

Bob Dylan in the Country: Rock Domesticity and Pastoral Song

In the Tub

ONE DAY, AROUND 1970, JOHN Lennon took a bath. Then he wrote a song about it. “In the middle of a bath I call your name,” sang the composer of “Revolution.” Next, he shared his call with his wife: “Oh, Yoko! Your love will turn me on.” About the same time, Lennon’s erstwhile writing partner, Paul McCartney, went to his second home in rural Scotland to get away from the press. There, the composer of “Eleanor Rigby” got down to work: “Fly flies in, fly flies out,” he sang on his second solo album, *Ram*. While McCartney was in Scotland, the American writer Paul Simon went to his doctor for a checkup. His song “Bridge Over Troubled Water” had recently stood with McCartney’s “Let It Be” as an anthem of consolation for a generation exhausted by war and political violence. Both tunes had achieved broad success with both white and black audiences—in the latter case, through covers by the soul singer Aretha Franklin. Simon’s GP read him the riot act about his fast living. Simon passed the news on to his spouse: “Peg, you better look around! How long you think you can run that body down?”¹

What is this stuff? By the end of the 1960s, rock and roll music had generated a canon of powerful songs built around a set of frequently reworked themes: sexual desire, regret, more sexual desire, rebellion, drugs, despair, escape, sexual desire.² Now, all of a sudden, major composers in the field were writing about trivia.

ABSTRACT At the close of the 1960s two developments changed the shape of mainstream rock and roll music. The first was a new focus, on the part of a number of influential artists, on music about domestic life—kids, spouses, home. The second was a new interest in blending rock rhythms with instrumentation and themes taken from country music. This essay explores the ways in which these two concerns overlap in the work of Bob Dylan. I argue that Dylan’s work at the turn of the decade offers insights into our own current moment, when the relationship between the public world and the private world is being renegotiated. I show how Dylan’s “country” songs are, in fact, models of self-conscious experimentation that push against the conventions of popular song and highlight the conditions of their own production. REPRESENTATIONS 152. 2020 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 103–22. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2020.152.5.103>.

The turn to domestic themes on the part of major white rock stars reflects the changing relationship between public art and personal expression at the end of the 1960s. Rock music's extraordinarily rapid rise to dominance in the field of entertainment was built on images of rebellion and fictions of expanded consciousness. Now it seemed to have run out of steam. In part, it had been overwhelmed by the explosion of spectacle and drama that had taken over much political and social life. In the United States, the violence and confusion that followed the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King and the Democratic Convention in Chicago dwarfed expressions of youthful rebellion on the part of rich rock musicians. So these artists increasingly showcased themselves, not as rebels or teen-magazine "stars," but as personalities. Songs about family life, bathing experiences, and dietary regimens began to creep into the canon, and listeners were turned into paparazzi in spite of themselves. The music seemed to be at a crossroads.

The moment has resonance. We now enter our own new "decade" (that conventional unit of pop culture history), and face a set of challenges that have rearranged our relationship to the public world, to private space, and to our understanding of community. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a new experience of domestic space, as millions of people are compelled to shelter in place and wait for signs of improvement. Daily rituals of bathing (Lennon), home life (McCartney), and self-medication (Simon) replace the public experiences of political gathering (say, "Revolution"), face-to-face conversation ("Hey, Jude"), and street life ("The Sound of Silence"). In our own moment of nesting, *not* communing is both the prudent and the ethically correct thing to do. And yet, as the massive protests against racial injustice that erupted in May 2020 have also shown, the domestic idyll of self-quarantine is shaped by race and class. Sheltering in place is largely the prerogative of a professional class that remains overwhelmingly white, even as the protests against a segregated society have been strikingly multiracial. All of these factors raise the question of what we can learn from an earlier moment of political upheaval, and from the escapist art that was produced in response to it.

The late 1960s' focus on domestic or family life intersected with another musical phenomenon, to which it was closely linked. This was the turn to country. Many established acts who had made their reputations playing psychedelic or hard rock music in the mid-1960s would shift direction and embrace the traditions and sounds of country music (or, as it was called then, "country and western"). The Byrds, who had been imitating the jazz avant-gardism of John Coltrane as recently as 1966, recorded *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* in 1968. The experimental Bay Area band known

as the Grateful Dead put out *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty* in 1970. In England, Elton John followed his first two collections of rock-based songs with the country-themed *Tumbleweed Connection* (1970). Back in the United States, the Band upended mainstream rock with two albums (*Music from Big Pink*, in 1968, and *The Band*, in 1969) that blended ragtime and Appalachian traditions in rock songs about sharecroppers and moonshiners. Linda Ronstadt followed her 1969 debut, *Hand Sown . . . Home Grown*, by recording her second release in Nashville, the "Country Music Capital," and folksinger Emmylou Harris achieved mainstream success with a set of country ballads. These shifts were accompanied by an emerging "country rock" movement (the Flying Burrito Brothers, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Poco, the New Riders of the Purple Sage, and others) that would subsequently be swallowed up and neutralized by the success of the Eagles in the mid-1970s. The turn to a country sound, which enabled both the later "Americana" musical movement (Wilco, Gillian Welch) and the more pop-oriented "country folk" tradition (John Denver), coincides exactly with the turn to domestic themes noted in my references to Lennon, McCartney, and Simon. Rock music, a genre based often on songs about escape from small towns, now suddenly wanted to return to them. "I'm goin' up the country," sang Canned Heat at Woodstock, quoting bluesman Blind Willie McTell. "Oh me, oh my, love that country pie," exulted Bob Dylan in 1969. McCartney celebrated "the heart of the country / Where the holy people go." "Are you ready for the country?" asked Neil Young a year later, in 1972. James Taylor offered helpful updates on his own rural development projects—"setting me down a homestead on the farm"—on his album *Mudslide Slim and the Blue Horizon*, also from 1971. Why do all of these people want to go to the country? What do they mean to do when they get there? The ideal of rustic contentment and simple home life has a long history in the Western imagination, dating back to the idylls of Theocritus and Bion and the poems of Horace. Yet here it was, at the center of American and British modernism, exemplified by the kings and queens of rock music. In the mid-1960s, McCartney had moved to Saint John's Wood, a fashionable area of London. By the turn of the decade, like a character in a Virgilian eclogue, he was pretending to shear sheep in Scotland.³

"Country" is, of course, a complex label, since it denotes at once a sonic texture, a tradition of musical expression (with certain carefully delineated themes and song structures), and, more generally, a rural setting. By its very ambiguity, the term is able to mediate the intersection of the domestic themes mentioned earlier with another artistic tradition, the tradition of pastoral. It suggests the capacious conventions of pastoral art—a form of expression tied to a particular setting that both pretends to emerge from

that setting and comments on it. Pastoral literature, as Raymond Williams has shown, mediates, through artistic form, the tension between new types of production, on the one hand, and the social structures that new forms of production are rendering obsolete, on the other. In this instance, we see rock, a musical form that had taken over the entertainment world, suddenly searching for some other source of energy. The pastoral setting allows rock to continue to appear transgressive while seemingly settling down. In the country setting it can be disruptive, but not in the same way that riots in the streets are disruptive. Moreover, whereas earlier cultural turns to pastoral had drawn on traditions of rural experience (Virgil's invented shepherds, Thomas Hardy's farmers, the Provençal vintners of Marcel Pagnol), rock music generated a kind of second-order pastoral. To suggest rural experience without actually embracing its problems, it drew on an already mediated account of an invented rural life—the tradition of country music. Yet because it was appropriating, not rural experience, but art *about* rural experience, rock music could empty country music of many of its defining characteristics: the latter's sentimentality and nostalgia were brushed aside; its political conservatism was defanged through snarky irony; and all traces of race and class were carefully scrubbed away. What remained was a set of scenarios—cheatin' hearts, the glory of nature, beautiful farm girls ready for love, handsome cowboys free of attachment—and a particular sonic palette, signaled principally by the pedal steel guitar, which became the signifier of "countriness" for much rock music.

The turn to rural themes and home life at the end of the 1960s was not only musical. It reflected a larger trend in the so-called counterculture of much white urban youth. Following the rock festivals at Woodstock and Altamont and the Manson Murders, and under the continuing pressure of the Vietnam War, rising crime, and a slowing economy, many white middle-class young people from urban areas sought escape and a retreat from an inhospitable workaday world. Country life became romantic. The commune movement took shape. Organic farming emerged as an honorable profession. Thousands of young people began to look for ways to get "back to the garden," in Joni Mitchell's famous phrase from 1970. At a moment when the urban nuclear family was under immense pressure, the small-town culture of the country seemed to offer a location for reinventing social experience. And country music offered a set of stories against which young white people could celebrate their own cultural sophistication, in a setting that seemed to promise escape from urban chaos.⁴ Thus the turning of the decade was marked by the conjunction of a shift in *social mores*—the ruralization of the largely white "hippie" moment as part of a search for "authenticity"—and a new *artistic language*—the countrification of the heretofore urban phenomenon of rock and roll.

In the Basement

Hovering behind this moment was the mostly absent figure of Bob Dylan, the major songwriter of the era, who, several years earlier, had “retired” from touring following a motorcycle accident and seemed, so far as anyone knew, to be living in Woodstock, New York, with his family. Dylan’s work at the turning of the decade is often thought of as his “country period.” It consists of a set of records linked by rural and domestic themes, featuring the twangy instrumental and vocal sound traditionally associated with country music. *John Wesley Harding* (1967) features Dylan singing over a pedal steel guitar and offers a cover photo of the artist standing in the woods. *Nashville Skyline* (1969), as the name suggests, draws on the themes and scenes of commercial country music, with Dylan channeling Hank Williams and crooning in a duet with Johnny Cash. 1970’s *Self-Portrait* features covers of a number of classic country tunes. It depicts moonshiners and outlaws, introducing female backing singers and a country fiddle. *New Morning*, from 1971, has a largely rural setting, with Dylan celebrating the wonders of groundhogs, corn in the field, and country streams. 1974’s *Planet Waves*, which introduces mandolin and accordion, builds on the domestic theme, as kids, wives, and grandparents drop by. In the midst of these productions, Dylan’s soundtrack to Sam Peckinpah’s 1973 film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (in which the singer also played a small role), features both instrumental and vocal tracks drawing on country instrumentation (we get a banjo and fiddle on one track) and western themes. This country art is also, as these descriptions should make clear, linked to the interest in domestic experience that I noted earlier with my examples from Lennon, McCartney, and Simon. But how do these new directions express themselves in Dylan’s lyric language and musical form? Is this a pastiche of country music, or some new type of modernist experimentation? Is this work anti-establishment nihilism or a return to some set of very conservative values that should long since have been set aside by any artist interested in moving forward?⁵

The challenge faced by anyone writing about country experience, domestic life, simple pleasures, and family bonding is that, on the whole, they are boring themes. Happy families, as Leo Tolstoy famously pointed out, are all alike. To be sure, from the time of the French impressionists, domesticity has had its own tradition, in both literature and the visual arts, featuring scenes from family life in light-infused interiors, set among elegant furniture, pianos, potted plants, and Spanish guitars. In this artistic tradition, the drama and movement that haunt the domestic world are often expressed through the smallest details, in a glance, a splash of color, or a bit of shadow. But how to convey such nuances in song? “All the tired

horses in the sun / How 'm I supposed to get any ridin' done?" asked Dylan in a song from 1970 that simply repeats the same two lines over and over.⁶ Coming from a wealthy rock star on an album called *Self-Portrait*, it's not a very interesting question. The horses are obviously a domestic hobby (desperadoes don't "get any ridin' done"; they ride because they have to). And the answer, obviously, is to wait until the horses are rested. For, indeed, "time passes slowly up here in the mountains" (362), as he adds in a pithy observation on 1971's *New Morning*. It sounds tedious, both as life and as music.

Dylan's writing on 1966's *Blonde on Blonde*, the last pre-accident album, projects an image of the singing protagonist as constantly on the go and in demand. The songs unfold against a background of all-night parties, casual drug use, and sexual promiscuity. The singer's character hangs out with judges, riverboat captains, mysterious French girls, countesses. Even Shakespeare stops by. This lively setting changes in 1967. Dylan produces two sets of recordings, the official 1967 release *John Wesley Harding* and *The Basement Tapes*, a group of practice recordings, released later, that Dylan made with the white rhythm and blues outfit soon to be known as the Band. The tension between a pastoral world of family connections and friendship, on the one hand, and the public world of violence and protest that was dominating the news, on the other, seems to haunt both of these projects. But they solve the problem in different ways. On *The Basement Tapes*, the songs waver between grand philosophical themes, such as apocalyptic destruction ("This Wheel's on Fire") or the brevity of life ("Tears of Rage"), and small moments of friendly counsel. Thus, for example, "Nothing Was Delivered" offers a gangster-like threat: "Nothing was delivered but I can't say I sympathize / With what your fate is going to be, yes, for telling all those lies" (408). But then it turns, in the refrain, to offer friendly advice: "Take care of yourself get plenty of rest" (408). Is this a song about the crisis of governmental legitimacy, after the Warren Report? Or is it about a tense session of horse trading, down at the local feed store? It's not clear. The transition between one set of assertions and the other—formally, between verse and chorus—is strikingly abrupt, as if Dylan were groping to bring two distinct spheres of experience together. Another song, "Too Much of Nothing," cries out against inequality and injustice ("Too much of nothing / Can make a man abuse a king / . . . Can turn a man into a liar," and so on) but segues into a friendly greeting in the chorus: "Say hello to Valerie / Say hello to Vivian / Give her all my salary / On the waters of oblivion" (402). These songs, like many on *The Basement Tapes*, struggle to reconcile the grand collapse of public confidence that characterized the Vietnam years with some new sense of intimacy appropriate to a nested country experience.⁷

Thus Dylan seems to be working to establish some new location for emotional and moral life, rooted in the domestic world, beyond the public space of politics and spectacle. One of the best-known songs from *The Basement Tapes*, “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere,” reveals the challenges of the situation. The problem of stasis shines out from the title. Here is the chorus:

Whoo-ee, ride me high
Tomorrow’s the day my bride’s
Gonna come, Oh, oh, are we gonna fly
Down in the easy chair

(406)

Change is in the air, but just barely. “It’s so easy to fall in love,” sang Buddy Holly in a song about losing control of your emotions. But here you no longer have to pursue love. It comes to you, in the form of a mail-order bride. “Falling in love” is literal; just sit down. The simple harmony and repeated melody line of the song, which never varies between chorus and verse, suggests that, despite the good feelings, not much is happening.

One way to harmonize big themes with intimate scenes is to put people in motion, moving them between the public world and private drama. This becomes a central feature of Dylan’s “official” release of that year, *John Wesley Harding*. It is an album of small songs that point to grand ethical dilemmas through simple forms. Whereas most of *The Basement Tapes* songs were sing-alongs, reinventing community through performance, none of these songs even has a chorus.⁸ An essential motif is the escape. The record features a set of stories in which characters risk being trapped or enclosed by catastrophe but reclaim their own destinies through movement. The title track sings the heroism of the famous outlaw Wes Hardin, “a friend to the poor.” The song updates Woody Guthrie’s dust-bowl ballad about Pretty Boy Floyd, who was unjustly accused of crimes he never committed. By contrast, Hardin (or “Harding,” as Dylan spells it), is depicted as a free agent, a man “never known to make a foolish move” (276). Outlaws, like cowboys, are good characters to use in modern, automobile-age pastoral. They are connected to the land, but, like commuters, they never settle down. And the point of the album seems to be that everyone is an outlaw in one way or another. The album abounds in evasions: “Drifter’s Escape” features a hobo who is saved from judgment by a corrupt judge thanks to a bolt of lightning. “As I Went Out One Morning” gives us a scene of temptation from a fair “damsel,” whom the narrator somehow resists. “All Along the Watchtower” provides an allegory of escape and revenge. “Dear Landlord” recalls a topos mobilized at the very beginnings of modern

pastoral tradition, in which such fictions as Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* and Thomas More's *Utopia* unfold against the violence visited by a new class of "landlords" taking over the territory traditionally farmed by the peasantry. The exceptions are the final two cuts, "Down Along the Cove" and "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight," which are both about nesting and introduce, now for the first time in Dylan's work, the telltale sound of the pedal steel guitar, setting us clearly in the country.

The overlapping of an allegorical vision of pastoral, on the one hand, and the newly domestic impulse of much rock stardom, on the other, is revealed when we note that the scenarios from *The Basement Tapes* and *John Wesley Harding* are reworked on *Nashville Skyline* and *New Morning*, right at the end of the decade. On these records, the drama of escape is now no longer on a "clouded plain" or in an unidentified "courthouse." These songs touch on recognizable quotidian late-1960s life—at least as we might imagine it in upstate New York. *New Morning* features songs about crisp winter days, life in the hill country, roosters crowing, a car "coming down the road for a country mile / Or two" (368). It all sounds great. Yet, no less important is the fact that a number of the songs depict disappointment or failure in public life. In "Went to See the Gypsy," from *New Morning*, the protagonist goes to meet someone famous, a star or guru of some kind. The expectation of spiritual transformation is palpable: "He can drive you from your fear / Bring you through the mirror / He did it in Las Vegas, and he can do it here" (363), says one character as the scene begins. Yet the narrator steps out for a second to make a phone call and, when he returns, the gypsy has vanished. The meeting is a bust. Similarly, in "Day of the Locusts," on the same record, the protagonist receives an award (presumably, the honorary doctorate bestowed on the biographical Bob Dylan by Princeton University in 1970), yet the ceremony is stifling. In both of these songs, the solution is to escape: In "Went to See the Gypsy," the protagonist finds meaning elsewhere: "So I watched that sun come rising from that little Minnesota town," he sings, in conclusion. "Day of the Locusts" ends with a getaway scene:

I put down my robe, picked up my diploma
Took ahold of my sweetheart and away we did drive
Straight for the hills, black hills of Dakota
Sure was glad to get out of there alive

(361)

These stories replay the escape scenes from *John Wesley Harding*. Now, however, the "real" biographical Bob Dylan (or, perhaps we should say, Dr. Dylan, after the Princeton visit) seems to be making an appearance.

In the Light

Escape and movement are, of course, frequent in Dylan's early folk songs, where he takes to the road at the drop of a hat. Yet here he repurposes the imagery of escape in order to invest it with reassurance and pleasure. The escape in "Day of the Locusts" is not to the uncertainties of riding the rails, but to a fun vacation in the Dakotas, with his sweetheart. It's a domestic idyll, complete with diploma. "Went to See the Gypsy" ends with the narrator in a small town in Minnesota—reminding us of the biographical Bob Dylan's own midwestern small-town roots. There he waits for the sunrise that will offer illumination in a way that the gypsy could not. Going home is better than going to Vegas. This reworking of scenarios of escape, to home and love rather than to "the road," indicates how Dylan is appropriating the superficial vocabulary of movement and travel—themes relevant to the newly restive generation of fans I mentioned earlier, hitchhiking here and there—for an ethos of domestic life and groundedness. The songs use a rhetoric of movement to project an ideology of commitment. He traces out a new geography of domestic emotion. At the same time, the pseudo-biographical register means that these songs are, in a very real sense, about their own genesis and composition. Dylan's persona doesn't evade uncomfortable situations in order to point an accusing finger at authority, as he might have done five years earlier, but, rather, to recount anecdotes of illumination that generate the songs we are experiencing. In this regard, he points back to the high pastoral tradition, in which poets write poems about shepherds in the fields who are also poets singing about their flocks, and about other poet-shepherds. Here, the poet in the country occasionally ventures out long enough to pick up material to tell the story of his venturing and reaffirm the value of the country setting.

We can see this spatial and emotional realignment most clearly on one of the strongest cuts from *Nashville Skyline*, the concluding tune, "Tonight I'll Be Staying Here with You." It begins with a classic scene of escape; someone is getting on a train to leave town. "Throw my ticket out the window / Throw my suitcase out there, too" (326), he begins, over a Floyd Cramer-inspired piano riff; and we prepare ourselves for some scene of a lover dropping his belongings into the garden as he slips out the side window at dawn, heading back to the road. By this time in his career, Dylan had written a whole set of songs featuring this scenario, building on a folk-song tradition about lusty traveling salesmen and hobos. "When your rooster crows at the break of dawn / Look out your window and I'll be gone" (78), he had written in "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright," from 1962. Yet now he converts the cliché of departure into its opposite, a scene of remaining. When he throws his suitcase out the window, it's not to pick it

up and run from the sheriff; it's to stay: "Throw my troubles out the door / I don't need them anymore / 'Cause tonight I'll be staying here with you." The promise of comfort (and sex) offers respite from life on the road, a simple life lived with emotion instead of adventure. Thus, Dylan paints a scene of domestic love, of commitment, of *staying*—conventionally a fairly static topic—by manipulating a cliché about leaving. The song unfolds between the hero's decision to remain and the consummation of bliss. The singer reflects on this situation in the bridge, which is built on a bluesy minor-sounding musical phrase:

Is it really any wonder
The love that a stranger might receive
You cast your spell and I went under
And I find it so difficult to leave
(326)

Love turns strangers into friends. The transformation is underpinned by a dramatic musical cadence leading back to the verse. Dylan stretches out the final word—"leave"—to suggest the power of the force that is holding him. For good measure, the backing musicians cycle down the scale to a dramatic break, falling silent for an instant before moving on to finish the story.⁹ As he winds it up, Dylan drives the song further against its somewhat stately country ballad form, altering the melody by introducing more blues-like phrasing, with flatted sevenths and flatted thirds on the first two lines of the last verse. In a very rare move for Dylan, he actually repeats the lyric of the first verse as the last verse. In many popular songs, such repetition is marked by a change in the lyric of the last verse, through which we can gauge the emotional distance the song has covered: The first verse says I'm lonely. The last verse repeats much of the first verse but discloses that I'm no longer lonely. Dylan, by contrast, repeats the lyric exactly, but he changes the form, reshaping the melody. It is as if the imminent arrival of "tonight" pushes the singer against the easy, controlled melody line set up by the first two verses. And by the end of the song Dylan has invented a double for himself: "If there's a poor boy on the street / Then let him have my seat," he sings, evoking the traveler persona that he used to inhabit, two minutes earlier, but that he has now sloughed off. The song offers a bewitchment scene—say, Odysseus *chez* Calypso—but reshapes it into a conversion narrative. Here, staying is rebirth.

An even more elegant and complex version of the same process comes in "Lay, Lady, Lay," the radio hit from *Nashville Skyline*. It is a remarkable recording on a number of levels. For one thing, the explicit sexuality of the song was unusual in a year when the number one tune was "Sugar, Sugar,"

by an invented group called the Archies (“Sugar, ah, Honey Honey, you are my candy, girl, and you got me wanting you”). Even more impressive is the way “Lay, Lady, Lay” moves, as it unfolds, from sex to commitment, from the hook-up to deep engagement. The expression “to lay” is late-1960s vernacular for copulation.¹⁰ Yet the courtly term “lady” and the homey reference in the first lines to “my big brass bed” suggest that we are in a domestic situation. Indeed, the near rhyme between the grammatically incorrect imperative “Lay” and “Lady” stresses the fundamental ambiguity of the situation. And as the lyric unfolds, we move from sex to romance; “Lay, lady, lay / Lay across my big brass bed” turns, by the end, into the grammatically happier and emotionally clearer, “Stay, lady, stay / Stay while the night is still ahead” (318).

What is most striking about the track is its sensuality—not a word that one would conventionally apply to a Bob Dylan recording. The story, such as it is, is carried along by the sonic texture and by the striking opening chord progression. The beginning measures seem to echo the opening cadence in Dylan’s duet with Johnny Cash on the first cut of the album, a reworking of 1962’s “Girl from the North Country.” There Dylan and Cash strum their way from the tonic chord (G major) to a minor chord based on the third scale tone (B minor). “Lay, Lady, Lay” is in a higher key, A major, but the sequence begins in a similar way, moving from A major to C-sharp minor. But then it continues with a G major chord, taking us out of A major. That leads, in turn, to B minor, the chord that bears the same relationship to G that C-sharp minor does to A. In other words, the opening line is in two parts, major to minor chord in A, then major to minor chord in G. The minor chord in G, B minor, also conveniently happens to be the second chord in A, which connects the two keys and sets the table for the shift to the dominant chord, E major, on the verse: “Whatever colors you have in your mind / I’ll show them to you and you’ll see them shine.” The harmonic tension within the line, as the band hits, for an instant, the discordant G major chord, underpins his repetition of the lyric: “Lay, lady, lay,” he begins, then, more insistently (over G major), “Lay across my big brass bed.” The lyric is gently repetitive and explanatory, while the harmony is insistent, built on a single piece of chromatic information.

Overlying this progression is Pete Drake’s warm pedal steel guitar line, which follows the acoustic guitar and smooths the transitions through the tonic lability characteristic of the pedal steel. Indeed, in contrast to much country music, where the pedal steel is used as a punctuating instrument, playing filigrees, echoes, or occasional solos, here the instrument carries the rhythm section. Its timbre holds the song up to the light, and it moves in dialogue with Bob Johnston’s organ accompaniment, which moves voicings around to create an effect of ascent, even as the pedal steel moves resolutely

downward. Thus the accompaniment seems to move in several directions at once, generating tension and release across its simple four-measure hook. There is passion in the air, but the union of the lovers will produce a kind of stability, suggested by the slurred bass line that lands back on the tonic at the end of each chorus. Later, in the outro, we move steadily up the diatonic scale, to the fourth, before landing lightly on the tonic as the recording ends. The drama in the song is oblique, in passing, like a shadow on the face of a character in an impressionist canvas.¹¹

The double effect of the opening passages, a steady movement that is nevertheless quite stable, is replayed in the curious structure of the lyric. The opening four lines appear to be a chorus of sorts, and yet they advance the moral center of the story, which moves from sex to commitment. The verses (“His clothes are dirty, but his hands are clean / And you’re the best thing that he’s ever seen”) comment on and describe the basic situation. The whole song is about the relationship between surface and depth, and yet there is no great revelation when surfaces are stripped away. The lover has dirty clothes, but his “hands are clean,” suggesting both that he’s stopped at the washbasin on the way in from the field, and that he’s morally upright. These multiple senses are all bound together by the implicit message to the lady, that to realize happiness she needs to open her eyes and see the beauty—both physical and emotional—in the person before her. The woman is promised transfiguration through love, but the colors she will see are already inside her: “Whatever colors you have in your mind / I’ll show them to you, and you’ll see them shine.” The song moves from sex to spirituality, from passion to commitment. This double register is reflected in the double inscription of the singing/loving persona in the lyric, as both first-person seducer (“*my* big brass bed”) and third-person commentator (“you’re the best thing that *he’s* ever seen”). This juxtaposition of protagonist and commentator in the same song is a technique that Dylan has used often in his career. In this case, it makes it possible for the song to give voice to desire, while also explaining what that desire means.¹²

The striking image of the “colors” in the mind of the lady in “Lay, Lady, Lay” sets up a lyric motif that unfolds across these records and matches the themes of movement. Dylan responds to the stasis inherent in domestic or pastoral scenes by injecting them with moments of illumination. Light is the key image here: “You’ll see them shine,” “I long to see you in the morning light.” The return to Minnesota, in “Went to See the Gypsy,” ends with the hero watching the sun rise. “Day of the Locusts” features a moment when darkness prevails, until, “the next time I looked, there was light in the room” (361). Whereas Lennon wants to sing of bathtime bliss and McCartney wants to celebrate the simple life, Dylan uses the banal scenarios of daily life as the settings for moments of

inspiration or enlightenment. “May you always know the truth and see the light surrounding you,” he urges in the most enduring song from *Planet Waves*, “Forever Young” (456). And the light is not simply physical or natural light. It is also spiritual and emotional light.

We find hints of illumination all over these songs, even after dark. In one of the seemingly minor songs on 1969’s *Nashville Skyline*, “One More Night,” the singer regrets his lost love and complains that he lives in darkness: “The stars are in sight / But tonight I’m as lonesome as can be,” he begins, channeling Hank Williams’s “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.” Yet, in contrast to Williams’s bleak vision of despair, in which nature is reduced to a set of metaphors for loss, Dylan’s persona notices the beauty of the changing heavens: “I will turn my head up high / To that dark and rolling sky” (320). The dark sky, with its “rolling” motion, suggests that clouds are moving, that change is afoot. A lively guitar solo underpins the moment. Love may be gone, but there is enchantment and a kind of spiritual illumination—an epiphany, if you will—in the beauty of the sky. And, indeed, we next get an acknowledgment of the magic of the present moment of expectation: “I will wait for the light / While the wind blows high above the tree.” Even when love goes wrong—or, perhaps, especially when love goes wrong—there is consolation in the beauty of nature, in the sky and the wind.¹³ Across these songs, Dylan interweaves scenes of movement, of leaving and arriving, with moments of illumination. We get full-blown revelations in such songs as “Three Angels,” in which statues in the street on Christmas morning play the music of the spheres, in “Father of Night,” where Dylan praises God, or in “If Not for You,” where the beloved is depicted as making possible the rhythm of the day: “Babe, I’d lie awake all night / Waitin’ for the morning light” (368). And, by contrast, the theme from *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” evokes death, conventionally, as the end of day: “It’s gettin’ dark, too dark to see” (432).

Thus, beneath the smooth surfaces of these domestic scenarios and country ballads, Dylan introduces elements of restlessness and illumination. His desire is not for a cabin in the woods. Rather, these songs display an art looking for flashes of brilliance in the everyday, for knowledge through form and metaphor. In this way, Dylan projects a more *aesthetically* focused alternative to the “self-exploration” advanced by many of his contemporaries. We think, again, of Lennon’s star turn in the bath, of James Taylor’s self-regard, or of Joni Mitchell’s confessional album *Blue*, exactly contemporaneous with *New Morning*, which, on “California,” brings the droning sound of the Appalachian dulcimer (the modern equivalent of the literary shepherd’s lyre), into mainstream pop as accompaniment for the jet-setting Mitchell’s desire to leave gloomy Paris and return to sunny Los Angeles. Dylan is touching on many of the same themes as his contemporaries, but he

is doing so to suggest that moving to the woods or the canyon is no answer to the nightmare of political chaos. It is only useful as an opportunity for aesthetic discovery. Like all pastoral, this work becomes, in the end, about its own power to enchant. For many musicians schooled in psychedelia, the “country” sound entailed a retreat to apparently simpler structures. By contrast, in these songs, Dylan seems to be pushing against the conventions and forms of the genre. He is deploying the clichés of the restless hippie moment to carve out an emotional landscape that lies elsewhere, in moments of epiphany, in the surprises of everyday life, in the discoveries of artistic form. Just pay attention to the sunrise, or to the stone angels high above the street.

It is in this context, in the images of illumination and the tension between movement and repose, that we might underscore the importance of Dylan’s own compositional style. He seems to be writing many of these songs on the piano. Though he had always played the piano, at the turn of the decade it seems to become an important element in the shape of the songs. “One More Night” begins with a bluesy piano riff. “Father of Night” is built on a descending piano line. “Dirge,” one of the strongest songs on *Planet Waves*, is a piano torch song. At one level, of course, this connects to the material conditions of Dylan’s work. He spent the years immediately before 1966 mostly traveling. It is difficult to write on the piano when you are on the road, on tour, in hotels. Cowboys carry guitars, but not, generally speaking, pianos. However, when you have a stable work place—say, a nice house in Woodstock—you can plink away all day at the keyboard. The piano presence might, in fact, be the most “domestic” feature of these songs.

In the Rain

All of these details—the glancing reference to travel, the piano experiments, the moment of illumination, and the domestic setting—come together in the most powerful tune from *New Morning*, the dramatic song called “Sign on the Window.” The song contrasts with the other cuts on the album, which, as noted, sing of the good life in the mountains. “Sign on the Window” tells of despair and emotional chaos. It also maps out, quite literally, in its geography, the turn to the “country” that was in the air. It is a distillation of the themes of the new decade, a kind of metasong about how to write at the beginning of the 1970s. “Sign on the window says ‘Lonely,’” begins the lyric; “Sign on the door said ‘No Company Allowed’” (369). The contrast between the two signs suggests that we are in the aftermath of something. The first sign describes the protagonist in the present tense, his situation after he has read the second sign, which is evoked in the past tense. Ray Charles’s recording of Doc Pomus’s “Lonely Avenue,” from

1956, and Roy Orbison's "Only the Lonely" (1962) offer a tradition standing behind this moment. Two more signs follow: "Sign on the street says 'You Don't Own Me' / Sign on the porch says 'Three's a Crowd.'" That clarifies things. There's a broken relationship here, a woman has left her lover for another and is advertising the news. "You don't own me," Lesley Gore had proclaimed in her 1963 hit song of that title, "I'm not one of your little toys." Gore's manifesto of female agency now becomes a billboard slogan that humiliates our singing protagonist.¹⁴ The song is reduced to shorthand, to hieroglyphs of earlier song traditions. The "country" scenario of a cheatin' heart has been reduced, literally, to a set of signs, which supplant the emotional signals that the narrator has obviously failed to read before the song begins. If he'd been able to decipher her feelings, there would be no need now for posters.

In the second verse, details are filled in. We learn that the woman has run off with another man, to California, no less, ever the land of dreams. We're not told if they hitchhiked, as was frequent at the time, but we wouldn't be surprised if they had. The narrator should have seen all this coming: "My best friend said, 'Now didn't I warn you / Brighton girls are like the moon.'" More light imagery sets the emotional darkness of the scene against the brightness of the Brightons, who are changeable like the moon—but bright enough to get out of town.

It's a desolate scene, and quite striking in contrast with the "lost love" songs from earlier in Dylan's career. Conventionally, Dylan's persona gets dumped and responds with sarcasm by accusing the woman ("I Don't Believe You") or by shifting attention elsewhere ("Absolutely Sweet Marie," with its imagery of prisons and railroads). Here, we truly seem stuck. The sense of frustration is reflected musically in a set of repeated sixteenth notes—the same note played multiple times in a row—as a kind of filler and prod to the piano accompaniment. Voices chant in the background and an organ chimes in. This insistent pattern—ta, ta, ta, ta—is then slowed down and reshaped at the end of each of these verses into a sequence of piano chords over the subdominant B chord, then the tonic F sharp—dum, dum, dum, dummm—played four times for emphasis, like the ominous opening phrase of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Both the lyric and the accompaniment change, however, when we come to the bridge. There, he shifts from F-sharp major, up a half-step, in an unusual move, to G, and on up, through several other major chords, to D major, a chord based on the sharp fifth note of the scale. The modulations give the impression of restless movement upward and a kind of clearing as Dylan opens the vocal line of the bridge. These modulations would be unusual on the guitar. But the piano part suggests change, which is set in tension with the bleak immediacy and density of the lyric that follows:

“Looks like nothin’ but rain / Sure gonna be wet tonight on Main Street / Hope that it don’t sleet.” We notice immediately the internal and end rhymes: “rain” rhymes with “Main” and “sleet” rhymes with “Street.” The entire bridge is only three lines, but we get four lines’ worth of bad news through the rhyme. Lyrical condensation mirrors meteorological condensation. The mere name of Main Street, which should have its own “sign,” and where one should be cruising if one were in a more conventional rock song, evokes, through the rhyme, two kinds of bad weather at once. And, indeed, Dylan then returns to the final verse through the only passage in the song where the piano breaks out of its rhythmic pattern into melody. He launches into one of the very few piano solos that he has ever recorded. Previously, Dylan’s featured instrumental work had largely consisted of harmonica solos or guitar riffs. Now he provides an emotional scaffolding for the story with an entire verse of piano melody. The pounded chords, suggesting both bad weather and bad feelings, finally give way to broken chord patterns that sweeten the situation, hinting at some kind of resolution. In a song that is all about signage, the emotional burden is carried outside of language, by the piano.

And we do get a resolution of sorts, though it is not without its ironies. The protagonist resolves to move west, to get back to the country.

Build me a cabin in Utah
 Marry me a wife, catch rainbow trout
 Have a bunch of kids who call me “Pa”
 That must be what it’s all about
 That must be what it’s all about
 (369)

It is difficult to know for certain whether this is resolution or self-delusion. The Brighton girl, who was bright like the moon, will be replaced by trout streams, a flock of young ’uns, and that great western American invention, the frontier “wife.” We seem to have drifted into a TV western, or into the movie *Shane*. This is not the vision of conjugal fidelity and family bonding celebrated elsewhere through these albums. Nor is it the dream of rootedness and contentment evoked by Dylan’s contemporaries. It’s a cartoon. And the cliché nature of this final scenario suggests Dylan’s distance from the fantasy of domesticity that overtook many of his fans, who vowed to “get back to the country” at the end of the 1960s.

My point here isn’t simply that this ending is the inverse of the happy nesting celebrated by people like McCartney and Taylor. After all, it’s a gloomy song. The point is that, poetically, it works in a different register, as a parody or self-consciously artificial response to the situation of the protagonist. The mannered style of the last verse is built into the situation.

It is the only possible response to the stasis of the rest of the song. If you think you can escape, to California or Utah, you're living in a fantasy. The last verse perfectly embodies the uneasy fit between the clichés of country life and Dylan's probing, restless innovations in form and presentation. Domesticity can only come at the expense of passion, as Plan B, via a pastoral scene that is patently ironic.¹⁵

Beneath their images of down-home delight and domestic contentment, these songs reveal a pressure on form and genre that suggests an ongoing experimentation. "Good old country comfort," to recall an Elton John line from 1970, is precisely not the goal. It feels fake. It risks leading to another version of commodity culture, a selling of the rural, a loss of critical edge. Dylan's protagonists seem ill at ease in the world of rural contentment. Their discomfort is paralleled in the ways he pushes back on the forms of country music through harmonic and metrical innovations. He offers a set of songs in which the grand public dramas of earlier albums give way to moments of intimacy and friendship. Opportunities for illumination emerge beyond the fake world of the Vegas "gypsy" and the university ceremony. Neon makes way for the colors of the mind. As "Sign on the Window" suggests, it is not the clichés of country life that bring insight. It is movement, change, an expanded vision.

I have been arguing that the overlapping of domestic and pastoral themes in popular music at the end of the 1960s offers a kind of mirror for the current problematic retreat from the public world in pandemic days. In Dylan's work at the turning of the decade, the focus on family and rural settings offers the occasion for a meditation on the relationship between art and illumination, moments of brightness or epiphany at which some larger meaning seems to emerge. And yet, the ways in which he pushes back at the conventions of country songwriting also point to the artificiality of the entire situation. They suggest that, if anything, the moments of illumination or epiphany are generated, not through the rural setting or country themes, but through the process of shuffling, whereby the clichés of the country tradition are moved about and turned against themselves. As "Sign on the Window" suggests, Dylan's version of the "country rock" moment is underpinned by a reflection on the conditions of its production, on the circulation and repurposing of signs of "authenticity" that point constantly to their own contingent artificiality.

"Thank God I'm a country boy," proclaimed John Denver in 1974. His delight, coming from someone who was obviously *not* a country boy, marked an ironic endpoint to the moment of country-inflected ideals of music and youth culture at the turn of the decade. As we have seen, Dylan's domestic music is implicated in this moment, though it reflects *on* it more than it takes its ideals seriously. It paints scenes of domestic contentment that are

also scenes of escape, scenes of cheatin' that are scenes of spiritual illumination. Dylan's songs seem to be observing the social changes around themselves, while thinking about new directions to be explored. And, indeed, by 1975 Dylan would be off of the farm, writing about travel and regret on his masterpiece, *Blood on the Tracks*. As for the hippie ideal of rural contentment, it was, in the end, as Horace knew and Dylan seemed to grasp, a landscape of the mind. Yet such was the escapist lure of much popular music at the beginning of the 1970s. Dylan goes there, but the irony of songs like "Sign on the Window" suggests that he knows he can't stay.

Notes

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1. I quote here from John Lennon's "Oh, Yoko!," on his *Imagine* album, and from Paul McCartney's "3 Legs," on *Ram*, both from 1971. Paul Simon's song "Run That Body Down" is from his first solo LP, *Paul Simon*, which appeared in 1972.
2. Indeed, so dominant had rock music become in the entertainment world—brushing aside jazz, folk, and pop—that it had achieved historical self-consciousness; its own history became part of the act: thus, Sha Na Na performed the 1957 hit "At the Hop" at Woodstock, and Linda Ronstadt launched a career built initially on reworkings of old tunes by Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, and Roy Orbison. Old rock, it turned out, was new rock.
3. It should, I hope, be obvious, but nevertheless probably requires stating, that I am not presuming to offer a general account of the popular music scene at the end of the 1960s. I want to isolate and describe one current of work that emerged suddenly and became influential. We could note that many black musicians, working in a rhythm and blues tradition, responded to the same moment with increased activism. For example, Marvin Gaye's *What's Goin' On*, a major comment on poverty, race, and the war in Vietnam, dates from 1970.
4. See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973), chap. 3, "Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral."
5. With the exception of *Planet Waves*, which was released by Asylum Records, all of these recordings were issued by Columbia Records. In recent years, Dylan's organization has released outtakes from most of these sessions as part of his "Bootleg Series." For an account of both the timbre of country music and the larger sociocultural implications of that timbre, see Jocelyn R. Neal, "The Twang Factor in Country Music," in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, ed. Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (Oxford, 2018), 43–64.
6. Christopher Ricks, Lisa Nemrow, and Julie Nemrow, eds., *The Lyrics: Since 1962* (New York, 2014), 344. All citations of Dylan's lyrics refer to this edition. Page numbers are indicated in my text.

7. The contrast between grand philosophical themes and moments of personal connection on *The Basement Tapes* songs has been noticed as well by Mike Marqusee in *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 1960s* (New York, 2005), 233. On the importance of the pastoral as “process” (traceable initially to William Empson’s book *Some Versions of Pastoral*), see Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago, 1996), 37–43.
8. I am grateful to Greil Marcus for this observation, as I am, more generally, to his study *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York, 2011) for background and context of *The Basement Tapes* and Dylan’s work in 1967–68.
9. In the strong descending line, punctuated by guitar figures, we might hear an echo of another dramatic piano-based story, also involving trains and escapes, from four years earlier. This is “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry,” from 1965’s *Highway 61 Revisited*. That recording features two different piano parts. Now Dylan rewrites the story, and his protagonist sticks around.
10. Or so says the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “laid (adj.),” <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=get+laid>.
11. It is worth pointing out that the verse, such as it is, builds off of the V chord, moving to the VI chord, E to F-sharp minor. The move from a major chord to a minor chord one step up is, of course, totally conventional (see “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere,” for example), but to do it from the V is a bit rarer, at least in Dylan’s work. The shift to the V chord is more conventional on the bridge than on the verse. In other words, this is a slightly unusual way to build a verse, since one would assume the verse to be the center of the song’s message and therefore to hover around the tonic. Here, however, as noted, the action in the song—both dramatically and harmonically—is in the chorus. Dylan will do something similar later on, in more complicated terms, on “Tangled Up in Blue” from 1975. For an extended riff on alliteration in Dylan, built on a discussion of the title of this song, see Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* (New York, 2003), 37–38. Michael Gray stresses the simplicity of Dylan’s language here in *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (London, 2000), 24. He argues that the image of the “clean hands” comes from the Bible, Psalm 24. Neal, in “The Twang Factor in Country Music,” argues that the wavering tone of the pedal steel guitar, which can slide from one frequency spectrum to another, connotes a disruptive working-class identity that pertains across any number of musics: “These scoops, slides, or portamentos have long been associated with an excessive display of passion, poor refinement of technique, or perceptions of the exotic, sexual, and rebellious (gypsy music, the clarinet glissando that opens George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* as signifying jazz over classical traditions, the use of a B-bender on an electric guitar in rock music, etc.)” See Neal’s discussion on pages 48–49 of her essay.
12. For a discussion of Dylan’s technique of simultaneously depicting his protagonists as actors and as commentators on the action of his songs, see Timothy Hampton, *Bob Dylan’s Poetics: How the Songs Work* (New York, 2019), chap. 6. (Released in paperback in 2020 under the title *Bob Dylan: How the Songs Work*).
13. Thus, Hank Williams’s version of nature, from 1949’s “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”: “Hear that lonesome whippoorwill, / He sounds too blue to fly. . . // The moon just went behind a cloud / To hide its face and cry. // Did you ever hear a robin weep, when the leaves begin to die? / That means he’s lost the will to live / I’m so lonesome I could cry.” From the Songfacts database, <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/hank-williams/im-so-lonesome-i-could-cry>.

14. For the tradition of “lonely” rock and country songs, see, in particular, all of Orbison’s 1961 album, *Roy Orbison Sings Lonely and Blue*. Elvis Presley had, of course, done “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” in 1960 (the song dates from the 1920s). One could evoke as well Bobby Vinton’s “Mr. Lonely,” also from 1962, though it is about a homesick soldier, so less relevant here. Christopher Ricks’s discussion of this song in *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* plays around with the fact that in English “the only rhyme for ‘lonely’ is ‘only.’” This makes it “perhaps the loneliest word in the language” (37). It is important that Dylan is also drawing on popular song traditions; he deliberately rhymes “lonely” with “own me,” which suggests, perhaps, Lesley Gore more than the *OED*.
15. Greil Marcus has noted as well the “western” slant of the songs on *New Morning* and stresses the importance of Dylan’s piano work. See his December 1970 *New York Times* review of the album, reprinted in *Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus: Writings 1968–2010* (New York, 2010), 30. Michael Gray argues that there is something unconvincing about the final note of “Sign on the Window,” which, on his reading, suggests “artistic insincerity.” I am trying to contextualize that affect by suggesting that a failure of “sincerity” is built into Dylan’s relationship to the themes explored here. See Gray’s discussion in *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan*, 172.