"Kindred Points:"

The Twin Worlds of Joanna M. Glass

by Hetty Clews

Born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Joanna Glass acted with Saskatoon Community Players and wrote for radio and television in both Saskatoon and her later home, Calgary. An Alberta Arts Council scholarship enabled her to study acting at the Pasadena Playhouse. Several years, several cities and three children later, domiciled in a small town in Connecticut, she decided to try play-writing.

In nine years her output has been prolific. Santacqua, her first play, was premiered at the Herbert Berghof Playwriting Unit in Greenwich Village in 1969. Then a one-actor entitled Jewish Strawberries was presented in Detroit.

In the autumn of 1972 and spring of 1973 the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York produced the two short plays Canadian Gothic and American Modern which have since been seen in Calgary, Vancouver, Saskatoon, Victoria, Montreal and many other cities. In 1977 they were published by the Dramatists' Play Service in New York. Both plays were adapted for radio and were then aired by CBC. The two plays gained critical note for the playwright and her work continued to gain momentum theatrically.

Another play, Artichoke, premiered at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut in 1975. This play has since been performed at the Cricket Theatre, Minneapolis; Tarragon Theatre, Toronto; the Persephone Theatre in Saskatoon. The summer of 1977 saw the play adapted for television. CBC recently shot this adaptation of Artichoke in Starbuck, Manitoba for television viewing early in 1978.

Reflections on a Mountain Summer, her only novel, was published in the United States, Canada and England in 1974. It was serialized by BBC radio in 1975. Her first screenplay was an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel, Surfacing, completed in 1975.

Joanna Glass does not, as yet, reach a large reading public. Only two of the works considered in this paper--the diptych dramas Canadian Gothic/American Modern and the novel Reflections on a Mountain Summer--are in print. The other two plays to which I shall refer, Artichoke and The Last Chalice, Glass kindly made available to me in typescript form as works-in-progress. All the plays, however, have recently enjoyed considerable success in production. Canadian Gothic/American Modern have been performed in New York, Saskatoon, Winnipeg and Victoria. Artichoke has been produced in Toronto, Montreal, Minneapolis and Saskatoon. The Last Chalice, commissioned by Manitoba Theatre Centre, premiered in Winnipeg in October 1977, and is presently under revision for a New York production next season.

Appended to this paper is a biographical note which elaborates this vita and which also may account for the double ambience of her best known plays, Canadian Gothic/American Modern. For whereas Glass's roots are in Saskatchewan, her present home is in Guilford, Connecticut. The twin points of demographic reference provide, in most of her work, a dichotomy, if not a dialectic, which substantiates the epigram offered as a starting point to this paper, thinking of her as a

> Type of the wise who soar, but never roam,
> True to the kindred points of heaven and home.

Wordsworth's couplet occurred to me as I reflected upon the acronym for her novel; Reflections on a Mountain Summer, i.e., ROAMS. That the acronym is purposeful the opening chapter makes abundantly clear.(1) That the quotation from Wordsworth's "To a Skylark" is apposite this study will seek to prove. Therefore, though my chief concern is with Joanna Glass as dramatist, it might be profitable at this point to scan the novel for what it shows of the kindred points from which Glass customarily soars.

First, however, we should note that the prevailing mode of the novel, as one might expect, is dramatic. This is to say more than that it is "dramatized" fiction in a Jamesian sense, for what we have in "ROAMS" is a long dramatic monologue on the part of its putative author Jay, an aging and slothful American living off his unearned income in company with an energetic and arty menopausal wife. He leaves his wing chair in an attempt to recall and record a magical summer spent in the Canadian Rockies forty years earlier. The writing of the memoir itself, which proceeds to celebrate his mother's taste of heaven no less than his own, is interspersed with scenes from the immediate present, lively with family dialogue and acerbic with comments on contemporary urban America. Within the memoir several episodes become scenes dramatically enacted(2)and at its climax comes a highly mimetic monologue with-

in the monologue--the outpourings of the bereft and anguished mother, Laura, when her lover is gone. (pp. 210-233) This is a tour de force and a distillation of the method of the work as a whole, for in it retrospection weaves in and out of a present-tense continuum, a whole night being drunk and talked away while the presence of the listener, in dramatic monologue tradition, is strongly embodied in the rhetoric. Furthermore, Laura's discourse brings together the twin themes of the novel: her own theme, "I swear to God it's criminal to realize love at forty. I mean the word both ways, Jay. Comprehension and acquisition;" and Jay's theme, "You know what I think, Jay, after all this ruminating in my cups I think the first thing we must do if we're ever to walk abroad with peace in our hearts, the first thing we must do is learn to forgive our parents." (pp. 232-233)

Jay's encompassing monologue works towards his final declaration that this he has learned to do long ago. His own act of retrospection is not motivated by a need to understand and forgive either his mother or his shadowy and ineffectual father. It seems rather necessitated by his desire to lay the ghost of the man Winger, who, in loving his mother, became briefly his own cherished adoptive father and thus to come to terms with the diminished thing his life has been since his early glimpse of heaven. As he explains his obsession to his daughter, he says that his encroaching sixties are weighing heavily upon him--he has "intimations of immortality." He adds, "I'll finish it if it kills me!" (p. 119) And he finishes it resigned to ulcer and incipient coronary.

Though the explicit themes of the novel have to do, as noted, with the realization of love in its double sense and the acknowledgement of Jay's own parental culpability, an implicit theme derives from his "kindred points" of Detroit and Buena Vista.(3) Detroit is the place where he lives comfortably, without meaningful employment, in an uneasy truce with a wife he claims to like rather than love, and who once endeared herself to him by her resemblance to his mother. (p. 284) The city is that amalgam of culture and decadence which has to be "home" to him, a storehouse for the attic contents of his mind, and a source of continuing disaffection. He winces at the memory of its riots,(p. 60) deplores its corruption (pp. 22, 150) and its pretensions,(p. 84) ridicules its mechanistic wealth as exemplified by Henry Ford,(pp. 61, 251) repudiates its inequities,(p. 248) makes token efforts towards its amelioration (pp. 202-304) and ultimately endures its environment only with the help of Demerol (pp. 62, 292, 307). Buena Vista is the heaven he continually longs for,(pp. 3, 174, 307) knowing he can never return. (pp. 3, 18) Memories of the summer of '32, that idyllic summer radiant with beauty and happiness--until Winger departed--are thickly strewn throughout Jay's narrative. A

typical reminiscence is triggered when he finds an album of faded flowers among his attic souvenirs. He lovingly categorizes every bloom, remembering the evoked location:

> . . . the scents, the intensity of the light or the lack of it, the burnt umber of the earth, are with me again and I am transported back to the creeks and ravines and meadows. . . . Those were my halcyon days. . . . At the end of the day we took home bunches of frail, mauve laurel. Winger gave them to my mother. . . . I was very happy. (pp. 187-188)

The reader will find much more in similar vein. Perhaps this documentation will serve sufficiently to illustrate Jay's preoccupation with the kindred points of a Buena Vista heaven and a Detroit home. But one important observation remains to be made. It is that a synthesis of the polarity which informs Jay's awareness seems to occur in the person of Laura. Jay's longing to disinter his mother from her Grosse Pointe grave and put her high on Mount Binnie, "where she laughed and loved, and went to bed with Winger's laurel in her hair," (p. 307) is not without a reason beyond the one provided by sentiment. Laura's dementia following Winger's desertion heralds a strange serenity. Restored to comparatively sane and productive life, she separates herself from both worlds, renouncing "home" in a newly hermetic life-style, and sublimating her craving for the Buena Vista "heaven" by creative outpouring in poetry and painting. Her non-conformity becomes undeniable eccentricity, her self-sufficiency moves her to the garret where her memories of her love-adept find lyric utterance; her combination of sensitivity and endurance draws her son to share increasingly a state of being removed from the twin worlds of home as it is and heaven as it was. So it is that when she dies, she is at once alien and reconciled--buried at a distance from her family but at peace with all dues paid. (p. 296) "Roams" is really Laura's story; unlike every other character she soars above those points of reference which limit the mobility of lesser mortals. Jay recognizes this, and the author who stands behind him, despite the disclaimer that "we can't anticipate a universal truth imbedded somewhere deep in "Roams" (p. 81), surely recognizes it too. One can soar only through Art--which is why the novel is written.

The bright book of life which is the novel allows its writer a discursive freedom which the strictures of the dramatic form deny. Nevertheless, Joanna Glass's plays, too, are informed with the same kind of dualism which we have seen Laura Rutherford transcend.

In Canadian Gothic and American Modern, as the titles suggest, there is a double contrast of place and time. The contrast is between the Saskatchewan

prairie and the American mega-city on the one hand, and between the primitive fifties and the sophisticated seventies on the other. Of course these twin contrasts intensify each other--the fifties in Cardigan, Saskatchewan (easily recognizable to prairie-dwellers as Saskatoon) being still a time of pioneer settlement in an environment always comparatively inimical to creature-comforts, and the seventies in Manhattan being a time of proliferation of the accumulated possessions and blatant aberrations of a herded and materialistic society. The world of the Canadian family is a world of rigorous extremes (ninety above in summer, thirty below in winter),(4) of closeness to a nature which is not only accessible but encroaching (fields of crocus or tiger lily on the doorstep (p. 10) and migrating mallards, obeying what Mother calls "Nature's magic," overhead,(p. 11)) of simple pleasures like skating on the nearby slough (p. 11) or sharing a Coke at the Sunset Cafe,(p. 14) and of traditional chores like spring housecleaning (p. 8) or fixing the inevitably banging screen-door on the inevitable porch. (p. 23) It is a world where, the exigencies of Nature apart, change comes very slowly; where Indians continue, in baffled and dogged paradox, their assimilation and repudiation of the white man's ways; where women like Jean's mother persist in bright defiance of social norms only to their cost; and where a man like Jean's afflicted father can still say "Cardigan has been good to us." (p. 24) The world of the American couple is succinctly summed up in a list Pat provides for her psychiatrist: "Billboards, dixie cups, snowmobiles and Hondas. Kinetic sculpture, lawn flamingoes, geodesic domes." (p. 47) It is a world where women live their automated lives to the seasonal metronome of glossies like "Good Housekeeping:" Spring vases of lilac and forsythia, Summer picnics of jellied salads and devilled eggs, Fall decorations of Indian corn and Winter firesides of mulled wine and fruitcake. (p. 38) It is a world where businessmen, regularly unloaded from the Long Island railroad, protect their vested interests and make their properties appreciate by equally compulsive patterns of lawn-mowing, faucet-fixing, a yearly form-filling and monthly record-keeping. (p. 45) The sickness to which both Pat and Mike(5) succumb is designated "Urban blight" by the humourless therapist who listens to Pat's story. (p. 47) In the brilliant, richly subtexted word-play which constitutes the dialogue between husband and wife, there is, as the playwright notes in a preface, a "survival kit stocked only with words." (p. 31) With words Pat fends off the probing psychiatrist. With words--written on the backs of IBM cards--Mike composes endless suicide notes. An objective correlative to the theme of the play is found in the opening scene, when Pat brings home her latest loot as scavenger ("rat,

squirrel, magpie."(p. 35)) She has collected, and in this precise order, a stone with an initial scratched on it, a quill, a stubby pencil, and a Bic ballpoint pen. She has finally seen, before entering their home, none other than their neighbour Mr. Gutenberg watering his lawn:

> Mike: [It takes him a minute] Too much! Remarkable progression. [He stands to attention] To summarize: Man Will Express Himself.
>
> Pat: [Standing at attention] To summarize: Woman Will Make Order out of Nonsense.

Thus the play celebrates the necessity of that verbal communication which the Canadian father obdurately denies: "The less said, the better. Things are easier dealt with when they're not put in words." (p. 10) This is a denial which the Canadian mother accepts: "We never talked of it again. I let him be. As far as a woman's able." (p. 10) And whereas the Canadian couple, after a "simple conversation," went each his separate way (p. 9) in silence, the American couple, whose conversation is never "simple," continue to express themselves in words as they pursue together a single way--to make order out of nonsense, mutually and to fill the empty spaces in their lives. (p. 48)

In production, the kindred points of these two plays emerge even more sharply than they do in reading. There are several reasons for this. One is the customary twin casting. When the married couple in both plays is impersonated by the same actors, the similarities and the differences in the two marriage relationships are thrown equally into relief. Another reason, at least in the Belfry production which I witnessed, is the extreme contrast in stage setting. The sparse set-design for the first play, abstract and impressionistic with its suggestive triumvirate placing of chairs and levels, is replaced by a realistic interior for the second play--a luxury penthouse sitting-room filled with domestic clutter and all the usual accretions of affluence. A third reason is the striking difference in cumulative emotional effect as the scenes are played out before your eyes. Canadian Gothic is, indeed, generically gothic, with an undeniably cathartic climax reminiscent of classical theatre forms. The horror of the scene in which Father is blinded by a can of lye breaks with wrenching suddenness into a conflict hitherto stated in gentle, even humorous, terms. American Modern has no such emotional shock to offer. The compatible couple remains unitedly indomitable and there is no physical scathing adumbrated in their high-spirited repartee. Yet the impression of their pain, a pain more searing for being spiritual instead of physical, is made more vivid and haunting by means of the enacted impact

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of scarring in the preceding play. Of the two, the second is ultimately more tragic. The imperfect alliance of Father and Jean, each incommunicatively grieving for a loved one lost and yearned for, is after all preferable to the matched bravado of Pat and Mike, seeking to fructify a desert that neither understands. Their whole world is loss and emptiness.

The twin environments touched by Glass in her double play-bill, therefore, are not solely those of location, despite readily substantiated autobiographical elements in both plays. Analysis of the dramas as theatre shows rather that the contrasted worlds are psychological. In common to both are wounded people. But the elemental rhythms exemplified in prairie land and sky have a psychological product of endurance. The artificial cycles of a mechanized society produce rather a psychology of substitution, where "I-it" replaces "I-thou," and only words or things can fill empty spaces. In showing the legacy of loss in both worlds, Glass remains true, again, to her kindred points of reference.

The unpublished plays, Artichoke and The Last Chalice, have a Saskatchewan setting. Both incorporate also a second "world" to provide, again, a "kindred point."

The initial situation in Artichoke is not unlike that in Canadian Gothic. The protagonist, Margaret, like Jean's mother, is strong and proud. She, too, is mismated, and turns from husband to daughter. But another world intrudes into her prairie kitchen in the person of her visiting cousin, Gibson. He is the "artichoke" of the title, with a buried heart--"an eccentric vegetable, not one of your more essential foods." (p. 50) The world he represents is the university; he is a publishing scholar, a renowned authority on Alexander Pope, a disenchanted professor who has longed to return to what he thinks is the "simple" home of his boyhood. That the gallant tillers of the soil are not so "simple" is what he discovers. That she can have no place in his Vancouver life, love him though she may, is what Margaret discovers. As in Canadian Gothic, the rigours of prairie living produce stalwart people who can value what they are left with when the alternatives offered by the other world are rejected. Like Jean and her mother, and like Laura, Margaret is "solid." "One thing," she says, "I'm living proof of. I stay. I don't quit." (p. 69)

Similarly, in The Last Chalice, the abused wife, Ruth, has great capacity for loyalty. She, also, says "I stay, dammit! I stick." In one of his more sober moments Cam says to her "You have no concept of hopelessness. And I have none, of hope. You wear a halo, Ruthie. That's what makes you beautiful." (Act II, p. 15) But Ruth is an exception in Glass's gallery of

noble women in that she has limited imagination and intelligence--at least she has lacked the education and opportunity to develop them. And the play is unusual in that the two worlds are discovered internally, within the mind of the protagonist Campbell McCandless. Cam is the most pathetic of all creatures, the chronic alcoholic. He has known prosperity and esteem, and the world that rings in his head is the world of the past, tracing back his ancestry ("If there is any such thing as the Canadian aristocracy, we are it" (p. 15)) to the twelfth century. The last chalice, to which he clings as all else is stripped away by the bootlegger who supplies him with illegal whiskey, is the remnant of a gift from the Duke of Wellington, with whom Cam's great-grandfather fought at Waterloo. For Cam this heritage, and the linked fantasies of a time when he was revered as befits such a heritage, are the heaven to which he can gain access only through drink. The kindred point of home is exemplified by the inhospitable Saskatchewan prairie, "world renowned as the home of the titless witch;" (p. 14) by the prairie farm girl who is his wife, "no history, no culture, no aspirations," (p. 35) and by the daughter who is a continuing reproach to him because of the way he has abused her:

> I look at you. . . . You know what I see? Me. The results of my own brutality. You're like a little sapling, forced to grow sideways, around an impediment. It's so painful to see, sometimes I want to block you out entirely. (p. 25)

Cam ends his tragedy by blocking out wife, daughter and home as he prepares to "bottom out" into the heaven that means his death. Such an ending is inevitable and moves an audience by its inevitability--it is perhaps a consummation necessitated by failure to reconcile two worlds.

I must end on a personal note, in an attempt to express my tribute to the writing of Joanna Glass. My Canadian roots are in the Saskatchewan prairie. When Jean, in Canadian Gothic, remembers her mother, she speaks of knowing that in the fields around Cardigan "there was still stubby crocus. There were lilies and mallards. Only her song was gone." (p. 13) For me, remembering the fields around Saskatoon will now be forever enriched by the song Joanna Glass has provided in her soaring over the Canadian prairie, true to the kindred points of heaven and home.

NOTES

1. Reflections on a Mountain Summer (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1974), pp. 7-8. Cf. a later altercation, p. 82, and the narrator's discussion with his daughter, pp. 119-120. All subsequent references to this edition will be found in parenthesis in the text.

2. A good example of such enactment occurs pp. 168-172, where the remembered dialogue is formulated into a script.

3. This fictional resort seems very like Banff. Its nearest city is Calgary (p. 12), and in 1930 it was a place "where only man was vile, and not too many men had discovered it." (p. 3) The family retreat built there, on the slopes of "Mount Binnie," was known as "Timberline."

4. Canadian Gothic and American Modern (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1977), p. 8. All subsequent references to this edition will be found in parenthesis in the text.

5. These names are interesting. Russ Wodell, writing in Victoria's Monday magazine as a reviewer of these plays in production (March 31, 1977), suggests that they may be inspired by the Tracy/Hepburn film Pat and Mike.