

ESSENTIAL GLASSCO

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SEEKING TO PINPOINT the “essential Glassco” and attempting to systematize his work is a frustrating task. Over a writing career of forty years he appears in numerous different guises. At one moment he’s “Nijinsky’s faun, fresh from some sylvan adventure”¹ and the next he’s the bearded old man on the mountain hurling down his tablets of doom. There’s the profligate youth chronicling the escapades of the lost generation and the reclusive poet wrestling with death and consciousness in the Eastern Townships, the mischievous master of erotica and the elder statesman of Canadian letters. Clearly, in dealing with such a complex personality and versatile artist, it is safest to begin at the beginning.

John Glassco was born in 1909 into an establishment family that had been in Montreal since before the American Revolution. Education at Selwyn House School and Lower Canada College prepared him to take his place among the English-speaking power elite of Quebec but he lacked the temperament for this role. Glassco early decided to be a poet and he had the independence of spirit to rebel against his fate and the craftiness to manipulate parental dismay to his own ends. At seventeen he quit McGill. Amazingly well-read for his age and thoroughly acquainted with all the post-war avant-garde literature, he saw himself as a surrealist poet suffocating in Montreal. After extorting an allowance from his disapproving father he set off to live and work among the dazzling expatriate literati of Paris.

Shortly after arriving, he abandoned surrealist poetry and in a characteristically self-confident move decided to write his memoirs. Glassco was very sure of his untried abilities and as it turned out, rightly so, for as a record of his next four years we have that remarkable achievement, *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, a portrait of an age, a study of youth, and a very clear picture of the young John Glassco.

The *Memoirs* are outstanding because they manage successfully to be so many things at once. There are the people who came and went, Joyce and Hemingway,

Gertrude Stein and Robert McAlmon, making Paris in the 1920's the improbable centre of English writing. Glassco makes a historical contribution through the brilliantly recalled conversations about literature among the people who were forging its twentieth century form. But there is more in the *Memoirs* than just literary history. Primarily they are an account of hedonism on a heroic scale, the remembered joy of a total indulgence of appetite. The reader is dragged, to his own delight, through an exhausting and continuous course of parties and escapades of debauchery and excess. Finally, the centre of interest becomes the young man through whose eyes all this is seen, the not-yet-artist who is simply living and garnering experience.

The book was not written at the time of the action. It was put together from diaries when the author was considerably older — twenty-one — and awaiting an operation for tuberculosis with a slim chance of survival. The shadow of death hangs over the *Memoirs* and there is created an added piquancy of lost happiness as the scene from time to time shifts back to the silence and sterility of the hospital room.

This young man who assembled his memoirs in the Royal Victoria Hospital justifies the archness and arrogance he showed toward his elders and literary superiors by proving himself a prose writer of uncommon ability. Louis Dudek has called the work "the best book of prose by a Canadian writer I have ever read".² Ignoring for a moment the material, one must recognize the technical excellence of the writing itself, the power to entrance and entertain, and the ability to select and edit while still revealing the entire picture.

A couple of years are condensed into twenty-six chapters dealing with probably twice as many days. The narrative moves effortlessly along as adventures are interspersed with reflection, conversations, and portraits. The reader's attention is never allowed to flag. Both Glassco's prose and poetry are enhanced by his great power to recall totally a situation and reconstruct its mood. In the *Memoirs* this is accomplished by the use of a dramatization of dialogue which does not even pretend to be a verbatim account of the actual conversation. The author simply withdraws and lets the characters reveal themselves. It is Glassco's greatest ability and the one which gives his scenes such economy and freshness. It is also an invaluable technique in a memoir with a cast in the dozens. The problem of capturing the atmosphere of a party is handled in the same way. Like Evelyn Waugh, the greatest chronicler of revels, he achieves success by relying on the selective presentation of catches of conversation.

The first edition of *Memoirs of Montparnasse* was sold out within weeks of

its publication in 1970. The key to its great popular success lies in its engaging style. As an example, here is Glassco's impression of Gertrude Stein, at whose salon he had arrived uninvited.

A rhomboidal woman dressed in a floor-length gown apparently made of some kind of burlap, she gave the impression of absolute irrefragability; her ankles, almost concealed by the hieratic folds of her dress, were like the pillars of a temple: it was impossible to conceive of her lying down. 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.

It is this combination of impudence and elegance that consistently charms the reader.

The *Memoirs* are valuable also for what they tell us about the man who, forty years later, won the Governor General's Award for Poetry. The book chronicles an important period in the development of Glassco's sensibility. He went to Paris to write poetry, to communicate, to instruct, but gave it up when he found he was the one who needed instruction.

I had, moreover, no experience of anything but ecstasy. I had never known despair or anguish, which I looked on as literary expressions. I had not endured hunger, frustration, illness or chastity; these were the afflictions of others. I had nothing on my conscience and had never wept except from loneliness, fright, or boredom. How then was I qualified to write?

He then sets out conscientiously to acquire experience, and abandons himself to a life of self-indulgence which he considers the appropriate course for a man of his age. "Half of man's miseries," we are told, "result from an insufficiency of leisure, gormandise and sexual gratification during the years from seventeen to twenty." Glassco sees himself as the appropriate artist, the poet-not-quite-yet.

As well as lacking experience, he shuns commitment and dedication which he sees as "so many pairs of weighted diver's shoes — of no use to anyone who wanted to remain on the surface of life." But this existence on the surface of life could not last, and the commitment comes unlooked-for when Glassco falls in love with an American millionairess whom he himself recognizes as worthless and a "mangeuse d'hommes". Here the real learning experience begins with the ecstasy and suffering of unreturned love. Glassco links the experience directly to the breakdown of his health and the resulting tuberculosis.

It must be remembered that the *Memoirs*, as they are presented, are filtered not only through the consciousness of the young man of the boulevards but also

through the sensibility of the slightly older man, gravely ill and facing a very uncertain future. The younger man was "still engrossed by detail", while the hospitalized author is seeking to communicate, through the *Memoirs*, a "more extensive view of life". There is here a link between action and death. Glassco's surrender to romantic love had destroyed his youth, and nearly ended his life. Without this experience he would still have been young and healthy, yet he says if he had it to do over again, he would do nothing differently. This dilemma forms a theme which recurs constantly in the later work of Glassco. The poet, like the young memoirist, seeks the overview, and in the shadow of death grapples with the burden of consciousness and the value of commitment.

In the final chapter, the author says he is writing "to recapture a little of the brightness of those days when I had health and spirits; for that brightness even seems to gild these long, dreary days." At the same time, Glassco is spreading out his life before him, examining it, drawing conclusions, and passing them on. Working at the task single-mindedly every day, he has made a commitment to communication, and this marks the end of the apprenticeship of the artist.

WITH THE OPERATIONS for tuberculosis, the young man of the *Memoirs* disappeared completely. The energy, the arrogance, the self-confidence and the gregariousness were left behind, and Glassco moved to the country, adopting the secluded life of a semi-invalid that his slow recovery forced on him. He lived first at Baie d'Urfé and in 1936 moved to the Eastern Townships, getting by on a small private income supplemented by a few dairy cows and a rural mail route. These were empty years for Glassco the artist. Turning his back on the literary world, he was part of no movement, and had no contact with the Montreal poets of the 1930's and 40's. A novel was undertaken but never completed, and of the surviving poetry produced in this period, the earliest piece we know of was written in 1940.

Finally, Glassco the artist resurfaces in 1958 at the age of 49 with the publication of *The Deficit Made Flesh*, a book of twenty-seven poems. Since then, hardly a year has gone by without the appearance of some work written or edited by Glassco; three books of poetry, two novels, the memoirs, three books of translations. It is the beginning of a new career.

The John Glassco of the *Memoirs* was not a mature artist. He had an admirable style, complete technical command of the language, lots of anecdotes to relate, but could only speak with authority on youth. John Glassco the poet was

a long time in developing, and when he does emerge, he reveals a sensibility and a wisdom of age, a vision of life that no young man could have. It is a poetry of the end of life, inspired by the imminence of death. All his best poems are written from the vantage point of a hilltop, where the "future is abolished"³ and where for a prolonged moment a man can turn and survey the past laid out before him. The experiences and the emotions, the goals and the motivations are sifted through in the light of the harsh, newly-realized truth of death.

The intolerable loss of consciousness must somehow be made tolerable. The place of the individual's ego must be rethought so that death can be seen as a culmination of life rather than a contradiction. It is this process of sifting and rethinking that is the inspiration and which provides the raw material for John Glassco's later career as a poet.

The poems which spring from this special sensibility are of two main types. There are the long meditative poems which deal with consciousness and the workings of the mind. They recreate and analyse at length a mood or emotion. The psyche is isolated and we see it again and again assaulted by love, ambition, sensuality, or the awareness of approaching death.

The other category consists of shorter, tightly-wrought poems built around symbols in the external world. Included here is most of the townships poetry. The images, concrete, familiar and prosaic, are brilliantly manipulated by the poet. Old houses, crumbling barns, and deserted homesteads are perceived through an eye which alternately sees in them horror and tranquility, corruption and beauty.

To date, there are three volumes of poetry. *The Deficit Made Flesh* was followed in 1964 by *A Point of Sky*, and in 1971 the *Selected Poems* appeared and won the Governor-General's Award for poetry in English.

The selection for this last volume was not in fact made by Glassco, but by A. J. M. Smith. Smith has chosen all the best poems from the earlier books and added a few new ones. His organization of the material into four sections is of great value in interpreting the poet. As in a piece of music, the reader is led through various moods and styles in the different sections, the themes developing and repeating, slowly revealing the Glassco sensibility from all angles.

The townships poetry is all contained in the first section. Though this group of sixteen poems alone would not reveal the entire Glassco, the important themes are immediately brought to light by these powerfully presented rural scenes. First is the "Rural Mail", a poem of the country which shifts in focus from a pastoral view of the green good valley to a grotesque close-up of the hard, embittered

existence of the farmer, "man on man's estate of nature, Farmer on farm, the savage civilized." In the last stanza the focus again expands; the eye pulls back to view the end result, the reward of this life.

Where the bull, the buzz-saw, and the balky mare
Are the chosen fingers of God for a farmer's sins,
Like the axe for his woods, and his calves and chicks and children
Destined for slaughter in the course of things.

Already in this first selection, written in 1940, we have the situation, the pointlessness of a life which is an enslaved existence, without consolation, and ending finally in an absurd and brutal death. Very frightening stuff, it illustrates the poet's view of the essentially tragic nature of the individual's life.

Success in Glasco's poems lies in finding a permanence, not in cheating death but in finding values which will make a whole life complete unto itself within the brackets of birth and death. The conventional, socially approved goals and dreams don't work. Many of the poems, like the first, are tragedies, but tragedies are the result of mistakes, and a mistake implies the failure to perceive and follow the correct course.

"The White Mansion" deals also with false goals mocked by death, and men made the fools of time. The mansion is the creation of the homesteader who made it his dream and the focal point of his life. But the master of the farm has been himself over-mastered and has become the slave of the vision. In the poem, this controlling obsession has become personified in the mansion itself as a mocking demon who captures the soul of a man and wrings him dry.

Ere I was done the dying farmer cursed me,
Crying within the strangling noose of hope.
I am the grave of the husbandman's hope.

I am a shining temple, a tall man's pride.

The house, a projection of the individual ego, must be supreme and its slave must have no other gods before it.

Two hearts, two bodies clove, knew nothing more.
Ere I was done I tore them asunder. Singly
They fled my ruin and the ruin of love.
I am she who is stronger than love.

This poem is the most powerful and direct in the section. Glasco's great ability has always been the creation of dramatic characters, as witnessed in the memoirs.

Some of the poetry tends to be a bit didactic, and the poet is always at his best when least visible. His themes are best revealed by his characters in other poems such as "The Death of Don Quixote" and "The Web" who can speak with more conviction and more freedom than the poet can permit himself.

Interspersed with these poems of negation and denial are others of a more tranquil mood and more positive tone which, in affirming life, lead the reader on to the next step, the consolation, and the transcendence of time.

In the poems already mentioned time was shown as the enemy of man by means of the decaying farmhouses and the fields grown back to weeds. The collapse of man's monuments to himself was the act of a malevolent nature. In "Luce's Notch", the same workings of time are presented in a different light, in a poem of a very different mood.

Once again the scene is the abandoned farm, Glassco's principal symbol of mutability. This time the poet's attention is fixed on the forces of nature that are reclaiming the homestead of Aaron Luce. He compares his feelings in these surroundings with the impressions he had fifteen years earlier in the same place. The result is a didactic exposition of the lessons learned in the meantime, the process of coming to terms with change, and time, and death.

The young man's feelings are

Of that ecstatic suffering which is joy,
That sense of being unable to possess
A natural scene.

The ego is supreme, the one power in the world that must be fed. The frustration arises from the inability to dominate nature, and to bend it to the will. This attitude is the cause of the tragedies witnessed in the earlier poems. Building monuments to the ego and seeking immortality for the consciousness are endeavours that will be mocked by death.

In the second half of the poem we are granted entry into the higher state of consciousness which the poet has achieved with age.

This madness I have no more. I only see
Beauty continues, and so do not I.

Desire is the great danger, the indication of the ego in control. The poet must be content merely to see, to comprehend and to communicate the truth.

In nature has been found a permanence which transcends death. Far from mastering the natural world, the mortal human being must come to see himself as a small and transient part of unchanging but seasonal nature, completely sub-

servient to its rules. Success in the short span of life lies in realizing this and thus escaping the fate of time's fool.

All that makes man unique is his faculty of consciousness, his ability to see and to perceive. This is his only real possession, and it is an instrument which allows him to organize experience, apprehend beauty, and approach truth.

"Luce's Notch" celebrates and recreates a moment of awareness, the realization of man's place in the universe. It ends with an invocation of nature to reveal more.

You natural scenes to whose eternity
 My transient vision and my life are bound,
 Teach me to see . . .

. . . Keep me as I am now,
 Here on this solitary mountain-top,
 Purged of each last impulsion of desire
 To make you mine, to carry you along
 On the wings of possession.

Glassco's position is blocked out in the first section of the book. It differs from the other sections in that it is nature poetry, the medium being the contemplation of scenes in the Eastern Townships. In the second part, the subject matter is more human, but the same themes continue to develop. "Brummell at Calais" and "The Death of Don Quixote" are two tragedies of consciousness.

Glassco's eulogy of the notorious dandy of Regency England is distressing and ambiguous. Brummell, we are told, succeeded in life because he never did anything. He did not try to wrench anything from the world, so he had nothing that death could take from him. He is compared to a butterfly, a thing of beauty in nature which gives delight and exists for its allotted time without plan and without fear of mortality. Brummell managed to escape suffering and frustration and in this way perfected "an art of being".

For see, even now in the long implacable twilight,
 The triumph of his veritable art,

An art of being, nothing but being, the grace
 Of perfect self-assertion based on nothing,
 As in our vanity's cause against the void
 He strikes his elegant blow, the solemn report of those
 Who have done nothing and will never die.

However, we recognize something of the cop-out in this. Brummell's tranquility

is that of an idiot or an animal. In rejecting the unique human faculty of the conscious, the dandy has settled for a lower form of life. He has escaped despair in the same way as those who undergo a lobotomy and is consequently less than a complete man.

Much more affecting and noble is the character of Don Quixote, dying sane and disillusioned.

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.

Here is a man whose life was animated and committed. Was his mad vision just an illusion? And is the reality better than the illusion? Is the reality more true than the dream? We return to the problem of consciousness which is a gift, but also a responsibility and a burden. Brummell rejected its responsibilities and was less for it. Don Quixote's madness is merely a symbol of this consciousness that animates and seeks to give form to the brief space between birth and death. Impelling man to work toward some end, it is the force referred to earlier in "The Brill Road".

... we follow the blinding years,
 Into the sweeping, swallowing wind,
 Into the gape of all and the loss of the person,
 Driving his birthright deathward in a trance
 Over the mountain's swollen Jovian brow,

The road is a trick, like every form of life,
 A signal into the dark impartial storm

These lines echo the young Glassco of Montparnasse who was unwilling to make a commitment and to surrender control of his life to a purpose. "Literature," he reflected, "like any other form of gainful employment, was just another trap."

In the Don Quixote poem the force of the vision is represented symbolically and ironically as a form of madness, a mental aberration. Our sympathies are entirely with the old knight as he mourns the loss of his "world of beauty", but his dream must be wrong for it cannot accept death and will not prepare the dreamer for the loss of consciousness. Don Quixote, therefore, must be consigned

to the same category as that less romantic egotist, the builder of the White Mansion. The only difference is that the old don does not die alone. His one consolation is Sancho, "faithful unto death". Though the dream is gone, the love and devotion of the old companion still remain.

The last three lines of "The Death of Don Quixote" are an introduction to the love theme which works through the remainder of the *Selected Poems*. One gains nothing by "remaining on the surface of life"; that was Brummell's error. The commitment is necessary, but commitment to another person is more rewarding and lasting than devotion to an ego-centred idea.

The third section is composed of poems of love: carnal, unrequited and lost. The concentration is on human relationships, the meeting of two isolated egos. Love is the one viable dream that will fill the space of life with joy and beauty. Glassco's concern is always the problem of maximizing the quantity and quality of experience. He puts it this way in the love poem "One Last Word".

The means are more important than the end,
Ends begin only as excuse for action,
For adventures sought for their own sake alone,
Pictures along the way, feelings
Released in love . . .

At the end of life, all that remains is memory, the recollection of the experiences and adventures encountered in the pursuit of the dream. Memory is the theme of "The Places Where the Dead Have Walked".

. . . What piece of ground
Impressed by a beloved foot
But has not gathered up the sound
to keep it captive underground
And store its music underfoot?

The piece of ground is the consciousness which has the power to recreate and relive past experience. Though the lover is gone, the love is not lost. It can live on in the memory and continue to be a source of joy and beauty. As Glassco pointed out much earlier in the *Memoirs*, the consolation of consciousness is that time and place can be destroyed at will by closing the eyes.⁴

In the fourth section, the poetry is once more written from the moment before death. The individual is alone, without hope, though not in despair. In "The Day" the ends and the means, the actions and the motivations of the ending life are examined.

Here are all the themes brought together. First, there is presented the undeniable terror of the end of consciousness.

On that day
We shall rise on our elbows and glare around us, looking
For the abolished future
In that moment of supreme consciousness
Of unmedicinable dismay
Of absolute from time . . .

Next there is the betrayal of death, the cancelling of the vision, here named the "impossible city" which was the initiator of life's actions, Don Quixote's madness. The dying man is betrayed too by romantic love which has failed as a goal. He ascribes the motive of selfishness to his loved one, and, unwittingly, to himself.

This first part, in which the ego confronts death, is all bitterness and despair, but the second part shows how to make a good death. In the first stanza, dying is equated with giving.

This poor man, this dying one . . .
The mask of humanity
Mock of consciousness
Where is his city
What is he doing?
— All that he is
His struggle and suffering
In part of ourselves
Exists for us only,
This is the last gift
Of his life's meaning
All that he sought
In the marvellous city
Relinquished and offered
To us the survivors
 As it will be
Ours to pass on
To those who have taken
Our hearts in their keeping . . .
The infinitesimal
Glimpse of a beautiful blessed falsehood

Death is the last gift. If one lives for others the ego is transcended and death holds no terror because the important things are not dying. This idea is expressed again in an exhortation to love which follows.

Forget the stones and scents and sounds of the fabulous city
 Here in the heart of another blooms a miraculous home
 Hide your proud head, renounce your ridiculous freedom
 Content you to be the singing prisoner of love.

With this poem, the problems of life, and of death, developed throughout the book, are finally resolved. This is attested to by the tranquil passing of the consciousness in the last stanza.

Removed from time
 Dependent on nothing
 When nothing will matter
 You will escape
 Like a mouse in the darkness . . .
 The shadow will touch you
 Engross you wholly,
 And soon, soon
 The day of others
 Freed of your sickness, . . .
 The day of their freedom
 Dawn quietly without you.

This is a skeletal outline of some of the important themes of Glassco's poetry. The young man who write the memoirs could "see every hair and pimple on a face without seeing the face itself."⁵ The older poet has attained the overview which was denied to the youth. The experience of living and dying is encircled, organized, and reduced to its essential facts.

First there is man's place in nature, where the race may survive, but each individual is doomed. Then there comes the problem of making a meaning between birth and death, that brief period of consciousness. And consciousness itself, that unique gift, is a two-edged sword which permits man to see and learn, but also creates the ego and gives birth to dreams and visions that are unattainable and doomed to frustration. The only commitment that is worthwhile is to another human being. Self-sufficiency is abandoned; the individual ceases to be isolated and becomes part of the chain which is immortal.

GLASSCO'S POETRY is intensely personal, and nowhere are there to be found the social themes of the contemporary urban poets. Yet, with the growing success of his second career as a man of letters Glassco recovered theregariousness of the younger man who constantly sought the company of other

artists, and in the 1960's he once again became involved in the literary world. He was the principal organizer of the Foster Poetry Conference in 1963 and later edited *English Poetry in Quebec* containing the proceedings and main addresses of that gathering. In 1965 he was awarded a Senior Fellowship by the Canada Council, and still continues to be an important force in the advancement of poetry in Canada.

One of his major contributions in this field has been his work in presenting Québécois literature to English Canada. He edited *The Poetry of French Canada in Translation*, an anthology which appeared in 1970, containing the works of 48 poets from the 17th century to the present. Over 60 of the poems were translations by the editor himself.

As early as 1962 he translated into English the *Journal of Saint-Denys-Garneau*, a poet with whom he feels a special affinity. Both lived and wrote in the shadow of death. Each abandoned an affluent Montreal background for a secluded rural existence, seeking in isolation to organize experience and come to terms with mortality.

John Glassco's first book was *Contes en Crinoline*, written in French and published in Paris in 1929. He mentions it in the memoirs as "a series of historical sketches with a unifying transvestite theme". Since then Glassco has produced several volumes of commercial erotica for fun and profit. Many were published pseudonymously, and the author insists they are of no literary value. They are, however, a delight, because one finds that the older man has not at all lost the rascality of the youth in Paris.

Under the Hill, published by Olympia Press in 1959 is his completion of the unfinished manuscript by Aubrey Beardsley. In this retelling of the tale of Venus and Tannhauser, Glassco studiously cultivates the style of the decadents. The changeover point is impossible to detect, and Glassco's tableaux are as bizarre as Beardsley's. The effect is exotic, titillating, and a little frightening.

Harriet Marwood, Governess is an enormous joke. It deals with the relationship between the lady of the title and her adolescent ward. Over its 250 pages a great love develops, cemented by frequent applications of stern discipline. This is Glassco's revenge on Victorianism. Written in the style of a 19th century lady novelist, perhaps the literary wife of a country vicar, *Harriet Marwood* maintains a tone of impeccable respectability while describing the most corrupt acts of sado-masochism. The English are portrayed as the most depraved people in the world, with whom anything goes as long as proper appearances are kept up.

The prose works⁶ do not reveal the complete Glassco, but then neither does the

poetry. It has been argued that the verse is the more serious, and so it is if by serious one means grave and humourless. Glassco's reverence for the form excludes all amusement and makes the poetry more earnest than the man. There is another side to Glassco which delights in the absurdities of life and has the will and the ability to make us laugh. The comic vision revealed in the simple, elegant prose of the *Memoirs* and *Erotica* is no less of an accomplishment and of no less artistic value than the very different vision presented in the poetry.

NOTES

- ¹ Leon Edel, Introduction to *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, 1970.
- ² Louis Dudek, the *Montreal Gazette*; quoted on back cover of the memoirs, Feb. 7, 1970.
- ³ John Glassco, "the Day", in *Selected Poems* OUP, Toronto, 1971.
- ⁴ *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, p. 106.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ⁶ This essay was written and accepted before the publication of *The Fatal Woman*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue. ED.