

# ***Robert Burns and the Creation of Modern Nostalgia***

## ***Robert Burns y la creación de la nostalgia moderna***

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### **Resumen:**

El poeta escocés Robert Burns ha estado en el centro de iniciativas nostálgicas, sobre todo en las celebraciones anuales de su cumpleaños, los clubes dedicados a su memoria y los omnipresentes monumentos que reivindican la admiración hacia él en todo el mundo. En estos escenarios, Burns sirve de emblema de la nostalgia romántica al evocar los placeres de la vida rural y la dignidad del trabajo. Siendo, en gran medida, un constructo del siglo XIX, este Burns (que en realidad se quejaba de las restricciones de la vida parroquial) ignora la complejidad de su poesía, así como las contradicciones y matices de su carácter. En este artículo, analizaré el modo en que tres poemas de Burns, «The Cotter's Saturday Night», «Auld Lang Syne» y «Farewell to the Highlands», trazan el terreno de una nostalgia moderna y reflexiva, aunque a menudo las obras se leen erróneamente como proveedoras de una nostalgia ingenua y romántica. Estos tres poemas parecen los más nostálgicos de todas las obras del canon de Burns; sin embargo, cuando se colocan lado a lado con poemas contemporáneos que articulan y exploran los mismos temas, como haré en todas las secciones de este ensayo, la nostalgia reflexiva de Burns aparece en altorrelieve. Además, como demostrarán las secciones dos y tres de este artículo, el examen de las obras influidas por los poemas que nos ocupan y que responden a ellos revela que los artistas (a diferencia de los críticos y los asistentes a las cenas de Burns) han sido bastante astutos a la hora de percibir la modernidad reflexiva en el corazón de las invocaciones al pasado que Burns plasma en sus poemas.

**Palabras clave:** nostalgia, diáspora escocesa, Robert Burns, poesía, romántica, finales del siglo XVIII.

### **Abstract:**

Scottish poet Robert Burns has been at the center of nostalgic enterprises, most notably the annual celebrations of his birthday, the clubs devoted to his memory, and the ubiquitous monuments claiming kinship all over the world. In these settings, Burns serves as an emblem of romantic nostalgia in his evocation of the pleasures of rural life and the dignity of labor. Largely a nineteenth-century construction, this Burns (who in reality chafed against the restrictions of parish life) ignores the complexity of his poetry as well as the contradictions and nuances of his character. In this essay, I will consider the way three of Burns's poems, «The Cotter's Saturday

Night», «Auld Lang Syne», and «Farewell to the Highlands», map the terrain of a modern, reflective nostalgia though the works are often mistakenly read as purveyors of naïve, romantic nostalgia. These three poems seem the most heavily nostalgic of all the works in the Burns canon; however, when placed side-by-side with contemporary poems articulating and exploring the same themes, as I will do in all sections of this essay, Burns's reflective nostalgia appears in high relief. In addition, as sections two and three of this essay will demonstrate, consideration of works influenced by and responsive to the poems at hand reveal that artists (as opposed to critics and Burns supper attendees) have been fairly astute in perceiving the reflective modernity at the heart of Burns's invocations of the past.

**Keywords:** nostalgia, Scottish diaspora, Robert Burns, poetry, romantic, late-eighteenth century

Until the early nineteenth century «nostalgia» was understood as a medical condition afflicting primarily soldiers amongst whom an incapacitating longing for home produced various symptoms documented and described by Johannes Hofer in his 1688 medical dissertation. In reviewing Hofer's description of the phenomenon, Svetlana Boym remarks that obsessive nostalgia over-emphasized the «sensations, tastes, sounds, smells» of home so that mundane reminders could trigger episodes of paralyzing longing<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, Boym remarks

Scots, particularly Highlanders, were known to succumb to incapacitating nostalgia when hearing the sound of the bagpipes – so much so, in fact, that their military superiors had to prohibit them from playing, singing or even whistling native tunes in a suggestive manner<sup>2</sup>.

By the early nineteenth century, however, «nostalgia» was recognized not only as a more general phenomenon, but also as a state of mind to be cultivated for a variety of reasons. In fact, Boym argues that what we call «nostalgia» today is a phenomenon of modernity with its own typology. In our time, she elaborates, nostalgia tends to take one of two specific (and countervailing) forms: «Reflective nostalgia recognizes the «contradictions of modernity» and «dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging» whereas restorative nostalgia sees itself as «truth and tradition» and posits return as its central motif<sup>3</sup>. Linda Marilyn Austin too regards modern nostalgia as an aesthetic category and analyzes the «transformation of nostalgia [the disease] into [nostalgia the] ... form of remembering»<sup>4</sup>. While neither Boym nor Austin feature Robert Burns in their mono-

<sup>1</sup> Svetlana BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books, 2001, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. XVIII.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Marilyn AUSTIN, *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780-1917*, Victorian Literature and Culture Series, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2007, p. 16.

graphs devoted to nostalgia, we can certainly see that the poet has been at the center of nostalgic enterprises, most notably the annual celebrations of his birthday, the clubs devoted to his memory, and the ubiquitous monuments claiming kinship all over the world. By and large, however, these are examples of romantic nostalgia, appealing, in the words of Carol McGuiirk, to «the most unimaginative among us», by offering «the pleasures of creative reconstruction» or «wishful thinking»<sup>5</sup>. Burns serves these enterprises as an emblem of nostalgia in his evocation of the pleasures of rural life and the dignity of labor. Largely a nineteenth-century construction, this Burns (who in reality chafed against the «narrowness of parish life») ignores the complexity of his poetry as well as the contradictions and nuances of his character<sup>6</sup>. The relationship between Burns and nostalgia is not merely romantic. In this essay, I will consider the way three of Burns's poems, «The Cotter's Saturday Night», «Auld Lang Syne», and «Farewell to the Highlands», map the terrain of modern, reflective nostalgia though the works are often mistakenly read as purveyors of naïve, romantic nostalgia. These three poems seem the most heavily nostalgic of all the works in the Burns canon; however, when placed side-by-side with contemporary poems articulating and exploring the same themes, as I will do in all sections of this essay, Burns's reflective nostalgia appears in high relief. In addition, as sections two and three of this essay will demonstrate, consideration of works influenced by and responsive to the poems at hand reveal that artists (as opposed to some critics and Burns supper attendees) have been fairly astute in perceiving the reflective modernity at the heart of Burns's invocations of the past.

## BETWEEN THE INGLE AND THE CHURCHYARD: «THE COTTER'S SATURDAY NIGHT»

Delancey Ferguson ranked «The Cotter's Saturday Night» as among «the weakest part of [Burns's] poetry»<sup>7</sup>. Ferguson's impatience, famously grounded in the experience of too many Burns Club «Birthday ballyhoo[s]», is, as Corey Andrews puts it, «a necessary tonic even today, as the poet's life and work continue to serve as an important national and cultural legacy in Scotland»<sup>8</sup>. Ferguson's vivid condemnation of the poem is too well-expressed to resist quoting. Though I do not endorse his view, I do enjoy the way he expresses his disdain:

<sup>5</sup> Carol MCGUIRK «Burns and Nostalgia», in Kenneth Simpson, ed. *Burns Now*, Edinburgh, Canongate Academic, 1994, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> MCGUIRK, «Burns and Nostalgia», p. 60.

<sup>7</sup> John Delancey FERGUSON, «The Immortal Memory», *The American Scholar*, 5, 1936, p. 450.

<sup>8</sup> Corey ANDREWS, «John Delancey Ferguson (1888-1966)». Accessed on 05/03/2023 at URL: [https://electricscotland.com/familytree/frank/burns\\_lives147.htm](https://electricscotland.com/familytree/frank/burns_lives147.htm).

The poet who matters is the author of ‘Tam o’Shanter,’ ‘The Jolly Beggars,’ and ‘Holy Willie’; the author of ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’ and the other poems beloved of Birthday orators is a sterile hybrid produced by inseminating an impressionable and imperfectly educated mind with the sentimentalism of Henry Mackenzie and William Shenstone<sup>9</sup>.

I argue that the poet of «The Cotter’s Saturday Night» does matter, and he matters precisely because he manages in that poem to convey a feeling of «nostalgia» as we know and experience it today. The very popularity of the poem and of the image of Scottish country life depicted therein alert us to the fact that it captures, conveys, or perhaps even creates an emotional state of some significance. The poem is the opposite of a «sterile hybrid»; it is, instead, evidence of the evolution of a new life form produced by the very contradictions that bred it.

It is the poem’s negotiation between universality and specificity that confers its nostalgic power – and the way this negotiation works is best examined in comparison with two poems that it invokes: Thomas Gray’s «Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard» and Robert Fergusson’s «The Farmer’s Ingle». Gray’s elegy was admired for its portrayal of the «“authentic” poet (who secludes himself from the avenues of official power)»<sup>10</sup>. For Burns, his beloved forbearer Robert Fergusson embodied the archetype made so wildly popular by Gray, the neglected poet, «unfitted for the world» whose pleasure he yet «relish[es]»<sup>11</sup>. It was Burns himself, however, who, in public imagination, seemed (and to some degree continues to seem) to be both Gray’s secluded poet and one of the untutored geniuses who lie in the churchyard. «The Cotter’s Saturday Night», though – or perhaps because – a sentimental favorite featured at Burns’s birthday dinners, is generally considered a poem inferior to its source material – inferior to Fergusson in terms of authenticity of voice, inferior to Gray in terms of universality of vision, depth of emotion, and elegance and precision of poetic diction. The poems have many shared themes and motifs, but I will concentrate on the most important three, at least the most important to the theme of nostalgia: language, time, and place.

<sup>9</sup> FERGUSON, «The Immortal Memory», p. 450. «The Cotter’s Saturday Night» has recently undergone impressive reassessment by Gerald Lee McKeever who argues that the poem is «subversively progressive» and «an important engagement with the dialectics of improvement» rather than «sentimental escapism». *Dialectics of Improvement: 1786-1831*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, pp. 38, 65. MCKEEVER notes the power of Fergusson’s «visceral» comment in transforming nineteenth-century admiration for the poem to twentieth-century disdain. *Dialectics*, p. 66n17.

<sup>10</sup> Linda ZIONKOWSKI, *Men’s Work: Gender, Class, and the Professionalization of Poetry, 1660-1784*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> Robert BURNS «On Fergusson I (1787)». See Rhona BROWN who notes that Burns «[c]onsistently portrayed» Fergusson «as unappreciated yet full with literary promise». «Burns and Fergusson» in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns*, ed. Gerald CURRUTHERS, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press, 2009, p. 88.

Language is the very point on which Burns's «Cotter's Saturday Night» receives poor marks in comparison with both Gray and Fergusson. Burns's mixing of English and Scots, however, struck W. K. Wimsatt as a strength of the poem, part of the «free expressive power» of the poet's essential gift<sup>12</sup>. Fergusson's «Farmer's Ingle» certainly evidences a «very genuine, unquestionable eighteenth-century Scots», but most of us can't actually understand it without a dictionary<sup>13</sup>. And English readers of Fergusson's own time would have been equally mystified. Burns, on the other hand, sprinkles his Scots vocabulary throughout his oeuvre (and, according to Wimsatt, in some of his «great» poems such as «Tam O'Shanter» as well as in the poems dubbed «mawkish» by Delancey Ferguson) in such a way that though «the words may be strange to us . . . they will scarcely seem an obstacle to our getting a strong impression of what the passages are saying»<sup>14</sup>. As Wimsatt sensibly notes, Burns mixed «country Scots», «literary Scots», and «straight English» to write poetry «largely transparent to an educated English reader» (of his time and ours) that provides us the same kind of pleasure «which we get from ... recognizing slapstick and indecent jokes in Shakespeare» (231). «The Cotter's Saturday Night», in other words, is not a hybrid at all. It might better be described as a triptych, a triptych that has merged into a three-dimensional image or a voice singing three parts of one song. Our pleasure comes from recognition of a past we never experienced, but one we recognize (vaguely) as our own.

Gray achieves some of the same effect in his use of archaic language. It is not a minor point of literary history that Wordsworth and Coleridge in their famous Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* called Gray out for his archaic (i.e. nostalgic) literary diction, despite their own nostalgic gesture to the (archaic) oral tradition of balladry. And Fergusson and Burns as well participate in the self-conscious evocation of literary language that is, in the words of David Hill Radcliffe, «at once wholly modern and yet suggestively archaic»<sup>15</sup>. Despite his reflection of a vital present-day Scots language, Fergusson does choose to use a modified Spenserian stanza in describing the farmer's home and his family's customs (and he also prefaces his poem with an epigraph from Virgil, taken from an eclogue whose subject is less the simple life than the poet's quest for literary fame). In other words, Fergusson's farmer's life is inflected with language that points both backward and forward in terms of literary culture. Burns's poem, even more decidedly, gestures to the future while glancing at the past.

<sup>12</sup> William Kurtz WIMSATT, «Imitation as Freedom, 1717-1798», *New Literary History* 1 (1970), p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> WIMSATT, «Imitation as Freedom, 1717-1798», p. 230.

<sup>14</sup> WIMSATT, «Imitation as Freedom, 1717-1798», p. 230. Cf. Murray PITTOCK who notes that «Burns's poetry not only used Scots as a national marker, but even – and this is still poorly understood – used different dialects of it within the same poem in order to convey different connotations or readings in tension with one another». *Scotland: The Global History: 1603 to the Present*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2022, p. 205.

<sup>15</sup> David Hill RADCLIFFE, «James Beattie's *The Minstrel*», *Studies on Philology* 100, 2003, p. 537.

The Spenserian stanzas of «The Cotter's Saturday Night» link the work to Fergusson (and James Beattie and William Shenstone), but, as Christopher Whyte has argued, the poem has a decidedly modern flavor, especially when compared to Fergusson's poem.<sup>16</sup>

Whyte's analysis of the two poems compellingly demarcates the distinction between Fergusson's treatment of time as opposed to Burns's. Discussing the idyllic nature of «The Farmer's Ingle» and «The Cotter's Saturday Night», Whyte reads «The Farmer's Ingle» as a celebration of both «family and labour», an idyllic cameo that blurs «all the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and the same life ... fus[ing] the cradle and the grave<sup>17</sup>». So the lines in which Fergusson depicts the «industrious» grandmother spinning – «Her eenin' stent reels she as weel's the lave» – with a «recurring vowel sound» that «may well evoke the repetitive nature of the work» are one with the feeling that the poem conveys that the evening described in the poem «could, and will be repeated, night after night ... even though the individual actors might die away to be replaced by others like them<sup>18</sup>».

«The Cotter's Saturday Night», in Whyte's words, represents labor as «an indignity from which the Sabbath offers a brief respite»<sup>19</sup>. While the poem's rendition of family worship has «an air of timelessness», time also threatens dissolution (especially with regard to Jenny's innocence) and requires a kind of patriarchal vigilance that anticipates «the changes to be wrought by increasing industrialization» – a culture in which work is alienation and family life is under all kinds of stresses from without as well as within. In other words, the popularity of Burns's poem may very well be due, Whyte suggests, to the way his so-called «idyll» actually encodes bourgeois fantasies and expresses bourgeois anxieties. It is significant, as Rhona Brown points out, that «Fergusson chooses the relatively prosperous farmer as his patriarch, while Burns's central figure is a cotter, occupying a role traditionally lower in the agricultural hierarchy»<sup>20</sup>. Burns adds pathos to nostalgia in this reflection of his own sense of economic fragility.

All three poems under consideration invoke the historical past. Gray's meditation on the benefits of obscurity is situated in relation to «examples of greatness which had proved dangerous to society»<sup>21</sup>:

<sup>16</sup> Christopher WHYTE, «Competing Idylls: Fergusson and Burns», *Scottish Studies Review* 1, 2000, pp. 47-62.

<sup>17</sup> WHYTE, «Competing Idylls: Fergusson and Burns», p. 50. Whyte quotes Mikhail BAKHTIN's discussion of the idyll in «Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel» in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael HOLQUIST, trans. Caryl EMERSON and Michael HOLQUIST, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 225.

<sup>18</sup> WHYTE, «Competing Idylls: Fergusson and Burns», pp. 50-51.

<sup>19</sup> WHYTE, «Competing Idylls: Fergusson and Burns», p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> BROWN, «Burns and Fergusson», p. 96, lines 57-60.

<sup>21</sup> Roger LONSDALE, *The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith*, London, Longman, 1969, p. 128n57.

Some village-Hampden that with dauntless breast  
 The little tyrants of his field withstood;  
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,  
 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

These key players in the English Civil Wars perhaps obliquely allude to a more recent wound; there is evidence that Gray composed much of the *Elegy* in 1746, in the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion and its bloody conclusion at Culloden – itself an episode in the long and violent negotiation of power between the people and the monarchy. Fergusson's historical examples harken back to the days of Scottish independence when the humble diet of the farmer and his family produced Scotsmen strong enough to withstand incursions by the Danes and the Romans. And, of course, Burns's historical reference point is William Wallace, a martyr, defeated by the English, but a symbol of Scottish pride and courage – the most lasting of these symbols and one to which a kind of nostalgia attaches even today.

With Wallace, we can turn to the complicated relationship to nostalgia that Burns's poem evidences. Neither of the source poems can truly be said to participate in the construction of modern nostalgia. Gray's melancholic longing for obscurity is mixed with a fear of insignificance and neglect. It is an exercise of the imagination that provokes many attempts following its publication (including the poems by Fergusson and Burns) to flesh out the humble lives left unattended by fame, but in the poem itself, such lives are mere shadows, and the churchyard, while seeming so specific has, significantly, never (and, as significantly, perpetually) been identified. Fergusson's poem is so rooted in its own local presentness that, despite literary gestures to the archaic, it does not provoke a particular feeling of nostalgia in the general reader. Those who can understand and experience the poem's power without a translator may find the depiction of rustic simplicity nostalgic, but the effect is limited to those readers. It is «The Cotter's Saturday Night's» bringing together of the melancholic universality of Gray and the local specificity of Fergusson that creates a scene powerful enough to enough readers that it becomes part of the vocabulary of «nostalgia».

And, interestingly, it does so by invoking typologies of both kinds of nostalgia identified by Boym: the restorative and the reflective, categories which reflect, she notes, «nostalgia's mechanisms of seduction and manipulation»<sup>22</sup> Restorative nostalgia «attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home» whereas «[r]eflective nostalgia thrives in ... the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately»<sup>23</sup> Restorative nostalgia «does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition», whereas «[r]eflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing

<sup>22</sup> BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, pp. 18-19.

and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity»<sup>24</sup>. And, a final distinction, «[r]estorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt».<sup>25</sup> Appropriated by romantic nostalgics, who read the poem as a sentimental portrait of Scottish rural life, «The Cotter's Saturday Night» is actually a textbook example of reflective nostalgia. Homecoming is not delayed, but it is temporary, as Saturday night is the only night of the week that isn't to be followed by the back-breaking, barely-sustaining labor that characterizes most days of the week. The happy family atmosphere, instead of being celebrated as in «The Farmer's Ingle», is deliberately placed under threat in that problematic verse in which Jenny is imagined the victim of «A Wretch! A Villain! Lost to love and truth!» who «betray[s] sweet Jenny's unsuspecting youth» with his «perjur'd arts». We're left wondering if the young man who has come to dinner and who is so seemingly «bashfu'» and «grave» could pose this threat. Or, are we to be relieved that Jenny has been claimed by someone who will save her and her family from this fate? The poem does not resolve the issue it raises – and this worry and concern over the outside world is distinctly reflective rather than restorative. Even Burns's opening gesture, which inverts the logic of Gray's elegy to imagine the public Robert Aiken as a cotter and «happier I ween», is an overt acknowledgement of the artificiality of the ensuing scene. The ending reverses the «move» by envisioning the children of the cotter (and those like them) as «virtuous populace» who by their moral strength become national heroes («stand[ing] a wall around their much lov'd Isle», much as Wallace did in his time). As McQuirk points out, as much as Burns seems to value the simple virtues of the Cotter, he is also aware of the vulnerability of their situation, the need to buttress simplicity with strength<sup>26</sup>.

«The Cotter's Saturday Night» reveals that Burns's place in the construction of modern nostalgia is a complicated one. While his legacy seems afflicted by the commemorative traditions of restorative nostalgia – complete with statues, religious ritual (as Delancey Ferguson complained), and association with absolute values – his actual poetry, even the poetry cited as source of the restorative image, reveals a much more complicated negotiation between past, present, and future. Reflective nostalgia, Boym notes, does not privilege «a single plot of national identity, and social memory»; instead, it «consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory»<sup>27</sup>. «The Cotter's Saturday Night's» combination of Spenserian stanzas and Scottish subject matter, allusions to Ferguson and Gray, English and Scots language, narratives of piety and narratives of treachery, fantasies of withdrawal and retreat and fantasies of prominence and strength – all of these

<sup>24</sup> BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Carol McGUIRK, ed. *Robert Burns Selected Poems*, London, Penguin, 1993, p. 229.

<sup>27</sup> BOYM, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 19.



features of hybridity point to reflective, not restorative, nostalgia. The odd alchemy of this poem, however, is that it became more famous, and more influential, as an example of the kind of nostalgic longing it doesn't actually express.

### «RAISE A CUP O' KINDNESS» TO FRIENDSHIP AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Nostalgia, as Austin notes, is a state that provokes «disdain» among literary commentators or critics of visual representation, disdain, she argues, that speaks to a «neglected psychophysiology»<sup>28</sup>. She remarks that

[o]ur fascination with the operations of depth psychologies, particularly with the Freudian repression and its symptomatic distortions, has led us to ignore evidence of the 'superficial,' automatic unconscious, even though it explains some of our most immediate pleasures as consumers of culture<sup>29</sup>.

Robert Burns's «Auld Lang Syne» is a premiere example of a work that prompts an automatic and seemingly superficial response – one that touches briefly and temporarily memories that are both personal and collective. It is a question, for me, whether or not to attribute the cultural presence and persistence of «Auld Lang Syne» as a yearly ritual of nostalgia to the Scottish diaspora, as McGuirk does<sup>30</sup>. Certainly, among the dispersed Scots there were many who were dedicated to preserving their memories of Scotland and to promoting the fame of Scotland's national poet. But what gave «Auld Lang Syne» pride of place in such an effort? Is it the power of song, in general? Or is it the power of this particular song with its specific use of Scots language and imagery? Or is it Burns's reputation, itself nostalgically reconstructed as McGuirk argues? For whatever reason, in many places worldwide, this song (or one verse of it) does have pride of place in the ritualistic public indulgence in nostalgia that marks the end of every year. Because we tend to associate the «nostalgic» with «popular consumption», low art as opposed to «high culture», superficiality rather than depth of emotion, we tend to deride works that evoke nostalgia (along with the readers [or viewers] who seek out artistic evocations of the emotion) as simplistic, superficial, and trite. And, though I would argue (against Austin) that the interest in and sophisticated work on sentimentality in literature over the past twenty-five years or so belies this generalization, to some degree, I must admit «Auld Lang Syne» has lost

<sup>28</sup> AUSTIN, *Nostalgia in Transition*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> AUSTIN, *Nostalgia in Transition*, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> MCGUIRK, «Burns and Nostalgia», 59-60.

critical esteem partly because of its pertinacity in bringing a tear to so many eyes with annual predictability.

Nearly a decade ago, authors Zoë Heller and Leslie Jameson commented for the *New York Times Book Review* on the «cardinal sin» of sentimentality, Heller remarking that the «pablum» of sentimentality «can spoil the appetite for reality», while Jameson found «that one of the deep unspoken fears beneath the sentimentality taboo is really the fear of commonality»<sup>31</sup>. And so it seems. For, I note that we of Western culture give ourselves permission once a year to indulge in these «simplistic, superficial, and trite» feelings as we sing «Auld Lang Syne» when the old year becomes the new. Although (social conventions being what they are) reflection is hardly encouraged at this specific moment, it is probably fair to say that the song does its cultural work in assuring that some memory of the past will provide a bridge into and a check upon the dreams and desires that greet the future.

Of course, Burns did not coin the phrase «Lang Syne» nor is his the first Scots song to feature the phrase. It is an old Scots song, an old Scots sentiment. Burns's special genius in making the old new, however, is evident when we compare his «Auld Lang Syne» with that of another makar, Allan Ramsay. This is not to say that Ramsay's version is inferior. It is just to say that, comparatively, we can see how Burns's specific rendering translated into a universal expression of nostalgia that Ramsay did not achieve and did not wish to achieve. Burns's genius was, as time has demonstrated, to make the specific and the personal so specific and personal it touched a universal chord. Ramsay's genius was to «catalyze sympathy» (as Steve Newman has put it)<sup>32</sup>, not an unrelated concept but one focused on creating community rather than one designed to promote nostalgic reflection. The difference can be seen clearly in a comparison of their two versions of the old Scots song.

Ramsay's poem first appeared in his 1718 collection of *Scots Songs*. Ramsay's song, as David Duff has demonstrated, is indebted to an even older version of the song (written mostly in English) in which two separated lovers reflect «despairingly» on memories, «imagining they have been rejected and forgotten»<sup>33</sup>. Ramsay changes that narrative in his version, also mostly in English, imagining the reunion of a war hero with the one he loves, in whose voice the first four stanzas of the poem are uttered. Ramsay's lovers, as Duff points out, not only «share their memories, ... they re-enact them»<sup>34</sup>. After the initial welcom-

<sup>31</sup> Heller and Jameson, «Should Writers Avoid Sentimentality», *The New York Times*, September 23, 2014. Accessed on 15-02-2023 at URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/28/books/review/should-writers-avoid-sentimentality.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Steve NEWMAN, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> David DUFF, «The Retuning of the Sky: Romanticism and Lyric», in *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. Marion THAIN, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 145.

<sup>34</sup> DUFF, «The Retuning of the Sky: Romanticism and Lyric», p. 147.

ing embrace, they walk through groves, re-experiencing and remembering the sound of murmuring streams they once knew. They embrace and please one another with «mutual charms», recalling and resuming their physical passion for one another. What is most interesting to me, however, is the rejection of «lang syne» in the penultimate stanza of the poem wherein the lovers' trip down memory lane has them (or her) finally recalling the past as somehow laughable in the enjoyment of the present. There is no evocation of nostalgia here, though we may find such in the final stanza wherein an «objective» speaker comes in to tell us that the marriage ceremony «put them out of pain», the final words of the poem and words that replace the refrain «lang syne» which occurs in each of the foregoing stanzas. Nostalgia is a kind of pain – and one that Ramsay clearly does not seek to celebrate.

With Ramsay's song in mind (as well as the version that pre-dates Ramsay's composition), it is fascinating to turn to Burns's familiar verses and note the new indulgence in nostalgia for its own sake. Burns seems to pick up on the first half of Ramsay's fourth verse wherein the female lover imagines her hero «pursu[ing] the chace» «o'er moor and dale with your gay friend» and drinking a «blyth bottle» before coming home to her. However, Burns leaves out the heterosexual romance and concentrates instead on that homosocial moment defined by physical activity in a particular landscape and indulgence in the bottle once the activity is complete. In Ramsay's poem, the activity is competitive; the «blyth bottle», obviously celebratory. In Burns, the physical activity is confraternal, as is the bottle. The quasi-religious implications of this confraternity are suggested by the words «trust» and «kindness» as well as the innocent (Edenic) nature of the remembered childhood pastimes of flower gathering and fresh-water paddling. Moreover, as Duff notes,

Burns's transposition of the song into Scots represents a deepening of its 'national' qualities but also an enhancement of its expressive effects as illustrated by the multiply alliterative phrase 'a right gude willy-waught' (a hearty drink) which literalises the metaphorical 'cup o' kindness' of the reinstated chorus and brings to a colourful vernacular climax the drinking theme that has been building throughout<sup>35</sup>.

Duff regards Burns's song as «a Scots bacchanalia» which «retains the pathos of the original love song», but converts that pathos into «a poignant nostalgia for childhood friendship that encompasses the sense of both lost time and lost place»<sup>36</sup>. The rhythm of the song is such that the final raising of the glass can seem a sacramental gesture, a communion of sorts that, like religious ceremony, speaks to both personal longing and universal connectedness. The difference between Burns's ending and Ramsay's (also a sacrament)

<sup>35</sup> DUFF, «The Retuning of the Sky: Romanticism and Lyric», p. 148.

<sup>36</sup> DUFF, «The Retuning of the Sky: Romanticism and Lyric», p. 148.

is the difference between the celebration of a mystery that affects all humankind and the performance of a rite that unites two.

Burns's «Auld Lang Syne» is clearly about nostalgia, but what kind of nostalgia does it express? As argued above, «The Cotter's Saturday Night» fits most clearly in the category of «reflective nostalgia» as defined by Boym. In some ways, the same can be said of «Auld Lang Syne». In the song's references to the braes and burn we hear allusion to the Highland clearances that «so often underpin Scottish parting songs»<sup>37</sup>, and, as McGuirk has pointed out, in «wondered mony a weary fit» and in «seas between us braid hae roar'd» we hear reference to Scottish emigration, the «economic exiles who worked in London offices as well as those who sailed for the new colonies in the Far east or the new republics in North America»<sup>38</sup>. In that sense, we may find a reflective nostalgia that recognizes the pressures of modernity on memory as well as experience. But as her argument continues, McGuirk begs to differ – and, to some extent, I would agree. What she finds in «Auld Lang Syne»'s invocation of the «most intimate details of Scottish landscape– ... the flowers, the riverbanks», as well as in Burns's dialect which is «emphatically and even defiantly local» is the «recollection of a vanished Scotland ... a Scotland that never was — a selective and itself nostalgic construction of the poet's imagination»<sup>39</sup> that fancifully convinces us of collective memories we don't literally have or share. In other words, the thrust of «Auld Lang Syne» gestures toward the ideal of truth and tradition that underwrites what Boym calls «restorative nostalgia». Yet, there is no sense that such a Scotland actually can or should be restored. It exists only in the imagination and serves, therefore, to provoke comparison and contrast to the present. In that way, it promotes reflection and points toward the future as much as the past.

Aaron Santesso's study of the influence of tradition on the construction of literary nostalgia is helpful here. In late-eighteenth-century poems such as Thomas Gray's «Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard» a set of literary tropes emerged in response to «the upheavals of early modernization: industrialization, secularization, republicanism»<sup>40</sup>. This «set group of tropes – which included children, villages, ruins, and schooldays», Santesso explains, «emerged over the eighteenth century, and ... was manipulated and used in the hopes of triggering an automatic nostalgic reaction among a broad readership»<sup>41</sup>. «[T]hey are meant to be», he concludes, «innately nostalgic»<sup>42</sup>. By the time of Burns's composition of «Auld Lang Syne», these tropes were so well established that he could invoke them in

<sup>37</sup> DUFF, «The Retuning of the Sky: Romanticism and Lyric», p. 148.

<sup>38</sup> MCGUIRK, «Burns and Nostalgia», p. 60.

<sup>39</sup> MCGUIRK, «Burns and Nostalgia», p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> AARON SANTESSO, *A Careful Longing: The Poetics and Problems of Nostalgia*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2006, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> SANTESSO, *A Careful Longing: The Poetics and Problems of Nostalgia*, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> SANTESSO, *A Careful Longing: The Poetics and Problems of Nostalgia*, p. 19.

shorthand, as it were – setting them to a familiar old tune, intensifying the sense of the past by elongating the old Scots phrase «lang syne» which Ramsay used by adding «auld» (which Duff calls a «tautological intensifier»<sup>43</sup>) and rendering it in a hybrid language of English and Scots that seems familiar, though quaint and just out of memory’s reach even for those who never spoke a word of Scots.

Hollywood has notably taken advantage of such familiarity in its frequent use of the air and the words of Burns’s «Auld Lang Syne» to sentimentally seal a film narrative by linking past to present and future. I think of *It’s a Wonderful Life* in particular, but the song has so often been featured in film that to single out one example says more about my taste than cinematic practice. «In fact», as Peter Tonguette observed, «Once Hollywood got hold of “Auld Lang Syne” it was loath to let it go»<sup>44</sup>. It is too reliable a «mood setter»<sup>45</sup> to jettison artistically, for it has been a part of the real lives of many viewers for whom the tune, if not the words, quickly provokes feelings of nostalgic wistfulness. For most of us who sing the song on New Year’s Eve, it provides just a moment of reflection in an otherwise festive, distracted, often drunken celebration. Fleeting though it is, that moment is culturally and personally powerful to many who experience it in public, with strangers who do not share the memories the song personally invokes.

The use of «Auld Lang Syne» in any given film invites exploration of resonances between film script and Burns’s song. Nora Ephron’s deployment of the song in her 1989 film, *When Harry Met Sally* directed by Rob Reiner is particularly rich in that the script draws attention to the paradoxical power of the song despite general bemusement as to what the words signify: «What does this song mean? My whole life, I don’t know what this song means», Harry asks Sally in the penultimate scene of the romantic comedy:

I mean, “Should old acquaintance be forgot.” Does that mean that we should forget old acquaintances? Or does it mean that if we happened to forget them, we should remember them, which is not possible because we already forgot ’em?<sup>46</sup>

Billy Crystal’s delivery comically defuses the intensely sentimental moment, but in her response Meg Ryan intensifies the initial emotion: «Well, maybe it just means that ...

<sup>43</sup> DUFF, «The Retuning of the Sky: Romanticism and Lyric», p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Peter TONGUETTE, «The Movies’ Crush on “Auld Lang Syne”», *The Spectator*, December 31, 2020. Accessed on 19-04-2023 at URL: <https://thespectator.com/book-and-art/movies-crush-auld-lang-syne/>. Film, however, was not uniquely attuned to the power of «Auld Lang Syne». Murray Pittock provides a brief and comprehensive review of the presence of this song in popular (and even folk) culture dating back to the nineteenth century. *Scotland: The Global History*, pp. 205-07.

<sup>45</sup> TONGUETTE, «The Movies’ Crush on “Auld Lang Syne”»,

<sup>46</sup> Rob REINER, et al., *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), Santa Monica, CA, MGM Home Entertainment, Inc., 2001.

we should remember that we forgot them, or something. Anyway, it's about old friends». The content of what the lovers say is exactly the experience many have with regard to this song – it punctuates the whole of our lives, thereby evoking all the emotions associated with nostalgia, and though we only vaguely understand the literal words, we know it's about «old friends», our past, our memories. Interestingly, too, this film's use of the song echoes (probably by serendipity rather than intention) the poem's origins in old Scottish songs of love as well as Burns's homage to friendship and collective (if largely invented) memory.

As Murray Pittock has noted, in *When Harry Met Sally*, as in many of Hollywood's uses of the song, «Auld Lang Syne» occurs at «a moment of romantic climax and change, symbolized in the changing of the year»<sup>47</sup>. Instead of romanticizing the past or restoring a threatened order (as perhaps the song does in *It's a Wonderful Life*, for example), in *When Harry Met Sally*, «Auld Lang Syne» serves to finally release the couple from the stasis of unfulfilled desire, allowing them a moment of reflection on their long friendship as they move forward into a more perfect union – the marriage they have been seeking all along<sup>48</sup>.

## FAREWELL TO THE HIGHLANDS? BURNSIAN NOSTALGIA AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Like «The Cotter's Saturday Night», and «Auld Lang Syne», Burns's «Farewell to the Highlands» has received disparaging commentary from literary critics. The poem strikes Drummond Bone, for instance, as «bad Burns ... simple to the point of vacuity»<sup>49</sup>. The song's simplicity, however, seems to be the key to its emotive power, its ability to tap into feelings attendant on «balked desire» and «noble resistance» and to attach those feelings to a landscape of «astounding beauty»<sup>50</sup>. The poem, a mere sixteen lines, is worth quoting in full:

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<sup>47</sup> Murray PITTOCK also reminds us of the more sinister use of «Auld Lang Syne» in D. W. GRIFFITH'S 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which appropriated Highland values of courage and commitment in a «defense of white supremacy» and a mourning of «the loss of the antebellum South». *Scotland: The Global History*, p. 207.

<sup>48</sup> I am echoing Stanley CAVELL'S meditations on the treatment of marriage in Hollywood film comedies as a metaphor for the state and the relationship between the governed and the governing in American democracy. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 65 and passim.

<sup>49</sup> Drummond BONE, «Nostalgia in Byron and Burns», *Byron Journal* 39, 2011, pp. 97-105.

<sup>50</sup> BONE, «Nostalgia in Byron and Burns», p. 110.

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,  
 My heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer;  
 A chasing the wild-deer, and following the roe,  
 My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.

Farewell to the Highlands, farewell to the north,  
 The birth-place of Valour, the country of Worth ;  
 Wherever I wander, wherever I rove,  
 The hills of the Highlands for ever I love.

Farewell to the mountains, high-cover'd with snow,  
 Farewell to the straths and green vallies below;  
 Farewell to the forests and wild-hanging woods,  
 Farewell to the torrents and loud-pouring floods.

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,  
 My heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer;  
 Chasing the wild-deer, and following the roe,  
 My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.<sup>51</sup>

The air chosen by Burns for this song «is nobly ornate, with a magnificent Celtic Sweep» ... «It has a pentatonic substructure, but has been ornamented and filled out into a major mode tune which is not a cheerful major but a nostalgic, even melancholy outpouring. Its slow ornaments are» ... «reminiscent of a bagpipe lament»<sup>52</sup>.

The «idealizing vision of the Highlands» presented in Burns's «Farewell» is an example, in McQuirk's words, of Burns's singular ability to appropriate «eloquent phrases and haunting images from lyrics of prior generations»<sup>53</sup>. This song, which Burns glossed by asserting that «the first half stanza of this song is old; the rest is mine», harkens back to the beginning of Jacobitism – neither the '15 nor the '45, but the '89. The original song is from Ulster, attributed to Donald Cameron, and is much more specific in its references to the experience of male comradery in battle and in drink than Burns's version is, even with respect to the hunt. Here is a verse combining both senses of male comradery in defeat, a verse that Burns did not choose to include:

Let's drink and gae home, boys; let's drink and gae home  
 If we stay any langer, we'll get a bad name;  
 We'll get a bad name, and we'll find oursel's fou,  
 And the lang woods of Derry are ill to gae thro.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> «Farewell to the Highlands», in *Robert Burns: Selected Poems*, pp. 156-57.

<sup>52</sup> John ASHMEAD and John DAVISON qtd by MCGUIRK, ed. *Robert Burns, Selected Poems*, p. 260.

<sup>53</sup> MCGUIRK, *Reading Robert Burns*, p. 110.

<sup>54</sup> «Portmore», *The Illustrated Book of Scottish Songs from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1852, 298.

Burns picks up the only stanza that seems to invoke a private memory – and he expands on that verse to make the personal reminiscence an articulation of a common humanity, but a complex theme that is not so easily summarized in words other than the words of the poem/song: «My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here / My heart's in the Highlands a chasing the deer».

Burns accepted the next two lines of the original poem with one variation. But, he is correct that the variation made the lines his own. The original song reads «A-chasing the wild deer and catching the roe», but Burns says «following the roe» and that makes all the difference between a song of remembered conquest and a song of perennial longing. And it makes the next line, shared with the original, his own as well: «My heart's in the Highlands wherever I go».

Twentieth and twenty-first-century artists have responded to Burns's creation of a Highlands of longing, of a Highlands of the mind. Indeed, Burns transformed the Highlands, as McGuirk notes, into «a simple but broad and timeless Romantic trope that speaks to personal memory and reflection as much as to national narrative»<sup>55</sup>. For many readers even today, she continues, «imagery of the Highlands still conveys exile (or its modern equivalent, alienation) as well as remembered (i.e. former) wildness, freedom and beauty»<sup>56</sup>. Such certainly seems to have been the case for William Saroyan, quintessential California writer, who in 1939 followed his hit story «The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze» – which provided the basis for a popular song, used to populist effect in a *It Happened One Night*, a film comedy by Frank Capra (the most sentimental, the most nostalgic of the classical Hollywood directors) – with another hit: *My Heart's in the Highlands*, first a short story, then a printed one-act play, and then a surprising success for the experimental New York theater ensemble, The Group. The play's title is an allusion specifically to Burns, not Cameron – a fact we know from the printed edition of the play, prefaced with Burns's lyrics.

The plot of the one-act play (which ran 90-minutes without intermission) is simple. As it will be unfamiliar to most readers of this essay, I will briefly summarize the plot. Johnny (played by a talented young actor, Sidney Lumet, who grew up to be the director of *Network*, and other films) is the son of a poet who is hanging around his front yard listening to a bird sing as his father composes poetry inside. Suddenly, a man with a bugle arrives (Jasper MacGregor) and he plays a beautiful song on this bugle. The song is «My Heart's in the Highlands», but not the tune Burns adopted. Saroyan's tune was written specifically for

<sup>55</sup> MCGUIRK, *Reading Robert Burns*, p. 116.

<sup>56</sup> MCGUIRK, *Reading Robert Burns*, p. 116. McGuirk is particularly interested in Bob DYLAN's «homage to Burns» in the song «Highlands» recorded for his 1997 album *Time Out of Mind*. Dylan treats the Highlands as «a site that speaks to lost freedom and former happiness» and, as such, one that reveals the «insufficiency of the here-and-now».



the play by composer Paul Bowles<sup>57</sup>. After MacGregor finishes the song, which «amaze[s], delight[s], and bewilder[s]» the boy, the following dialogue ensues:

Johnny: I sure would like to hear you play another song.  
 MacGregor: Young man, could you get a glass of water for an old man whose heart is not here but in the highlands?  
 Johnny: What highlands?  
 MacGregor: The Scotch Highlands. Could you?  
 Johnny: What's your heart doing in the Scotch Highlands?  
 MacGregor: My heart's grieving there. Could you get me a glass of cool water?  
 Johnny: Where's your mother?  
 MacGregor: (*Inventing for the boy*). My mother's in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but her heart isn't.  
 Johnny: Where's *is* her heart?  
 MacGregor: (*Loud*) In the Scotch Highlands. (*Soft*). I'm very thirsty, young man.  
 Johnny: How come the members of your family are always leaving their hearts in the highlands?<sup>58</sup>

While this dialogue may seem inane (and it certainly did to some of the critics of its day), the intensity of the repetition hammers home the longing. Eventually, the poet comes out of the house, orders Johnny to get some water, and sends him to the corner store for food that the boy will have to persuade the grocer to give on credit. As it turns out, there's no need for that because when the bugler plays another round of «My Heart's in the Highlands», mesmerized neighbors appear bearing vegetables, fruits, and meats.

The bugler, an aged actor, is retrieved soon enough by workers at the «Old Folks' Home» from which he has escaped. At the end of the play, Johnny, his father and grandmother are also preparing to move on (the poet, unable to sell his poems, the grocer no longer able to extend credit – though he does accept a poem as payment for arrears). The bugler reappears, having escaped again from his confinement. He asserts again that his heart's in the highlands, offers a dying speech culled mostly from the end of *King Lear*, and expires. Johnny and his family leave, with Johnny's last comment, the final line of the play, being «I'm not mentioning any names, Pa, but something's wrong somewhere». So, in addition to longing, there is a vague kind of social commentary, a sense that good people are being let down by people in positions to make things easier, not harder, for them. In a very real sense, this play offers the message of Burns's typical Jacobite song: an envisioning of «a better future, a world of empowered working people that's coming yet»<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Bowles is more familiar to us as the author of *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), a novel with its own bitter commentary on the optimism of the American dream of social progress and individual fulfillment.

<sup>58</sup> William SAROYAN, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1939, p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> MCGUIRK, *Reading Robert Burns*, p. 121.

More important is that it offers this message through unabashed nostalgia and sentimentality, two words (states of mind) that we are used to dismissing out of hand as, perhaps, unsophisticated, populist, «leveling», even as we celebrate Wordsworth's definition of the poet as a «man speaking to men» – a concept he inherited from Burns. The «lowest common denominator» is the ideal audience for poetry according to these poets and feeling, not meaning, is what the poet aims to evoke. Saroyan is pretty clear about his agenda: «Art comes from the world, belongs to it, can never escape it»<sup>60</sup>. «As for the message and the moral of the play it is the simplest and oldest in the world: It is better to be a good human being than to be a bad one. It is just naturally better»<sup>61</sup>. Saroyan glosses his intent in writing *My Heart's in the Highlands* as supporting this message: «Stop one good man from functioning and you stop all men, which may or may not be fascism, but is certainly something vicious». In a capitalist world in which money alone makes dreams come true, many good men will be stopped. (This notion was not foreign to Adam Smith nor to Scots-descendant Alexander Hamilton and the other authors of *The Federalist Papers* who argued – on the one hand, that the development of the Moral Sentiments had to underwrite the unfettered operations of the capitalistic enterprise and, on the other, that the views of the minority had to have weight in the discourse and operation of a democratic society). It is the work of imagination to link these notions to the Highlands of Scotland, but linked they were by Saroyan.

What kind of art does it take to make this point? In Saroyan's view, it is not art aimed at the head, but art aimed at the heart – the exiled heart, longing for return to something it recognizes as home. That is, nostalgic, sentimental poetry. And it is poetry that should not be *dismissed* as such, but celebrated for its ability to reduce us to tears. Such poetry works the way sympathetic critics described Saroyan's play working: John Anderson of the *New York Journal* said: «People seemed to find themselves weeping without knowing what the hell was the matter with them». He called the play «a parable of beauty – the unearthly longing of people for a place that the heart knows»<sup>62</sup>. John Mason Brown of *The New York Post* praised the play's «deliberate vagueness» and its consequent ability to touch «by what is poignant, charming, and yet indefinable»<sup>63</sup>. Wolcott Gibbs of *The New Yorker* noted: «Mr. Saroyan's work deals, in a cloudy and agitated way, with the fundamental human yearning for food, affection, music, and some faraway, ineffable home where the heart can be at rest»<sup>64</sup>. That home is the highlands created by Robert Burns. «Farewell to the Highlands», like «Auld Lang Syne», and «The Cotter's Satur-

<sup>60</sup> SAROYAN, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup> SAROYAN, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> QUOTED IN SAROYAN, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, p. 110.

<sup>63</sup> QUOTED IN SAROYAN, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, p. 115.

<sup>64</sup> QUOTED IN SAROYAN, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, p. 117.

day Night», finds its source and strength in the past while, at the same time envisioning a radically different future.<sup>65</sup>

As McQuirk observes, Walter Scott «went on to develop Burns's idealizing vision of the Highlands in his first novel *Waverley*, which uses Highland settings and a Highland cast to explore romantic aspects of the Scottish character»<sup>66</sup>. The romanticizing tendency is evident as well in the 1947 Broadway musical *Brigadoon* by Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe, made into a Hollywood film in 1954<sup>67</sup>. In both of these texts (as well as others that relish the tropes of tartan kilts, bagpipes, heather, hills, and lochs) the romance of the Highlands may seem to trump reflective consideration, though both offer commentary on the contrast between the valor and beauty (and dangers) of the past and the sterile, corporate, empty present and both tacitly encourage (though do not map) a future in which some of the virtues of the past are restored. Other invocations of the Highlands can be seen as more fully participatory in the peculiar blend of sentimentality and critique, reverence for the past and clear-eyed commitment to the future, that characterizes modern nostalgia as Burns deployed it. Bill Forsyth's 1983 film *Local Hero* is one such text that, like *Brigadoon*, reverses the pattern of immigration, sending the American dreamer back to the Highlands to re-discover the power of myth and history.<sup>68</sup> Unlike *Brigadoon*, however, *Local Hero* moves toward a vision of the future, emerging from a reimagined Highlands locality.

Arif Dirlik has discussed *Local Hero*'s «romantic nostalgia for the concretely (and, therefore, humanely) local against the abstractly and, therefore, dehumanizingly) global»<sup>69</sup>. The film's two settings – the ultra-modern, steel and concrete Houston headquarters of the global oil company (Knox Oil) and the quaint, picturesque Scottish town the corporation hopes to buy and destroy in order to create a base for North Sea oil enterprises – are a study in contrast. Sent to seal the deal, Mac (played by Paul Riegers) gradually succumbs to the charm of the village and its quirky residents – even forgetting the cellphone to which he is tethered in Houston in favor of the village's old phone box which (in a way) becomes the central image of the film. Burt Lancaster is Happer, Mac's boss – successful in the oil business, but with a passion for stars and comets and other night-sky phenomena, including the

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Van Wyck BROOKS's seminal essay on the concept of creating a usable past. «On Creating a Usable Past», *The Dial*, April 11, 1918, pp. 337-41.

<sup>66</sup> McQuirk, *Reading Robert Burns*, p. 110.

<sup>67</sup> The myth of *Brigadoon*, the city that appears once every hundred years, is not a Burnsian myth, but the setting and the name of the place certainly are, BURNS's *Tam O'Shanter* takes place in Doon near Alloway, Scotland, Burns's birthplace, and features the brig (bridge) of Doon.

<sup>68</sup> David MARTIN-JONES notes the similarity of theme in *Brigadoon*'s and *Local Hero*'s contrast between the «soulless city and the rejuvenative wilderness». *Scotland: Global Cinema: Genres, Modes and Identities*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 99.

<sup>69</sup> Arif DIRLIK, «The Global in the Local», in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, eds. Rob WILSON and Wimal DISSANAYAKE, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1996, p. 21.

Northern Lights, about which he has Mac call in regular reports until he himself cannot resist the urge to see for himself. Once in the quaint village, Happer meets reclusive beach dweller Ben Knox, who owns much of the town and who is not interested in selling. In the end, Happer also loses interest in the oil refinery, deciding to commit the company's funds to the building of a research laboratory instead – fulfilling the prediction of a female marine biologist with webbed feet (the film's selkie) who always knew the town would serve as an anchor for the exploration and the preservation of the natural world. As Dirlik says,

We know that the humanization of one corporate CEO does not add up to the humanization of capital, and we are even more aware than [at the time the film appeared] that the salvaging of one local community from the ravages of capital does not stop the onslaught of capital on community. We have learned, if anything, that to save one community, it may be necessary to destroy another<sup>70</sup>.

Still, Dirlik finds the film instructive in its sense that the local can serve as a «site of resistance» to the pressures of capital (pressures we see in Saroyan's text, as well). Forsyth's wry detachment from the romance of the Scottish Highlands manages to reinvest the locale with a new kind of magic tied to environmental and economic politics, activist causes then and now. Without referencing Burns explicitly, Forsyth conveys a sense that his particular blending of the reflective and restorative values inherent in nostalgic longing can help reinscribe the romance of the Highlands in tune with our current perplexities (immigration, urban alienation, global warming and the concomitant international cooperation needed to slow the process) in order to see that there is, in fact, a strong connection between the romance of the Highlands and American dreams of fulfillment and progress. From that connection, it may be possible to create new dreams, visions of a world that embraces the global without sacrificing the local, one that pursues prosperity without losing humanity.

## CODA

In 2000, composer Arvo Pärt scored «My Heart's in the Highlands» for voice and organ, a piece which, according to Graham Ward, transcends the local to emphasize «a universal, spiritual longing»<sup>71</sup>. Paolo Sorrentino used Pärt's composition in his 2013 film, *The Great Beauty* (*La grande bellezza*) to explore the nature of memory in a sequence analyzed by Russell J. A. Kilbourn as an element of the film's «reflective nostalgia» as defined by

<sup>70</sup> DIRLIK, «The Global in the Local», pp. 21-22.

<sup>71</sup> GRAHAM WARD, *Another Kind of Normal: Ethical Life II*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 2.

Svetlana Boym<sup>72</sup>. To my knowledge, Kilbourn is the first to associate Burns with Boym's work – and he does so obliquely and partially, emphasizing Pärt's music as one leitmotif of a larger investment in the reflective nostalgia that defines Sorrentino's vision. As I hope the above discussion makes clear, I would credit Burns directly with the foundational insight that underlies all such treatments of nostalgic longing. The artistic choice to bring his words, images, and themes into newly conceived imaginative worlds and works is testament to the emotional power of the modern, reflective nostalgia created by Burns in «The Cotter's Saturday Night», «Auld Lang Syne», and «Farewell to the Highlands».

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<sup>72</sup> Russell J. A. KILBOURN, *The Cinema of Paolo Sorrentino: Commitment to Style*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2020, p. 99.