epode II, in which the country home described is a “*dis domus*,” the description of the country life is still contrasted with luxury of the city (ln. 65). The urbanite Alfius imagines that simple farm fare, a “*daps inempta*” (ln. 48), would be more satisfying than foreign delicacies. Despite the fact that the farmer’s life he dreams about is a rich farmer’s life, it is still characterized by simplicity and contrasted with the life of a rich money-lender. The country daydream is, in both these poems, a simple country life and clearly different from the luxurious life of the city.

Urban life is marked by excess in love elegy as well, and elegists contrast the importance of wealth in the city with the simplicity of the countryside. Propertius, as mentioned in Chapter I, discusses the difference between his Rome, in which love of money has overtaken virtue, and the ancient countryside, in which people were happy with mere fruits and flowers (III.13). Though his criticism of wealth may have been satirical, he was nonetheless satirizing an idea that carried weight at the time, that contemporary Rome was corrupted by wealth, as opposed to the Golden Age countryside.

Tibullus, in particular, as a writer of poetry that is sometimes urban love elegy and other times an ode to the countryside, demonstrates this contrast. In II.3, in the midst of his mistress Nemesis's time in the countryside, the narrator describes how, if he becomes rich, she might walk through the city adorned with his expensive gifts (ll. 54-55). The couplet introducing this possibility ends with "*per urbem*" and contains a vocabulary of wealth: *praedae, opes, luxuria* (ll. 53-54). The interjection of an urban setting precedes several lines describing foreign luxuries; thus the passage directly equates urban life with riches. The theme of wealth continues in the next poem, II.4, which describes in detail the gifts Nemesis demands of the narrator; he must give her imported fabrics and jewels in order to obtain her affections. Though these images are not explicitly set in the city, there are a few urban details⁷⁸ in the poem and none typical of the countryside. This poem demonstrates the luxuries of urban life, and it can be seen as a continuation of II.3's passage describing the gifts that Nemesis enjoys in the city.

In the *Georgics*, as well, the city, though it does not often appear, is the setting of luxury. Vergil's praise for the country farmer includes a description of urban life in which the city is marked by greed, politics, and violence, which in turn are inextricably linked to each other. Wealth appears repeatedly, but the farmer need not concern himself with "*aulae et limina regum*" (II.504). While men caught up in the politics of the city "*condit opes... defossoque incubat auro*" and attack towns for gemmed cups and luxurious bedding (II.506-507), the country man prefers working on his farm, producing rather than destroying. Thus this passage rejects wealth and gain in favor of a more modest country lifestyle.

⁷⁸ The "*sacra fana*" and "*custos*" are examples (ll. 23, 32)

Yet it is not only wealth that opposes the farm life in this scene; war is also contrasted with the countryside. Though not directly related to the city, the *militia* often serves a purpose similar to the city in country poems, as an example of a type of life to which the country life is preferable. In the *Georgics*, war is associated with wealth and presented as an unpleasant alternative to farming. This connection between war and wealth occurs frequently in Tibullus's works as well. In Tibullus I.2, the narrator chooses for himself poverty with Delia over being a soldier "*totus et argento contextus, totus et auro*" (ln. 71). Tibullus I.1 introduces this theme into the book when it explicitly pits a military life against the country life; though Messalla may achieve great glory and riches in war, the narrator prefers a simple life.⁷⁹ When the narrator discusses Messalla himself, he does not criticize soldiery, but at the beginning of the poem, he does disparage the "*labor adsiduus*" that accompanies a martial life (ln. 3).

In I.1 and I.2, the narrator asserts that war is not to his own benefit, but in I.10, he laments the effects of war more generally. He asks what "*ferus et vere ferreus*" man first discovered "*horrendi enses*" and thus gave war to men (ll. 1-2). Still, war is associated with the corrupting influence of wealth, for it "*vitium est auri; nec bella fuerunt / faginus adstabat cum scyphus ante dapes*" (ll. 7-8). When wealth and war were unknown, when there were no *arces*,⁸⁰ the shepherd could sleep peacefully, and the narrator wishes that such a life were his. This poem sets *militia* against the pastoral life, and later in the poem, Peace is explicitly depicted as a friend of the countryside, a force that allows the fields to prosper (ll. 45-49). Thus I.10 embodies a set of values that not only condemns war, but

⁷⁹ As "Amor, Rura, and Militia in Three Elegies of Tibullus" asserts, in Tibullus's works and I.1 especially, "love and the country-side, or love *in* the countryside, is viewed as Tibullus's alternative to participation in war."

⁸⁰ This word likely means "citadels" in this context, but it is also a word for "cities."

also treasures peace and equates it with the countryside, even up to the final couplet that requests that Peace arrive with the grain and fruits of a successful harvest.

It is worth noting at this point that soldiery and agriculture are not inherently separate in Roman ideology. Cato explicitly states in *De Agricultura* that farmers make the best soldiers, and Cincinnatus is considered a Roman hero for wiping off the sweat and dirt⁸¹ of his farm labor in order to take up the toga of a politician and lead troops in the defense of Rome. Though the soldier/farmer was an idealized model of a Roman citizen, both Vergil and Tibullus reject this model in their works. In the *Georgics*, politics and war are both denigrated in favor of agricultural work, and the happy farmer gives no thought to the tumult that absorbs Rome (ll. 495-514). Indeed, the poem specifically critiques the transformation of farmer into soldier by describing it as a “*nefas*” in which the honor of the plow is neglected in favor of the “*rigidus ensis*” (I.505-508). Tibullus, likewise, seems to see no value in putting down his imaginary plow in favor of a *horrendus ensis*. The passages above from Vergil and Tibullus consider agriculture to be at its best when not mixed up with the military, and indeed they contrast the life of a farmer with the life of a soldier.

In order to interpret the utopian imagery of the countryside in Roman poetry, it is helpful to examine the aspects of Roman society that are explicitly differentiated from the countryside. Both the city and soldiers are written as separate from and also as *inferior* to the countryside. If the country life represents certain values, urban and military life represent the obverse of these values; significantly, urban and military life are both associated with wealth. Throughout poems that set the countryside against the city, the

⁸¹ “*absterso pulvere ac sudore*” (*Ab Urbe Condita* III.26.10).

city is defined by luxury and excess,⁸² as opposed to the simple life of the country. Similarly, war is associated with the booty of battles, with a man who “*gemma bibat et Sarrano dormiat ostro*” (*Georgics* II.506), rather than the peaceful poverty country folk enjoy. When describing the country life, poets seem to be particularly choosing its simplicity and security over the extravagance and anxiety that defined other forms of Roman life.

In Country Music

Country music also critiques its own society through an idealized countryside and its opposite. The “country” of country music is consistently distinguished from the city, which makes an appearance in many songs. The American city is characterized as unlike the country, and just as in Roman poems about the countryside, urban life is found inferior to rural life. Yet the particular negative aspects of the city are not quite the same as the Roman city, though they are similar. Though the city might be depicted as wealthy, it is more frequently separated by a class distinction; the difference between wealth and class is a subtle but important one. Being upper-class in country music is not so much defined through money as through attitude; high-class urbanites are often pretentious and stiff, and their pretension may be a mask and a form of artificiality, in contrast to the “real” rural folk.

Just as wealth is a characteristic of urban life in the Roman sources, wealth is sometimes definitively connected to cities in country music as well. In Blake Shelton’s “Got a Little Country” (2010), the narrator is dating a city girl, and the city is synonymous with expense. The lyrics begin by listing the girlfriend’s pricey products—

⁸² For a discussion of nostalgia and luxury, see “Decline and Nostalgia” (pp. 292-294).

Rolex, Bowflex, Louis Vuitton, Manolo Blahnik, Gucci—before asserting that “she may look like New York, Miami, L.A.” Amidst these high-end brands is her “hair by Hollywood salon,” implying that, because the salon is in Hollywood, it is expensive. The song equates wealth and the city, and both of these are placed in opposition to being “country.” For, as the chorus goes, she *looks like* the city, “but when it comes to loving me, she ain’t that way... She’s got a little country in her.” An extravagant urban lifestyle is directly opposed to being country, though this particular girl is counterintuitively able to be both.

Other songs are not so forgiving to the expensive urban life, and two songs by Jason Aldean mention the wealth of the city as an undesirable alternative to the countryside. “Hicktown” (2005) is about the wild parties of the countryside, and it compares these to city soirees. The narrator makes the contrast clear: “We hear folks in the city party in Martini bars, and they like to show off in their fancy foreign cars.” The urban-dwellers may have cocktails and expensive cars, but Hicktown needs no such accoutrements to have “the party heard round the world.” The later song “Fly Over States” (2010) again plays on the idea that city folk have money but miss the point; the song tells the story of “a couple of guys in first class on a flight from New York to Los Angeles.” These men are the epitome of the urban life as they jet from the U.S.’s biggest city to its second biggest, and it is implied in the first line of the song that they are wealthy, flying “in first class.” Yet the remainder of the song describes how they are not as lucky as they think they are, for though they might be glad they do not live “in the middle of nowhere,” this is only because they have never experienced the flyover states.

The countryside is preferable to the city, even if (and perhaps because) the city is wealthy.

Yet there is another important theme underlying “Fly Over States,” which is the theme of the city folk oblivious to the importance of the countryside. The rich men on the plane have never “met the man who plowed that earth, planted that seed, busted his ass for you and me.” They live luxurious lives, but they do not recognize that it is the area of the nation about which they are so derisive that provides them with their goods. This sentiment is an ancient one, as Tityrus, too, complains about sending food to the “*ingrata urbs*” (ln. 34) in the first Eclogue. The difference aptly captured in these two works is the difference between production, which occurs in the countryside, and consumption, which absorbs the city.

For even when it is divorced from the city, wealth is not necessarily considered a good thing. Blake Shelton’s “Kiss My Country Ass” (2010)⁸³ establishes a dichotomy between the country and the upper class based entirely on wealth and social status, independent of the urban/rural divide. The song details all the ways in which the narrator is “country” and compares this to “a whole lotta high-class people out there that’s looking down on [him].” His country club is a honky-tonk, and he rejects “ties or three piece suits” for a “t-shirt and cowboy boots.” The song eloquently embodies the tension between the condescending elite and country folk when the narrator declares, “if that don’t fit your social class, you can kiss my country ass.” He is content as a “backwoods redneck,” and he considers this preferable to the pretentious lifestyle of the wealthy.

⁸³ It should be noted that this song was originally released by Rhett Akins in 2005 on a self-released album. As a single, the song reached #57 on the Billboard Country charts, but the album did not chart. In contrast, Blake Shelton’s *Hillbilly Bone*, which includes “Kiss My Country Ass,” reached #3 in the U.S. Billboard 200, and a music video for Blake Shelton’s “Kiss My Country Ass” was released in 2011.

Not only the wealthy, but also city folk generally are commonly depicted as condescending, in opposition to those in the countryside. People in the city may not be explicitly affluent, but they look down on the countryside nonetheless. In Van Zant's "I'm Doin' Alright" (2005), the narrator lives a life that's "simple, and it suits [him] fine." Yet this life does not appeal to everyone, and the narrator mentions specifically "all the rats in the city" who "look down their nose" at him. This snootiness is unfounded, however, considering that these particular city-dwellers are not themselves necessarily wealthy; they "are living out of a box," and so the joke, according to the narrator, is on them. In this case, pretention is a general urban characteristic, and one not exclusive to the upper-class, for this high-class attitude has permeated the city entirely.

This trope re-appears in Rodney Atkins's "Friends with Tractors" (2009), in which "a man from Hollywood, California" arrogantly namedrops. The man himself is not described as wealthy; rather, "he said he had rich and famous friends." The narrator responds to the city man's self-importance by telling him, "that's good for you... But, son, you ain't got a thing on me, see, I got friends with tractors." The joke here is the same as those in many of the above songs; whereas people in the city think that they are living the good life, they do not know that they are missing out on the country life.

"Friends With Tractors" includes another hallmark of wealth and city life that permeates country music; whereas in the countryside, what you see is what you get, non-country people are artificial, even to the point of dishonesty. In this song, the trickery is subtle, and it is "fancy five star restaurants" that are fraudulent. Even though the narrator was charged for everything, "that gourmet meal looked more... like fish bait on a

cracker.” Though these wealthy restaurants market themselves as superior to cheaper venues, their patrons leave “barely fed,” so they are more of a scam than a luxury.

This falseness is frequently contrasted with the genuine and honest nature of rural folk. In the countryside, people are depicted as “honest and true,” separate from the pretence of other lifestyles (Brad Paisley’s “Too Country”). The narrator and his girlfriend in Luke Bryan’s “Welcome to the Farm” (2009) escapes from the “gears and grime” of the city, and when they arrive at the farm, the girlfriend is improved by authenticity. The narrator tells her, “pine straw in your hair, not an ounce of makeup on you... Girl, I ain’t ever seen you looking so good as you do right now.” The girl, once she has discarded the artificiality of the city become her “real” self, is considered more beautiful than she had ever been.

The countryside is again a setting where people can be true to themselves in Tim McGraw’s “Down on the Farm” (1994). The song describes a Friday night party on a farm, and, like the festivities in “Hicktown,” it is compared to city parties:

You can have a lot of fun in a New York minute
 But there’s some things you can’t do inside those city limits.
 Ain’t no closing time,
 Ain’t no cover charge,
 Just country boys and girls getting down on the farm.

Whereas the city is characterized by seemingly arbitrary restrictions, the “rural route rules” of the farm party are entirely practical⁸⁴ and do not prevent people from just “getting down” and being themselves. The song makes this clear when it says, “well, you

⁸⁴ “Don’t mess with the bull—he can get real mean. Don’t forget to shut the gate, stay out of the beans.”

can come as you are, there ain't no dress code." The pretentious rules of city parties are stifling compared to the freedom and straightforwardness of a good time on the farm.

The ideal of authenticity, of "come as you are," is a common value of country music, and it recurs in Toby Keith's "It Works For Me" (2002). This justification for his choice of lifestyle emphasizes that he is free to be himself. He states, "I'm living my life under my terms; I'm calling the shots, as far as I can see," and he contrasts his situation with both the city and the upper class. Living "out on the back roads" and "walk[ing] the country mile," he does not understand urban life and asks, "if it's so good in the city, why don't anybody smile?" He is also unabashedly lower class, explaining at the beginning of the song that he has "never owned a brand new car [and] never worked in a white collar." He might be poor, and he might not be in the city where many people want to be, but he at least is able to stay true to himself.

Money, as well as the city, may be associated with inauthenticity, as in Luke Bryan's "What Country Is" (2009), which deliberately contrasts those who try to buy the country lifestyle with what the narrator considers real country. Throughout the song, he asserts that material goods cannot make a person truly country; rather country is "something you're born with." Being country is neither "a rebel flag you bought at the mall" nor "a John Deere cap that's never fell in the cotton"; it is an entire experience that includes the farm, country music, and fishing. The song insists that country "can't be bought," thus both emphasizing the importance of authenticity in the country life and dismissing those who attempt to use money to achieve authenticity.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ There is a rich irony in the importance of authenticity in a clearly idealized picture of the country life, but understanding that phenomenon would require a study of country music in its own right. In any case, this

In comparisons between what is and what is not a country life in country music, certain traits are often explicitly contrasted with a true rural life. The city is one antithesis of country, and it is characterized not only by wealth, but also by a higher social class. City folk often turn up their noses at their country counterparts, not aware of what they are missing by rejecting the proudly “blue collar”⁸⁶ countryside. Furthermore, people in the city are depicted as wrapped up in pretenses, rather than being true to who they are. Thus, if what is *not* country is characterized by material wealth, a high social status, and pretension, the country life is considered to be simple, lower class, and *genuine*.

This emphasis on being genuine is essential to country music. Country stars must prove their authenticity,⁸⁷ and many country songs highlight the idea that country is the music of real American lives.⁸⁸ Country folk are depicted as people who will “always be true to [their] heart” (Josh Turner’s “Backwoods Boy”). Rodney Atkins’s “Tell a Country Boy” (2009), a song describing the typical country boy, claims that “he means every word he says [and] leaves no doubt about where he stands.” Being country is an antidote to a society that often values dishonesty, according to country music.

Though genuineness is often written as the path to happiness, James Wesley’s “Real” (2010) takes a more ambivalent look at the authentic country life. Though the song disparages the absurdity of “reality shows” and praises the aspects of what is “real” in the countryside, such as long lasting marriages and the hard work of farmers, it also, as

seems to be the point of Blake Shelton’s “Same Old Song” (2001), which criticizes the idealized themes of country music and requests more authentic lyrics.

⁸⁶ The admirable characters of Blake Shelton’s “Country Strong” (2008) have “blue collar in their blood,” while those of Blake Shelton’s “My Neck of the Woods” (2003) have “sweat in [their] blue collars.”

⁸⁷ For a detailed discussion of the importance of authenticity for country musicians, see Peterson’s *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*.

⁸⁸ For example, Brad Paisley’s “This is Country Music” (2010), Trace Adkins’s “Songs About Me” (2005), and John Michael Montgomery’s “It’s What I Am” (1995).

mentioned in Chapter II, points out the harsh side of reality. Being “real” is still a virtue, but it must be its own reward, for it might be accompanied by emotional or material ruin. Another song, Brad Paisley’s “Bigger Fish to Fry” (2007) points out how being dishonest is often rewarded in modern society. The narrator considers his vices and finds them inconsequential in comparison to “politicians taking pork barrel bribes, crooked CEOs... getting off with no time.” These fraudulent men remain powerful and rich, though the narrator takes comfort in knowing that they will receive their comeuppance from the devil at “an everlasting barbecue.” Both “Real” and “Bigger Fish to Fry” are concerned with the deceitfulness of certain aspects of their society, and they voice this concern by comparing it to their own subculture that, though imperfect, is at least honest and “real.”

Differences and Similarities Between the Sources

Contrasts with the countryside in the two literatures have both similarities and differences. In both cases, the city is seen in particular as the antithesis of the poverty of the countryside; however, in the Roman sources this antithesis is represented through wealth, while in the country music it is represented through class. This distinction between wealth and class may seem arbitrary, but it is significant; whereas wealth is represented concretely as money and luxury, class is more of an attitude and a culture defined, according to country songs, by condescension and falseness. This sheds light on a difference in the “poverty” of the Roman poems and of the country music. Whereas the Roman sources view poverty as somehow a virtue in its own right, poverty in country music is more a manifestation of the genuine. Furthermore, the Roman sources emphasize the opposition between the military life and rural life and consider peace an

important aspect of the country life, a theme that country music rejects entirely,⁸⁹ while in country music, there is a distinct weight placed on being honest to oneself, a value that makes no such appearance in the Augustan poems. These key distinctions between Roman poetry and country music are likely the result of other cultural disparities; though commonalities in context are revealed through the parallel literary ideals of the country life, ultimately the two literatures are the result of different traditions, societies, and writers, and the incongruence of some of their ideals is a reminder of this.

Whatever their differences in the construction of their ideals, Augustan poetry and country music do both place a special emphasis on simplicity by iterating the ideal of poverty in contrast to wealth and high social standing. Throughout the sources, life in the countryside is a simple and modest alternative to other lifestyles. If ideals are, as Sarah Spence suggested, useful as critiques of “the great world, or the world of power,” the country ideal reveals a discomfort with wealth and, in the case of country music, elitism (27). The sources call instead for a stripping of the superficial and a return to a lifestyle filled with the simpler joys. That it is a *return* to such a lifestyle is a crucial, though subtle, point; in order to demonstrate the simple life, narrators often turn to the past, characterizing rural life as a beneficial reversion.

Idealization through Reversion

In Rome

⁸⁹ In fact, soldiers and the American military are consistently recurring themes in country music, especially since September 11th, as mentioned in Rick Cohoon’s review of *I Love It*. The meaning of war and the function of the military has change drastically between Augustan Rome and modern America, which may account for the difference; whereas armies and war were unabashed vehicles for military conquest and the acquisition of wealth in ancient Rome, the rhetoric of war in modern America, a rhetoric that country music espouses, is the military and wars are used to secure freedom and defend civilian citizens.

As mentioned in Chapter II, Augustan poets often invoke the an era long past in their descriptions of an idyllic country life. When describing the farmer's life in the *Georgics* Book II, the narrator describes it as the life Rome's ancestors led in the Golden Age (ll. 532-535). It was the farmer's life before the invention of war, and potentially in contrast to his contemporary world in which farmers *were* expected to leave their productive plow for the destructive sword. When the narrator idealizes a country life far from war and the *militia*, he uses images of the past, and if he is hoping for the world of his farmer to become reality, his hope is for a return to a Golden Age of centuries before.

Tibullus also consistently uses the past in his country imagery; the ideal rural life is often situated in the distant past, rather than in his imagination. In one passage, the narrator exclaims straightforwardly, "*quam bene Saturno vivebant rege*" before describing an idyllic pastoral life, but his imagery is not always *explicitly* of the Golden Age (I.3.35). Yet he does often refer to a simpler past, either pastoral or agricultural. In II.5, a shepherd of Romulus's era brings his girlfriend simple gifts of dairy, while in II.3, the narrator longs for the days in which "*glans aluit ueteres, et passim semper amarunt*" (ln. 72). Happy rural life is also related to the farmers of the past, who cultivated peacefully and productively. In I.10, when disparaging the effects of war, the narrator refers to a time when "*pax candida primum / duxit araturos sub iuga curva boves*" (ll. 45-46), and in I.7 he describes the festivities following the invention of agriculture and, especially, wine (ll. 29-38). In the case of both pre- and post-agricultural rural life, the countryside the narrator imagines is intimately linked to bygone times. Thus when the narrator daydreams of his own life as a farmer, he imagines a return to an era from long ago.

The importance of ancestors is another manifestation of this phenomenon. As described in Chapter I, references to ancestral farms and traditions occur in several poems about the countryside, and the farmer's life mimics the life of ancient Romans. This is the case in the farm scene at the end of the *Georgics* Book II, in which the farmer's life is compared to that of the Romulus, Remus, and the Sabines (ll. 532-533), and in Tibullus I.10, the gods are worshipped as they were in the "*veteris sedes... avi*"⁹⁰ (ln. 18). Narrators aspiring to the country life, to some extent, are hoping for a return to their familial roots.

These poets depend on golden ages⁹¹ and ancestors of the past as their reference points for an ideal country life, and descriptions of the past complement and are complemented by the focus on poverty in their images of rural life. The simplicity of a hard bed or wooden cups mirrors the lives of a pre-technological age and an era before foreign luxuries were commonplace in Italy.⁹² Poets advocating a return to the simple life are simultaneously advocating a reversion to a time before their own, and they often explicitly define the simple life as such a reversion.

In Country Music

In American country music, as well, the desire for a simple life is closely tied to nostalgia for times past. Nostalgia takes many forms in country songs about rural life, and one significant type is the longing for the era of one's parents or grandparents. These

⁹⁰ This phrase has a few possible translations, for the "*veteres avi*" might refer to an "ancient ancestor" or an "aged grandfather." The distinction is an important one, as the difference between appealing to ancestors and grandfathers will be discussed below. It is consistent with the argument here to translate the whole phrase as "the houses of my ancient ancestor," but the ambiguity of the phrase and the alternate translations are important to note.

⁹¹ Though not always the Saturnian Golden Age. In any case, it is difficult to define what exactly "the Golden Age" consisted of, and scholars attempting to understand this phenomenon reach different conclusions.

⁹² This point will be expanded on below.

relatives are often the custodians of an idyllic country life that the narrators can access through them. When narrators return to their childhood homes, their parents serve as a connection to a world where “a handshake still means something”⁹³ and “where the Bible is the Bible” (Tim McGraw’s “Home”). Sometimes the vision of the ideal country life is in part expressed as a memory of parents or grandparents, as in Buddy Jewell’s “Dyess Arkansas” (2005). In this song, the narrator’s hometown is introduced through his father’s experience; the highway now running through the town “used to be a one-lane gravel road” when his father was in school.⁹⁴ The next verse again recalls the father’s childhood “when living life was picture perfect, like a Norman Rockwell painting of the South.” In fact, the narrator does not refer to his own childhood at all during the song, so that idyllic small-town life is articulated entirely as the experience of his father.

Parents and grandparents not only provide narrators with memories of the past, they stand for important values. The virtuous farmer is identified with an older relative in Craig Morgan’s “God, Family, and Country” (2003), in which the narrator describes how his grandfather⁹⁵ “grew up in a time when a third grade education was all the school you needed to work the family farm.” The grandfather stands for an era in which people still cherished “God, family, and country.” These values are attributed to a previous generation, and the narrator himself accesses them by remembering how important they were to his grandfather. The grandfather featured in Justin Moore’s “Grandpa” (2009) similarly epitomized the country life for the narrator. The song is dedicated to his

⁹³ From Lonestar’s “Little Town” (2005). For this trope, see also Blake Shelton’s “That’s What I Call Home” (2001), Justin Moore’s “The Only Place I Call Home” (2009) and Mark Will’s “In My Heaven” (2001).

⁹⁴ In this case, the father also serves as a connection to country legend Johnny Cash, for Dyess was his hometown, as well. Emphasizing the father thus reinforces the authenticity of the “country” roots of Dyess.

⁹⁵ Technically, the song does not specify that the man described is the narrator’s grandfather. However, he is a male relative who joined the army in 1940, which makes it likely that he was the narrator’s grandfather.

grandfather who “never sold the farm,” always insisted “Roosevelt was the best,” was married for fifty years, and was present at the narrator’s creek baptism. The narrator thus uses his grandfather as a demonstration of several symbols of the country life.

Furthermore, because Grandpa is described as an “American born simple man” who was “the same man on Sunday morning as Saturday night,” he is also model of the country *values* of simplicity and genuineness.

Simplicity is a common attribute of parents and grandparents, and many narrators express their lower-class roots through these relatives. In Van Zant’s “Help Somebody” (2005), the narrator’s grandfather is described as “blue collar,” a man who “came from the school where you didn’t need nothing if you couldn’t make it with your own two hands.” He is a “backwards” figure who rejects modern materialism and embodies the lower class. The song repeats his advice to his grandson, demonstrating how this simple man passed on his own values to the narrator.

Though country music does not have a far-off “Golden Age” era to which it can refer, it nonetheless often does use rural and small-town life as a continuation of the past, even when not explicitly connected to parents and grandparents. The countryside is frequently depicted as a bastion of traditionalism and the old ways, a place where everything is still how it ought to be. Some songs make this explicit, such as Craig Morgan’s “Sweet Old Fashioned Goodness” (2006), which describes lists attributes of small-town life—good food “at Mama’s house,” church on Sundays, couples in love after fifty years of marriage, friendly neighbors—and describes them as “old-fashioned.” Brad Paisley’s “Too Country” (2001) also equates “country” and “old-fashioned,” expanding on the sentiment when it asks, “is [country] just too old-fashioned? Or just too antique?”

The song, which defends the notion of “country” from accusations of being “too country” sees country life as the antidote to modern society, implicitly criticized in the lyrics.

The song also uses a subtler tactic to connect the countryside to times past when it asks, “are there too many fish that still jump in the stream?” This use of the word “still” is telltale sign, common in country music, that writers view rural life as a holdover from a previous era. The word implies that this is how things used to be, but that generally they have changed; the countryside exists as the only place that remains how it used to be.⁹⁶ Justin Moore’s “The Only Place That I Call Home” (2009) uses “still” on two separate occasions when describing the narrator’s childhood home. In the chorus, he claims that it is a place “where the corn grows tall and the moonshine still flows.” Though moonshine is no longer a hallmark of American culture, he insists that his hometown keeps up this American tradition.⁹⁷ The countryside is also the home of traditional religion, where the “preacher still talks about a Judgment Day.” Other places may have abandoned such rhetoric, the lines says, but it remains staunchly supported in this town. In Buddy Jewell’s “Sweet Southern Comfort” (2005), the word is used as a reference to a pre-technological countryside when the narrator mentions “Mrs. Baker down the dirt road, [who’s] still got clothes out on the line.” Though the dryer has become a common household appliance, Mrs. Baker lives a simpler life, still performing chores as she always has. The

⁹⁶ Another song released by Brad Paisley, “This is Country Music” (2010), uses the word to insinuate a lack of patriotism in modern society when it declares that, “if there’s anyone that still has pride in the memory of those that died defending the old red, white, and blue, this is country music, and we do.” Unlike “Too country,” which makes no distinction between country *music* and the countryside, this song exclusively focuses on country music and thus declares patriotism a value of the genre, rather than of the lifestyle.

⁹⁷ The connection between corn and moonshine found here is potentially an important one. Moonshine, distilled as it is from crops, might serve as a reminder of the agricultural lifestyle. Furthermore, because it is cheap and “do-it-yourself,” it may also be a symbol of simplicity and contented poverty.

countryside, when described as “still” how it used to be, is characterized as rooted in tradition, an example of past times though the rest of the world has moved on.

Just as past times and past generations are used in Roman sources as exempla of simplicity, country songs often invoke nostalgic characters as manifestations of country values, including simplicity. Both literatures use past generations to express the “roots” of their contemporary characters.⁹⁸ Yet there is an important distinction between the two; significantly, the Roman poets desire a world of their ancestors, but *not* necessarily the ancestors directly preceding them. Tibullus does not want “*divitiae patrum fructusque*” (I.1.40), for he looks back to more ancient ancestors. Augustan poetry reaches for a distant, mythical past, while American country idolizes a relatively recent era, one still remembered and embodied by parents and grandparents. This is an important difference between the literatures, and it is not an entirely explainable one, though an explanation will be posited in Chapter IV.

The City and Resistance to Change

Depicting the rural life as a continuation of the past also defines the countryside as static, which serves another ideological purpose; both Augustan poetry and country songs use the country life as an antidote to change. Whereas the city in Augustan poetry is subject to change, and generally destructive change, the countryside is marked by stability. Appeals to the Golden Age and the simple life are appeals to regression, and thus they demonstrate a resistance to progress. In country music, cities represent change, and a rejection of urban culture is thus a rejection of change itself. Progress and change

⁹⁸ To an extent, these “roots” are expressions of patriotism as well. Such a reading is supported by the fact that “foreignness” is often depicted as an enemy of the countryside, either in the imported goods that Roman wealth buys, or in the immigrants who appear in country music to the dismay of the narrator. A fruitful analysis might result from further examination of the topics of foreignness, the countryside, and the city in these two literatures, but that would need to be the subject of another paper entirely.

are depicted as unhealthy and undesirable, and songs instead tend to admire sameness, praising a lifestyle that carries on just as it has for decades.

In Rome

In the Roman sources, the city is characterized by uncertainty, contrasted with the emphasis on routine in the countryside. Horace describes the anxiety the city causes in Ode III.29, when he points out that Maecenas must worry about what might happen next because a god has hidden the “*futuri temporis exitus*” (ln. 29). Fortunes are apt to change in the instable world of wealth, for Fortune herself cruelly “*transmutat incertos honores*,” so that one must be constantly concerned where one will stand tomorrow (ln. 51). In the countryside, however, Maecenas would be able to relax and enjoy a “*munda cena*” in peace (ll. 15-16).

The farmer’s life in the *Georgics* is equally predictable, unlike the events of the city that precede the description of his life. The city is a place of “*discordia*,” where the threat of destruction pervades the atmosphere (ln. 496). Military service, the alternative to the country life that is woven into this description of the city, is equally uncertain. Soldiers might end up dead or in “*freta caeca*” (ll. 503-504), and often they “*exsilio... domos et dulcia limina mutant*” (ln. 511). These “*domi et dulcia limina*” belong to the world of the farmer, for he remains in his own “*casta domus*,” safe from the turmoil of other lifestyles (ln. 524). His life is one of familiarity, as opposed to the instability of a political or military life; the farmer knows that he will harvest in the fall and rest in the wintertime, just as countless generations before his did.

In love elegy, the changefulness of the city is expressed through the mistress. Tibullus’s narrator frets over several potential changes in his relationship with Delia. He

worries that he will die while fighting and thus be unable to return to her (I.3), he worries that she will die (I.5), and he laments when she finds new lovers (I.5, I.6). The state of his relationship changes frequently, usually causing him great distress. His time with Delia in the countryside, on the other hand, is subject to no such inconstancy; when he envisions a life with Delia always at his side, he places it on the farm. There she will love him and him alone, and there is no talk of other lovers (or her husband). Daydreams of rural life are the narrator's retreat from the uncertainty of his reality, for in the countryside Delia's affections are enduring.

In Country Music

In country music, the city is again connected with change, though instability and uncertainty are not the danger in these songs; rather, change itself is threatening. In Montgomery Gentry's "Daddy Won't Sell the Farm" (1999), the narrator's father and his farm represent complete inflexibility in the face of a changing world. Though "the city's growing all around him," the father remains steadfastly dedicated to his farm. The city is the "urban storm," while the farm is the calm "eye" where the father will "live and die." The narrator explains his father's insistence on keeping his farm as a symptom of his admirable stubbornness: "You can't roll a rock up a hill that steep. You can't pull roots when they run that deep." In this song, the city is the change, while the farm stands for defying progress and maintaining the same life one has lived for decades.

The theme of the encroaching city reappears in Josh Turner's "Lord Have Mercy on a Country Boy" (2006), in which the countryside of the narrator's childhood is bulldozed by progress. The narrator lived happily wandering in the woods, but the streams he used to fish have been transformed, and the woods themselves have been

destroyed to make way for the sprawl of civilization. There is no recognition that this change might be constructive; the narrator does not enjoy the benefits of dams or “a Laundromat and a barbershop.” Instead, change is the enemy, and familiarity its victim.

Blake Shelton’s “The Last Country Song” (2007) describes a similar situation in which the city replaces the countryside. The song grieves for Hank’s Roadhouse, a bar “where all the folks come to hear country music play” that will be destroyed the next day. The country folk are “still here, but not for long,” for tomorrow the earth will shake and they will have to sing “the last country song.” This event was imminent, for “every year the city’s getting closer,” but again the transformation is unambiguously negative; Hank even equates change with disenfranchisement when he explains, “this land was our land but, Lord, now it’s their land.” Change in this case is represented by the destruction of a landmark and of the country way of life.

Reversion and Resistance to Change

In Rome

Indeed, in both literatures, regression or stagnation is seen as preferable to development. The return to a past era in Augustan poetry demonstrates this resistance to progress, for a reversion to the Golden Age is a reversion to a pre-developed world. In this age, the city of Rome was merely a collection of “*humiles in Iouis arce casae*” (Tibullus II.5.26), and weapons had not yet been invented.⁹⁹ This Rome was a Rome before technology, and the age was one in which time seemed not to move forward. Vergil’s fourth Eclogue cannot be ignored here; the poem declares that the Iron Age is about to end and “*redeunt Saturnia regna*” (ll. 6-8). The ending of the previous era does

⁹⁹ As explained in Tibullus I.10.1-5 and *Georgics* II.540.

not begin an entirely new one, it merely initiates a *return* to an age that the world had already moved through and concluded. Yet this return is described as desirable; the poem celebrates a regression rather than a progression.

That reversion was favored over progress at this point is further demonstrated by the attempts to market the tremendous political change as a “renewal.”¹⁰⁰ These efforts can be seen even outside of poetry. For example, Augustus used the *Ludi Saeculares*, a celebration to mark the beginning of a new cycle of history, to portray his reign as a return to a previous time rather than as the start of an entirely new era. The event marked the beginning of a cycle that had been repeated, and, as the *Carmen Saeculare* explains, would be repeated yet again. The countryside is a natural setting for anti-progress sentiment, and such a sentiment might, to some extent, explain the idealization of rural life common in Augustan poetry.

In Country Music

The rejection of progress in country music is even more pronounced, and the countryside generally remains a haven from the unstoppable change that sweeps through the rest of the country. Alabama’s “Right Where I Am” (2001), a song from the band’s final studio album released the year before they announced their Farewell Tour,¹⁰¹ demonstrates a country man’s discomfort with progress. The song disparages technological development, preferring “standing on this mountain high” to “subways running under the city, condos reaching to the sky.” The narrator laments technology’s invasion into the countryside, exclaiming “satellite feed out in the country—oh what a way of life!” and asks his audience to “turn off the TV, shut down the PC, and click off

¹⁰⁰ See Paul Zanker’s chapter, “The Augustan Program of Cultural Renewal” (pp. 101-166).

¹⁰¹ Their Farewell Tour was announced in May 2002, according to “About” page on the band’s website.

the world tonight.” Advanced technology is not seen as advantageous or helpful, and the narrator seeks to escape technology by retreating to his countryside.

In an example of a similar sentiment by an artist toward the beginning, not the end, of his career, Luke Bryan’s “Welcome to the Farm” (2009) describes a countryside that remains remote from the development of plastics that characterize the city. The song’s narrator describes the country as in a sort of time warp:

There ain’t no card in your pocket
 Ever gonna turn that old gas pump on
 It’s cash for everything around here,
 That’s just the way it’s been for so long.
 How you like that coke from a green glass bottle?
 It’s colder than that plastic stuff.
 Watch how Miss Annie at the counter
 Tells that story about me wrecking my truck.

While the city, altered by technology, is now dependent on credit, the countryside remains “just the way it’s been for so long”; even the characters do not change, as the store clerk is still leftover from the narrator’s youth. This backwardness is a comfort to the narrator and a way to escape the wheels of progress that move life back in the city. “Dyess Arkansas” similarly features Dyess as a place that remains the same. There are “no superstores or mini-malls” here, and “the population sign ain’t changed in years.” The narrator, by visiting Dyess, can return to a stagnant place that still resembles the town encapsulated by the memories of his father.

Yet the countryside is not necessarily safe from progress; rather, the tides of change may sweep away the beauty of rural life. Just as the city overtook Hank's Roadhouse in "The Last Country Song," development engulfs a narrator's hometown in Craig Morgan's "Where Has My Hometown Gone" (2003). Though the narrator left his small town as a young adult, he "finally saved up enough to get back home" and finds his childhood home transformed. The woods he used to hunt in are now a mini-mall, and "Riverview Drive is up to four lanes." These are standard nostalgic complaints in country songs, yet this song laments even natural changes. The narrator is upset to find that "time's made mamas out of the girls [he] used to chase when [he] was younger," and that the old mayor has died. These changes are unrelated to urban expansion, but the narrator finds them disconcerting nonetheless. Though the song is a complaint against development, it also expresses uneasiness with change more generally.

A return to the theme of successful and unsuccessful marriages addressed in Chapter II reveals that even in personal life, change is potentially harmful. The reasons for the failures of marriages are often described in terms of change, rather than a fall into routine or boredom, both potential reasons for divorce. In John Michael Montgomery's "No Man's Land" (1995), the single mother attempts to understand "what went wrong" with her marriage, and in Montgomery's "Little Cowboy's Cry" (1998), the problem is that the wife's love "has died." Little Big Town's "You Can't Have Everything" (2010) similarly describes a transformation in the marriage, as the narrator sings to her husband, "we don't talk anymore, you leave your ring in the drawer." Though these are subtle changes, they nonetheless describe some sort of break in the marriage, a shift to a negative relationship.

A clearer case of a change that causes marital strife is found in Kenney Chesney's "From Hillbilly Heaven to Honky-Tonk Hell" (1997); in this song, after a man marries a girl who is "his whole world," he begins drinking in town too often due to stress from his coal-mining job. This is the beginning of the end, and by the time the song ends, his "angel is crying 'cause her good man fell from Hillbilly Heaven to Honky Tonk Hell." The song attributes the failure of the peaceful marriage to a fall, a single devastating change; indeed this imagery appears earlier in the song, when the man "fell under [the] spell" of temptation. This fall from grace is partially the work of "the town" as well, for his "paradise" only became hell when he "started spending too much time in town." The town in this song is a catalyst for the change that ends the marriage, and turns an ideal country life into "Honky Tonk Hell."

It is not only failed marriages that demonstrate resistance to change, for happy country marriages, on the other hand, are characterized by repetition and stability. In Blake Shelton's "Cotton Pickin' Time" (2004), the narrator explains how he and his wife still skinny dip just like they did as teenagers in order to "keep [their] love from growin' old." It might seem counterintuitive that, in order to avoid boredom, a couple repeats the same tryst they have been having for years, but considering country music's fondness for stability, it is unsurprising. In another example, the lack of change in a spouse is depicted romantically; "Sweet Old Fashioned Goodness" features a man who mentions his wife who "ain't changed at all" in their fifty-plus years of marriage. A lasting marriage, according to this sentiment, is one marked by uniformity over time. Of course, skinny dipping and not growing old might be considered positive features of marriage in any genre, while love dying and falling into alcoholism are natural causes of divorce. It is

unsurprising that country music would use them this way; yet it is important that, rather than depicting change positively (for example by describing a couple who takes up a new hobby and saves their marriage) or playing on the trope of the “same old thing” in marriage, these songs idealize sameness and demonize transformation.

Change is potentially problematic not only in personal life or even individual communities, but in the nation as a whole, and, according to some country songs, America herself has been put in jeopardy in the name of progress. Justin Moore’s “Good Ole American Way” (2009) describes this process in which “we’re forgetting who we are.” The narrator describes himself as a country boy—Christian, tough, and hardworking—whose way of life is under siege. The song is a metaphorical call to arms, insisting, “we can’t stand by and just let it fade away, the good ole American way.” Change is seen as inherently un-American, as a threat to country values, and as destroying the “American way.”

A less defiant version of this theme is the subject of Toby Keith’s “American Ride” (2009). The song lists changes taking place in America, which are generally described as changes for the worse. The artist begins by claiming, “winter getting colder, summer getting warmer,” and the remainder of the song focuses on the erosion of country values like genuineness, simplicity, and religion. Now a woman who “can’t even sing a note” can, after plastic surgery, get a record deal; meanwhile, he sings: “plasma getting bigger, Jesus getting smaller.” This song, though it describes what country typically sees as unhealthy developments, takes a more *laissez-faire* attitude than “Good Ole American Way” by explaining “that’s us, that’s right—gotta love this American ride.” The song

acknowledges progress as an inevitable force in American life, while still admitting that this force can have negative consequences.

In Blake Shelton's "Green" (2008), progress is fully redeemed, but only by using an Augustan tactic and portraying it as actually a regression. The song describes how one progressive trend—the green revolution—has been practiced for years in the countryside. The song declares that the narrator, who lives on a farm and grows his own food “was green before green was a thing.” Though “people used to call [him] backwards,” now the rest of the world has acknowledged the benefits of his lifestyle and thus he has become “a man ahead of [his] times.” City folk may think that they are being innovative, but they are merely reverting to a somewhat old-fashioned lifestyle, one that the countryside already endorsed; thus this positive progress is revealed as not progressive at all.

Farming and Religion as Appeals to Traditionalism

Analysis of the traditional symbols of the country life further reinforce the idea that change may be harmful and things are best when they remain the same. As discussed above, unhealthy marriages in country songs are often those characterized by change, while lasting marriages are those marked by repetition and sameness. The use of farming and religion in descriptions of rural life advance an critique of change as well, in both Roman poetry and country music.

Agriculture and religion are generally described in these sources as *traditional* agriculture and religion. In both cases, despite the fact that in both eras, family farms are disappearing, the farms depicted in the literature are usually family farms rather than Roman *latifundia* or lands fueled by corporate agribusiness. The methods of farming are similarly outdated; in the Roman poetry, the farmer himself usually does the work rather

than slaves, and in country music, though the tractor is a popular image, crop-dusters do not appear. Thus images of farm life are images of the past, and descriptions of agriculture are used to reinforce an ideology of traditionalism.

The religion of the idealized countryside is also a religion of past times. The rustic rituals of the Roman countryside are characterized in Tibullus as harking back to the days of the narrator's ancestors; he worships just as they did (I.10.15-24). Furthermore, the emphasis on household gods that have been worshipped for generations connects the Augustan countryside to its forefathers. In country music, Christianity is an old-fashioned form of the religion, symbolized through church bells, hymns, and steeples; televangelists, inspirational Christian rock, and mega-churches are left out completely. The presence of Christianity may be regressive in another way as well: If America is perceived as increasingly secular,¹⁰² Christianity itself becomes a throwback to the past, and insisting that "Jesus is the answer"¹⁰³ is a form of resisting modernity (Brad Paisley's "This is Country Music"). Including traditional religion and traditionally pious people in the countryside further reinforces the countryside as a place resistant to change.

Agricultural and Generational Cycles

Resistance to change is further demonstrated by the use of cycles in both Roman and American sources. There is an emphasis on agricultural and generational cycles throughout poems and songs about the countryside; these cycles are marked by predictable repetition rather than abrupt change. Such cycles are also linked to rural life; the farm may be described through its daily and yearly cycles, and the countryside is

¹⁰² As it seems to be perceived in country music--for example, see Toby Keith's "American Ride" (2009), Brad Paisley's "This is Country Music" (2010), and Justin Moore's "Good Ole American Way" (2009).

¹⁰³ From Brad Paisley's "This is Country Music" (2010)

often the setting for continuity and posterity. Though generational changes do occur, they are depicted as *repetition*, characterized by stability and consistency.

In Rome

The patterns of nature and mankind are stressed in Roman poems about the countryside, but they occur throughout Augustan literature and are an important part of the *Carmen Saeculare*, a poem that does not explicitly describe rural life. The *Carmen Saeculare* reminds its listeners of the importance of fertility and progeny by invoking natural patterns. It refers to the nature of the new age itself, hoping that every one hundred and ten years, the *Ludi Saeculares* will be properly repeated (ll. 21-24); this hope is connected to posterity, for the repetition of the *Ludi Saeculares* is dependent the goddess of childbirth's blessing on new marital laws and her gift of offspring. Toward the beginning of the poem, it uses a more concrete and visual image of a constant pattern, the rising and setting of the sun, when the singers tell the sun, "*diem... promiss et celas aliusque et idem / nasceris*" (ll. 9-11). Along with this natural and certain cycle, the poem particularly calls to mind the cycle of human growth when it requests the gods to give good habits to "*docilis iuventa*" and rest to "*senectus placida*" (ll. 45-46). These cycles are all placed within the context of a poem that emphasizes the abundance and fertility of Rome.

Tibullus also refers to life cycles in his works, both in his poem for Cornutus's birthday and in poems about the countryside. The poem for Cornutus is not a rural poem, but, like the *Carmen Saeculare*, it describes different stages of a human life. The poem begins with the approach of a personified Birthday, a commemoration of the start of Cornutus's life, and it ends with children playing at his feet. This life cycle is

encompassed in the phrase, “*avis prolemque ministret*,” which precedes the final image of children (ln. 21). In the countryside, a farmer undergoes the same process that the narrator of II.2 desires for Coruntus. In II.5, a farmer’s wife has a baby, so that he becomes a father, and eventually he is a grandfather as well, who enjoys speaking in “*balba verba*” with his grandchild (ll. 91-94). Tibullus also writes agricultural cycles into his poetry; I.1.7-8 emphasizes the importance of timing in farming, and Paul Miller describes how these lines encompass a full agricultural cycle in only a few words (117). Though natural cycles are universal, they are especially pronounced in the countryside, where seasonal changes and familial changes complement each other.

Vergil’s *Georgics* also includes both agricultural and generational cycles. It especially devotes passages to agricultural cycles; a large portion of Book I¹⁰⁴ describes natural cycles important to farmers: astrological patterns, the seasons, the daily cycle of dawn to night, the monthly phases of the moon, and even weather patterns. Vergil relates these to farming, explaining which time in these cycles is best for different tasks. The *Georgics* also includes a description of the seasons of the farm that relates them to family and posterity. The description of the happy farmer at the end of Book II describes the full “*anni labor*,” referring to the work he has done throughout the year and moving from the harvest of the fall to the holiday of the winter (ll. 513-527). This description focuses on two extremes of farm life, the fall in which there is “*nec requies*” and the winter in which the farmer may take a holiday and lie on the grass (ll. 516, 526). In the midst of these seasons are the farmer’s descendants and ancestors. His descendants occur both in the beginning of the passage as the *nepotes* the farmer sustains, and as the “*dulces nati*” of

¹⁰⁴ From I.231-I.463

his household (ll. 514, 523), while his ancestors and their Golden Age are invoked at the end (ll. 532-533). Though generations are not directly connected to the turning of seasons, they are embedded within them.

In Country Music

Country music also features many scenes of generational repetition, in which offspring are representations or replacements of their parents. Some of these were discussed in Chapter I, such as the “little girl that looks like her mama” in Josh Turner’s “Everything is Fine” (2007) and the boy who is described as a combination of his mother and father in Rodney Atkins’s “Got it Good” (2009). Yet this trope is not confined exclusively to young children resembling their parents; in some songs, the narrators themselves take over the roles of their ancestors through their behaviors as well. In “Kiss My Country Ass,” the narrator explains that his grandfather and father are both veterans, and he “ain’t scared to grab [his] gun and fight for [his] homeland.” In Craig Morgan’s “Walking in My Father’s Shoes” (2000), the narrator attempts to emulate his father, asking himself “what would he do.” Though the narrator has “a lot to live up to,” he nonetheless continues “stumbling, falling, trying to stand tall in” his father’s shoes. In both “Kiss My Country Ass” and “Walking in My Father’s Shoes,” the narrators are proud of their family and aspire to echo their accomplishments.

In Rodney Atkins’s “Watching You” (2006), this pattern is exhibited through a young son who mimics the narrator, his father. Though the song begins with the four-year-old repeating his father’s bad behavior, the second verse is redemptive, as the son “got down on his knees; he closed his little eyes, folded his little hands, spoke to God like he was talking to a friend,” a habit he learned by watching his father pray. The lyrics tie

this generational cycle to the country value of piety, and they also refer briefly to agriculture, for when the narrator prays for his son, he does so in a barn. Yet the music video intensifies the link to agriculture, as almost the entire thing is shot in an agricultural setting. It begins with the son running out of a barn, and throughout the video, Atkins himself sings by a barn filled with haystacks, in a post-harvest wheat field, and under a tree next to a pasture. In the lyrics, the family is “driving through town” at the beginning, but in the video this town is actually mostly meadows, barns, and woods (see fig. 2). The song itself does not connect farming and child-rearing, but the video intertwines the two by setting these father-to-son patterns within an agricultural world.



Figure 2: Rodney Atkins and his son¹⁰⁵ “driving through town”¹⁰⁶

As an isolated case, this would probably not be significant, but examples like these, in which one generation repeats the generation(s) preceding him, are often tied to agriculture and the farm life. Farming is seen as a family tradition, with “third

¹⁰⁵ Rodney Atkins’s son Elijah plays the son in this music video, according to Craig Shelburne’s interview with Atkins.

¹⁰⁶ Source: Atkins, Rodney. *Watching You*. Curb Records, 2007.

generation” farmers frequently cited.¹⁰⁷ Thus agriculture is a connection to the land and to one’s roots; a farmer continues his work just as his grandfathers did before him. Generational repetition is tied to the farm explicitly in “Daddy Won’t Sell the Farm” and John Michael Montgomery’s “Good Ground” (2004). As explained in Chapter I, the narrator literally takes the place of his father in both these songs. In the former, the narrator inherits a farm from his father and staunchly refuses to sell it, just as his father did, while in “Good Ground,” the first verse is repeated almost word for word in the third verse, with “I” now substituted for “Daddy.” Both narrators grow up to replace their fathers, and both do so by taking control of the farm.

In two other songs about returning to childhood homes, the narrators make the cyclical nature of the countryside explicit. In Justin Moore’s “Heaven Ain’t That Far Away,”¹⁰⁸ his return home prompts him to declare that “life just goes in circles back to yesterday.” In Tim McGraw’s “Home” (2002), a circle is a connection to past generations and articulated through a religious reference. The narrator refers to the popular hymn “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” when he explains that “back home... the circle is unbroken when I hear them church bells ring.” Upon his return to his mother, his brother, and his father’s grave, he takes comfort in the fact that he is living in an unbroken cycle. The connection between generational cycles and this lyric is actually much stronger than

¹⁰⁷ For example, Blake Shelton’s “Home Sweet Home” (2008), Craig Morgan’s “International Harvester” (2006), Van Zant’s “The Hardest Thing” (2007), and Montgomery Gentry’s “My Father’s Son” (1999).

¹⁰⁸ Dating this song poses a problem, for the song seems never to have been released. There are lyrics for the song attributed to Justin Moore on several lyrics websites, and a YouTube video exists that features a recording of Justin Moore singing it; however, there seem to be no *official* references to the song. Regardless of the authenticity of the connection, the song seems to have been, at some point, recorded by the country singer, making it legitimate for the purposes of analysis. Though the date remains uncertain, the “About” page on Justin Moore’s official website says that he moved to Nashville in 2002, so the song was most likely recorded later than that.

the lyrics of “Home” alone imply, for the hymn itself is a description of the life cycle.¹⁰⁹ It describes “loved ones” who have died (thus breaking the circle) and now wait in heaven for the audience to join them, and the chorus asks, “Will the circle be unbroken... in a better home awaiting in the sky?” Thus when the narrator of “Home” claims that “the circle is unbroken,” he connects himself to past generations and declares that, through returning to his church back home, he is able to join his deceased loved ones.

Augustan poetry and country music frequently demonstrate individual and generational life cycles. The pattern that occurs between one generation and the next is an important one in both literatures, as sons become fathers and fill in the role of their ancestors. Though descriptions of this cycle may occur independently from the countryside, they may also be tied to agricultural rhythms or the farm. Just as a man farms on his *paterna rura* in Epode II, country songs often feature men who inherit their family farm and proudly raise their children there as well. Such patterns express continuity, even in the face of apparent change; the countryside is a constant and stable setting, in which what seems like progress is characterized as repetition instead. Though a boy might grow from a child into a man, he is not transforming into someone entirely new, he is merely becoming a figure familiar to him—his own father.

An examination of the values embodied by the countryside in Augustan poetry and American music reveals that although there are differences between the literatures, certain patterns emerge in both of them. Just as in Augustan poetry, “decadent, cosmopolitan contemporary Romans are morally inferior to their virtuous peasant ancestors, who lived a pure, bucolic life” (“Decline and Nostalgia” 294), modern country

¹⁰⁹ Lyrics from NetHymnal.org

music may advance the idea that “America had gone from being a God-fearing nation that upheld family values to one headed down a slippery slope to degeneracy, lawlessness, crime in the streets, and lack of respect for the traditions and traditional values that made America great” (Cusic 93). These remarkably similar descriptions of a particular mindset in these two eras are exemplified in their literatures. Countryside ideology emphasizes simplicity, glorifying the reversion to a simpler time, and it opposes progress and change. Whereas cities are the seats of instability and changefulness, the countryside is valued in part because it remains constant. It is an homage to an earlier age, and the symbols of country life, such as agriculture, simplicity, and piety reinforce the traditionalism of rural life. Family also demonstrates consistency in these sources, especially in the progression of life cycles from one generation to the next; explaining human development as part of a pattern makes the change inherent in human life less threatening by depicting it as part of a predictable cycle rather than as progress. Though the idealization of the countryside is complex, analysis demonstrates that it is especially concerned with promoting continuity and stability while rejecting change.

Chapter IV: Context

Yet this apparent similarity between the Augustan poetry and modern country music poses a new question: Why do these two literatures, produced in vastly different societies millennia apart, both use the countryside to espouse a message opposing progress? Is there some commonality between the cultural contexts of Augustan Rome and contemporary America that explains this phenomenon? The twin benefits of cultural distance and hindsight make the Roman context easier for a modern scholar to interpret, and a look at the historical background of Augustan poetry reveals at least a partial explanation for why certain poets might support stability over progress.

Longing for Security in an Age of Instability

During the reign of Augustus, Rome was still recovering from the trauma of its civil wars. The nation had been wracked by war and subject to uncertainty regarding who would rule over Rome. Following such a tremendous upheaval, it is natural that change would be seen in a negative light. For decades, the nation's future had been unknown, and changes in the political situation were accompanied by bloodshed. Augustus's rise to power put an end to the instability,¹¹⁰ and his program of propaganda marketed his reign as a "Return to Normalcy," as a restoration of the old political order rather than the foundation of a new one. The resistance to progress embodied by images of a stable, idealized countryside is the result of a culture in which change had generally brought change for the worse.

¹¹⁰ For a history of this period, see Farrell's "The Augustan Period: 40 BC-AD 14."

Thus the countryside in Augustan works is a symbol for stability, and images of the countryside are a way to reach around the Civil Wars and invoke an age that was unmarked by the turmoil of recent Roman history. Rural life was idealized because it represented a time before the drastic and devastating changes that had stained recent Roman history. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Peace is a characteristic of the countryside (in Tibullus I.10), and that the *militia* is inimical to a country life in both Tibullus and the *Georgics*, despite traditional Roman ideology of the farmer-soldier. The idealization of the country life was a glorification of peace, and it allowed writers to attempt to cope with the violence of their recent past by reverting to an earlier era.

Turning this framework to modern America, it is possible that the countryside in country music serves the same purpose. Writers use rhetoric of stable and unchanging rural life as a form of resistance to progress that they see as harmful to society. Yet the time period covered by the lyrics examined does not follow drastic political upheaval or civil wars; there is no immediately obvious crisis that explains *why* writers would return to this ideology at this time. Further analysis of what these lyrics criticize, however, reveals a common theme that might shed light on which American events could have triggered this type of literature.

Though there is no particular emphasis on peace in the countryside, there is nonetheless a critique of violence; frequently the countryside is a place where people can feel safe, while the city is considered to be the home of crime. The issue is not only the occurrence of crime; it is the mentality that accompanies high crime rates. People do not feel safe in cities, the songs say, regardless of whether they are actually *victims* of crime. This is exemplified by the imagery of unlocked doors in the countryside versus the

necessity of alarms in the city. Easton Corbin's "A Little More Country Than That" (2010) features a narrator who claims to be too country to live in a home "with the doors locked and alarms on." In Buddy Jewell's "Dyess Arkansas" (2005), the narrator contrasts Dyess with "bigger cities," highlighting the emotional distress of living in urban areas "where people live in fear and lock their doors." The countryside, on the other hand, is the corrective for fear; as Trace Adkins's "I'm Goin' Back" (2001) puts it, he must "get back to the farm where the cars aren't alarmed." Just as the city was characterized by uncertainty in the Roman sources, country music depicts cities as places of the uncertainty and fear associated with crime.

If the idealized rural world is a place free from crime and uneasiness, perhaps it is an increase in crime, or at least a *perceived* increase in crime, against which country music is reacting. This possibility does appear to be supported by real events that took place in America in the nineties. A slough of highly publicized crimes with large death tolls occurred throughout the nineties, and they hit close to home for many small-town Americans. The first two incidents, the deadly federal raid of the Branch Davidian complex in Waco, Texas, and the Oklahoma city bombing of a federal building, occurred on April 19th, in 1993 and 1995, respectively.¹¹¹ Both these events brought violence very publically into the "heartland" of America, which may have increased the traumatic effects they had on the population of these areas. If these two incidents were perceived as potentially the beginning of a trend of violence, and violence not localized in coastal urban areas, it may have resulted in an increased desire for a safe rural space.

Furthermore, these events both claimed the lives of many children, and this was a

¹¹¹ For more information on the relationship between these two events, see Garrett M. Graff's article

particularly devastating aspect, especially in case of the Oklahoma City bombing.¹¹²

These episodes are potential influences on imagery of a countryside free from fear and trauma, but a later American tragedy is perhaps more important to consider.

The school shootings at Columbine high school on April 20th, 1999 had profound effects on the American public. Garnering some of the highest news ratings up to that point, they were shocking both in scope and in the nature of the perpetrators. For Columbine was a crime committed not by strangers or traditional “terrorists” but by neighbors, and by *children*. It was an assault not only on the sanctity of community but also on the family, as well. As one journalist described it decades later, “nobody really felt safe after Columbine”¹¹³ and the impact was so great that it even led to the dubbing of its generation as “the Columbine generation.”¹¹⁴ These shootings are particularly relevant to a discussion of country music because they seem to appear directly in some country lyrics.

In two songs released in 2001, the narrators refer specifically to the issue of school shootings. In Blake Shelton’s “Problems at Home” (2001), he considers the problem of a Mississippi teenager who “brings his daddy’s gun to school” along with a New York girl who buys drugs for her mother. Both issues represent the corruption of the family unit, for in both parents are agents of the destruction, rather than the growth, of their children. Significantly, the first also takes place in a primarily rural area, demonstrating that the problem of violence has invaded the countryside. Mark Wills’s “In

¹¹² As Sue Ann Pressley put it shortly after the attacks, “The horror of the event was multiplied by the fact that so many of its first known victims were children.”

¹¹³ From Ramin Setoodeh’s article “The Columbine Generation.”

¹¹⁴ For example, in articles by Miranda Hitti and Ramin Setoodeh, and in “Editorial: The Columbine Generation.”

My Heaven” (2001)¹¹⁵ imagines a world free from these sorts of issues, for, as the narrator explains, in his vision of paradise, “there ain’t no children toting loaded guns to school.” Creating a world without violence, one in which families are still safely ensconced in a world of stability, is common throughout the fabrication of a rural utopia in country songs. If people understood the actual countryside to be threatened by violence and potentially ruined by *fear* of violence, they may have created a literary countryside that remains how it used to be—a neighborly place where “there ain’t no strangers around” (Van Zant’s “My Kind of Country”).

It may also be significant that these three events—the Waco raid, the Oklahoma City bombings, and the Columbine shootings—all took place in April.¹¹⁶ Springtime, especially in rural areas, is a time represented by hope and growth. That this season for productive change was marred by incidents of devastating violence may have exacerbated the effects on people’s resistance against growth and progress. This effect might contribute to the anti-change sentiment of songs about the countryside in particular.

Another incident of tremendous violence that affected country music deserves mention here. The enormity of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 eclipse those of the three events described above, and September 11th directly inspired a large number of country songs. Certainly these attacks also made people feel threatened, and they may have increased the desire for a safe American space and thus boosted the use of idealized country imagery. Yet what the earlier three events especially have in common—their

¹¹⁵ Re-released on Blake Shelton’s *The Dreamer* in 2003.

¹¹⁶ For one discussion of this relationship between the time of year and these crimes, see Tricia Escobedo’s article “What is it about mid-April and violence in America?”

closeness to small-town America and the focus on their destruction of children and families in particular—are not also features of the September 11th attacks. Furthermore, September 11th was the instigator of patriotism and a desire for vengeance in country music,¹¹⁷ themes that are not associated as strongly with the other three events. September 11th cannot be ignored in this discussion, but the correlation between it and imagery of stability and safety in the countryside does not seem as strong as that between the other events and this imagery.

The nature of these incidents of violence, when compared to the Roman civil wars, may also explain the difference in scope of the nostalgia between the two literatures. While the Romans wish to revert to a Golden Age of their ancestors, country narrators look back to the era of their fathers and grandfathers. The civil wars lasted for a more extended period and completely altered the Roman world. Thus the Romans were remembering a time that seemed more distant; the civil wars had so changed their world that they desired a society far-removed from their own. On the other hand, country writers live in a world that, though acutely affected by the violence of the nineties, has not been radically revolutionized by it. Country writers can still remember a safe America, whereas it was a far more remote vision for writers after the Roman civil wars.

Yet this is only one possible explanation for why country music, like Augustan poetry, idealizes the countryside as a place of stability and safety. The violent events cited here were one wave of potentially traumatic change undergone by America in this period, and it may be that other causes of this phenomenon may become more crystallized with the passage of time. Nonetheless, considering the situation of Augustan

¹¹⁷ As seen most clearly in Toby Keith's number one hit "Courtesy of the Red White and Blue" (2002), also subtitled "The Angry American."

Rome and modern America, it appears that in both cases, the nostalgia for an ideal countryside may have been a method of coping with (and potentially recovering from) sudden and violent change.

Moral Reform and the Countryside

There is another common feature between Augustan Rome and modern America that may more fully account for the importance of the family in countryside imagery. In Rome, Augustus pushed through marital reform laws, which encouraged both men and women to marry and have children, and which severely punished female adultery.¹¹⁸ Poetry of this period responded to these reforms, sometimes in glowing terms like those of Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*, (a poem commissioned by Augustus), and sometimes undermining it, as in Propertius and Ovid's poetry. Yet depictions of happy families in an ideal countryside certainly seem to support, rather than critique, the sentiment behind these laws. In modern America, marriage is being debated across the country; many Americans believe that marriage is in a state of obsolescence (Coontz), and controversy over same-sex marriage has led to the legislative and judicial action both banning and supporting same-sex marriage.¹¹⁹ The nature of marriage in America is changing, and though people have many different views on the topic, some feel that the institution of marriage is being threatened by recent developments and hope to "defend and restore" marriage.¹²⁰ In both societies, the issue of marriage and the family is a significant one, and writers may be encouraging a certain type of family in their works.

¹¹⁸ Treggiari 78-80, 277-298.

¹¹⁹ See articles by Jesse McKinley and Abby Goodnough, the report "Iowa Supreme Court Legalizes Gay Marriage" and DOMAWatch.org.

¹²⁰ This specific use of this phrase is used in reference to California's Proposition 8 on the "About Us" page of *ProtectMarriage.com*.

Literature about the countryside is a way to endorse marital and moral reform; the family is an important part of the idealized country life, as demonstrated in Chapter I. The countryside lends itself well to visions of ideal family life, for the country in both literatures is considered the appropriate setting for children. Though children are an important part of the country life in Roman poetry, they occur relatively infrequently in poems that are *not* about rural life. Country music is more explicit about the suitability of the countryside for raising children. The narrator of Blake Shelton's "Home Sweet Home" (2008) is grateful for his upbringing in the country, and while describing the town he grew up in, he claims, "I was raised down here and raised up right." In Rodney Atkins's "About the South" (2006), the narrator has the same opinion, asserting, "[I] grew up down here and it's where I'll grow my kids." John Michael Montgomery's "Good Ground" (2004) even explains why the countryside is beneficial for children: "There was room to grow, there was time to breathe, and dreams stretched high under summer skies." Both literatures affirm that children have a natural place in the countryside. Emphasizing this link in works about idealized rural life also idealizes family, a sentiment that may be linked to moral reform.

The association between the country life and family is reinforced by the idea that both of these institutions are modes of production; the countryside produces food while the family produces children, and this link between production and reproduction is explicit in works from both cultures. In the *Georgics*, the abundance of the countryside is compared with a sexual union between the earth and the sky:

vere tument terrae et genitalis semina poscunt.

tum pater omnipotens fecundis imbribus Aether

coniugis in gremium laetae descendit et omnis

magnus alit magno conmixtus corpore fetus

.....

parturit almus ager Zephyrique tepentibus auris

laxant arva sinus. (II.324-331)

This metaphor attributes the fruits of the country to a marital union; though *coniugis* may mean consort, it is also the word for spouse. Another conflation of harvests with offspring is found on the prominent work of Augustan art, the *Ara Pacis*. One panel features a female figure, commonly asserted to be Tellus, a personification of Earth,¹²¹ surrounded by abundance, a sheep and cow at her feet, crops behind her, and fruit and babies in her lap (see fig. 3). The children, harvest, and livestock together make up an image of bounty, the results of successful production and the hope for a continuing society.

http://en.arapacis.it/percorsi/galleria_fotografica

Figure 3: The Panel of Tellus¹²²

¹²¹ For a discussion of the potential identities of this figure, see Zanker 174-176.

¹²² Source: *Panel of Tellus*. 9 BCE. Museo dell'Ara Pacis, Rome. *Photogallery, Museo dell'Ara Pacis*. Web. 21 April 2011.

The link between growing food and raising children recurs in country music. In Luke Bryan's "We Rode in Trucks" (2007), the narrator recalls how the families in his hometown "raise cotton, corn, a little cane, and kids," as if children are another form of crop. The chorus of Carolyn Dawn Johnson's "Simple Life" (2004) changes partway through the song, from including the narrator's desire to "watch [her] garden grow" to the desire to "watch [her] babies grow." In country music, "growth" is tied to the growth of plants and to the growth of children, indicating an important correlation between family and production that links the countryside and the family.

The idealization of rural life and the significant role of the family in this life may reflect the moral/marital reform that is part of both Augustan Rome and modern America. Because of associations between the countryside and children, the countryside is a fitting setting for advancing ideas about the family. These moral reforms may also be connected to nostalgia more generally; people wish for an era before moral degradation (as if there was such an era) and advance this desire through a literary longing for a more virtuous time. Yet the connection is not straightforward, for the question remains whether it is the hope for moral reform that causes the nostalgia, or the nostalgia that leads to an increased concern with moral reform. That is, do people genuinely long for "good old days" in which marriage and the family were still sacred, or does the resistance to change discussed earlier manifest itself through resistance specifically to changes in the family structure? It might be that people desire a reversion to an earlier time characterized by more stability and security, and they express this hope through the family.

Conclusion

At first glance, Augustan poetry and modern country music may seem completely different; they take on different forms, describe different worlds, and come from different perspectives. Yet with more examination, they look more and more alike, utilizing similar symbols to express ideologies that, while they do vary somewhat between the literatures, also have much in common. Both the poetry and the country music draw on an idealized countryside, and their depictions of this countryside share many features, despite the real changes that have taken place between the two eras. Writers in both encapsulate an imagined or vaguely remembered country life using a set of images, turning the real countryside into a literary utopia in which the negative aspects of life are relegated to the city. Whereas the city is marked by change and uncertainty, degenerating into indulgence and stuffed with people who seem to have lost sight of what is important in life, an idyllic countryside remains the home of stability and virtue.

The exact catalyst for this type of literature is not immediately evident, but the historical context of the earlier sources can help to illuminate the context of the modern sources. The Augustan era has been studied extensively, and there is a wealth of literature already written to help interpret what might have sparked the desire for a stable and virtuous countryside. Using information about that period, the modern scholar can attempt to look at his or her own world in a different light. Analyzing the similarities and differences in the sources reveals what is relevant and significant both then and now—which hopes, fears, and desires the American country music crowd has in common with people living long ago. Though it is extremely difficult to understand accurately the

world we inhabit, the ability to step back from it and consider it in tandem with a more remote reality can be an indispensable tool. Though many people increasingly assert that the humanities, and especially classics, are not valuable, or at least not imperative, in the modern world, this is only true if the modern world does not consider it valuable or imperative to understand ourselves better.

For, although Augustan Rome and modern America are separated by centuries of historical development, they are nonetheless both part of the long expanse of human history. All sources that can demystify the human experience, from ancient ones that may seem irrelevant to modern ones that may seem unimportant, are indeed relevant and important, and they have the potential to reveal that societies that seem vastly different might be connected in unexpected ways.

Imagery of the country life in Augustan poetry and modern country music is an especially apt demonstration of the way societies connect to each other, because the imagery itself includes this story. Both literatures emphasize cycles of life, in which winter always becomes spring again and a child eventually takes on the role of his forefathers. Literature has the same capability, for the countryside of modern country music has taken up, in some ways, the mantle of its far-removed ancestor, Roman poetry. Though the literary understanding of the country life has been shaped through centuries and generations, developing and evolving with cultures over time, in some ways, it has looped back on itself, revealing that perhaps the circle *is* unbroken, after all.

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In the text, songs are identified by artist, song title, and year of release. The first time a song is cited in each chapter, all of this information is included. Subsequent mentions in the same chapter use only the song name. The “year of release” refers to the release date of the album that includes the song, not the release of the single. The exception to this is songs that have been released as singles but whose albums have not yet been released. In these cases, the year the single was released is noted.

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“A Working Man’s Wage” (20)

Atkins, Rodney. *It’s America*. Curb Records, 2009.

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---. *The Road and the Radio*. BNA Records, 2005.

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---. *Unleashed*. SKG Music Nashville, 2002

“Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” (98)

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---. *White Trash with Money*. Show Dog Nashville, 2006.

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---. *Not a Moment Too Soon*. Curb Records, 1994.

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---. *John Michael Montgomery*. Atlantic, 1995.

“It’s What I Am” (67)

“No Man’s Land” (53, 81)

---. *Leave a Mark*. Atlantic, 1998.

“Little Cowboy’s Cry” (53, 81)

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- “I’m Gonna Miss Her” (7)
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- . *Who Needs Pictures*. Arista Nashville, 1999.
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- “Home Sweet Home” (21, 37, 90, 100)
- . “Pure BS.” Warner Bros. Nashville, 2007
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- “Cotton Pickin’ Time” (29-30, 82)
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“That’s What I Call Home” (47, 72)

Tippin, Aaron. *Stars & Stripes*. Lyric Street, 2002.

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Van Zant. *My Kind of Country*. Columbia, 2007.

“The Hardest Thing” (20, 52, 90)

“My Kind of Country” (37-38, 97)

---. *Get Right with the Man*. Columbia, 2005.

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Wills, Mark. *Loving Every Minute*. Mercury Nashville. 2001.

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Zac Brown Band. *The Foundation*. Southern Ground/Atlantic, 2008.

"Chicken Fried" (21-22, 41)

"Toes" (5)

Appendix C: Translations of Latin Passages

All translations are my own. I have preferred to be as literal as possible in this Appendix, though in my translation of Tibullus I.1 on page 1, I leaned more toward readability.

Introduction

molestum rus: tiresome countryside

Chapter 1

iuncti boves: yoked oxen

fruges pecusque: crops and herd

felix: happy

incurvus arater: curved plow

fetus pecorum: offspring of the herd

beatus: “blessed,” “fortunate,” or “happy”

paterna rura bubus exercet suis: cultivates his ancestral farms with his oxen

amor: love

rura colam, frugumque aderit mea Delia custos, area dum messes sole calente teret: I will till the fields, and my Delia will be the guard of the crops, while she treads the harvests on the threshing floor in the hot sun

rura: the countryside

laetor quod sine me devia rura coles: I am happy because, apart from me, you will till the remote fields

pecus et finis pauperis agricolae: flocks and fields of the poor farmer

pastor cum grege languido: shepherd with a sluggish flock

mensis et arbor erant: was harvest and orchard

aurum omnes victa iam pietate colunt: all worship gold now, with piety overcome

parva seges satis est: a small field is enough

Tyrius torus: Tyrian couch (a bed of Tyrian purple was a luxury)

pudica mulier... atque dulces liberos: chaste woman/wife and sweet children

potius laudandus: more worthy of praise

*fetus matrona dabit, natusque parenti
oscula comprehensis auribus eripiet,
nec taedebit auum paruo aduigilare nepoti
balbaque cum puero dicere uerba senem:*

His wife will give him offspring, and the son of the father
Will steal kisses, when his ears have been grasped,
And it will not weary the grandfather to watch over his small grandson
And for the old man to speak lispng words with a son.

dulces pendent circum oscula nati: sweet children hang around his kisses

non frustra quidam iam nunc in limine perstat: not in vain, another now already
stands on your threshold

saeva puella: cruel girl

ad imperium dominae: at the command of his mistress

avidis nox sit pretiosa puellis: a night with eager girls is expensive

castas odisse puellas: to hate chaste girls

paterna rura: ancestral fields

ritus a prisco traditus avo: rite handed down from an ancient ancestor

patriam parvosque nepotes / sustinet: sustains the fatherland and small
grandchildren

funderet ut nato testa paterna merum: so that he might pour out to a son wine
from a father's jar

pudica mulier... atque dulces liberos: chaste woman/wife and sweet children

renidentes Lares: shining Lares (household gods)

deo... agricolae pro vitibus uvam / pro segete spicas, pro grege dapem: to the god
of the farmer a grape for the vines, wheat for the fields, a feast for the herd

requiescat arator: the farmer may rest

incultum sacellum: an overgrown shrine

agrestes foci: rustic altars

peccatis plurima causa: numerous occasions for sin

carmine cum magico... anus: a crone with a magic chant

sagae praecepta rapacis: teachings of a greedy sorceress

currat et inguinibus nudis ululetque per urbes: runs and with her groin naked and howls through the cities

maturus tempus: the right time

novus annus: new year

cubantem... dominam tenero continuisse sinu: lying down, hold [his] mistress in his soft lap

Chapter II

serat teneras vites: would/might plant tender vines

pomosisque ruber custos ponatur in hortis: "let a red guardian be placed in a fruitful garden" or "a red guardian might be placed in a fruitful garden."

si licet et solito membra levare toro: if it is permitted to ease his limbs on a familiar couch

nam veneror: for I do pray

fingebat haec: imagined these things

dolor in lacrimas verterat omne merum: sorrow turns all wine into tears

ipse boves mea si tecum modo Delia possim / iungere et in solito pascere monte pecus: If I might be able to yoke my oxen with you, Delia, and to graze the herd on a familiar mountain

olim veteres... coluere Sabini, hanc Remus et frater: once the old Sabines maintained, that Remus and his brother [maintained]

aureus hanc vitam in terris Saturnus agebat: Golden Saturn drove this life in the lands

ex agricolis et viri fortissimi et milites strenuissimi gignuntur: out of farmers both the bravest men and the strongest soldiers are begotten

ingrata urbs: ungrateful city

iniusta noverca: unfair stepmother

anguis in herba: snake in the grass

mollis herba: soft grass

Chapter III

fastidiosa... copia et molem exacting wealth and heap

opes, fumus, strepitus: riches, smoke, noise

miseras preces: wretched prayers

sine aulaeis et ostro: without tapestries and purple

dis domus: rich house

daps inempta: unbought feast

per urbem: through the city

praedae, opes, luxuria: plunder, riches, luxury

sacra fana: sacred temples

custos: guard/watchman

aulae et limina regum: the palaces and thresholds of kings

condit opes... defossoque incubat auro: store up wealth and sit upon buried gold

totus et argento contextus, totus et auro: all covered with silver and all covered with gold

labor adsiduus: incessant work/struggle/worry

ferus et vere ferreus: savage and truly iron-hearted

horrendi enses: horrible swords

vitium est auri; nec bella fuerunt / faginus adstabat cum scyphus ante dapes: is the fault of gold; there were no wars when a wooden bowl stood before feasts

nefas: great evil

rigidus ensis: hard sword

gemma bibat et Sarrano dormiat ostro: might drink from a jewel[led cup] and sleep on Tyrian purple

ingrata urbs: ungrateful city

quam bene Saturno vivebant rege: how well [people] lived with Saturn as king

glans aluit ueteres, et passim semper amarunt: nuts nourished the ancients, and they loved everywhere, always

pax candida primum / duxit araturos sub iuga curva boves: bright Peace first led the oxen, about to plow, under the curved yoke

divitiae patrum fructusque: the riches and fruits/profits of his fathers

futuri temporis exitus: outcome of the future

transmutat incertos honores: changes her uncertain rewards

munda cena: delicate meal

freta caeca: hidden seas

exsilio... domos et dulcia limina mutant: change their homes and sweet thresholds for exile

casta domus: virtuous home

humiles in Iouis arce casae: humble huts on the hill of Jove

redeunt Saturnia regna: "Saturn's powers return" or, in clearer English, "the reign of Saturn returns"

diem... promiss et celas aliusque et idem / nasceris: you bring forth the day and conceal it and you are born another and the same

docilis iuventa: teachable youth

senectus placida: peaceful old age

avis prolemque ministret: may [Birthday] give offspring to a grandfather

balba verba: literally, "babbling words," i.e. baby talk or nonsense

anni labor: year's work

nec requies: no rest

dulces nati: sweet children

*tum pater omnipotens fecundis imbribus Aether
coniugis in gremium laetae descendit et omnis
magnus alit magno conmixtus corpore fetus*

.
*parturit almus ager Zephyrique tepentibus auris
laxant arva sinus*:

In the spring, the lands swell and demands life-giving seed.
Then the all-powerful father Sky, with fertile showers
Descends to the lap of his delighted consort and he, great,
Having mixed with her great body, rears all their offspring.
The nourishing field gives birth and, to the warm breezes of the West,
The plowed fields open their laps.