

# GLASSCO'S GOVERNESSES

## *Some Literary and Psychosexual Sources*

*Patricia Whitney*

**I**N FEBRUARY 1928 John Glassco had set off for Europe with his friend Graeme Taylor. Both lately of McGill University — more lately of the jazz at the Union and the beer at the Prince of Wales Tavern than of the lecture halls — the two sophisticates were determined to join the literary crowd of Montparnasse. Four years later, however, Glassco, seriously ill with tuberculosis, was being fetched home from the American Hospital in Paris by his mother. Admissions to the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal followed in 1932, 1933 and 1934.

In June of 1934, while Glassco was recovering from yet more surgery on his chest, weary of the fear of death, exhausted by suffering, frustrated in his attempts to write poetry, he first writes in his diary of what will become a life-long pre-occupation — masochistic pornography:

I had been feeling tremendously excited and enthusiastic over a story to be called 'The Way Back' — the story of a masochist. It seemed that I got frightened at the depths I found in myself, depths of sexual perversion, while thinking out this story — rather like my sensations after reading [Octave] Mirbeau's 'Torture Garden' [Le Jardin des supplices]. I wrote 500 words of a masochistic scene in great elation the night of May 31st, and then, after I had gone to bed (or rather turned out the light) the 'dreadful imaginings' began. At any rate, things got steadily worse for a week — two weeks — and I began to be frightened about everything . . . . the most awful feeling of nausea all day long. (McGill Journal 28B-28C).<sup>1</sup>

There is a connection between Glassco's creation of pornography — it was to become a near obsession and in later years he would regret the time he had given over to it — and the experiences of his childhood. Glassco not only wrote about masochistic sex, he practised it. It can be argued that masochism, what Freud called "the most frequent and most significant of all perversions" (Reik 6), had its beginnings in the disturbance of Glassco's childhood. His father was a sadist who viciously beat his sons, both John and his elder brother David, before fondling them sexually.<sup>2</sup>

These frequent and horrific experiences seem to have bred in Glassco a compulsion for suffering, a sexual need that demanded satisfaction. Thomas Reik

argues that masochistic pleasure, “depending on the idea of being beaten and used sexually by the father, is dispelled and inhibited as soon as the same idea becomes conscious” (20). Such an idea can give pleasure to a male only when it remains repressed: “it is unbearable for the conscious. . . . For it is associated with the other idea: ‘I am a woman’. . . . So it must be repulsed for the sake of endangered masculinity” (Reik 20). It is a commonplace that insight destroys fantasy. The desire must, therefore, be masked. For the masochist, the mask is the figure of a woman. The idea “I want to be sexually gratified by my father” is replaced by the reality “I am beaten on the buttocks by a woman” (Reik 20). Reik argues further that for the masochist “to be beaten means . . . to be loved. He wants to be loved in the form of punishment” (22). While the conscious love object is a woman, this person “is a composite figure: she is the loving and loved woman but with the punishing gesture of the father” (23).

It is my conviction that Glassco’s behaviour — he had frequent masochistic encounters throughout his life — and his pornography represent two different but related responses to the trauma of his childhood suffering at the hands of his father. In the writing of his pornography, he not only re-enacted his *unconscious* desires for his father’s violent caresses, but also created a mannered world where the “victim” is, in fact, in control. In masochistic sex, the man being beaten (for this does seem to be almost exclusively a male practice) is actually in control of the amount and degree of punishment he will receive from the dominatrix.<sup>3</sup> Similarly in the writing of masochistic pornography, the author is, at least in a consciously superficial way, in control of the narrative, and consequently of the descriptions of humiliation, degradation and physical punishment. Such descriptions are, as are the practices of masochistic sex itself, ritualistic. Steven Marcus states that “the principal character in such scenes seems to be rehearsing some twisted recollection from early childhood; and the whole atmosphere of some kind of play, of roles and role playing, of a domestic drama comes through as well” (127). The suggestive parallels with Glassco’s experience, both literary and personal, appear all too obvious.

Susan Sontag argues in “Fascinating Fascism” that

to be involved in sadomasochism is to take part in a sexual theatre, a staging of sexuality. Regulars of sadomasochistic sex are expert costumers and choreographers as well as performers, in a drama that is all the more exciting because it is forbidden to ordinary people. Sadomasochism is to sex what war is to civil life: the magnificent experience. (103)

Sontag makes the further point that “What the French call ‘the English vice’ could . . . be said to be something of an artful affirmation of individuality; the playlet referred, after all, to the subject’s own case history” (104).

As interesting as Sontag’s amoral theorizing may be, there is beyond the trappings of costume and ritual, beyond the tormenting unconscious fantasies of the maso-

chist, the reality of what she calls “the subject’s own case history.”<sup>4</sup> The publication of Freud’s lecture of 1896, translated by James Strachey as “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” and made available in Jeffrey Masson’s *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (1984) makes clear the consequences of sexual abuse on children: “Sexual experiences in childhood consisting of stimulation of the genitals, coitus-like acts, and so on, must . . . be recognized, in the last analysis, as being the traumas which lead to a hysterical reaction to events at puberty and to the development of hysterical symptoms” (267). In Glassco these symptoms of hysteria frequently took the form of incapacitating panic attacks. On 15 December 1957, his forty-eighth birthday, Glassco describes such an episode experienced while alone in the house with his mistress, Elma Koolmer:

The attack began as soon as I entered the house. Absolute horror, feelings of compulsion to commit homicide — *on anyone*, and Elma was alone in the house with me. . . . This time, terrible. Symptoms: Sheer terror over what I *might* do — strangulation, stabbing, braining: attempt to tell myself I *could not* really do so, un-availing. It is what I might, and physically could, do. The Imp of the Perverse. . . . Claustrophobia: I want to undraw the curtains, open the windows, even in the middle of winter.

What is worst is the conviction I am going mad, and must be restrained before I kill someone. N.B. Only when I am alone with someone: two others has no effect.

Then I feel I must be alone. Only then am I safe against the compulsion. Had to ask Elma to leave Saturday morning. Thank God. When she was gone half the terror vanished: there was no one to kill.

Symptoms: Indescribable horror and tension. Perfect command of limbs, vision etc. Only when tension mounts a nervous jerking of the hands and legs, desperate courting of tears to relieve tension, no use. N.B. Terrible nervous susceptibility to the *slightest sound* even someone clearing the throat goes through me like a knife.

Obsession at such times: to commit suicide — but how? (McGill Journal 156)

This frightful description of a man in agony is an expression of hatred for and frustration at the father, but directed against the self. Masson argues that what is meant in Freud by the “father aetiology” is the “source of neurosis that lies in actions on the part of the father, i.e., sexual attacks on the [child]” (Masson 115). Glassco’s father had been, at this point, dead more than ten years; his younger son had attended the funeral. But the nightmare memory was not dead: Glassco had consciously wanted to murder his wicked father, but could not do so. Glassco’s rage was expressed not only through his attacks of panic hysteria, but also through extreme anxiety, recurrent clinical depression, and the acting out of, and artistic description of, masochistic sexual practices. In an essay, “The Pornographer as Artist,” Glassco wrote, most revealingly:

the pornographer’s task is not only to give pleasure, like any artist, but to recognize psychosexuality under all its aspects, and thus present another facet of the artist’s aspiration to reveal, to testify, to validate every path to the enchanted country which man may discover in solitude. (3, PAC Vol. 17)

I assert that Glassco's pornography was essential to his mental stability. If, in Freud's words, the "Outbreak of hysteria may almost invariably be traced to a *psychical conflict* arising through an incompatible idea setting in action a *defence* on the part of the ego and calling up a demand for repression" (Freud 271), then one means of channeling the psychic pain was to describe, over and over, the sexual and physical pain and humiliation suffered long ago, to render into art the bitter experience of childhood. This Glassco did most effectively in two pornographic novels, *Harriet Marwood, Governess* (1976) and *The English Governess* (1960), also known as *Under the Birch* (1960). On 22 March 1938, Glassco records in the McGill Journal that he had read a curiosity published in Paris in 1913 and known as *La Gouvernante* by Aimé Van Rod.<sup>5</sup> This book was to define and delineate both *Harriet* and the *Governess*.

*La Gouvernante* tells the story of an English governess, Miss Humphreys, who is hired to instruct a young boy of thirteen who lives in London near All Souls Church: "James Lowell avait treize ans lorsque mourut sa mère." James is described: "C'est un petit garçon un peu insignifiant . . ." [7]. Compare these brief passages to selected passages from the opening of *Harriet Marwood*:

Richard Belsize Lovel was fourteen years old when his mother died. He was even then a rather insignificant boy. . . . (5)

In London's Great Portland Street, not far from All Soul's Church, there is a row of gloomy mansions. . . . For here, more than fifty years ago . . . there blossomed the romance of Richard Lovel and Harriet Marwood. . . . (3)

Like that of the young hero of *La Gouvernante*, Richard Lovel's family seat was originally said to be located "near Christchurch" in Hampshire.

The essential outline of the plot — a sadistic but beautiful governess inflicts severe corporal punishment on her young pupil with the clear purpose of satisfying her own sexual preferences while developing an appropriately masochistic young male whom she will eventually make her husband — is the same in both novels. The subjugation of the boy is symbolized in *Harriet* by Richard's taking his wife's name: "Here, then, is your petition to have your name changed by act of deed poll to Richard Marwood. A pretty name, is it not?" (222). Richard's reply is enthusiastic: "'To me, it is the loveliest name in the world,' he said as he signed the paper" (222). On his governess's instructions he is sterilized before their marriage; needless to say there can be no room for children in a relationship where one partner must remain forever a burlesque of the child: dependent, chastised, humiliated. As Harriet tells her whimpering husband-to-be: "And you, Richard, will . . . be doubly dear to me, to love and to cherish — both as husband and child" (226).

Once married and passing their honeymoon "in the absolute seclusion of the

house at Christchurch," Harriet, like a perverted parent, surveys her creation and savours her absolute victory and control over the boy:

She smiled in the semi-darkness. The promised goal had been reached, her cup was full at last: she enjoyed the entire possession and control of the man whom she loved with all that mixture of tenderness and severity which marked her nature. He was indeed, she thought, such as she had made him: a creature dependent on her, body and soul, the plaything of her humours and caprice, the helpless, beloved and obedient instrument of her desires. . . .

Such complete domination of one person by another, exemplified in Richard's reaching toward his beloved Harriet and "commingling his agony and rapture in an embrace which was a sheer ecstasy" (219), is thematically identical to *La Gouvernante*. While I have explained that the plots of the two novels are highly similar, significant events have been rearranged. In Glassco's own copy of *La Gouvernante* he had marked turning points in the plot, examples being: "the house full of howling; then seaside" (165); "seaside" (172); "Honeymoon piece. B.'s ardours. Return to Christchurch where the punishment-room has been fitted up" (181).

In *Harriet*, the seaside incident is occasioned by a trip to Bournemouth where Richard is to visit a Mrs. Barrington and her daughter, Alicia, who "greeted him with all the affection and vivacity of their earlier meeting" (188). Richard is delighted to find that Harriet has "engaged a bathing-machine immediately beside the Barringtons' own" (194). Richard's pleasure is somewhat dimmed by Harriet's insistence that he wear a bathing costume that exposes his buttocks, and don "a bathing-cap of thick white rubber, of the style which fastens under the chin" (195). This detail, original to *Harriet*, is a reflection of Glassco's own rubber fetish,<sup>6</sup> and is enlarged upon and combined with the obsessive flagellation and humiliation in the climax to chapter six of the novel where Harriet takes Richard into the bathing-machine while Alicia and her friends listen in horror to "low tones and the governess's voice and the youth's almost inaudible reply; then . . . the sharp report of whipcord on naked flesh . . ." (199). The beating over, Richard emerges to Alicia's disgusted rejection. Alicia's "normal" feelings for Richard are extinguished and his humiliation exacerbated.

Another plot variation between *La Gouvernante* and *Harriet* concerns the "Honeymoon piece," to quote Glassco's marginalia. In *La Gouvernante*, Miss Humphreys and James Lowell are married, take their wedding trip, then return to "Christchurch where the punishment-room has been fitted up" (Glassco's holograph comments, *La Gouvernante* 181). In *Harriet*, Miss Marwood and Richard go abroad to holiday in France at a château, where they are to be attended by two servants, Berthe and Angèle, who become participants in the boy's discipline. Subsequently, Harriet and Richard spend an idyllic year in travel: "like a long en-

chanted voyage overseas forever calm and beneath a sun that shone endlessly” (152). Their return to Christchurch, after a short visit to the “discomfort and gloom” of London, is described in terms of romantic harmony of nature and mood:

The day of the journey to Christchurch marked the visible beginning of spring. The sun was shining in a blue sky variegated with great white clouds, the air was soft, and the countryside, seen from the windows of the train, was putting on its first and freshest green. Richard felt like one just released from prison. (165)

In a nice irony Richard is, of course, headed into his own gilded prison. Upstairs, Richard finds his bedroom changed from its original “monastic bareness” to a chamber of luxury. Christchurch has been transformed, but only so as to accentuate the perverse contrast between the security of the luxurious house and furnishings and the harsh tyranny of the dominatrix. Richard’s new-found delight is soon cut short when he is forced to put on the punishment “harness of his boyhood” (182) and lie “face downwards on the bed” (182-183) to await his whipping, a punishment for masturbation. The position of punishment adopted by Richard is the very one young Glassco was made to assume to receive his father’s sadistic beatings and sexual invasions.

While Glassco had claimed inspiration from other works in the writing of *Harriet*, he never did acknowledge publicly his debt to *La Gouvernante*. In the Preface to *Harriet* — Leon Edel has noted that “an entire essay might be written on Buffy the prefacer” — the author writes that in his search for an appropriate style for his pornographic novel “I found that the finest model I could take was Frances Trollope . . .” [vii]. This reference has the quality of a passing witticism. It is perhaps of interest that the Trollope work the author mentions in the Preface to *Harriet* is *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, published in England by Mrs. Trollope in 1832, some fifty years before the period of the 1880’s Glassco had sought to evoke in *Harriet*. One can hardly fail to smile at the sexual possibilities suggested by the words “fanny” (in both the North American and more daring British meanings of the word) and, of course, by “trollope.” As for “Domestic Manners,” it is these, albeit of a special kind, that are the subject of *La Gouvernante*, and of Glassco’s *Harriet* and *English Governess*. There is the tantalizing exchange in Mrs. Trollope’s work where Miss Blair is called upon by a distraught Mr. Blondel: “Miss Blair! Now, pity, I’m a quack! for whip me . . .” (240). But no, surely we do Mrs. Trollope and her severe intentions an injustice here.

Glassco wrote to Geoffrey Wagner, with whom he enjoyed an epistolary friendship based on their shared enthusiasms for Swinburne’s *Lesbia Brandon*, and for flagellation in general, that: “I drew on Sadlier’s *Fanny by Gaslight* for *The English Governess* — the look and smell of London in the 1880’s, and Harriet’s costumes” (PAC Vol. 4).<sup>7</sup> Of *Fanny by Gaslight*, Michael Sadlier claimed that his novel integrates much that was factual. In the author’s note he had written:

The institutions and scenes presented as characteristic of London night-life at the dates in question, are purely fictitious as regards locality and detailed description. But little is made to occur which, in some form or somewhere, did not actually take place. Similarly one or two of the characters, in themselves imaginary, have life-stories borrowed or blended from those of real people. The manner of speech and the slang used are as far as possible in period. . . . [v]

It is possible that Glassco did draw on Sadlier, although my reading of this book does not suggest any dramatic similarities. Certainly the life of London is vividly described, much is made of the description of women's clothing, and there is one reference to flagellation when Fanny, on her own in London, changes her name to Kitty Cairns and "fell in with a Nepaulese [*sic*] Rajah — a man of fabulous wealth and sadistic tastes — who took her to Mother Stewart's School of Flagellation, just off Wardour Street" (301). This long novel (491 pages) is written in an unintentionally lugubrious style, and is a female picaresque. There is no apparent relation between this work and either *Harriet Marwood, Governess* or *The English Governess*.

While Glassco claims to have been influenced by Mrs. Trollope and Michael Sadlier, the Queen's University Glassco Collection holds neither novel. It seems clear from the textual evidence that the true literary antecedent of both *Harriet Marwood, Governess* and *The English Governess* is, in fact, *La Gouvernante*. If there is, however, one text that somehow infuses Glassco's mind and pornographic prose it is *Lesbia Brandon*. He discusses the importance of Swinburne's novel to his own thinking in a letter to his friend Geoffrey Wagner on 10 December 1966:

Your ideas on 'sadism' jibe with mine. Civilized sadism (we must find another word for it: Denhamism [refers to Denham in Swinburne's *Lesbia Brandon*] comes to mind, but would doubtless be confused with the recent fetishism for denim trousers) has of course nothing to do with whips, blood, tortures, etc. I have an idea the real sadist feels he is expressing the most intense form of love, and his attitude and acts of domination (only *symbolized* by the infliction of punishment) are conceived by him as being indications of a deep and protective regard, and moreover as actually affording a moral (*not* a masochistic or even sexually toned) pleasure to him *vis-à-vis*. The ideal partner sought by the sadist would thus be someone who craves the security and assurance of absolutely boundless love and finds the proof of it in despotic, possessive behaviour: for her, or him, the motto or epigraph is "Whom God loves, he chastises", and the more, the more. A kind of absolute idealism.

(PAC Vol. 4)

There is a plaintive note here in the words "I have an idea the real sadist feels he is expressing the most intense form of love" that seems to express longing for a love, perhaps even a father's love, so impossibly remote, so unattainable, an idea that echoes in John Glassco's poem "The Crows":

Absolute power and absolute submission  
 Locked in each other's loving arms

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "The Way Back" would undergo some thirty drafts before emerging as "The Black Helmet" in *The Fatal Woman: Three Tales by John Glassco* (1974).
- The McGill Journal is a holograph document of 128 leaves held in the John Glassco Collection at McGill University. The Journal is a diary Glassco kept, with greater or lesser regularity, from February 1934 until 24 March 1964. Glassco destroyed a good deal of material; for example, the existing Journal begins only on fol. 24. Quotations from the John Glassco Papers (MS 467) are provided with the permission of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview with Cecilie Glassco (Mrs. David Glassco), Westmount, P.Q., 21 July, 1984.
- <sup>3</sup> See Steven Marcus's excerpts from *My Secret Life* in his *Other Victorians*, 125-126, for such a description.
- <sup>4</sup> Against Sontag's amoral, non-evaluative theories of pornography, one might oppose the arguments of Irving Kristol's "Is This What We Wanted?":
- if you believe that no one was ever corrupted by a book, you also have to believe that no one was ever improved by a book (or a play or a movie). You have to believe, in other words, that all art is morally trivial and that consequently, all education is morally irrelevant. (188)
- Or consider the answers offered by George Steiner in "Night Words" when he advances his chillingly persuasive thesis that there is a disturbing parallel between pornography and the death camps: "there may be deeper affinities than we as yet understand between the 'total freedom' of the uncensored erotic imagination and the total freedom of the sadist." (312)
- Kristol's and Steiner's arguments are compelling, as are those of such feminist critics as Susan Gubar (see especially her "Representing Pornography"). I do not believe that pornography is neutral. However, my purpose in this paper is to argue the connections between Glassco's abusive childhood and his adult pornography, as well as to present the principal literary source of his *Governess* novels.
- <sup>5</sup> The happily-named Amié Van Rod was the pseudonymous author of at least thirty-five works of flagellatory pornography including *L'École du fouet* (1910), *La Fascination du fouet* (1910), *Le Fouet au couvent* (1922), *Le Fouet dominateur, ou l'École des vierges* (1909), *Les Humiliations des Miss Madge* (1912), and *Visites fantastiques au pays du fouet* (1910).
- <sup>6</sup> In an Autobiographical Sketch Glassco wrote in 1961, when he was again in hospital suffering from tuberculosis, he notes that he was aware of being made sexually excited at the age of six by the smell and feel of a rubber bathing cap he was required to wear to his swimming lessons at the baths near his school.
- <sup>7</sup> *The English Governess* (or *Under the Birch*) is the novel derived from *Harriet*, composed by Glassco and his companion, Elma Koolmer ("gentrified" to von Colmar), in Foster, P.Q. and Paris, 1958-59 and subsequently published in 1960.

## WORKS CITED

- Edel, Leon. "John Glassco (1909-1981) and his Erotic Muse." *Canadian Literature* 93 (Summer 1982), pp. 108-117.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Aetiology of Hysteria," trans. James Strachey. In Masson: 251-282.
- Glassco, John. Autobiographical Sketch. Unpublished TS., 9 June 1961. 6 pp.



- . "The Crows." *A Point of Sky* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964).
- . [pseud. Miles Underwood]. *The English Governess* (Paris: Ophelia, 1960).
- . *Harriet Marwood, Governess* (Don Mills: General, 1976).
- . The McGill Journal. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, McLennan Library, McGill Univ., Montreal. The John Glassco Collection.
- . [pseud. Miles Underwood]. *Under the Birch: The Story of an English Governess* (Paris: Ophelia, 1960).
- Gubar, Susan. "Representing Pornography: Feminism, Criticism, and Depictions of Female Violation." *Critical Inquiry* 13: 4 (Summer 1987), pp. 712-741.
- Kristol, Irving. "Is This What We Wanted." In David Holbrook's *The Case Against Pornography* (LaSalle, Illinois: A Library Press Book, 1973), pp. 187-194.
- Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).
- Masson, Jeffrey M. *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1984).
- Mirbeau, Octave. *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1922). Public Archives of Canada (PAC). The John Glassco Papers. MG 30/D 163.
- Reik, Thomas. *Masochism in Modern Man*. trans. Margaret H. Beigel and Gertrud M. Kurth (1941; rpt. New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1949).
- Rod, Aimé Van. *La Gouvernante* ([Paris]: Ed. Parisienne, 1913).
- Sadlier, Michael. *Fanny by Gaslight* (London: Constable, 1940).
- Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism," *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1980), pp. 73-105.
- Special Collections. Douglas Library, Queen's Univ., Kingston. The Glassco Collection. Cataloguing in process.
- Steiner, George. "Night Words," *George Steiner: A Reader* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 305-314.
- Trollope, Frances. *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832; rpr. Gloucester, U.K., 1984).

