

# CLAIMING THE LANDSCAPE: JOHN GLASSCO AND HIS POETRY OF THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

---

Patricia Whitney  
*School of Canadian Studies*  
*Carleton University*

John Glassco first experienced the Eastern Townships of Quebec as a boarding student at Bishop's College School in Lennoxville in 1923-1924. Although he was a miserably unhappy child required to "fag" for the older boys at the school, something of the landscape surrounding Bishop's appears to have lodged in his imagination, because after the Paris years (1928-32), and the trials of tuberculosis and quarrelling with his parents, it was to the Townships he went to settle when he came into an inheritance from his Grandfather Rawlings in 1936. He decided on the Dawes house, the White Mansion of his poetry, which still stands among mature trees just outside the village of Knowlton. In January 1937, Glassco moved to the property with his life companion, Graeme Taylor. They called the farm "Windermere" to honour Wordsworth.<sup>1</sup>

The two men soon established themselves as notorious members of the community, seen about in flashy fur coats, chain-smoking and on the look-out for the housekeeper of their dreams. They found her eventually in Mary Elizabeth Wilson, "beauty queen," ardent horsewoman and all-round sexual good sport. "Sappho" as the men called her, was willing to milk the cows, bake the pies, accompany her employers to the pub in Knowlton for drinking bouts (in winter they travelled by cutter, drawn by their ox "Rocket") and mediate the male couple's ever-complex sexuality.

Glassco's other preoccupations were the pursuit of mannishly-beautiful women who would indulge his craving for masochistic punishment, the raising of hackney ponies (he would eventually found the Foster Horse Show), the writing of endless drafts of pornographic prose, and the composing of the poetry that would become, in 1958, *The Deficit Made Flesh*.

During the twenty years between his taking up residence in the Townships and the publication of his first book, Glassco came to know the landscape intimately. Not only did he live there year round — he rarely went to Montreal and never further afield — he spent much of his time driving the roads in all seasons. This activity was regularized during the war years. Unable to serve in the armed forces (he had only one lung, a result of the tuberculosis he contracted in Paris, and was refused when he tried to enlist in the RCAF), he took over Rural Route Number One for the post office in Knowlton. Poems such as “The Brill Road” and “Needham Cemetery” are markers of those days of driving his route. He travelled by cutter in winter, very smart in a fur coat and hat, his beloved Dalmatian dog “Lucy” on the seat beside him. He would sell milk from the Windermere cows to his customers and oblige housewives by secreting, in road-side hedges, their personal mail-orders purchases, bought with egg money hidden from tyrannical husbands.

Other than his war-service job as a rural postman, Glassco had no profession other than that of writer. He was a slow one at that, very self-critical and loathe to publish even as he longed for recognition of his talent. He suffered intensely from incapacitating depression, writing in his Journal in April 1946 that he was “fearful of stirring up old ghosts”.<sup>2</sup> His father, at whose hands he had suffered both physical and sexual abuse, had died in 1945. It would be several years before the aftermath of his father’s death, accompanied by the frightful reminders of his own childhood suffering, would release Glassco. Paradoxically, the memories of his adult experiences were tinged with nostalgia about “the past of Windermere with all its atmosphere of ecstasy, happiness, heart-break, misery — disgust” (fol. 119). In his dark frame of mind he saw a world of decay around him. He fancied that new buildings were prefiguring their own decay, that “all endeavour [was] doomed.” Even the simplest acts seemed to carry within them gloom and sadness: “The sight of a farmer spreading manure the other day...felt like weeping for him.” He felt he could never again breed a mare, much less beget a child, turning over in his mind Schopenhauer’s words: “The soul is grieved by everything it looks on.”

At his worse, even the landscape of the Townships failed to cheer him, becoming “this Canadian landscape...the most unreal collection of places, angles and colours that ever was seen.” He was himself a “deadman” alive only “from force of habit.” But by

late March of 1947, Glassco had managed to exhibit some self-discipline. He was writing two or three hours each evening after dinner and drinking less. This period of reform produced "The Entailed Farm," which was published in *The Canadian Forum* in May 1947. He had written "Stud Groom" and "Soldier's Settlement" and began to see a small body of poetry emerge. He wrote with pleasure in his Journal that "At least I have done something! And the plan of keeping on writing verses such as these is almost the only thing that gives meaning or direction to my life these days, — the plan of keeping on until I have about 1000 lines, enough for a volume, — 'The Rural Mail'" (fol.122).

With Glassco, such bursts of happiness and self-confidence were followed by periods of low self-esteem and cruel self-criticism when he would dwell in his Journal on the "intensity of sadness...the underlying melancholy of human life" (fol.23). Nevertheless, he was able to write "Gentleman's Farm" even while in this despondent mood. He was pleased to find in it "a further good slice of documentation of the rural landscape."

The aftermath of his father's death, and all the burdens of unresolved wounds and angers that accompanied the event, had not yet exhausted itself. In June of 1947 Glassco began to undergo incapacitating panic attacks that sapped his strength and left him terrified; he wrote in his Journal of "hiding my face in my hands and sobbing." Like most victims of incest, he suffered seemingly endless torments of grief, guilt and horror. Throughout 1948 he lived a mole-like existence, sleeping ten or twelve hours a night, rising at two in the afternoon to paw anxiously over his pornography manuscripts. Only his poetry remained uplifting; he retained the "still shining goal of my Rural Mail book of poems: about 350 lines done out of a necessary 1000" (fol. 135).

By this time Sappho was long gone and so was the grand house in Knowlton. Glassco and Taylor were living in Foster, still affecting riding clothes and top boots around the house. Glassco was elected town councillor by acclamation and was beginning to write about the town, as "Blighty" illustrates. Still, his emotional health remained fragile and he wrote sorrowfully in his Journal: "My poetry is steadily going downhill, my ideas becoming more inchoate & emotionally intense & less & less articulate. Wordsworth has said everything I wish to say, already, & a hundred times better than I could hope to" (fol.139). Much of the 1950s were a decline. The terrifying homicidal fantasies directed towards his father grew more intense; a dancer he had met in



Photo: P. Whitney

*Glassco's farmhouse in Foster where he lived with G. Taylor in 1946*

Montreal was imprisoned on drug charges; he was drinking heavily and watching Graeme die a long, painful death. Yet still the poems of the Township landscape came to him.

The turning point came in November 1956 when A.J.M. Smith wrote to Glassco to ask permission to include "Deserted Buildings Under Shefford Mountain" in his *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*. The significance of this contact was that Glassco and Smith rekindled the acquaintanceship of their McGill University years when both men had been on campus; their friendship grew and Smith would edit Glassco's poems and ensure the publication of *Deficit* with McClelland and Stewart in 1958. Also in 1956, Elma Koolmar (later to style herself von Colmar) moved into the Foster house with Glassco and Taylor as housekeeper. Taylor was jealous of this arrangement; he died miserably in February 1957. Nevertheless, Glassco's love affair with, and eventual marriage to, Elma was to usher in the most creative period of his life, when under her "inspiration" he would publish two volumes of poetry, his translations of de St-Denys Garneau, *The English Governess*, and the *Memoirs of Montparnasse*.

## II

In the second part of this paper I would like to turn to the poems themselves. It is not likely that a poet as well-read as

Glassco could have been free of the prevailing artistic climate of his period: Modernism. Against this influence stand his admiration for the brilliant originality of Gerard Manley Hopkins, his fondness for and knowledge of the Georgians, and his reverence — not too strong a word — for Wordsworth. Nevertheless, he was profoundly moved by Eliot (as is demonstrated by the debt to Eliot's *Four Quartets* in the elegiac tone, the chaste diction and the evocation of places of great meaning in Glassco's "A Point of Sky"). Still, the poetry of *Deficit* points more to the continuity of Romanticism in Modernism than it does to Eliot's "impersonal theory of poetry" that spoke for Modernism as "cultivating impersonality, objectivity, and detachment" (Schwartz 71). Revisionists have, however, argued that Modernists like Pound and Eliot have "exaggerated their break with the nineteenth century" (Schwartz 72). Eliot and Pound were in reaction to nineteenth-century excesses of subjectivity, an accepted view that Schwartz also holds. In fact, Eliot's poetic theory, more than his poetry itself, may be thought to stress the impersonal.

A.J.M. Smith, writing the jacket blurb for *Deficit*, finds Glassco's poetry "classical". I can agree that Glassco's verse is "classical" in its adherence to established forms such as the ode, but would argue that it is Romantic-Modernist in sensibility. His impulse is to explore and exploit form rather than to question or challenge it, certainly, and he held to his unrealized wish, stated in his *Intimate Journal* on 2 June 1965, "to found...a 'Romantic Revival'".<sup>3</sup> In fact, Glassco was a poet deeply influenced in youth by the Romantics, nursed to early maturity in the very bosom of Modernism — Paris in the twenties — and holding fast to the forms if not the sentiments of the Neo-Classical period.

Northrop Frye calls the rural poems the "core" of *Deficit*, and perceives in them "how a feverish vision of a paradise of conquered nature forces generations to wear themselves out to construct and maintain a 'Gentleman's Farm' or a 'White Mansion'" (*The Bush Garden* 91). The Gentleman's Farm is a monument to foolish pride. Man never learns. The Philistine comes to a "valley of slash and beaver-meadow" (man has already despoiled the landscape), and now "things are humming" as the "silos rise" and "the milkwhite temple" fulfils the passion of the "absentee whose will has broken/ Between these barren hills." This is a temple of greed, the "working out of a man's reverie." The whole of man's efforts to harness the earth are foolish. The speaker calls on the reader to see "that the wreck of all things made with hands...Must marry

the ragged matter." All man's temples are hollow; so says the narrator in "Deserted Buildings Under Shefford Mountain":

Here where I grasp the certain fate  
Of all man's work in wood and stone,  
And con the lesson of the straight  
That shall be crooked soon or late  
And crumble into forms alone

There is no trust in man — man is "The Whole Hog" — the destroying father whose "demons spoke of his hold forever / On my heart, and mine of the fragile tenure of all things". The purest loathing is husbanded for release not on figures of myth or painterly images but for the Nobodaddy of "The Whole Hog". The narrator is led to the father by the betraying woman: "When I was very young my mother told me / That my father was the strongest of men". The child finds in his father a corrupted power. He would "set himself to become / Great God to a little child," "To be the Absolute to someone else". The father builds in the child's heart "an altar" on which the boy is to be sacrificed: "the altar stands, eternal absolute". This perversity is the unholy church built "in living rock" on "infallible authority," which has reduced the boy to a dog "whistled by my master," "alone and nosing about the world for love and tid-bits". Like the hungry stray he is, the boy lurks outside the lighted windows of his father's house where there are "no dissensions" and where stands "the Portland vase before the Venetian mirror." This temple of domesticity is the abode of evil: "my father's demons spoke of his hold forever / On my heart, and mine of the fragile tenure of all things".

It is perhaps too facile to equate Glassco's terror of his abusive father with his certainty of man's corruption of innocence (whether that innocence be the trust and unawakened sexuality of the child, or the earth itself); there is nevertheless a reverberation of this association in the collection as a whole. Whereas in *Deficit* there is occasional beauty in moments of serenity in nature and receptivity in man, there is never a dualistic sense of an ontological struggle between man and nature, matter and spirit. One cannot struggle against a preordained fate. The child may battle against an abusive father, but the child will always lose. His fate is sealed in the perversity of the strong man's desires. So too man may attempt to subjugate nature, but such struggle is an illusion. The world of nature is "untouched/ By hope or hunger"; the man must let things be as he resigns "The flowers to yellow and the

lake to blue" ("Hail and Farewell"). Moreover, man is himself nature, although he may be displaced from knowing her face by his own folly. As the child is of his father's flesh, so man is of the matter of his mother, nature. Both the child and the man, in the cosmology of these poems, dwell among the damned.

Glassco explores this idea in the religious context of "Thomas A Kempis," where the mystic is a prisoner in his monk's cell: "not that he's brave / But that, on earth, there is nothing left to fear." For the saint, fate is sealed as surely as for the sinner because "Nobodaddy held him in his hand / A fireless particle." This is an essentially Calvinistic view of predestination. Struggle is irrelevant; one can only endure and await God's predetermined decision about one's fate. Man, his fate, and his destiny are one with nature. To struggle is futile. This grim view does not preclude pleasure, happiness or the love of beauty, as in the lines "But oh, green leaves and singing birds that see / The flaming sun" show. Nevertheless the Calvinistic view is the baseline that supports the poems of *Deficit*.

Munro Beattie called the poems in this collection "splinters from a damaged sensibility". He discerned here "an attitude to life that is both compelling and repulsive" (310). While Beattie perceives a struggle between man and nature that is much less fated than I would support — I see rather a rage followed by unwilling acquiescence — he does recognize the essential pessimism of the poems, where the speaker has "put his money on nature" to



Photo: P. Whitney

*On the road to St-Étienne (Bolton Glen)*

prevail now and forever. These are moral poems: not moralistic or didactic, but rather a statement of a baleful knowledge that the road leads upward to “impossible heights” where it finds no Olympus or Parnassus, but is enveloped in “boiling snow”: “There is no turning back; but the road is a trap. / This is the involvement that we never sought” (“The Brill Road”).

In the landscape poems of this collection, the speaker often stands at the top of a hill, but he is no god surveying a paradise. He is doomed to the rise and fall of the path he must follow. Like the hackney pony on his jogging track going round and round, the man must follow the road that leads nowhere but to where: “The hills darken, and this heaven-riving road thrown / Like a noosed lifeline to five worthless farms / Peters out under the snow” (“The Brill Road”). This first book of Glassco’s poems surely expresses the fragmented sensibility that could write in “The Entailed Farm”:

From us, with our hearts but lightly tinged with poison,  
Who composed our quarrel early and in good season  
Buried the hatchet in our father’s brain.

### III

In *The Deficit Made Flesh* the poems are strong and concrete, close to the “green valleys where accidents may happen” and the “stony pastures” in a world where, at its best, “all is gold and azure” and where “The Brill Road” can end on a plaintive note that longs for a northern paradise:

Does it even exist, that quiet road  
Snow-pleached between the laden, bending trees  
Where the small, fat birds will be flitting and feeding,  
Where the mind is muffled and we move at peace?

John Glassco was aware of the immediacy of the Eastern Townships in his poetry. On 4 August 1956 he wrote to Elma, sending her holograph copies of “my five best poems all now finished”:

“Deserted Buildings Under Shefford Mountain” (“Clark Baird’s old place in Iron Hill”); “A Devotion” [a celebration for Elma]; “The Entailed Farm” (“This is Julia Wheeler’s place — you know, just past the cemetery”); “Blighty” (“This is Bill Arnold’s place — with the sign!” [a green house named “Blighty” still stands on the



principal road through the village of Foster]); and "The Burden of Junk" ("This is me and Arthur Charles who lives (still) beside the farm in Knowlton [Windermere]. The harmonium I saw with my own eyes!") (McGill Collection).

He wrote himself into the Townships, making the landscape, at times, a sign for his own despair. Yet this landscape sustained him. He died in Montreal it is true, but he never gave up his house in Foster — a larger stone home he had built for Elma after their marriage. For one moment in the "warm wind" of "Soldier's Settlement" there is a dream of imagined serenity and eternity in this landscape:

But stand for an instant and fix forever  
The battered mail-box, the shallow stream,  
In a frame where all is gold and azure  
And the stony pasture, plinth of a dream.

After his death, his ashes were scattered in the Yamaska River of the Eastern Townships and John Glassco went back to the landscape he celebrated in *The Deficit Made Flesh*.

## NOTES

1. The biographical details in this paper are distilled from my doctoral dissertation "Darkness and Delight: A Portrait of the Life and Work of John Glassco" (1988).
2. I have named John Glassco's unpublished diary, which is held at McGill University, the McGill Journal. It is a holograph document of 128 leaves dating from 28 February 1934 to 15 December 1957. The Journal is part of what I refer to elsewhere in this paper as "The McGill Collection." The collection is held in the Dept. of Rare books and Special Collections, McLennan Library, McGill University. The John Glassco Collection. # 74-731/1917-65.
3. The "Intimate Journal" is part of the John Glassco Papers at the National Archives of Canada. MG 30/D163.

## WORKS CITED

- BEATTIE, Munro. "Poetry 1950-1960." *Literary History of Canada*. Gen. ed. Carl F. Klinck. 2nd. ed. Vol. 2. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1976. 3 vols.
- FRYE, Northrop. *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. Toronto: Anansi, 1971.

GLASSCO, John. *The Deficit Made Flesh*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1958.

———. *A Point of Sky*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1964.

SCHWARTZ, Sanford. *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-Century Thought*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.