JOHN GLASSCO (1909-1981)

and his Erotic Muse

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JOHN GLASSCO CULTIVATED THE LYRIC and erotic muses — Euterpe and Erato. He was, above all, in his later years, a tough-minded poet who mingled reflection with satire, and most of his reflections were on the wear-and-tear of life, the crumbling of man's creations, old houses — like the body — disintegrating in a mournful landscape, mixed with sweet and bitter memories and delicate observations; the triumph of the dust and yet somehow out of death and decay the hardness of reality:

> It is the world that counts, the endless fever
> And suffering that is its own and only end.

The elegance and polish, rhythm and cadence, the perfect pitch, as it were, is curiously to be found also in his erotic writings which are largely in prose. John Glassco — he had been Buffy to us from his earliest years — made a distinction between "porno" written as art and that which is scribbled as commerce. Yet even when he attempted to write for commerce he proved unfailingly delicate and aristocratic: he wrote in the tradition of Cleland, or the *Contes drolatiques*, or the French *élégants*. He captured the spirit of the *conte leste*, the frivolous and "improper" fantasy, for which the Gallic world has so many more synonyms than we have. The phallus was for Buffy a wanton and pretty bird of flight and repose; the libido an exquisite gift of nature. His erotic muse was forever young, born of pre-adolescent titillation and exposure. There are brief backward glances in various of Buffy's prose writings — "in view of my own upbringing" and "my own early memories supplied much of the psychology," and an allusion to "that susceptible teen-ager who could never say no to anyone." These brief autobiographical references allow us to extrapolate some early governess in Montreal's Simpson Street, where Buffy was born, who perhaps administered spankings that had erotic overtones; or some early housemaid taken with the charms of the juvenile Buffy — he had so many. He is our one writer in Canadian literature who has completely escaped self-consciousness. And if his poetic musings on death are unsentimental and confront reality, he is an unabashed romantic when

erotism triumphs. His porno is a reaffirmation of the life-spirit and the magical solace of fantasy.

Glassco was the one sensualist of the "Montreal Group." F. R. Scott was intellect and gambolling wit; A. J. M. Smith aesthetic force and bourgeois rebellion; A. M. Klein, rectitude and rhetoric of the prophets and Hebraism; and Leo Kennedy was Puck. Buffy was a shy youth who talked of "lesbians and lavender boys" and went to a Paris to be, if possible, a libertine. The word has a certain vicious overtone that could never be applied to the faun-like creature I knew between his seventeenth and twenty-first years. And then he had thrifty Montreal in his veins, in spite of his desire to be rid of it; and strong literary ambitions. His late poem about the old city, its Scottish-French mix, its sordid annals of rapacity and piety, the established streets of his childhood and his memories of the red light district make curious reading beside Klein's Montreal, the weighted city of Joyce's cosmopolite verbal mix, polyglot and romantic. Klein, the ghetto stranger, observed Montreal as a phenomenon; Buffy, the rooted Canadian, took it for granted and brooded over its changes. I think that in his poetry he was the most ingrained existentialist of our little group.

I met Buffy at McGill when he was seventeen and in full rebellion against his father — the family dictator and pillar of affluence and authority, bursar of McGill University. Later we met in the bars of Montparnasse; and during an idyllic episode, shared a flat with Graeme Taylor and a young girl from the Canadian west in Nice. I have suggested in my preface to *Memoirs of Montparnasse* some part of our youthful feeling of irresponsibility and the fleeting fool's paradise — a paradise of delight — in which we lived till the Depression caught us. Buffy's precocious memoirs, which he was writing then as if he had already lived his entire life, became his liveliest — and in some ways saddest — book. Our ways parted in 1931 for many years, and we met again in late middle life and renewed the old friendship on the basis of our late maturities. In his last years, Buffy was still in full possession of his quick imagination, his grasp of the colour and detail of life and his ability, as always, to take the world in an easier stride than those of us who had grown up inhibited and been limited by poverty or conflict — as Smith was in his middle-class ways and English heritage, or Scott in his marvellous and consistent knightliness arrayed against economic dragons, or myself in my role of perpetual "outsider." John Glassco's good fortune was to have accepted early the benignities of his sexual self. He was a very handsome youth when I knew him; there was something faun-like in his aspect, the bright eyes, the slightly receding chin, the soft smooth roseate skin — one can see his physical charm and vitality in a photograph reproduced in one of Kay Boyle's books of reminiscence. He was a faun ready to make friends in some enchanted woodland with man or woman; a bit frightened by certain kinds of women and nearly always delighted if he could establish a triangle. He then liked

best as a kind of untragical Oedipus a male companion and a woman to be shared between them. This is the subject of Morley Callaghan's acute yet crude story "Now That April's Here" about Buffy and Graeme Taylor and their plump little girl at Nice. One finds the pattern in Buffy's works and it may sound a bit kinky. It depends on the sexual point of view, for uninhibited sex demands free souls as well as free bodies. I think Buffy felt that a male companion defended him against predatory females; he could then all the more enjoy the latter, for — to judge by the forms of his fantasies — he could, given the right woman, be comfortably bisexual.

Some years ago Glassco, in an interview, listed his three primary fears — "the fear of women, the fear of poverty and of course the fear of death." His fear of women is constantly illustrated in his "fatal women" stories — the Electra female of the brandishing whip who brings the joyful pains of traditional masochism and subjugates the male. His fear of poverty came from his having been for a longish period genuinely down-and-out in Montparnasse where he lived hand-to-mouth as a writing or typing hack or as a sexual convenience to women willing to pay a price. This is all confessed in the *Memoirs* with the lightest and yet most probing touch. To have grown up in a millionaire's family and to have to scrabble for his food eroded Buffy's sense of self: and in his later years he rebuilt his finances by scrupulous study of the business pages and apparently shrewd sallies into the stock or bond market. As for his fear of death, this was, in Buffy's case, not at all the normal "existential" fear we all share. For Buffy, death was terror: like one placed in a firing squad and reprieved at the last minute. After his scrounging days in Montparnasse he returned to Montreal — he was 24 — suffering from galloping consumption. The story is touchingly told, even humorously, in his memoirs. But the trauma was permanent. He was saved by a now obsolete kind of lung surgery that left him with a single lung and a consequent shortness of breath. He had learned the meaning of survival; and during his months on the edge of death he escaped into memories and fantasies of his life abroad. He relived his brief happy years. Most of *Memoirs of Montparnasse* was written in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal, and then laid aside, as if Buffy now had a new life to live.

JOHN GLASSCO'S POEMS about man's daily death-world spring, as we can see, from old intensities. His pictures of human fragility are etched out of his own fragile yet life-consuming passions. His erotic writings thus carry, in the midst of their frivolity, the post-Montparnassian experience. There is surely a distinct relation between Buffy dying and surviving at 24 and his picking up later the last writings of Aubrey Beardsley who did die of tuberculosis

at 26. Buffy's emotions on discovering Beardsley's unfinished *Under the Hill* were a kind of reliving of his own reprieve — with the difference that there had been none for the great artist in black and white who revolutionized the *art nouveau* of the nineties. Buffy was nearing fifty when he set out to finish Beardsley's work even as he had completed his own memoir of himself which at that time lay unpublished in his attic. The Olympia Press in Paris, which specialized in both erotic and porno publication, produced a beautiful green-cloth edition of the Beardsley work limited to 3,000 copies in which we may read: "Under the Hill or the story of Venus and Tannhauser, in which is set forth an exact account of the manner of state held by Madame Venus, Goddess and Meretrix, under the famous Horselberg, and containing adventures of Tannhauser in that place, his journeying to Rome, and return to the loving mountain, by Aubrey Beardsley, now completed by John Glassco." In the introduction — and Buffy's introductions to his erotica are miniature masterpieces of the mock-pedantic and mock-academic — he tells us how Beardsley's pen dropped from his hand (so to speak) at the end of a sentence on page 69 of this edition, and how he picked up the pen at that moment. Here are Beardsley's last sentences:

> Venus was in a ravishing toilet and confection of Camille's, and looking like K——. Tannhauser was dressed as a woman and looked like a Goddess. Cosmé sparkled with gold, bristled with ruffs, glittered with bright buttons, was painted, powdered, gorgeously bewigged, and looked like a marquis in a comic opera. The salle à manger at De La Pine's was quite the prettiest that ever was. . . .

And here Buffy begins:

> The walls, covered with pale blue satin, held in silver panels pictures of shepherds and shepherdesses, of nymphs and heroes, moving in measure in Sicilian landscapes or upon the azure shores of Aegean waters. From the ceiling beautiful divinities made as to throw garlands on the guests, with such effect that one was surprised that the roses, as if unwilling to quit Olympus, would not descend on earth. . . .

The transition from one writer to the other is harmonious. It is, however, no easy task to compare the two texts, for the Beardsley fragment contains bedroom sequences while Buffy's deal with larger frolics and the journey of Tannhauser to Rome, the sadder part of the story. Beardsley's exotic work is filled with passages that seem to be describing his own drawings:

> Before a toilet-table that shone like the altar of Nôtre Dame des Victoires, Venus was seated in a little dressing-gown of black and heliotrope. The coiffeur Cosmé was caring for her scented chevelure, and with tiny silver tongs, warm from the caresses of the flame, made delicious intelligent curls that fell as lightly as breath about her forehead and over her eyebrows, and clustered like tendrils round her neck.

Buffy in his portion understandably gives the effect of Beardsley's art as well, but he works more out of literary allusion, the words come to his mind before the

picture. Both delight in using French and other foreign words as if they were a part of the English language. Beardsley thus speaks of "all the décolleté spirits of astonishing conversation," and in Buffy's portion we find him exclaiming "What frolics and romps! What bagatelles, fredaines and folasteries!" Buffy captures the girlishness Beardsley imparted to Venus in accord with Edmund Wilson's observation that Beardsley made "the grotesqueries and orgies of her court . . . quite natural and harmless." This is the effect Buffy gives not only here but in all his erotic writings. But it is again in his Introduction to his Beardsley pastiche that Glassco reveals to us the depth, below the surface of the frolic, of his identification and empathy with the artist's ability to laugh and mock and invent during the short hours left to him. Beardsley, Buffy writes, may have partly failed "due only to his partaking of the all-too-human faults of dejection, listlessness, ennui. But now, in an age whose painfully enlarged vision he may have anticipated, an age which has learned to value, as his own never did, the existence of a world apart from the sphere of our sorrow, we can appreciate the marvellous cohesion of his fancies, the sheer boldness and élan of his conception, the perfection of taste shown in the apposition of thought and epithet which is always startling and always delightful, and the sheer freedom and beauty of this elegant, playful, sad, supernal world of the spirit which he was still attempting to realise even while he was slowly dying." It is as if Buffy were remembering his own spirit when he was writing the *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, and he adds this sentence that expresses not only his emotion but also defines his erotic writings: "Above all let us not make the mistake of identifying his partial failure with what was in truth his greatest strength, his essential unabashed reliance on the prodigious inner power of eroticism, his sense of what makes man's private universe revolve." Completion of Beardsley's fantasies appear to have meant more to Buffy than the stimulus of matching wit with wit, cleverness with cleverness, bawd with bawd. The old and the new text are seamed together — it is all but invisible — by the common life-in-death and death-in-life experience of a strange, one might say almost macabre, English artist who founded a new style in art, and an artistic spirit from Canada who possessed the empathy needed to forge the posthumous union. In Buffy, there seems to have been in the experience, a way of proclaiming his own survival and the permanence of art, through a reliance on fantasy. We find a repetition of the Beardsley experience a few years later, when Buffy translates into English the French-Canadian poetry of Saint-Denys-Garneau. Buffy's preface to this translation, which received the Canada Council translation award, refers us back once more to his brush with death in 1932. For Garneau's art was born out of the same experience: he had in 1928 suffered a heart injury which forced him to abandon his studies. Buffy writes; "Thus, at the age of 22, he was brought face to face with his own imminent death; and the next nine years of his life — the last nine — were passed in

intimate converse with a few close friends and in the feverish search for the religious certainty and the poetic 'truth' that had always obsessed him." We need not labour the point. Translation is a form of imitation: and as Buffy had imitated and completed Aubrey Beardsley in the 1940's so in the 1970's he carefully rendered Garneau into English and made his prolonged struggle and his poetry available to English readers.

We can see the imprint on an entire literary career of a life-and-death experience — the life reprieved to do its work. Buffy was not a Catholic, like Garneau, and so was free to be more light-hearted in his secular alternations between poetic meditation and the aphrodisiac delights of Harriet's whip or Squire Hardman's voyeured double satisfaction: a relish both of the whipping of the young and of the sexy female form that is administering the punishment — and all in heroic couplets derived from Alexander Pope.

BEFORE WE LOOK AT JOHN GLASSCO's poetry, which together with his *Memoirs* is perhaps the most enduring of his writings, we might linger briefly over his pastiches and collages, the ingeniosities of "porn." I have already suggested that his erotic writings, because they are fantasy and aphrodisiac, contain affirmations of life and of life's health-giving sensuality. Buffy's flagellism, in various books, shows a young exuberance fluted through high verbal divertimentos. It also suggests his curious plight, for he is always describing a passive male whose sexual power is derived from a whipping *femme fatale*: a kind of romantic agony described by Krafft-Ebing and earlier in the works of Leopold Sacher-Masoch, whose novel *Venus in Furs* Buffy translated and inevitably prefaced. The "fatal woman" rather than the punishment is the prime mover in this area of Buffy's erotic world. She whips the flesh into activity and with her own compulsive erotic drive makes the male rise before her; he has been subjugated but he triumphs. It was perhaps no accident that Buffy's first book of poems was titled *The Deficit Made Flesh* — the process I describe is that of a deficit for which compensation is found: pain inflicted by female hands so to speak takes the delicate youth "out of the red" into an Elysium of sexual delight. Within this process we can discern the narcissistic element — it is inevitably there. One must learn first to admire one's self in order to admire others; there must be a love of self to learn the love of another. This is enacted for us when Buffy writes a book under the name of Sylvia Bayer and has her dedicate this book to John Glassco. There is more than authorial vanity in the act: there are all the pleasures of transvestitism. When Sylvia's heroine contemplates the phallus as a work of art, it is Buffy who is doing the contemplating — our components are now beyond narcissism and the love of Hyacinthus. The beauty of flesh, the

artistic form of flesh, is discerned through a series of masks. The mode is always one of indirection.

One of Buffy's inventions is that of *collage*: he transports the term from modern art into his way of grafting on another text a quantity of erotic activity not originally intended. We can see his elaborate gambit in a collection of homosexual stories which he bluntly titled *The Temple of Pederasty*, borrowing his text from some standard translation of the Japanese realist Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693), and doubtless dressing it up a little; and then interpolating erotic detail. Saikaku wrote vividly in the Tokugawa period of that "floating world" which has given the west so much delight — in the form of those delicate and documentary prints made from wood blocks of streets and waterways, men and women, and notably poised and indeed "floating" courtesans in multi-coloured kimonos reflecting an entire era of popular as well as courtly sex. *The Temple of Pederasty*, published in 1970 with a warning that it was not to be read by children, gives Saikaku as primary text. The translator is invented: he is none other than Buffy in a kimono bearing the name Hideki Okada. However, Buffy writes the preface as John Glassco and it gives the work an air of solemn authority. In his preface, Buffy explains very carefully that Saikaku lent himself to this treatment — "the rather highflown sentiment of the original is subtly and sharply redressed by a frankness of epithet no less than by the tone of genuine passion, supplying elements which give an added dimension to the stories themselves and in many cases transform them entirely." He adds that "the authorship of these interpolations is extremely doubtful" — but we may be sure that their author is John Glassco alias Hideki Okada.

A word needs to be said about the introductions in which the transvestitism and other acts of role-playing are performed. An entire essay might be written on Buffy the prefacer; and it is difficult to tell when he is himself and when someone else. I suspect he is himself, for example, in the preface to his translation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* which James Joyce so much admired and had in his library. Who knows? Joyce may have named Leopold Bloom, who is quite a masochist, after the man whose name gave the language that word. Perhaps the most amusing of Buffy's mock-introductions is the one he appended to the amusette he created called *Squire Hardman*. He printed a limited edition of fifty copies at his own expense and carefully explained to the reader with a show of pedantry that the author of this early nineteenth-century flagellant poem, written in the manner of Pope, was George Colman, whom critics called a writer of "filthy facetiae." For those who want to pursue the elusive pseudonymous life of John Glassco, I might as well enumerate all the pennames I have found (there may be others) under whose masks Buffy created his diversified erotic works. I have already mentioned Sylvia Bayer, Hideki Okada, and George Colman. There are also Grace Davignon, W. P. R. Eadie, Albert

Eddy, Silas N. Gooch, S. Colson-Haig, Nordyke Nudleman, Jean de St. Luc, and Miles Underwood. The latter is the pen-name used for Buffy's international success, his best-sold tale of the governess and the whip. Indeed it was pirated and translated in so many countries that Buffy — given the new dispensation to such works — decided in the end to legitimize the governess. *Harriet Marwood, Governess* had been published by Grove Press in the U.S.A. and in 1976 he brought out a Canadian edition that bore his own name as well as his usual preface. The book is filled with much amusing pastiche-and-collage of Victorian novels — all careful reticence and politeness until one arrives at the whippings. These have the usual monotony of porn though they are constantly lightened by Buffy's waggish style. We are satiated with the constant cut of the whip or strap. Buffy was well aware he was administering pain and saccharine — but mostly the latter — in these masturbatory fantasies. They are written in a closely-imitated style and Buffy supplies a genuine source:

> the whole problem had resolved itself, quite simply, into the question of what literary *style* would be the most effective; this, I came to see, was crucial, and on choice the success or failure of my book would depend. After long deliberation, I found that the finest model I could take was Frances Trollope, that shrewd courageous and observant Englishwoman whose *Domestic Manners of the Americans* I had long admired: her leisurely periods, her stylized dialogue, her ringing clichés and redundant cadences seemed perfectly adapted to my purpose. Accordingly, having soaked myself in her dreadful and now forgotten novels for a whole week, I completed my own book in the comparatively short period of four months, finishing it on March 4th, 1955. I have never written a novel so rapidly, nor with so much pleasure.

IT IS CLEAR FROM MY ACCOUNT of John Glassco's erotic writings that his method has been one of imitation, of pastiche, of using well-tried models, but invariably wrapping them in the delicacy and elegance of his own large literary talent. Buffy's poetry, however, is neither pastiche nor collage: and if it is imitative we might say this was because he adheres to the traditional forms and to classical models. His ear is for the dignity and verbal power of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He tends to be elegiac but he is looking backward from Gray to Marvell and Donne and the less strenuous metaphysicals. His modernity resides in his using his own immediate world and his own death-in-life experiences and his capturing the old tone with a cold unsentimental ear: yet behind all he wrote there is the warmth of passion and a love of the fantastic. Occasionally he returns to the poet of his youth, T. S. Eliot, as in this echo of the *Four Quartets*:

The day when it will not matter
The day no longer depending on another day
When time shall have run out
When nothing will matter.

Yet he is not religious. "God will desert us when we come to die." The fatalism runs deep. And so we are not surprised when he selects Don Quixote as subject for death — an unsentimental elegy in reality for the self, an extended epitaph. We might have suspected that the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance would please Buffy. He had lived by his fantasies and when these dreams were gone it was time to die:

The withdrawal of the vision,
The removal of the madness,
The supplanting of a world of beauty
By God's sticks and stones and smells
Are afflictions, I find, of something more absurd
Than any book of chivalry.

The same hard almost relentless inquiry is pursued in a finished sonnet that reaches into the heart of Utrillo's painted streets:

Streets without figures, figures without faces,
Desolate by choice and negative from need.
But the hoardings weep, the shutters burn and bleed;
Colours of crucifixion, dying graces,
Spatter and cling upon these sorrowful places.
— Where is the loved one? Where do the streets lead?

The light-hearted pornographer is not light of heart when he writes poems which are the truest expression of John Glassco. He is indeed the poet of "Grief without voice, mourning without mind . . . The shame and self-loathing of mankind." The romantic eroticist looks backward to Pope or to Dryden; and when he invokes Eros in his poetry it is to use her with irony, and satire, and to make of her a metaphysical conceit. As in "Belly Dance":

The corpsewhite column spiralling on slow feet
Tracing the seashell curve, the figure eight,
Coldly unwinds its flowing ribbon
With public motions of the private psalm
Of the supposed woman to the thought of man.

The belly dance and the masturbation become one "the viewless member in his nerveless hand, / Working within the adverse air." In his metaphysical vein, John Glassco is close to his old friend in the Montreal Group, A. J. M. Smith. But if I were asked where the difference lies, I would find myself forced to say (for I do not want to diminish Smith's achievement) that the latter drew his poetry out of literature much more than Buffy, who was keenly literary and in-

tellectual but drew his poetry out of felt experience. There lies the crucial difference. In his poetry, Glassco is making use of the central experience of his life and it takes over as he looks upon "hope battered into habit, and a habit / Running to weariness." The houses in the countryside — in the Eastern Townships where he lived — are mute and sealed with their secrets; they are dark and void of man and set in dull meadows that have gone to seed. He finds the White Mansion "which is the death of man and of his dream" as in the Quebec farmhouse in which he reads the earlier history of the Canadian French — the house that is "the sweet submissive fortress of itself / That the landscape owns!" and in it "the airless dark, / Of the race so conquered that it has made / Perpetual conquest of itself." The graveyards "minding their own business," "the green paths trodden by patience," "the fathomless future of the underdog" who beats the ploughshares into an honest dollar. "April again," he sings, echoing Eliot, but with a wry twist

> and its message
> unvaried, the same old impromptu
> Dinned in our ears by the tireless
> dispassionate chortling of Nature.

He looks with this aging cold eye acutely enough to observe the flowers, the snakes, the squirrels, the willow-wren, and the field-birds, and for the eroticist at a given moment sex becomes "the bitter triumph over a stranger's body."

I have quoted enough to suggest the mood of Buffy's poetry; when he remembers, it is to recall such matters as the dictatorship of his father, in a poem titled "The Whole Hog" where he asks himself through what consciousness of his own fragility his parent

> set himself to become
> Great God to a little child? It is a question
> that opens up vistas of personal hell. . . .

Buffy unfolds for us in other poems other aspects of his life removed from such hells; and nothing is more moving than the moment, in his long poem about Montreal, when he remembers how in the rue Jeanne Mance, when he was an adolescent, he made his way to an elaborate house, "pre-eminent in the houses of ill-fame / Of our metropolis" and there lost "my too-long-tried virginity." He was fourteen and "warm beyond my years." It would have been another of life's ironies for John Glassco if he could have foretold that in that very street, at the age of 71, one cold January day of 1981, in the town rooms in which he and his wife lived when they were not at Foster, Quebec, the end would come, with great swiftness, a sudden moment of malaise, without the time to meditate, like his Don Quixote, on the moment that did not lead to another moment.