

# Rhetoric of religion

## Retoryka religii

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### “I’m On My Long Journey Home”: Rhetorical Identification in the Bluegrass Gospel Singing of Ralph Stanley and the Stanley Brothers

### “I’m On My Long Journey Home”: retoryczna identyfikacja w muzyce bluegrass gospel Ralpha Stanleya i Stanley Brothers

#### Abstract

The gospel songs of Ralph Stanley offer solace by means of identification with the singer’s losses and struggles, but they also offer a metaphoric framework of journey and homecoming found in many folk and country songs. The framework gives shape and meaning to the troubled aspects of life that make up much of the content of bluegrass songs, sacred and secular. Referencing Kenneth Burke’s early theories of rhetorical identification and symbolic appeal, this study reads the inclusion of gospel songs in stage and recorded performance as a secularized means of self-definition: singers and listeners are linked as people with common origins and destinations. While expected themes of repentance and faith run throughout these gospel songs, the progressive form of home that is lost and then recovered sets up a secular analogy to the story of sin and redemption so common in American Protestant Evangelicalism. By scattering these songs throughout a bluegrass performance, the journey toward home becomes the pathway by which all the troubles of betrayal, heartbreak, conflict, and hard times are borne and transformed. In place of creed or practices of piety, all are invited to find common purpose in the experiences of disappointment, regret, and loss in the knowledge that they are on the “Long Journey Home.”

Muzyka gospel Ralpha Stanleya daje pocieszenie poprzez możliwość identyfikacji z cierpieniem i zmaganiem piosenkarza. Jak w wielu utworach folkowych i w muzyce country znajdujemy tam również metaforę podróży i powrotu do domu. Ta metaforyczna rama nadaje kształt i znaczenie trudnym doświadczeniom życiowym, o których opowiada znaczna część utworów bluegrassowych, zarówno sakralnych jak i świeckich. Odwołując się do wczesnych teorii Kennetha Burke’a dotyczących retorycznej identyfikacji oraz symbolizmu, w niniejszym studium występy i nagrania muzyki gospel zostają odczytane jako zsekularyzowany sposób na samoidentyfikację: wykonawcy i słuchacze są połączeni jako ludzie o wspólnych korzeniach i celach. Motywy skruchy i wiary powtarzają się w utworach gospel, zaś powracający motyw domu, najpierw utraconego, a następnie odzyskanego, tworzy świecką analogię do historii grzechu i odkupienia, tak powszechnego w amerykańskim protestanckim ewangelizmie. Poprzez wykorzystanie tych motywów, w trakcie występu bluegrass, podróż do domu staje się wędrówką, w czasie której przeżywane i przekształcane są bolesne doświadczenia zdrady, rozpacz, konfliktów. W miejsce wyznania wiary lub praktyk religijnych, słuchacze zapraszani są, by odnaleźli sens i cel doświadczanych rozczarowań, żalu i utraty w świadomości, że uczestniczą w „długiej drodze do domu”.

#### Key words

Bluegrass, Gospel Song, Home, Identification, Ralph Stanley, Stanley Brothers  
bluegrass, muzyka gospel, dom, identyfikacja, Ralph Stanley, Stanley Brothers

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## “I’m On My Long Journey Home”: Rhetorical Identification in the Bluegrass Gospel Singing of Ralph Stanley and the Stanley Brothers

### 1. Introduction

When country music icon Ralph Stanley died after seven decades of performing (June 23, 2016), tributes appeared in major news outlets. In the obituary for the *New York Times*, Bill Friskics-Warren described Stanley as a “singer, banjo player, and guardian of unvarnished mountain music. . . a pivotal figure in the recent revival of interest in bluegrass.” One of bluegrass founder Bill Monroe’s early imitators, he started performing in the 1940s with his brother Carter as the Stanley Brothers and Clinch Mountain Boys. The band used Ralph’s driving banjo to propel up-tempo songs, occasionally slowing down to do a hymn or “inspirational number.” The obituary made special mention of their recording of “Rank Strangers,” “a performance ignited by Mr. Stanley’s unearthly wailing on the chorus that is often considered the group’s signal achievement.” (June 23, 2016). The waltz-time song about a returning wanderer was composed by Albert Brumley, a popular gospel songwriter best known for “I’ll Fly Away.”

I wandered again to my home in the mountain  
Where in youth’s early dawn I was happy and free  
I looked for my friends but I never could find them  
I found they were all rank strangers to me

Everybody I met seemed to be a rank stranger  
No mother no dad not a friend could I see  
They knew not my name and I knew not their faces  
I found they were all rank strangers to me

They’ve moved all away said the voice of a stranger  
To a beautiful home by the bright crystal sea  
Some beautiful day I’ll meet them in heaven  
Where no one will be a stranger to me

The song and its story stand as representative anecdote of the bluegrass “high lonesome sound.” The sense of loneliness builds as the singer looks in vain for friends, then family. The verse, sung by Carter Stanley, yields way to a chorus led by Ralph’s high-pitched cry: “Everybody I met” (solo then echo by group) moves even higher for “seemed to be a rank stranger” (solo then echo). A “rank stranger” would describe someone totally unknown, just as someone completely without knowledge or skill might be called a “rank beginner.” Carter’s lead voice returns as the melody descends to complete the call-and-answer pattern in the next three lines of the chorus. The second verse reports the singer’s losses through “the voice of a stranger”: “They’ve moved all away. . . to a beautiful home by the bright crystal sea.” Desolation is consoled with the hope of reunion in heaven, “where no one will be a stranger to me.”

This combination of high lonesome vocal style and story draws from a tradition of mournful ballad singing brought to the Appalachian Mountains by Scots-Irish immigrants. Song collector Alan Jabbour believes “this almost religious view of life as a pilgrimage, as a migration, actually matched their life experiences” (Ritchie and Orr, 235). Traditional songs like “The Wayfaring Stranger” contrast transitory earthly sorrow with eternal bliss, here depicted as settling down in family reunion, “going over home.”

I’m just a poor wayfaring stranger  
 Traveling through this world of woe  
 Yet there is no sickness, toil, nor danger  
 In that fair land to which I go

I’m going there to see my father  
 I’m going there no more to roam  
 I am just going over Jordan  
 I am just going over home

For Ralph Stanley, the story became personal when brother Carter Stanley died young in 1966. He wrote the epitaph on the tombstone, anticipating their reunion: “Farewell, Carter, for a Little While.” Ralph was not sure he wanted to continue performing alone, but after a period of mourning he was encouraged by fans to tour again. He also decided to include more “old-time mountain music” of his youth and the unaccompanied gospel singing he learned in the Primitive Baptist Church. Over time he expressed his preference for the label “mountain music” over “bluegrass,” yet Ralph Stanley is revered as a pioneer of the “high lonesome sound.”

If Robert Cantwell is correct in claiming that part of the success of bluegrass music is attributable to the adaptations that turned the music of home and dance

into a performance art (Cantwell 1984), one could ask whether similar adaptations were made to include the singing of the church in the bluegrass sound. The songs of the congregation and southern gospel quartets provided resources for repertoire, and bluegrass pioneers Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, and the Stanley Brothers wrote a number of gospel songs themselves. Can anything be said about the kind of gospel song that became popular in bluegrass, and, if so, is there a way to account for its appeal?

This study will make its case that the symbol of heaven as a home at the end of life's journey not only accounts for the appeal of many gospel songs, it also provides an organizing framework observable in all the Stanley songs, sacred and secular. It will use the identification theory of Kenneth Burke, who famously argued that "all religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion" (Burke 1961, v). In Stanley's case, the symbol of home that is lost then regained in heavenly reunion told the story of his own grief and decision to continue performing without his brother. Identification with his loss and determination to persevere urges listeners to do the same. The singer's story and the traditional song symbol of home coalesce to offer listeners the role of pilgrim for their own life journeys.

### **The Stanley Gospel Sound**

The incorporation of gospel singing in bluegrass grew out of the tradition of brother duets and hillbilly groups of early country music, in which up to fifty percent of the songs were religious (Rosenberg 1985, 22). The practice of singing from a paperback gospel collection was common (Malone 1998, 218-21). By way of personal example, a friend of mine grew up in East Kentucky. His uncle's bluegrass band, The Kentucky Hilltoppers, recorded and appeared on radio in the 1950s. He once showed me his uncle's tattered copy of the *John Daniel Quartet Song Book*, published and sold by WSM Radio Nashville and marked with the Hilltopper's favorite gospel numbers. As we looked through the songbook, my friend recalled that the Hilltoppers always closed their radio shows with the same song, bluegrass founder Bill Monroe's gospel composition, "The Old Crossroads." Monroe had been influenced by gospel singing schools that gave shape to the style and repertoire of his performances (Smith 2000, 20-21, 43).

Ralph Stanley became one of the best known of first-generation bluegrass performers when his acapella rendition of "O Death" appeared in the 2000 film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Listeners noted the grim lyrics and otherworldly character of his raspy voice begging, "Won't you spare me over to another year." After Stanley's death, David Cantwell wrote for *The New Yorker*: "That something

as universal as a man praying for safe passage to another year was deemed exotic and haunting by contemporary audiences, rather than as ordinary and human, says more about us, I think, than it does about Ralph Stanley” (June 26, 2016).

Stanley’s singular vocal style was formed in the Primitive Baptist Church that “lined out” the hymns, a practice that continues in the church today (Stanley 2009, 1-3). Working from a lyrics-only songbook, a leader sings a line at a time that is echoed by the congregation (Patterson 1995; Cauthen 1999). The style became a regular feature of Stanley’s concerts: “I’ve taken this old time Baptist sound overseas with me, and I actually believe that it was meant for me to do that. By doing this, so many people have heard it, and I believe it has helped a lot of people, or I hope it has” (Davis 2003, 203). Stanley noted the effect of singing the songs in performance:

That’s when you’re meaning what you’re doing.... People never mention it, but then I see lots of tears in the audience. Back years ago, I’d see women get up and shout when I’d do a gospel song. I haven’t seen any shoutin’ for a while, but I see a lot of tears. I guess that’s when you’re feeling something, feeling the spirit. I believe it helped to sing a hymn in church when I was five years old (Dawidoff 1997, 92).

By Stanley’s report, his brother Carter was in church then also; it is not surprising that the first song they recorded as a duo was a gospel number, “Death Is Only a Dream.” Therefore, this study will take the gospel songs of the Stanley Brothers and Ralph Stanley’s solo career as one continuous body of work, recognizing the evolution of the Stanley sound and Ralph’s introduction of unaccompanied gospel singing after Carter’s death.

### **The Long Journey Home**

The image of home has been understood in various and sometimes conflicting ways by interpreters of country and gospel music. Cecelia Tichi (1994) argued that songs about home are nostalgic. They look back with longing to escape from contemporary culture’s complications to an Emersonian idealized state of nature. Curtis Ellison (1995) presented an analogy: just as salvation follows sin in gospel music, so country music offers a secular spirituality in which personal hard times are followed by salvation in romance, family, or a heavenly home.

David Fillingim’s view has more in common with Ellison than Tichi. Fillingim argued that it is the marginalized situation of the “redneck” (borrowing Will D. Campbell’s use of the term for Southern and rural working-class whites) that makes “home” an answer to the absence of any sense of centeredness or permanence in much country and southern gospel music. The feeling that “this world is not my home,” to quote a famous tune, contributes to social conservatism by “rejecting

the significance of life in this world.... Songs about home, then, express a longing for a life that *does* matter, a longing for a place with some permanence” (Filligim 1997, 292). Gospel songs are eschatological; that is, they look ahead to a better day, and are not nostalgic.

An explicitly rhetorical study of southern gospel songs was done by Scott Tucker (2004). His fantasy theme analysis examined the role played by visions of the future in guiding behavior for the present. Tucker looked at 660 songs in the seven Gaither *Homecoming* songbooks, a staple of southern gospel singing (Goff 2002), and discovered that 192 contained some “content devoted to creating the rhetorical vision of heaven.” In addition to the expected description of heaven as a future home where suffering ends, there are calls to continue the long journey of faith with frequent references to the rapture of the church (the sudden coming of Christ to take believers to heaven from this world). Tucker concluded that imagery of heaven offers an escape from the troubles of this life, urging perseverance in Christian living for believers waiting to go home.

All of these studies speak of some measure of escape or relief from the troubles of this world, be they personal demons, loss of loved ones, or economic hardships that are patiently endured in the hope of better times to come. Only some of the studies narrowed the scope to songs about home, and none examined the bluegrass gospel songs that are unique to the genre, especially those written by the artists who performed them. With a focus on one of those artists, I argue here that it is not primarily escape or even transcendence that gives Ralph Stanley’s gospel songs their appeal, but the perception of movement toward a homecoming with its associations of family reunion and sense of belonging. Referencing Kenneth Burke’s theory of symbolic appeal within the larger theory of rhetorical identification, I understand Stanley’s performance of gospel songs in stage and recorded performance as a secularized means of self-definition. Singers and listeners come together as people with common origins and destinations when the journey of life is identified as homecoming. The prospect of heavenly reunion inspires more than patient endurance; listeners are motivated to see themselves as pilgrims on a long, difficult, and purposeful journey.

### **The Rhetoric of Identification and Symbolic Appeal**

In *The Rhetoric of Religion* Burke argued that religious language is most thoroughgoing in its rhetorical intent, producing his study of Christian theology to prove the point (1961). Burke readers know, however, that a fascination with theology is woven throughout his work. (In an interview, he told me he enjoyed reading Julian the Apostate and that writing one of his own books marked his loss of faith.)

*A Rhetoric of Motives* traced the attempt to overcome human division through identification using biblical terminology, as for example, the “problem of Babel”:

The theologian’s concerns with Eden and the “fall” come close to the heart of the rhetorical problem. For, behind the theology, there is the perception of generic divisiveness which, being common to all men, is a universal fact about them, prior to any divisiveness caused by social classes. Here is the basis of rhetoric (Burke, 1950, 146).

It is the rhetor’s task to find and proclaim unity where none is apparent. Although Burke himself said that the difference between persuasion and identification distinguishes traditional rhetoric from the “New Rhetoric,” (Burke 1951, 203) he added that, in his mind, the two are not in conflict. In many ways, the unconscious components of a sense of identity make the conscious efforts at persuasion possible (Wess 1996, 200).

As for the relation between “identification” and “persuasion”: we might well keep it in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications. . . . So, there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification (“consubstantiality”) and communication. . . (Burke 1950, 46).

“Stylistic identifications”: foundational to Burke’s theory of identification is his understanding of literary form as a basis for appeal. His method begins with an internal analysis to discover the effect the artistic work (or “poem,” as he sometimes said) is meant to have on its author and audience. Every literary work has its own network of symbolic action that links the work to the environment within which it was created. He described the internal analysis of the work in terms of poetics, but added that questions about symbolic action “do involve the relation of the work to the author and his environment, insofar as such information is available” (Burke 1966, 42). Stylistic identification as symbolic action organized Burke’s earliest conception of rhetoric.

His first book of criticism and theory, *Counter-Statement* (1931), examined the appeals of literary form and symbol in a “*Lexicon Rhetorica*.” Here Burke defined form as “the creation and fulfillment of desire,” the sense of being led along as one hears a limerick or follows a hero’s quest. Literary form gives shape to human experience, and to the extent that experience is common, or shared, the symbol becomes persuasive and transformative. Burke believed that “[i]ntensity in art may be attributed sometimes to form, sometimes to the Symbol, sometimes to both. Symbolic intensity arises when the artist uses subject-matter ‘charged’ by the reader’s situation outside the work of art” (Burke 1931, 163). So also of eloquence: “That work is most eloquent in which each line had some image or statement relying strongly upon our experience outside the work of art, and in which each image or statement had a pronounced formal saliency” (Burke 1931, 156). Here

“poetry contributes to the formation of attitudes, and thus to the determining of conduct” (Burke 1931, 163). In sum: “The Symbol is perhaps most overwhelming in its effect when the artist’s and the reader’s patterns of experience closely coincide,” and those effects in turn shape attitude and action. (Burke 1931, 153, 163).

His list of symbolic appeals stressed what the symbol, as the basis of a larger work of art, “does” for the writer and the reader. Burke insisted in his early works, against then current literary trends, that symbol-mediated communication not only joins individuals to their social environments, it does so by providing means to adjust and adapt (Selzer 1996, 157). Some, like Burke’s friend Ralph Ellison, saw it as a means of survival: “‘Language is equipment for living,’ to quote Kenneth Burke. One uses the language which helps to preserve one’s life, which helps to make one feel at peace in the world, and which screens out the greatest amount of chaos. All human beings do this” (quoted in Eddy, 2003, 12). Today others find a basis of social concern: “...what Kenneth Burke terms identification with, an altruism based on reciprocity, may be found to be more adaptive, or ‘natural,’ by way of enlightened self-interest if nothing else, than the egocentrism and narcissism propounded in Freudian models” (Swearingen 1991, 236).

The connections between the situation(s) that gave rise to the artistic work and the varied situations of its reception make sense of the world by taking form in similar patterns, what Brummett calls “homology” (2004, 33-41). For example, Katison’s study of the words and music of “Amazing Grace” found that the hymn’s appeal extends beyond the church because it offers “equipment for living with life’s trials through the homology of the grace anecdote” (2013, 146). The basic narrative form that depicts divine help coming from outside the self forges links with a wide variety of lived experiences.

This study, then, is informed both by Burke’s early theory of form and symbol (Wolin 2001) and his later recommendations for textual analysis:

The study is thus built pedagogically about the “indexing” of some specific “symbolic structure,” in the attempt to study the nature of a work’s internal consistency and of its unfolding. But in contrast with courses in “literary appreciation,” the generalizations at which we aim are not confined to a concern with the work’s “beauty.” Our question concerns its linguistic nature in general; and then, beyond that, the insight it may afford into man’s ways as a symbol user (Burke 2007, 275).

My study used Burke’s identification theory to discover the ways in which the bluegrass writer/singer seeks to identify with listeners’ experiences and the ways in which they are asked, directly and indirectly, to identify with the singer and the gospel message. It also followed Burke’s recommendations for textual study: analysis of cluster, agon, progressive form, and transformation (Burke, 1954). I looked at the lyrics of the most popular gospel songs of Ralph Stanley and the



Stanley Brothers as posted on the site, [www.bluegrasslyrics.com](http://www.bluegrasslyrics.com). I recognize that analysis of bluegrass gospel lyrics alone falls short of giving account of live or recorded performance, a point made for another genre by Jeffrey Carroll in *When Your Way Gets Dark: A Rhetoric of the Blues* (2005, 71-73). Stripped of the instrumentation, voices, audience, and setting, the lyrics alone do not show us how these songs “instruct, entertain, or persuade.” Therefore hearing at least some of the songs is recommended.

### **Home, Journey, and Reunion**

In 1952, the brothers recorded “The Wandering Boy,” a song either collected or authored by A. P. Carter, who put his name on it and recorded it with the Carter Family in 1927. Like “Rank Strangers,” it tells the story of one who left the family home with emphasis on the waiting mother. Again, there is no reunion on earth, but here the reminder of heavenly meeting brings little, if any, comfort.

Out in the cold world and far away from home  
Some mother’s boy is wandering all alone  
No one to guide him or keep his footsteps right  
Some mother’s boy is homeless tonight

Oh, bring back to me, my wandering boy  
For there is no other that’s left to give me joy  
Tell him his mother with faded cheeks and hair  
Is at the old home, awaiting him there

Well, I remember the parting words he said  
We’ll meet again where tears are never shed  
No separation in that land so fair  
When life is over, I’ll meet you up there

The story has roots in the moral literature of the nineteenth century. An online search discovered an 1849 book, *The Wandering Boy, Careless Sailor, and Result of Inconsideration: A True Narrative* by Horace Lane, and an 1877 song by gospel writer Robert Lowry, “Where is My Boy Tonight?” Two of Carter Stanley’s compositions for the Stanley Brothers followed the theme with variations. “The Fields Have Turned Brown” brings the wandering boy home to find no one waiting.

I left my old home to ramble this country  
My mother and dad said, “Son don’t go wrong  
Remember that God will always watch over you  
And we will be waiting for you here at home”

“Son, don’t go astray,” was what they both told me  
“Remember that love for God can be found”  
But now they’re both gone, this letter just told me  
For years they’ve been dead, the fields have turned brown

For many long years, I traveled in sorrow  
No thoughts of the day when I would return  
Now as I go home and find no one waiting  
The price I have paid to live and to learn

“White Dove” more positively associates the heavenly reunion of lost parents with the happy childhood home, yet the sense of sadness lingers.

In the deep rolling hills of old Virginia  
There’s a place that I love so well  
Where I spent many days of my childhood  
In the cabin where we loved to dwell

White dove will mourn in sorrow  
The willows will hang their heads  
I’ll live my life in sorrow  
Since mother and daddy are dead

We were all so happy there together  
In our peaceful little mountain home  
But the Savior needs angels up in heaven  
Now they sing around the great white throne

As the years roll by I often wonder  
If we will all be together someday  
And each night as I wander through the graveyard  
Darkness finds me as I kneel to pray

Like the slow-tempo “Rank Strangers,” both songs produce the “high lonesome sound” in three-four time, particularly on the sustained high harmonies of the chorus. The combined elements of heartbreak and promise in these songs do not fit neatly into either category of sacred or secular. Their negative example stands in contrast with the larger number of gospel songs that depict the journey from happy home to heavenly reunion. The movement is more like a pilgrimage toward belonging than the loneliness of wandering.

These themes of home, pilgrimage, and reunion noted by Tucker in his study of southern gospel singing appear with the greatest emphasis given to reunion. By unconscious selection or by intention, many depict a journey that ends in “glory,” often described as “home.” The unaccompanied “Gloryland” was a staple of Ralph Stanley’s concerts.

If you have friends in Gloryland  
Who left because of pain,  
Thank God up there, they'll die no more  
They'll suffer not again

Then weep not friends,  
I'm going home  
Up there we'll die no more  
No coffins will be made up there  
No graves on that bright shore

In the traditional “Bright Stars,” the mothers are “gone to heaven a shoutin’,” while the fathers are down in the valley praying. “I’ll Meet You in Church Sunday Morning” asks the Lord in Heaven “To guide us safe home on our way,” because “the path is narrow to that home far away.”

Mother’s example can lead as well. The singer in “Mother’s Footsteps Guide Me On” remembers learning of Jesus and the difference between right and wrong “with my mother here at home gathered there around the fireside.”

Happy days I still remember  
With a mother long gone on  
Now rejoicing with the angels (up in heaven)  
Mother’s footsteps guide me on

Mother’s love will always guide us  
As I journey on and on  
There will be a great reunion  
Mother’s footsteps guide me on

Of course, as noted above, it is possible to stray from that guidance, as the wanderer does in “Mother No Longer Awaits Me at Home”

One night while the moon from heaven was shining  
My mother was praying for me to come home  
She asked her dear Lord to watch o’er me out yonder  
To send me back home to never more roam

When I left my old home way back in the mountains  
I said I’d return with honor and fame  
But a young reckless heart turned wrong at the crossroads  
And now as I go home I bring Mother shame

“The Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn,” by Ralph Stanley, names the “narrow way [that] leads home,” promising the oversight and protection of the Great Shepherd who is “coming back to claim us,” thus bringing the journey to completion.

The sun is slowly sinking  
The day is almost gone  
Still darkness falls around us  
And we must journey on

The image of sheep and shepherd, drawn most famously from the 23rd Psalm, appears in “Green Pastures,” once again to describe movement toward the heavenly destination.

We will not heed the voice of the stranger  
For he would lead us on to despair  
Following home with Jesus our savior  
We shall all reach that country so fair

The ecumenical sentiment of “You Go to Your Church and I’ll Go to Mine” puts all believers on that same journey.

The road is rough and the way is long  
But we’ll help each other over  
You go to your church and I’ll go to mine  
But let’s walk along together

This song, along with many others in the Stanley collection, adapts the biblical metaphors of the “right way” from the Book of Proverbs and the “narrow way” of Jesus’s teaching, especially Matthew 7:13-14. Both hold out the prospect of a safe and happy home as reward for making the choice to follow guidance rather than wander. These songs promise reunion with family and the end of tiresome travel as motivations, replaying images of the mountain home. In this way, the ultimate and universal destination of death is softened and even made appealing. Associations of home, most often in the person of Mother, offer a visionary means to reclaim one’s losses. Listeners regain a sense of home and early beginnings and with it, its associations of belonging and protection.

To speak of home, then, is to speak of reunion, a set of relations as well as a sense of place, as the singer affirms in “Wings of Angels.”

Someday He’ll wake me from the dead  
No more I’ll sleep there all alone  
But carried up to Him on high  
On the wings of angels headed home

Even as “home” provides a ready rhyme for “alone,” the lyric also pairs the two most prominent aspects of the association of heaven with home. First, heaven/home is where one is present with a loving and nurturing God; a person

may choose unwisely and miss out, but there are few references to divine judgment. This coincides with Ralph Stanley's choice of a universalist church: "I'm glad I don't believe in a burning hell after I die and I've never been afraid of it. I think God is *Love*, and *Love* never hurt anybody" (Davis 2003, 210). Instead, singers and listeners look forward to "being with" God or comfort themselves in the thought that loved ones are there, as in "Gathering Flowers."

Death is an angel sent down from above  
 Sent for the buds and the flowers we love  
 Truly 'tis so, for in heaven's own way  
 Each soul is a flower in the Master's bouquet

Second, listeners can hope for reunion with those who have gone on ahead. The thought is not restricted to the gospel songs but is also included in many bluegrass songs about grief and heartbreak. The sadness that comes with loss of Mother has little relief in "Sweeter than the Flowers" except for the single line, "someday we'll meet you up there." The grieving lover of "Sweethearts in Heaven" remembers strolling hand in hand in the home village, but now he must look ahead to the time when, "We'll be sweethearts up in heaven/ For me I know you are the one." The gladness of reunion runs throughout bluegrass visions of heaven, but gospel songs especially rejoice at the thought: "Oh what a blessed reunion (2 times)/ When will we gather over yonder/ There'll be Shouting on the Hills of God." Another affirms, "I'll not be a stranger when I get to that city... Through the years, through the tears, they've gone one by one/ But they'll wait at the gate until my race is won." In "Over in Glory Land" the two sets of relations with God and family come together.

What a joyful thought that my Lord I'll see  
 Just over in the glory land  
 And with kindred saved there forever be  
 Just over in the glory land

Therefore, while it is true, as others have argued, that an end to life's troubles and losses is one source of appeal communicated in visions of heaven (Stern, 2007), another and perhaps more prevalent motivation is that of belonging, of no longer being a stranger and alone. Moreover, it is the singer's expression of lament and hope that names this universal experience by placing emphasis on the accompanying feelings, particularly the feelings of grief. The broken-hearted and lonely experience of bluegrass songs appears to have migrated to bluegrass gospel to be answered with the anticipation of community.

In sum, as a “strategy for coping” with the difficulties of life, especially the universal experience of grief and loneliness that comes to those who lose loved ones to death, these Stanley songs enable singers and listeners to see themselves as travelers on a journey that leads home to a reunion with family in the presence of God. The darkness often associated with death is answered with the dawning of eternal daylight. The songs comfort, but they also guide, urging the listener to travel on the right way instead of wandering and becoming lost. The identification listeners make with the singer’s losses are in themselves consoling, but the progression of movement that leads to the expected end also uses what Burke called the appeal of progressive form (Burke 1954). Listeners who know the story of the Stanley Brothers and Carter’s early passing are also invited to join Ralph in his role as hopeful pilgrim.

## Conclusion

Barry Brummett said it well: “Kenneth Burke’s work was written some years ago but is evergreen in its constant usefulness for scholars” (2003, 5). Burke’s literary emphasis on identification and symbolic appeal is especially helpful for analysis of bluegrass gospel songs that transform painful human experience into images that comfort. In some ways, this study has discerned what the singers have known all along. Songwriter Iris DeMent grew up in a Pentecostal Christian family; she recalls that its expression of the faith always gave her trouble because she found it hard, rigid and unsympathetic. Yet she recorded an album of the old country and gospel songs, saying that she found more of an invitation there.

“I’m so wrapped up in those sounds,” she says. “It’s more than music to me. It’s kind of a place. I know this about those songs. It’s music where people are sitting and writing about life, the things they’re struggling with and the hard times. They’re about trying to get through life and hope for the future. Whether you believe in heaven or not, heaven is an idea of hope, and hope can get you through life. For me, I’m drawn to that music because it’s honest. It’s written to help people, to give them a little courage to get through. For a lot of people, and for my family, that’s all they were trying to do, was get through life, and those songs helped a lot” (Dawidoff, 1997, 265).

My own sense of these songs is not that different. I believe that they offer solace by means of identification with a singer’s losses and struggles, but they also offer a framework, a journey and homecoming that gives shape and meaning to the other troubled aspects of life that make up so much of the content of bluegrass lyrics. While themes of repentance and faith run throughout the Stanley gospel songs, the progressive form of home that is lost and then regained sets up a secular analogy to the story of sin and redemption that one expects in the songs of the Protestant Evangelical congregation and southern gospel quartet. By scattering these songs

throughout a bluegrass performance, the journey toward home becomes the pathway by which all the troubles of betrayal, heartbreak, conflict, and hard times are borne and transformed.

Neil Rosenberg observed that the emerging bluegrass of the 1940s and 1950s spoke to the social concerns of urban transplants by dwelling on “down home,” not the themes of adultery, divorce, and alcohol use that were typical of honky-tonk country music (Rosenberg 1985, 8). Along that line, I would add that the gospel tunes of bluegrass, especially the Stanley songs, directed the listener’s attention “up home,” so that even those singers and listeners who had no religious affiliation could place themselves in the same storyline told in church (Titon 1988, 247). Even as Jesus goes ahead to prepare a place for his disciples (John 14:2-3), so Mother and Dad go ahead to reestablish the home that was lost, simply by their presence and eventual welcome. Until his death in 2016, Ralph Stanley could move an audience to sing as he lined out, “and grace will lead me home” from the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” but it was the association with the familial home in the Stanley gospel songs that made the prospect appealing.

This association was especially meaningful to Ralph Stanley, who wrote and recorded a recitation, “Hills of Home,” for his departed brother in 1969. In it he tells the story of life with his brother, the sadness of losing him, the desire to quit performing, and the decision to carry on. In the background a Stanley Brothers song plays with Carter’s voice singing lead: “Let me rest on a peaceful mountain/ in the hills near my home sweet home.” Ralph ends the recitation with thoughts of his own death: “For one day, this earth I’ll no longer roam/ and once again we’ll be together, side by side, in the hills of home.” He performed the piece throughout his solo career as an encore, and a recording of “Hills of Home” was played at his own memorial service.

One recounting of Ralph Stanley’s life in music takes its title from the another of his gospel songs, *Traveling the High Way Home* (Wright 1993). The title also points to his all-embracing form of belief in which all are on the journey, or at least can be. One must choose to depart and wander, otherwise one is on the path, saved until sinful, instead of the other way around. In place of creed or practices of piety, all are invited to share their experiences of disappointment, regret, and especially loss in the knowledge that they are on the “Long Journey Home.”

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