

LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF PLEASURE

John Glassco's Quest

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“**M**Y MOTTO HAS ALWAYS BEEN ‘Liberty and the pursuit of pleasure.’”¹ In that phrase of Man Ray, avant-garde photographer and the character “Narwhal” in John Glassco’s *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, one recognizes the unifying theme of Glassco’s book; it provides both pattern and meaning (the terms are ultimately indistinguishable) and makes the autobiography a work of literary art rather than a repository of facts. Liberty and pleasure — each a good in itself, and each a means to a still more valuable end. Liberty is a necessary condition for the pursuit of pleasure, and pleasure, at its highest degree, transforms itself into the experience of ecstasy. As Ford Madox Ford says, or is made to say: “Joy is in the nature of a fever, of hysteria . . . a drunkenness, an unnatural state.”² It can best be attained, the *Memoirs* suggest, through sensual pleasure, and such pleasure can be experienced best in youth, when the senses are keenest and worldly commitments are fewest. The *Memoirs* culminate in a series of ecstatic moments, resulting from supreme pleasure.

There are no Blakean implications here; sensual pleasure does not lead to a cleansing of the doors of perception and a recognition of the infinite in everything. In Glassco’s cosmos, “all life and indeed the whole universe of phenomena existed only as . . . an accident, an interruption of nothingness”; therefore, joy or ecstasy can be felt only while one is able to ignore the basic truth and its consequence — the transience of everything, particularly of youth. Rather than revealing ultimate reality, sensual pleasure mercifully blinds us to it. Youth, after all, is defined as a drunkenness.

Such a world-view must lead to a reversal of values by which frivolity becomes serious and seriousness frivolity, while “to remain on the surface of life” is the only genuine wisdom, and the pursuit of pleasure the most rational use of one’s time. A moralist might accuse the *Memoirs* of advocating an ethic of selfish irresponsibility, but they contain their own defence on both the metaphysical and the practical levels. Glassco’s behaviour conforms to the nature of the universe as he sees it; furthermore, in an accidental and therefore absurd, or meaningless,

universe, all moral codes must be purely arbitrary and *all* action absurd. (But surely that which is most pleasureable is least absurd!) In practical terms, the *Memoirs* assert that Buffy and Graeme's way of life had at any rate the negative virtue of not harming anyone;³ they were guilty only of "greed, sloth and sensuality — the three most amiable vices in the calendar." But Glassco claims more, he argues in effect that their behaviour satisfied Kant's categorical imperative: so live as if your every act were to become universal law. "Far from misusing our time, we were really turning it to the best account . . . half of man's miseries result from an insufficiency of leisure, gormandise and sexual gratification during the years from seventeen to twenty." No starving in a garret for the sake of Art! When Kay Boyle writes, in her edition of McAlmon's *Being Geniuses Together*: "We were thin as rakes, white-skinned, hollow-eyes, as poets had always been,"⁴ that "we" does not include Buffy and Graeme, who are no more ambitious to die as romantic bohemians than to live as prosperous businessmen. Buffy's nearly fatal illness results from devotion to pleasure, not poetry.)

Food and sex are the prime sources of pleasure in the *Memoirs*, and it's in terms of food that the contrast between Canada and France is most dramatically presented: "Lobsters broiled in butter, tender little octopuses in black sauce, how your memory haunts me in this abode of corned-beef hash and Jell-O!" The "abode of corned-beef hash and Jell-O" is the Royal Victoria Hospital of Montreal, in which Glassco completed the *Memoirs* while awaiting a dangerous operation. These foreshadowings occur throughout the book, intensifying the sense of present pleasure. But corned-beef hash and jello have more than literal significance; they symbolize the omnipresent blandness of North American existence, its willful denial of the senses, in contrast to the delicate perversities hinted at by "tender little octopuses in black sauce."

The *Memoirs* assume a necessary opposition between the hedonist and society; the unqualified pursuit of pleasure is socially subversive, setting a bad example and rendering ridiculous all socially-approved goals. Society deals with the demands of the senses by ignoring them, by repressing them, or (more subtly) by selling an inferior substitute for pleasure, exemplified by a night-club floor-show: "this ton of listless flesh, these fixed smiles, these snowy pink-tipped contours . . . the appetites of desire, glamour and money were opposed and never met." This organized "pleasure," frustrating rather than satisfying the senses, is to the reality as corned-beef hash is to octopuses in black sauce.

From the point of view of the *Memoirs*, all social institutions (including the various professions) impose constraints on the pursuit of pleasure. Hence Buffy's early attraction to the apparent anarchism of the surrealists. But anarchism with leaders and manifestos is perhaps self-contradictory, while on closer examination the surrealist techniques, far from offering imaginative freedom, become only another set of rules — formulas for surprise. Better then simply to lead one's own

free life in the cracks and crevices of organized society; that is the practical possibility which the *Memoirs* present. Freedom from external pressure is gained at the outset, by the escape to Paris. Freedom is threatened more seriously by the internal danger of commitment — specifically, to the career of writing. “I had no commitments except, in a vague way, to remain uncommitted . . . vis-a-vis the deadly earnestness of Morley Callaghan . . . I had once again the salutary sense of the abyss that yawns for everyone who has embraced the literary profession . . . literature . . . was just another trap.” The writers who figure in the *Memoirs* appear dehumanized in some sense by literary ambition: Hemingway a calculating opportunist (behind a show of boozy good-fellowship), Callaghan a myopic professional, Stein the tyrant of her salon.

The conflict between father and son, or Montreal and Paris, is external; that between the apparently incompatible demands of life and art, or “enjoyment and achievement,” is between Buffy’s own conflicting desires, and therefore more difficult to resolve. Throughout the *Memoirs* he struggles to avoid the commitment to literature, which is demonstrated by the existence of the book itself and foreshadowed by Graeme’s remark in the first chapter: “I just saw you in a dream — as an old man with whiskers, writing. . . .” The decision to write the *Memoirs* was an attempted compromise by which life, experienced to the fullest, might be translated directly into art. But this apparently undemanding form made its demands, and the choice between life and art had to be repeated in Luxembourg and on the Mediterranean. Even at 18, Buffy (unlike McAlmon) knew that an autobiography is more than a receptacle for facts.

But however much Buffy might believe “that if I could only get rid of my itch for writing, I might be quite happy” to get rid of it was impossible. He lives his life in literary terms. Arriving in Paris on a disagreeable winter night: “I had only to think I was now in the city of Baudelaire, Utrillo and Apollinaire to be swept by a joy so strong it verged on nausea.” (Pleasure and pain, at such a pitch, seem indistinguishable; perhaps the quest was ultimately not simply for pleasure, but for intensity of life.) To denounce the soul-destroying boredom of his Montreal job, he borrows the rhetoric of D. H. Lawrence: “the day was curling its edges around the granite walls of the Sun Life Assurance Company, while inside the men and women were all busy denying their dark gods.” The dream of Paris itself seems to have originated in a reading of George Moore’s *Confessions of a Young Man*, and Moore’s hospitality and gift of a pamphlet to Buffy and Graeme constitute a secular benediction for their enterprise.

Repeatedly life is shaped or given significance by literary recollection. When Buffy and the novelist Diana Tree, about to become lovers, share a carriage: “‘Keep on, keep on!’ she cried, like Leon Dupuis in *Madame Bovary*.” Mrs. Quayle misquotes appropriately on reencountering Buffy after an interval of six months: “O what can ail thee, man-at-arms / Alone and palely loitering?” The

quotation not only describes Buffy at the moment (pleasure has ended for him) but foreshadows the sexual slavery that she will impose upon him and his condition when he emerges from it. When Kirilenko the photographer gives the now penniless and hungry Buffy chance of employment as a male prostitute, the offer is seen as the recurrence of an archetypal situation: "the theme of Mephisto and Faust, of Vautrin and Rubempre, here reduced to its crassest terms . . . Homeless, cold, and hungry, I made the classic response. 'You might as well.' "

Moments of ecstasy in the *Memoirs* result not only from sensual enjoyment, but from a total experience of which literary, artistic and historical associations form an essential part. These alone suffice in the realization of Paris already quoted, which owes nothing to outward circumstances. Even an ecstasy which appears purely physical, the consummation of liberated sexuality, owes much to reminiscence and association. The passage must now be quoted in full:

'Keep on!' she cried, like Leon Dupis in *Madame Bovary*. 'Go right around the Arc de Triomphe and then come back.'

As we returned down the avenue a parade came out from the rue de Presbourg. About a hundred students, led by a makeshift band of drums and tin trumpets, were pulling a float bearing a gigantic movable phallus; worked by ropes, its head was slowly rising and falling. The crowd shrieked with joy as it moved slowly into the glare and crawled down the avenue. We fell in behind this symbol of the Third Republic. Reaching the Café Tortoni, our carriage turned off at the Rue Galilee outside Mrs. Quayle's apartment. We looked into each other's eyes with rapture; we had become lovers.

Pleasure is intensified and universalized by placement in a wider context. The occasion is Bastille Day, a national holiday celebrating the destruction of a prison, the symbol of repressive authority. The phallic image invokes a more ancient past, a pagan consecration of sensuality, including the sexual climax being achieved in the carriage (with the lovers triumphing at the Arc de Triomphe!), while the Café Tortoni recalls the literary and artistic life of nineteenth-century Paris. The passage ends, ironically, with the Christian implications of "turning off at the Rue Galilee." (A double irony, since their destination is the apartment of Mrs. Quayle, and Buffy's later involvement with her nearly destroys forever his capacity for pleasure.)

The third ecstasy is the vision of the Mediterranean, and as with the realization of Paris, it comes primarily from within:

my throat was dry as ashes, I was coated with a mixture of soot and sweat and aching all over; but the sight of that tideless inland ocean, mother of gods and men, nurse of poetry . . . made me dizzy with joy. The moment was permanent, unforgettable, Keatsian . . . The first dip . . . was like a baptism: all the grime and sweat and alcohol seemed to wash away in the embrace of the Mediterranean.

It is a pagan baptism, following the initial benediction by George Moore and

the celebration by Buffy and Diana Tree of what has been presented as a holy day of sensuality. Such a moment transcends simple hedonism; it is available only to the mind prepared by experience and knowledge. Ecstasy is felt in those instants when the physical world is, in Wordsworthian terms, half-perceived and half-created. "The visionary gleam . . . the glory and the dream" — the language of Buffy's favourite poet seems appropriate, and for both writers these moments are a unique privilege of youth.

BUT ECSTASY ALONE does not make a writer; craft is needed, and experience of other kinds. Buffy refuses to make the commitment to literature precisely because he realizes its demands, and doubts his own willingness, and ability, to meet them. Not only was the labour of composition incompatible with the full-time pursuit of pleasure, but "I had never known despair or anguish . . . hunger, frustration, illness, or chastity. . . . How then was I qualified to write?" The list of deficiencies is formidable, but all of these experiences were to be supplied, and are recorded in the *Memoirs*. Finally, he doubts his own vocation: "I told myself that my desire to write had never been more than a . . . symptom of juvenile revolt. I came to believe that I was lacking in any seriousness . . . I had really nothing to say." The bulk of the *Memoirs* was in fact composed, as Glassco informs us in his Preface, "in the Royal Victoria Hospital at Montreal during the winter of 1932-33, when I was awaiting a crucial operation." Dangerous illness resolved Buffy's doubts, providing both occasion and motive for writing. While writing in order to relive past happiness and to find meaning in his brief existence, he would discover that he indeed had something to say.

Given these circumstances, one is tempted to say that the *Memoirs* move from frivolity to seriousness. But this is too easy. If the pursuit of pleasure constitutes the most rational use of one's time, as the *Memoirs* claim, it cannot be considered frivolous. It might be more accurate to say that there is a progression from a trivial seriousness (the solemn dullness of Buffy's Montreal) to a profound seriousness resulting from a comprehension, under threat of death, of the value of life when it is fully experienced.

Seriousness is required to provide both the content and the shape of art. Material and occasion are both useless without that devotion to the craft of writing for want of which McAlmon's book remained only "inchoate maunderings." From the beginning, Buffy understood that recollection was not enough. The basic decision was made deliberately and early: "I've already abandoned surrealism and decided to write my memoirs — not a journal but a record of my life written in chapters, like one of George Moore's books — to impose a narrative

form on everything that has happened since we left Montreal last February.” From the outset, the author had provided a model for himself, and a principle of selection and emphasis: “This is to be the book of my youth, of my golden age.” The recording of events without form (as in a journal) is rejected, and form is not expected to arise automatically out of recollection (it is to be “imposed,” and requires a certain aesthetic distance from the raw happening). Buffy explains one of his abandonments of the *Memoirs* on the ground that “I was feeling handicapped by the recentness of events. I could not see Daphne and Angela in any kind of perspective and was reduced to stating just what had happened.” Three months in hospital, two years and more after the experience, provided that perspective.

LACKING THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT, we cannot study the process of composition in detail. Something can be learned, however, by comparison of the first chapter of the *Memoirs*, as published in 1970, with the version that appeared in *This Quarter*, under the title “Extract From an Autobiography,” in 1929. Glassco’s claim in his preface that “The revision amounts to the occasional improvement of a phrase and, in the case of the first chapter, the excision of some particularly fatuous paragraphs” clearly does not hold.

In fact, a version of about 5300 words was reduced to about 2300. A continuous passage of 3½ pages (out of 12), describing the last night in Montreal, was dropped; gratuitous anti-semitic remarks were omitted; diction was sharpened and colloquialized; telling details were added. “George [the “Graeme” of the final version] and I were striding along the station platform behind a porter, our arms full of overcoats, then I relaxed”⁵ became “Only when we were marching along the echoing wooden station-platform, under the great wooden roof that covered the lines of tracks and with the engine shooting soot and steam all around, did I relax.” In his prefatory remarks to the *Memoirs*, Edel praises Glassco’s “fine ‘visuality’”; the praise is deserved, and the effect was deliberate — no accidental result of total recall! If the language contained such a word as “audiality,” we could say that the passage exemplifies that as well. Something more is accomplished; the recurring adjective “wooden,” reinforced by “echoing,” not only characterizes the station but, by implication, the society which produced it.

In spite of its much greater length, the “Extract” gave no information about Buffy’s actual work at Sun Life, whereas the *Memoirs* inform us that “By ten o’clock I would finish my morning work of posting up the five and ten-cent weekly premiums for burial insurance paid by Chinese labourers in Hong Kong, and then go and bed down in one of the toilets in the basement, where I made

myself a little nest in my ankle-length raccoon coat." The triviality and dullness of the job combine with the implied exploitation of the poor to indict the world of business. Posting premiums for burial insurance — what an incongruous job for the 18-year-old Buffy, concerned only with enjoying the present at all costs! The fact that even bedding down in the toilet seems a desirable alternative emphasizes the monotony of the work, while the raccoon coat offers a picturesque period detail. The entire passage functions both as texture and as an essential part of the total design; it indicates precisely what Buffy and Graeme are escaping from.

Stylistic revision eliminated vagueness and wordiness and often substituted a colloquial for an inappropriately "literary" diction. After subletting their Montreal apartment, says the "Extract," "We . . . were hardly discommoded by having to remain away from our apartment on certain nights of the week — less so than we had at first thought when it transpired that one of the men was never in the place, undoubtedly owing to the fact that he would obtain no one who would accompany him thither."⁶ "Discommoded," "transpired," "accompany him thither" — the obsolete vocabulary of a provincial man-of-letters, entirely inappropriate to the narrator of the *Memoirs*. In revision: "The extra twenty dollars was a help, and it was no hardship keeping away from the apartment until late on Wednesday and Saturday nights; moreover, it soon turned out that Petersham was not using the place (his night was Wednesday), though he continued to pay."

If the narrator could not be allowed to seem a belated Victorian (as the diction cited above might suggest), neither could he express himself as a gushing adolescent. "But George, you know that I cannot go to Paris without you. I can go nowhere without you. To think of you living alone here, without me whom you love so much . . . do you think I could enjoy myself in Paris, had I ten women in my bed every night?"⁷ The Buffy of the *Memoirs*, who "must have imbibed sophistication with his mother's milk," would have seemed incredible after such a passage; necessarily, it was dropped.

We may note in passing the increased dramatic effect achieved in revision. The first sentence of the "Extract" reads: "In the winter of 1928, George Graham and I were living in an apartment on Metcalfe Street in Montreal." The opening sentence (fragment, rather) of *Memoirs* is "Winter in Montreal in 1927." Season and location, the two essential facts, are given, the rest can follow. Furthermore, the revised version parallels "Paris! We made it after all," which opens the second half of chapter 1 in *Memoirs*.

Study of Glassco's revisions demonstrates that the *Memoirs* were the product of conscious art, not only in their texture but in their shape and focus. The persuasion of George, it seems likely, was cut not only because of its embarrassing sentimentality but because it was inconsistent with the sense of destiny being

fulfilled which the *Memoirs* create. External obstacles are emphasized, while internal doubts cannot be admitted: "It was on a dream of Paris that our ideas were vaguely but powerfully concentrated. This kept us going." In the "Extract," not only does "George" require persuasion, but the topic of Paris only arises after Buffy's father has offered him an allowance of \$100 a month. "After a great deal of hypocrisy on my part," says the "Extract," "and of generosity on his, he consented to give me a hundred dollars a month for seven years. I was greatly touched by this. . . ." The pattern of the *Memoirs* requires that the father must not be given credit, even ironically, for generosity, and that the son must be uncompromising in his hostility. He can acknowledge neither hypocrisy nor the weakness of having been "greatly touched." The passage was completely rewritten, with the father being motivated solely by desire to avoid scandal: "I hear you and your friend Taylor are running something close to a house of ill-fame. . . . Colonel Birdlime, of McGill's Department of Extramural Affairs, tells me it's common knowledge. . . . [H]e offered me an allowance of a hundred dollars a month if I would live more discreetly." Father and university, related symbols of stupid authority, are ridiculed by association with the farcical name "Colonel Birdlime" (implying a trap for those who desire freedom), and by the sense of petty espionage which the detail creates.

It's no use asking what the historical truth might have been — that is irrecoverable. Doubtless the 1930 version represents not pure invention but the elaboration of a different selection of facts, and the effect created certainly was necessary to the *Memoirs* as we have them. To say this is not to discredit their accuracy. A life cannot be recorded in all its detail; selection must take place, and inevitably it creates a pattern, or establishes a goal. Experience must be reported in words, and language is not a transparent window; the autobiographer's diction and syntax imply an attitude toward the events being narrated.

“**A**UTOBIOGRAPHIES ARE ESSENTIALLY works of fiction” — a fact which has been known for a long time, and has become a commonplace of modern criticism.⁹ But it must be added that a fiction is not necessarily fictitious, that is, it need not be a "lie," or invention. To say that an autobiography is a work of fiction is to say that by selection, by emphasis, by control of tone, the author has revealed what appears to be the meaning of his existence. For him to be found lying would discredit his work. We go to autobiography for truth of a different kind than the "truth" of fiction; we look for a revelation of meaning in actual, historical existence.

What, then, should one make of those aesthetic discussions and monologues by Ford, "Narwhal," and others which are recalled in such convincing, yet im-

probable, detail? They cannot be accurate reports unless Glassco, like Boswell, immediately entered them in his journal — but he kept no journal. The greater part of those speeches must have been invented. Yet in the act of reading we do not take them to be lies in a sense which would discredit the work. One assumes that they were neither entirely invented nor simply recalled; rather, that they were elaborated from remembered fact. In addition, they are saved by their transparent artificiality. One is not asked to accept them as literal truth (as Boswell claims for his recorded conversations). The implicit claim is of a different sort — of dramatic appropriateness to character, time and place.

Glassco himself has stated this dual responsibility of the autobiographer:

Dear Kay, this loose and lying chronicle
 You'll understand and all its young intention
 to dress the naked facts and brightly tell
 A young man's story. . . .¹⁰

The verse does not imply authorial irresponsibility. “Loose and lying” is a statement, perhaps exaggerated, of the autobiographer’s freedom, but is promptly qualified by “to dress the naked facts.” To “lie” in this carefully qualified sense — not to arbitrarily invent, but rather “to dress the naked facts,” to select, to emphasize, to elaborate, to slant — there is the essence of the autobiographer’s art.

The *Memoirs* are structured around a set of basic polarities. On one side the father, the university, Montreal, business, age and authority, and denial of the senses. On the other, youth, Paris, rebellion, art, liberty, and sensual pleasure. Both literally and symbolically, winter is associated with Montreal and its correlatives, while Paris is identified with spring and the Mediterranean with summer. The narrative pattern is equally clear — a rising and falling curve of pleasure, commencing with escape from Montreal and the encounter with Moore, reaching its long climax during the summer and early autumn on the Riviera, and declining with the return to Paris, poverty and a scramble to survive (and significantly the sale of Moore’s gift), separation of Buffy and Graeme, obsessive love, and nearly fatal disease.

“‘I don’t like an unhappy ending to a book,’” remarks Narwhal, functioning as aesthetic spokesman. “‘I’m not saying I like a happy ending either. I’m led to wonder if a book should end at all . . . there might be some merit in a book that was either left unfinished, or ended, say, by repeating the sense of its beginning.’” The *Memoirs* both satisfy and exceed those requirements. The ending is open — Buffy is left waiting for his operation; it repeats the sense of its beginning — Montreal, winter, the absence of pleasure — but at a higher intensity, both because the danger is greater and because the narrator has experienced life and pleasure and learned their full value. The form is a spiral rather than a circle; pattern has been achieved without the boring symmetry of exact repetition.

This narrative pattern derives from life, but there is an important and related structuring device which is purely literary, the technique of foreshadowing or more precisely of juxtaposing contrasting layers of time. In chapter 1, the chronological account is interrupted by "Paris! We made it after all. This is where I'm writing now . . . It's spring night in the rue Broca, and there's moonlight on the unfinished, abandoned statues in the yard outside the studio." Knowing that the dream has been entirely fulfilled, we return to the intensified drabness of Montreal. But not before a further, more complex layering: "As I begin writing again, his [Graeme's] voice startles me. . . . 'I just saw you in a dream — as an old man with whiskers, writing. . . .'" That chilling suggestion of age and mortality not only emphasizes and adds pathos to the transience of youth, it ironically undermines the efforts of Buffy to avoid the destiny, the commitment to writing, that John Glassco would accept.

Beyond their first three chapters, the *Memoirs* were composed under the shadow of death. Chapter 3 ends triumphantly: "The streets were dipped in warm sunshine now; it was the first day of spring." Chapter 4 is headed:

DECEMBER 1932
ROYAL VICTORIA HOSPITAL
MONTREAL

That heading, with the following paragraph, accounts for the existence of the *Memoirs* and offers a perspective from which the events to be narrated can be understood and evaluated. These references to the hospital, set off in italics, recur throughout the book. (Could Glassco have learned the technique of signalling time shifts with italics from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1930?) They follow moments of fulfillment or of ecstasy: spring in Paris, McAlmon's praise for the first chapter of the *Memoirs*, its acceptance for *This Quarter*, the two months' idyll with Stanley on the Riviera, the acceptance of Mrs. Quayle's invitation, the dream of a perfect existence on the Ile St. Louis. Pleasure appears more precious with our foreknowledge, and suspense is created as well. Not as to whether Buffy will survive his operation — we know he will — but as to what, facing death, he will make of his own experience. Can hedonism survive the threat of death? It does, nothing is recanted, and the work retains its integrity. Pleasure remains a self-justifying goal, the narrator has pursued and attained it, he has lived his youth to the limit, and his project has therefore succeeded. There is no moral to be drawn; physical pain can teach only "the pointlessness of suffering," and the only possible lesson is the need "to be a little more careful in exploiting the resources of pleasure." The conventional moral pattern of sin, punishment, repentance, redemption is necessarily denied; punishment and redemption are impossible in an accidental universe, there is no repentance, and the concept of sin becomes meaningless.

The significance of order depends finally on what is being ordered, and the *Memoirs* are notable for their richness of texture, or content. (Some of the methods by which this richness was achieved have been pointed out in the discussion of Glassco's revisions.) Perhaps the most striking single quality of the *Memoirs*, which justifies their title, is the author's skill at portraiture — of Stein, Hemingway, Callaghan, McAlmon, Moore, Frank Harris, Lord Alfred Douglas, etc. That of Stein may be taken as representative:

A rhomboidal woman dressed in a floor-length gown apparently made of some kind of burlap, she gave the impression of absolute irrefragibility; her ankles, almost concealed by the hieratic folds of her dress, were like the pillars of a temple. . . . Her fine close-cropped head was in the style of the late Roman Empire, but unfortunately it merged into broad peasant shoulders without the aesthetic assistance of a neck; her eyes were large and much too piercing. . . . She awakened in me a feeling of instinctive hostility coupled with a grudging veneration, as if she were a pagan idol in whom I was unable to believe."

That Stein *did* look like this can be proved by photographs; the portrait is true. It becomes literature because it is imaginative as well. "Rhomboidal" wittily suggests the geometrical blockishness of her figure and introduces the sense of rigidity which pervades the passage. The reference to late Roman sculpture not only aids visualization but implies the kind of authority she possesses — an implication reinforced and extended by the associated simile of the pagan idol, which in turn has been prepared for by "hieratic" and by the comparison of her ankles to "pillars of a temple." A "floor-length gown apparently made of some kind of burlap" — the casualness of the description suggests her total indifference to fashion and throws emphasis on the figure itself; no adornment is present or required. "Irrefragibility" immediately draws attention; such learned words are rare in the *Memoirs*, and it is an unusual adjective to apply to a person. Meaning "undeniable" or "irrefutable," it seems more appropriate to an argument or a doctrine. In context, it indicates that Stein's authority (for believers) is *personal*, not depending on her work or her theories. The final comparison to a pagan idol sums up not only the details composing the image of Stein, but also the writer's own ambivalence — throughout, whatever is granted, or taken away, is instantly qualified.

"But this is not the whole truth about Gertrude Stein!" her admirers might object. It is not; only a novelist can know the "whole truth" about his characters. In this portrait Glassco offers not *the* truth but *a* truth, a testimony which reveals both subject and author. The total "truth-about-Gertrude Stein," to the extent it goes beyond primary source materials, is after all made up entirely of such testimonies.

Glassco's *Memoirs* easily surpass their model, Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man*. (Moore really confesses nothing, he neither narrates nor portrays, he never

allows the reader to be aware of anything but his own ego.) Glassco has written a memoir in the true sense; he presents the most vivid image we have of expatriate life in the France of the late twenties. Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, written perhaps thirty years after the event, lacks the immediacy of Glassco's record, while not more than a quarter of Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* deals with the twenties. *Memoirs* is less sentimental and less pretentious than Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*; Glassco did not consider himself an exile (Paris was his true home, he was an exile in Montreal) and he does not offer his experience as representative of either his country or his generation (such abstractions did not concern him).

The *Memoirs* are rooted in a particular context of time and place, but they possess a wider interest as well. They are representative in a more universal sense than Cowley's. They ask fundamental questions. Liberty and pleasure — can one make them the exclusive goals of life, and what are the consequences if one does? To do so is an experiment that only a young man would attempt, and the narrator embodies the youthful desire for pleasure, fullness of life, intensity of experience. More truly than Moore's *Confessions*, the *Memoirs* constitute "a statement of youth for all time, a youth in which we all partake somehow."

NOTES

- ¹ From an interview prefaced to *Man Ray*, ed. Jean Saucet and Sarane Alexandrian, trans. Eleanor Leviewx (Chicago: J. Philip O'Hara, 1973).
- ² John Glassco, *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 37.
- ³ In this essay the author of the *Memoirs* will be referred to as "Glassco," the protagonist as "Buffy."
- ⁴ In Robert McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together*, revised and with supplementary chapters by Kay Boyle (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 209.
- ⁵ John Glassco, "Extract from an Autobiography," *This Quarter*, No. 4 (Spring 1929), p. 210.
- ⁶ "Extract," p. 199.
- ⁷ "Extract," p. 200.
- ⁸ "Extract," p. 200.
- ⁹ T. H. Huxley, quoted in John Sturrock, "The New Model Autobiographer," *New Literary History*, 9 (Autumn 1977), 52.
- ¹⁰ From an unpublished poem to Kay Boyle, written on the half-title page of a copy of *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, in the Canadiana Collection of the North York Public Library, Willowdale, Ontario.