

Disintegrated Consciousness

Brian Trehearne, ed. *The Complete Poems of John Glassco*. London: Canadian Poetry Press, 2018. lxvi + 492 pp.

“Bon-vivant,” “wit,” “hoaxer,” and “pornographer” are just a few of the terms critics have used to describe John Glassco (1909-1981). Glassco, or “Buffy” as his friends called him, was prolific. His *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1970) is one of the best fictionalized autobiographies written by a Canadian author. One of his pseudonymous novels, *Fetish Girl* (1972), has the distinction of being, as Glassco himself boasted in a letter to Fraser Sutherland, “the first rubber-fetish novel ever written” (199). His translations of Canadian French-language poetry, including *The Poetry of French Canada in Translation* (1970) and *The Complete Poems of Saint-Denys-Garneau* (1975), are some of the finest ever published. Glassco’s own poetry appears in influential periodicals such as *The Canadian Forum* and *The Tamarack Review*, as well as in five volumes published in his lifetime: *The Deficit Made Flesh* (1958), *A Point of Sky* (1964), the sadomasochistic extravaganza *Squire Hardman* (1966), the Governor General’s Award-winning *Selected Poems* (1971), and the satirical topographical long poem *Montreal* (1974). In 1983, *Canadian Poetry* published a special issue devoted to Glassco (13), containing essays on Glassco’s poetry by John Burnett, Ed Jewinski, and Michael Darling (as well as two additional essays on *Memoirs of Montparnasse* by Stephen Scobie and Thomas E. Tausky, and a poem on Glassco by Ralph Gustafson).

In the years following this special issue, however, critics have largely ignored Glassco’s poetry, preferring to focus on other products of his output, such as his translations, his erotica, his memoirs, and his correspondence (see in particular Brian Busby’s fine biography of Glassco, *A Gentleman of Pleasure* (2011), and his edition of Glassco’s selected letters, *The Heart Accepts It All* (2013)). In his Introduction to *The Complete Poems of John Glassco*, Brian Trehearne suggests numerous reasons for this neglect: Glassco’s poetry has been out of print for many years (xiv), his period of productivity was relatively short (xv), his idiosyncratic style is at odds with the tastes of contemporary readers (xvi), and, perhaps most importantly, critics have not known how to engage fruitfully with Glassco’s “disintegrated consciousness” (xxxii). Trehearne borrows the phrase from G.W.F. Hegel by way of Lionel Trilling to frame several aspects of Glassco’s poetic style: its “errant

multiplicity of voice, form, and genre” (xxxiv); its “susceptibility to and gift of pastiche” (xxxv); its representation of myriad “exemplars of modern selfhood” (xxxv). Trehearne writes:

If on these ... grounds the poetry of John Glassco may be thought to evince the disintegrated modern consciousness identified by Hegel, it must be on the level of authorial *ethos*, the creative and textually present “character” of “John Glassco” that we construe and reconstruct as we read his works in the aggregate. No one poem by itself will make a particular *authorial* consciousness inarguable, but a *Complete Poems* might, in its proliferating dissonances, give us little choice but to posit a larger voice that is indifferent to *essential* techniques, subjects, or stances. (xxxvi, emphasis in original)

By bringing together in one volume for the first time all of Glassco’s poetical works, *The Complete Poems of John Glassco* puts this extraordinary poet’s disintegrated consciousness on full display, in all its mesmerizing variegation.

With the publication of this new scholarly edition, Trehearne aims to remedy the recent critical neglect of Glassco’s poetry. By collecting all of Glassco’s original published poetry, including the handful of periodical poems that were never republished in one of the collections as well as numerous poems from Glassco’s archives that have never before been published, *The Complete Poems of John Glassco* brings into sharp focus the poet’s diversity of influences, sources, preoccupations, and themes. Trehearne devotes an entire section of his Introduction (xxxix-li) to outlining the various ways in which future Glassco critics might approach Glassco’s poetical oeuvre, itemizing his many stylistic influences—Hopkins, Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Eliot, among others (xxxix-xlvi)—and reviewing his diversity of subject matter—temporal experience, anti-Puritanism, father-son relations, the poetry of place, philosophical nihilism, the human body, among others (xlvi-li). “It is certainly to be hoped,” Trehearne writes, “that these rich mental landscapes will attract new readers to Glassco’s poetry in the years ahead” (xlvi). *The Complete Poems of John Glassco* provides these future critics with a comprehensive starting point.

Owing to the difficulties in dating many of Glassco’s poems, some of which Glassco deliberately perpetrated himself, and which the editor discusses in detail in the Introduction (xix-xxx), Trehearne arranges *The Complete Poems of John Glassco* “according to a principle of ‘diminishing authorial endorsement’” (liii), meaning that poems from the

published collections appear first (beginning with *Selected Poems*) (1-162), followed by the periodical poems (163-84), and ending with the archival poems (185-280). This organizational method is sensible, as it enables the reader to perceive how Glassco himself envisaged the arrangement of his published works while also carving out a space for those works Glassco thought less deserving of posterity. Omitted from this edition are Glassco's translations, which is also sensible. As Trehearne points out in the Introduction, "Glassco's output as a translator is so substantial and textually complex as to require a separate edition" (li). Perhaps there is a critic out there who will one day take up this worthy challenge. Readers who prefer to see Glassco's poems in chronological order by date of composition and/or publication will find a complete list among the Editorial Notes (Appendix D).

As might be expected, this scholarly edition also includes extensive Editorial Notes, in the form of Editorial Emendations (283-87), Textual Notes (289-373), and Explanatory Notes (375-468). The Editorial Emendations conscientiously itemize the relatively few changes and corrections Trehearne has made to the copy-texts (284). The Explanatory Notes supply a wealth of useful information about Glassco's broad-ranging "allusions, references, and historical, cultural, and literary contexts" (liii), drawn from general reference publications (especially *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, to help locate Glassco's many, sometimes obscure, classical allusions), as well as from documents in Glassco's papers at the Canadian Archives and at McGill University (376). The Textual Notes "provide a bibliography of [each] poem's appearances in print ... a brief descriptive statement of any relevant documents—worksheets, manuscripts, typescripts—in the archives, and collation of the copy text with all printed and selected archival versions of the poem" (liii). Researchers who do not have easy access to Glassco's archives in Ottawa or Montreal will find the Textual Notes particularly useful in helping to reconstruct Glassco's development and revision, sometimes substantial, of many of his poems.

However, in his painstaking compilation of these Textual Notes, Trehearne helpfully resists the temptation (to borrow a phrase from Glassco) "to go the whole hog" (23). While Trehearne collates exhaustively "All published versions of a Glassco poem," he is more selective with the unpublished archival documents, collating only "those [versions] that were treated by Glassco ... as finished work" (290). In his Introduction to the Textual Notes, Trehearne provides a cogent rationale for this decision:

A scholarly edition is not and should not aspire to be a complete archive of the poet's works; it is a selection made by a scholar *from* such an archive, intended to save the reader work. This edition does not collate archival documents, whether typescripts or manuscripts, that constitute *the record of Glassco's ongoing composition of a poem*. Such "genetic editing" is a current norm of Canadian editorial theory, but in practice it leads to cluttered, barely legible textual notes that almost no one, including specialists, actually uses.... (290, emphasis in original)

Trehearne's Textual Notes are thus clean, readable, and straightforward, and they avoid becoming the intimidatingly dense thicket of codes and symbols characteristic of some other examples of the form.

The Complete Poems of John Glassco stands alongside Trehearne's other major critical edition, *The Complete Poems of A.J.M. Smith* (2007), also published by Canadian Poetry Press, as significant advancements to the ongoing efforts by Canadianist scholars and archival researchers to bring Canadian modernist authors and poets back into print for a new audience of readers and critics. Trehearne's new edition makes available for the first time in years the unique contribution to Canadian modernism of a poet, wit, and bon-vivant whose work has been sidelined for too long.

Works Cited

Glassco, John. Letter to Fraser Sutherland. 25 June 1971. *The Heart Accepts It All: Selected Letters of John Glassco*. Ed. Brian Busby. Montreal: Véhicule, 2013. 199.

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