



## Special Collections

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**Joanna M. Glass**

**Biocritical Essay**

**by**

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Playwright and novelist Joanna McClelland Glass has spent a large proportion of her adult life in the United States, although the influence of her formative years lived on the Canadian prairie has been pervasive and continual. At the same time, her American residency <sup>1</sup> has provided her with the contemporary writer's increasingly rare opportunity to straddle that border. Her dual perspective, focused primarily on the family life of North America, is both pungent in its comic objectivity and poignant in its delineation of failure and loss from whatever side of the line these originate. Perhaps her most characteristic stances as a writer lie in her ability to perceive the oddity in the ordinary, the bright untypical seasons in otherwise conventional lives. In the theatre this means adroit reversals of habitual audience expectation, attributable in part, possibly, to the two-way cultural distancing of the expatriot writer. Character in Joanna Glass's writing fluctuates between the eccentric observer of modern life and its would-be participator, this formally reflected in a tension between narrative and dramatic modes discernible in both her plays and novels. Overall, the fictitious world of this writer is apt to be short on joy (although intense when it happens) and long on consequences; if passion is sudden, pride or despair is usually the more enduring. What is striking is the witty, buoyant, sometimes wry, literary style, a facility with the language of speech that perhaps owes less to either prairie origins or U.S. domicile than to her natural gifts as an articulate, humorous commentator on modern comi-tragedy.

### I

Joan Ruth McClelland was born October 7, 1936, daughter of Kathleen née Switzer (1898-1970) and Morrell (Pat) MacKenzie McClelland (1894-1967) of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Her mother, who was born in the District of Grenfell, in the then North West Territories, moved to Saskatoon around 1914-15, while her

father, a native of Nova Scotia, came west with his family as a boy of nineteen. The background of both parents is present in the most autobiographical of Glass's works, *Play Memory*, 1983, a revised version of *The Last Chalice*, Manitoba Theatre Centre, 1977. Of Austrian extraction, her mother was raised on a remote prairie farm where she was removed from school after the second grade in order to help at home with the younger children. Joanna Glass recalls a story of her mother hiding with her siblings in the homestead attic while the Indians came to call for their customary bag of flour.<sup>2</sup> In her initial proposal for the play, she wrote to the artistic director of the M.T.C., Len Cariou, that the mother, Ruth, of the play, is without a history and barely literate; conversely, the father, Campbell, is a fourth generation Scots-Canadian whose history is closely tied with part of Canada's in that his ancestors fought with Wellington at Waterloo, in return for which they were given a tract of land in Nova Scotia.

Pat McClelland's life in Saskatoon seems to have been very much as depicted by his daughter, not only dramatically, but also in a short story entitled "At the King Edward Hotel", 1976.<sup>3</sup> This is to say that during her own childhood the writer's father was an unemployed tobacco salesman turned alcoholic, inordinately proud of his Scottish background, its plaids and its poetry, and full of nostalgia for the Nova Scotia of his youth. Joanna Glass has described how a bootlegger would come to their house, taking furnishings in exchange for liquor, including a fine walnut door from the closet of her bedroom<sup>4</sup> (an episode that finds its way variously in her novel *Reflections on a Mountain Summer* and in the second version of the play). Despite the disadvantages of home life that forced both her mother and herself while a child to scramble for their living, Glass nevertheless acknowledges a debt to her father for instilling her with the love of language to which she attributes her knack of writing dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

She also notes that her teachers at Saskatoon Technical Collegiate had a tremendous influence on her developing interest in literature and drama.<sup>6</sup> In 1953 she participated in the Saskatoon District High School Drama Finals and also joined the Quota Club, an amateur group directed by Louise Olson. Upon graduation she spent her third summer working at Kilmorey Lodge, Waterton Lakes, Alberta, later taking employment at radio station CKOM, Saskatoon, to write commercials and host her own program, "Journey with Joan"; she also performed with the Saskatoon Community Players, playing the lead in F. Hugh Herbert's *For Love or Money*.

Within a year of graduation she had moved to Calgary, earning her living writing continuity for CHCT TV but with the real purpose of joining Betty Mitchell's well-known Workshop 14. First she was prop girl and costume mistress for the 1956 Dominion Drama Festival entry, *The River Line* by Charles Morgan, followed by performances in *Picnic* and *Desperate Hours*. Her big opportunity came with the lead in Maxwell Anderson's *Anne of a Thousand Days*, Workshop 14's 1957 D.D.F. entry. This led to her winning a drama scholarship offered by the Province of Alberta Cultural Activities Branch, which she took for a summer program at Pasadena Playhouse. It was here that her first name, which had become Joanne in Calgary, was further modified to Joanna.

After a year in California, including a period at Warner Brothers Drama School (all of which she recalls as "a horrific experience"), she travelled to New York where she met Alexander Glass, then a graduate student in physics at Yale. They were married in New Haven, Connecticut in 1959. During the next four years she acted with the Yale School of Drama. In 1963, her first child, Jennifer, was born, followed two years later, after a move to Washington, D.C., by twins, Mavis and Lawrence. She began to write in this period, but more

"seriously" after the children started school.

A playscript entitled "Over the Mountain", completed by 1966, is Joanna Glass's first work on public record.<sup>7</sup> This was a drama, not a comedy, the original of the later *Artichoke* material; it seems to have had little appeal to the agents she initially approached because of its Canadian farm family story; one commended her for writing "beautifully", but noted that its "admirable particularity" lacked the "universality" required for a New York audience.<sup>8</sup> Later Joanna Glass was to say that this attitude prevented the play's performance for years,<sup>9</sup> even when "Over the Mountain" had been transformed into a comedy. In 1968, now living in Detroit where her husband had become chairman of Physics at Wayne State University, Glass completed a second play that was entirely American in content, first called "Portrait of a Dying Man". Under the title *Santacqua*, the work was accepted at the Herbert Berghof Studio, New York, for a workshop production, December 12-21, 1969, in a program designed to assist promising new playwrights who need to see their work performed.

This was an experience that yielded helpful critical response; it also encouraged her to return to her first script, which she had already changed to comedy. *Santacqua* was revised in 1971, but never satisfactorily enough for the playwright to seek its further staging: the play is a characteristically strong study in personality but problematic in dramatic structure - inherently novelistic according to her new agent, Lucy Kroll, who tried to encourage her to rewrite it as a novel.<sup>10</sup>

This play is a study of an aging Italian-American who had risen in the world to become head of his union in the factory of a small eastern American city. Mario Santacqua is proud of his self-education, the obliteration of his accent and the knowledge he has acquired from the Encyclopedia Britannica; but he has a conservative wife who clings to her Italian traditions and a mixed-bag of a family, some who have succeeded and some not. In essence his pro-American, pro-Wasp drive has had destructive effects on them all and they are dreading his nearing retirement. He, in response, tries to take a new lease on life by propositioning his youngest son's girlfriend, ending in a near disastrous confrontation with them all. Mario's determined immigrant drive was later to be recalled in the cameo portrait of Mike Melzewski, the middle-aged Ukrainian bootlegger of *The Last Chalice/Play Memory*.

Within a year of her first workshop Joanna Glass was given a second, this time with the further revised *Artichoke*, still with its Canadian prairie farm setting. This happened at Long Wharf Theatre, New Haven, November 29, 1970, directed by William Garry, Canadian-born literary manager of the theatre. While the presentation did not lead immediately to a full-scale production at Long Wharf, the play was now circulated to various theatres, including Stratford, Ontario, Vancouver Playhouse and the Centaur, Montreal. In the meantime, two one-act plays were in process, "Trying"<sup>11</sup> and "Jewish Strawberries", both of which received workshop productions at the Hilberry Theatre, Wayne State, within the next year.

The first real break-through as a dramatist came in 1972, however, with the staging of Joanna Glass's now familiar companion pieces, *Canadian Gothic* and *American Modern* at the off-Broadway Manhattan Theatre Club under the direction of Austin Pendleton. The plays premiered November 16 and were revived in the following Spring. In the meantime, she had followed Lucy Kroll's advice to start a novel, although rejecting the Santacqua material in favour of worlds she knew better: *Reflections on a Mountain Summer* is set in part in Detroit (where she had lived for five years) and in part in the Waterton Lakes area where she had worked as a girl. The central plot is borrowed in some measure from the *Artichoke* story. A verbal commitment to

publish when the novel was only one third finished came from Bob Gottlieb of Alfred Knopf, Inc. on the strength of his admiration for the writing in *Canadian Gothic* and *American Modern*, which he saw during the spring revival.<sup>12</sup> There is an element of irony in the timing of these projects. As she later reported in an interview with Toronto *Star* drama critic Gina Mallet:

"I was so tired of being told by producers that things set in Canada didn't have a universality that would have had commercial appeal", she says. "I got that thrown a lot at me in my early days. So I thought, I'll try fiction".<sup>13</sup>

But the fact was that the two, drama and fiction, came to a happy conjunction at this point.

The difficulty in getting Canadian material produced seems to refer specifically to *Artichoke*. In June 1971, agent Lucy Kroll had reported that producer Elliot Martin was enthusiastic about the play and hoped to do it that Fall, but after some correspondence over what he considered certain improbabilities in the script, to which Joanna Glass responded, the idea seems to have faded. From time to time over the next three years she worked on revisions, but it was not until the Spring of 1974 that Martin spoke to Colleen Dewhurst about playing the role of Margaret Morley. It was another year and a half before the first full production was finally staged, again at Long Wharf Theatre, October 17- November 14, 1975, with Dewhurst in the lead. Two years earlier, the Glass family had removed to Oakland, California; the marriage was beginning to founder, leading to separation and finally divorce in 1976. That year Joanna returned to the east with her children, settling permanently in Guilford, Connecticut.

Meanwhile the companion plays were beginning to find new stages, first in Canada in a brief run enthusiastically directed by Ken Dyba at the Pleiades Theatre in Calgary, opening November 29, 1973. There was a production at Berkeley the following year, and finally a good flow of stagings in various Canadian regional theatres through the rest of the 1970's.<sup>14</sup> The success of these plays and the Long Wharf opening of *Artichoke* led to further Canadian interest in her work. Yet well before the Canadian premiere, at Tarragon Theatre, Toronto, October 9-14, 1976, the management of the Manitoba Theatre Centre took the initiative to commission Joanna Glass for a new full-length play to open their 20th anniversary season. However, the premiere of *The Last Chalice*, October 7-29, 1977, was critically problematic, leading the playwright to withdraw the script from option for several years until a restructuring was completed. Nevertheless, with five productions of *Artichoke* during the previous season and several more to come, Joanna Glass was now established as a new Canadian playwright in Canada.<sup>15</sup>

Her next play, *To Grandmother's House We Go*, completed in 1980 with the aid of a National Endowment Grant, opened in the Fall of that year at The Alley, Houston, starring Eva Le Gallienne as Grandie. The play moved to the Biltmore Theatre, Broadway, January 15, 1981. Set in a small Connecticut town, the work explores confrontations among three generations of a disparate American family during Thanksgiving holiday weekend: its key comic question: "Is there life after children?". It was later toured in the United States and also was produced at Das Kammerspiele, Hamburg, in the Fall of 1982.

The eventual revision of *The Last Chalice* into *Play Memory*, with the aid of a Guggenheim Fellowship, led to a successful pre-New York run in October 1983, under the direction of Harold Prince and jointly sponsored by the McCarter Theatre, Princeton, and the Annenberg Center, University of Pennsylvania,

Philadelphia. It opened briefly at the Longacre Theatre, New York, April 26, 1984, to mixed reviews but also a Tony nomination for the playwright.

Over the years Joanna Glass has written several film scripts, including a commission for an adaptation of her own novel, *Reflections on a Mountain Summer*, 1980, the rights to which are owned by actress Michael Learned.<sup>16</sup> Her second novel, *Woman Wanted*, 1985, from St. Martin's Press, began as a film script in 1975; by a curious stroke, the movie rights for the novel were sold to Zanuck/Brown before the work was completed. Joanna Glass will write the film script as well.

In 1985 she was awarded a Rockefeller grant to work at Yale Repertory, New Haven, on her new farce "Towering Babble".

## II

The combination of a Canadian prairie youth and a long adult American residency has greatly influenced Joanna Glass's literary direction, both in her choice of subjects and in her way of looking at them. Whether she is examining the moral stringencies of her prairie past, as in *Canadian Gothic* and *Artichoke*, or the social perplexities and disenchantments of an American present, as in *To Grandmother's House We Go*, a certain cultural distancing from either society prompts a characteristically ironic, sometimes comic, perspective on both. Within and beyond the context of national dualities, as an examination of her literary evolution reveals, is the individual voice of the writer with her own particular approach to theme and character and to the structural patterns that contain them in both her plays and novels.

A further duality is evident in Glass's exploratory handling of the two genres in which she chooses to write. The common element lies in her natural perception of character through speech; basically she is interested in how people reveal themselves both in what they say and in what they choose to leave out.<sup>17</sup> Thus she may alternately depict her characters through the immediacy of dramatic dialogue or in more expansive modes of narrative monologue, together revealing an incipient novelist in her plays and the manifest dramatist in her novels. The formal construction of the plays, as well as of the fiction, therefore, is frequently characterized by the effort to integrate dramatic voice and narrative reflection.

This generic dichotomy, along with her thematic interests in contrasting societies, is presaged in her first professionally performed works, the companion pieces *Canadian Gothic* and *American Modern*. They are thematically linked only through their titles, in the ironic reversal of reference to Grant Wood's painting, "American Gothic": the first looks to a dour Canadian past, the second to a brittle American present. They are structurally contrasted by the predominance of narrative in the former and a totally dialogue format in the latter, but in neither does the dramatic movement itself extend beyond the ironies and revelations of the spoken word.

In *Canadian Gothic*, the novelistic element may be initially discerned in the themes of the play. One is struck by its echo of the familiar motifs of traditional prairie fiction found variously from F.P. Grove to Margaret Laurence. While the play is certainly not "every prairie novel rolled into one", as sardonically observed by reviewer Heather Robertson,<sup>18</sup> it can be viewed as a vivid dramatic (or semi-dramatic) abstract of certain characteristic regional concerns of the prairie novel. Jamie Portman rightly praised the play for its

"marvellous economy and fluidity"<sup>19</sup> in its spare depiction of repressive insularity. The arid prairie conformist, exemplified in Jack, the husband and father of the piece, is shown in conflict with the romantic free spirit of his wife, Natalie, and later of his daughter, Jean. In the play as a whole, Jack's inflexible regimen is exposed but not defeated. Yet in other ways, *Canadian Gothic* also counters the prairie fictional stereotypes indicating the emergence of the individual voice of Joanna Glass as well; for example, in the bright originality of Natalie, for whom housework is "busy work", the quicker its dispatch, the sooner she is free to escape to the outdoors and sketch; or in the sympathetically depicted Cree boy, Ben Redleaf, while for one brief summer he is the lover of the adolescent Jean.

The contrasting *American Modern*, although a slighter work, similarly draws on and counters established literary norms: in this case the social and metaphysical ironies of American family values as dramatized, for example, in the plays of Edward Albee. But instead of the raw recriminations and perverse role-playing of an Albee marriage, Glass's Pat and Mike find mutual if eccentric accommodation to the spiritual despair of their lives. While they can no longer connect to the world of consumer values around them, they have re-learned to relate to each other. In "a kind of comic theatre of the absurd",<sup>20</sup> their survival is sustained by witty if rueful exchanges that acknowledge and expatriate on the decrepitude of their lives.

For these plays Joanna Glass has artfully contrived contrasting stage experiments appropriate to their themes. *Canadian Gothic* is cast into a narrative format in which the four inhabitants of Cardigan (Saskatoon), Saskatchewan sit facing the audience on chairs as they individually relate their stories, primarily through monologues. Not only is this a personal means for each character to deal with the past (the 1930s) in relation to the present (the 1950s), but most importantly it is a strategy for depicting the multiple points of view of characters who can not or do not care to communicate with each other. When, at certain points in these separate chronologies, dialogue does take place, it is usually to reinforce that separateness (with the significant exception of the important moments between Ben and Jean).

*American Modern*, on the other hand, is structured as a virtually plotless dialogue between two compulsively articulate people. The minimal dramatic occasion is Pat's return from the city to their Long Island suburban home after a first and unsuccessful visit to a new psychiatrist. In her report of the interview to Mike, Pat reveals to the audience her transformation from model American mother and housewife into a neurotic suburban bag lady. Now a compulsive scavenger of streets and beaches, collecting bits of string, dead anemones, shreds of letters and shards of stamped glass bottles, she clutters her house with the useless scraps of objects that once gave her life meaning. Mike, in self defence, has sought refuge in his own set of eccentricities: he builds Georgian mansions for the birds and writes compulsive suicide notes for the "euphoric" kick of the exercise. Their talk shows them living in a kind of post-Gutenberg nightmare in which they accumulate the fragments of the lost order of their lives into configurations of absorbing futility. But their witty sharing of affliction is the play's most positive sign. They are as much sustained by their talk to each other about their respective neuroses as they are by the eccentric activity their dialogue describes.

While the dialogue structure of *American Modern* shows the characters at least willing to articulate the failures of their existence, the narrative structure of *Canadian Gothic* articulates the reticence and distance of its speakers. In the one, the people reveal themselves to each other in what they say, in the other they reveal to the audience what they choose not to say to each other. Of the two, *Canadian Gothic* is the more interesting stage experiment; in it Joanna Glass has economically abstracted potentially novelistic material

and dramatically exploited narrative point-of-view technique. With its telling of dramatic events rather than enacting of them, the dramatic movement of the play itself lies more in the consequences of those events than in their causes. The focal character is the daughter Jean, whom we watch being transformed from the mother's child to the father's daughter. Jean's brief love affair with the Cree boy has led to a confrontation between Ben and her father that turned accidentally violent, leaving Jack blinded for life and Jean his dutiful nurse, finally resigned, at the age of thirty, to her sterile existence. Ironically, by the end of the play Jean and Jack are the new gothic pair.

In the full length comedy *Artichoke*, written and revised during and after the period of the companion pieces, the patterns of a stringent prairie society are the chief source of its humour, in contrast to *Canadian Gothic*. More conventionally structured than either of the short plays, *Artichoke's* fully developed naturalistic setting plays comically against its exaggerated characterizations and outlandish domestic situation to offer an amusing prairie twist on the theme of marital infidelity. Here moral self-righteousness and repressed feeling erupt in frankness of speech and blatant behaviour for all to see and savour. To producer Elliot Martin, Joanna Glass had written in 1971 that in *Artichoke's* central character Margaret Morely she was after certain Scots Canadian "qualities of pride and self-importance" that lend themselves to "ironical, high comedy".<sup>21</sup> The result is a comic mixture of the free spirit of *Canadian Gothic's* Natalie and the stringency of her husband Jack within the one person. Margaret, a town girl of some education, has been married for fifteen years to Walter, for fourteen of which he has been banished to spend his nights in the smokehouse instead of the marital bed. She will not forgive her husband for a sexual misdemeanour with a "water witch" during the first year of their marriage when the well went dry. The consequence was Lily Agnes, left on her doorstep nine months later.

Showing a more nurturing side to her townish flare for propriety, Margaret has undertaken to raise the progeny of Walter's indiscretion as her own. She has kept the water witch inheritance at bay in this fey little girl, now "fourteen going on forty-five" by supplying her with a hat for a "lid" (without it Lily believes she would "run naked in the wind and talk gibberish") and a ragged copy of Emily Post for genteel vocabulary in moments of crisis. Walter in his way has become equally as stubborn as his wife on the problematical marital question: "I'm the one who done wrong. It's up to her to do the forgiving".

The play opens to this stalemate, the situation exacerbated by the impending visit of Margaret's friend and companion of her youth, Gibson McFarland, who is now a specialist in the poetry of Alexander Pope at a Vancouver university. Gibson is in need of "sanctuary" from his "weltschmerz", a variation on the "urban blight" motif of *American Modern*, and the fear that his students may be right when they tell him that Pope is irrelevant to the twentieth century. Under such tempting circumstances, Margaret is ripe for the revival of the romance of her youth.

Structurally *Artichoke* employs two features of *Canadian Gothic*: the escape interlude as pivotal event in the action (i.e., the summer affair between Jean and Ben), and, in modified form, stage narration. However, the narrating characters in *Artichoke* function primarily in the conventional dramatic role of chorus whose participation in the main action is secondary. Two affable bachelors, Archie and Jake, introduce and comment on the action from a gossipy neighbourly distance, aphoristically linking the great world to the small, the scandals of the famous to the increasingly savoury situation next door.

The catalyst for change is Gibson. Walter, the virile land- proud prairie patriarch is enraged to find himself cuckolded by the neurotic professor from the city, an event entirely instigated by his normally respectable wife. He is forced to take refuge with Archie and Jake for the summer when Margaret decides to take possession of *her* house and for once follow her own inclinations.

But even the romantic interlude has its problems: nights on the Toronto couch in the kitchen are fine, but the days of Margaret and Gibson are soon disrupted by their natural reassertion of separate inclinations. Gibson, the scholar, is trying to write a paper on Pope, while Margaret, the farm wife, has chores on her mind. This leads to a spirited confrontation that sends Gibson himself to the smokehouse, for day-times at least. The restoration of normality at the end of the summer is a welcome relief to all concerned, and a new start between husband and wife seems forthcoming. Margaret has finally challenged Walter in his own terms; at the same time she has unexpectedly rediscovered something of her own reality, less in lavender water and poetry than in the shared work and life of the farm.

The folksy commentary of Archie and Jake also establishes the idiom of *Artichoke*, the ritualized comic patterns of speech that the Morleys have evolved over the years thereby imposing a kind of order on their unusual family situation. In the plainspeaking of Walter and Margaret there is recurring candour about the water witch, the smokehouse, Walter's visits to the woman in town for "relief", sinning and forgiving, most of which is solemnly echoed by the wise child Lily Agnes. Lily's own personal vocabulary, incongruously drawn from her constant reference to the anachronistically genteel directives of Emily Post, is the verbal equivalent to her "lid"; similarly, Gibson's dependence on his quotations from Pope. For these characters, speech, despite its seeming frankness, is essentially oblique, making *Artichoke* a verbal as much as a situational comedy of manners in which the public idiocyncrasies of language are either self-protective or self-evasive. It is the playwright's calculated reversal of normal expectations of reticence on private matters that makes the overall effect of speech largely comic in the play, almost creating a parody of propriety that barely manages to contain the water witch in them all.

If there is a problem in the play, it lies perhaps in the characterization of Gibson, the "artichoke", a "very eccentric vegetable", in the words of Jake. In the abstract, Gibson's role is clearly identifiable: as comic catalyst to the Morley marital stalemate, as naive dreamer of pastoral joys on the Saskatchewan prairie, and as an inept substitute for Walter around the farm. "Not one of your more essential foods", Jake adds. "It takes forever to get to its heart". In a sense, this points to the difficulty with Gibson. He seems always to be edging beyond his purely comic function into unfocused indications of psychological complexity that the glib role of neurasthenic professor hiding behind his Pope quotations can not quite sustain. Thus Margaret's penultimate pronouncement of "misfit" for Gibson seems a rather perfunctory dismissal, demanded more by the comic exigencies of plot than psychological reality. This is where fiction offers Joanna Glass the scope for a more probing psychological exploration than she had yet managed to articulate in drama.

In her first novel, *Reflections on a Mountain Summer*, completed while *Artichoke* was still in its last stages of revision, Glass again takes up the misfit figure of similar circumstances at greater leisure and to a different outcome. In the novel, the comic resolution of *Artichoke*'s escape interlude is transformed into a comi-tragic response of long years' standing. This time the misfit is the woman in the case: Laura Rutherford, an unhappy Michigan lumber heiress who finds a temporary alternative to the sterility of her arranged marriage in a heated summer affair with one Winger Burns, foreman of the local road gang at a Rocky Mountain resort. Her story is told in the retrospection of forty years later by her aging son Jay who was a boy of fourteen at the



time and has now decided to write a novel about this, the most affecting experience of his life as well as of his mother's. As inheritor of the lumber fortune, he has lived a sedentary life in a prestigious Detroit suburb observing the passing scene bemusedly from the favoured position of his wing-back chair.

The time focus of *Reflections on a Mountain Summer* alternates between Jay's attempts to recover that one "magic" season of his adolescence and his present-day relationship with his own family, composed of his brittle menopausal wife Patricia and his discreetly independent daughter Debbie, both of whom feel that Jay has already been too long absorbed with his past at the expense of their present. The dual time frame of *Reflections* gives Joanna Glass a fuller rein to the mordant comedy of urban futility begun in *American Modern*, here in combination with what Jay recalls as the more desirable provinciality of his brief Canadian past in Buena Vista, Alberta, in 1932.

In a continuation from her dramatic writing, Glass renders character here the most vividly through the speaking voice, the first person protagonist's in particular. With Jay she develops and integrates her two established approaches to character through speech, here more extensively combining the interior and external modes: the narrative and reflective mode of *Canadian Gothic's* individual points of view, for which fiction provides the more direct and expansive access; and dialogue, minimally narrated and, as in *Artichoke*, finding its comic core in the ritual patterns of the family exchange, particularly in the present-day scenes of *Reflections*. Jay is also something of an Archie and Jake in reverse, their comic provinciality transformed into his wry urbanity: from his side-line perspective as a member of the idle rich, he can also comment on the comedy and pain of the scene beyond the dry dailiness of his own uneasy domestic truce.

In this character, as some reviewers were quick to note, Joanna Glass, a woman novelist, has created an entirely convincing male protagonist both as man and boy,<sup>22</sup> attributable perhaps to the dramatist's innate ability to distance herself from her creations. But in common with his creator in one important respect, is Jay's endowment with a theatrical percept of life's small as well as large moments, his own and other people's. Like Gibson he is "intimately acquainted with sorrow" (Gibson lost his parents young as did Jay his surrogate father, Winger Burns). Jay is also a misfit who rather excels at self-dramatization, but he also excels at the more detached dramatic rendering of scenes in which he himself is in the observer role: for example, himself in dialogue with Patricia as he sardonically recounts her inebriated indiscretions at a party the night before. Better still is Jay's reconstruction of his mother Laura's impassioned monologue to the silent listener, her adolescent son, the night Winger departs for good. The possibilities of dramatic voice in fiction are consistently realized in *Reflections on a Mountain Summer*, although more so in their individual time frames than coherently in the novel as a whole.

As in the plays, again most particularly in *Canadian Gothic* and to a degree in *Artichoke*, Glass's structure for the novel is primarily determined by her attempt to reveal the past as the shaping influence of the present.<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly what gives *Reflections* its particular ironic liveliness is Jay's way of presenting the inanities and absurdities of a Detroit suburban present in constant collision with his determined reconstruction of his Canadian past. The effect as a whole, however, is not totally organic. While Laura's story with its direct repercussions, past and present, is coherently traced by Jay's narrative, his too frequent present-time digressions beyond the immediate concerns of the Rutherford family are distracting to the novel's past/present focus. Too often Joanna Glass seems to be using his loquaciousness as the excuse for clever sallies into the social or sociological surfaces of contemporary life in the automotive city. The result is a polarization rather

than a unification of the novel's two time structures; the strong coherence of Laura's story lies in uneasy juxtaposition to Jay's sometimes unfocused anecdotal ramblings. While ambitious in its scope, *Reflections on a Mountain Summer* does not maintain a fully satisfactory control of the dimensions it aspires to integrate.

In a different way the problem of controlling an ambitious structure was also to arise in Joanna Glass's next work for the stage, the Manitoba Theatre Centre commission in 1976 of *The Last Chalice*, much later to be revised as *Play Memory*. This commission and her growing reputation in the Canadian theatre with productions of her other plays encouraged the continuation of her Canadian themes, in this case the autobiographical study that she had already tentatively approached in a short story, "At the King Edward Hotel", published that same year. The theme of the destructive father had already appeared in several guises in Glass's work: Jack, in *Canadian Gothic*; Jimmy Rutherford, Jay's other parent in *Reflections*, as well as in the brief sketch of Jimmy's own father. The latter is described as a swindling Toledo stock-broker who, when caught, lapsed into alcoholism, leaving his children to survive as best they could against his indebtedness to the bootlegger. The last straw for Jimmy was the middle-of-the-night removal of his ornate walnut bedroom door in exchange for whiskey, an episode repeated in *Play Memory*. In the short story, the alcoholic father spends his days in a Saskatoon beer parlour ruminating nostalgically about a glowing Nova Scotia youth in contrast to the inhospitable prairie, his unspecified failure in business and an irate wife at home. Joanna Glass was now to dramatize the story more completely with the figure of Cameron MacKenzie (re-named MacMillan in *Play Memory*), her most ambitious stage character to date.

With Cam she is also in part returning to the theme of Scots- Canadian temperamentality first identified in *Artichoke's* Margaret Morley as a person whose pride "is special". Like Margaret, Cam openly and uncompromisingly nourishes a resentment of long standing against a personal betrayal. But for him, unlike Margaret, there is no "special solution",<sup>24</sup> no possible occasion for the self-vindication that will turn events around. His accommodation to pain and bitterness is unrepentant alcoholism and its penalty is the physical and emotional abuse of his innocent family. Even so, there is still an appealing individuality in Cam, the remnants of a proud and spirited man who refuses to be either anonymous or ordinary, whose sardonic wit and preposterous conviction of Nova Scotian ancestral superiority seem to set him apart from the commonplace categories of alcoholic case history.

Fresh from her excursion into the shifting time structures of her novel, in *The Last Chalice* version Joanna Glass was now attempting a further step by devising a purely dramatic rather than narrative recollection of the past that takes the form of Cam's hallucinatory projections under alcoholic stress. In these scenes the "boys" of Cam's one-time tobacco company sales staff appear on stage to enact with him real and fantasy versions of their betrayal in a war-time gas coupon swindle. This had been initiated by Cam himself so that his "boys" could get the extra mileage they needed to earn their livings in financially austere times. But when the company discovered the misdemeanor, the salesmen conveniently forgot their pledge of a "united front" to protect the boss and Cam was ignominiously fired. These scenes are themselves an interesting expressionistic stage experiment in single point-of-view, but since the emphasis of the play is more on present condition than past cause, they lose focus in other digressive excesses, for example in Cam's frequent monologues addressed to the picture of a favourite dog, or in his outrageously unanonymous obscene phone calls when his wife Ruth's back is turned. Altogether there is too much of a one-man show about *The Last Chalice* without a firm sense of its dramatic direction. To an extent Joanna Glass has created a character in search of a play.

The clearest line of conflict in the play's present, however, is in the opposed social backgrounds of Cam and his wife Ruth, presumably an unimportant factor in the heyday of their marriage, but now contentious in its decline. Cam is the uppity eastern Canadian Wasp whose ancestors were given a Nova Scotia land grant for service at Waterloo, also a gift of six chalices of which only one now remains out of the bootlegger's grasp. Ruth is the semi-literate daughter of an Austrian prairie sod-buster. Ironically, while she is scrubbing floors to keep them all alive, Cam is indulging in élitist debate with his "Bohunk St. Bernard", Melzewski, who has become prosperous on the artifacts of Cam's "aristocratic" past. What we are told was once a genial "embroidery" to his life has become a pretentious absurdity. Yet his refusal to be faceless has its tragic note as well: to conform is to be common like Ruth or, worse still, to put himself in the same category as the petty betrayers of his past.

The much pared down and restructured *Play Memory*, 1983, serves the material more organically. It replaces Cam's private reliving of the past with *Reflection's* narrative frame device in which the daughter Jean speaks from the retrospective perspective of her own adulthood, introducing and participating in the now chronologically ordered and realistically oriented flashbacks that comprise the body of the revised play. There is some reduction of the extravagance and witty arrogance of Cam's élitist personality, also a diminishing of regional divisiveness. But there is more focus on the nature of the relationship between Cam and Ruth and more explicit concentration on the effect of Cam's condition on his family life. In *Play Memory*, the betrayal of wife and child and its consequences provide a stronger dramatic counterpoint to Cam's own betrayal by fairweather friends, giving a clearer through-line to the material than in its preliminary version. There is also the re-emergence of a motif from *Reflections on a Mountain Summer*, that of children learning to forgive their parents. While in *The Last Chalice* the strongest focus by the end is on Cam's brutal rejection of his family for an ebullient spree of despair with the thirty-six bottles from the sale of the last family relic, *Play Memory* offers a gentler reading of the character. Cam rejects wife and daughter so that they might now take up elsewhere the "normal" life he has come to despise. In Jean's words, "the most admirable thing he had done in his life was to let us go".

Perhaps Joanna Glass's best achievement in the revised script is to make Cam's flow of talk function more effectively as revelation of the man behind the voice: to show his talk to be as much a defense as a weapon. Thus, for example, the new text is altered on the matter of his aristocratic pretensions, which he is now shown to resurrect only after he has lost his job. His bravado about the past is the compensation of a man who has lost his present. That there are still moments when he wants that present back emerges wistfully late in Act 1: in a verbal onslaught between husband and wife about "Kraut peasant" and "old bones in graveyards" with Jean as enforced audience, the argument takes on a ritualized zest; its humorous undercurrent of conscious performance dissolves the tension into a resemblance of the old affection. Certainly throughout his decline and perhaps for his whole life, Cam has been essentially a performer. For years his survival kit has been stocked only with words: "Appropriate noises" to amuse and cajole the bootlegger; provocative insults to his wife for her humble survival tactics; contemptuous words to his A.A. sponsors for the banality of their good will. In Cam MacMillan the playwright exposes the hollowness of speech by probing beneath its self-dramatizing surfaces. Her use of Jean as participating narrating voice provides the means of ordering the play's thirty-year chronology in a more tightly controlled version of Jay's past-to-present point-of-view function in *Reflections on a Mountain Summer*. In *Play Memory* the novelist and dramatist in Joanna Glass achieve a new state of equilibrium.

In the years intervening the two versions of *Play Memory*, Joanna Glass returned to stage comedy with *To*

*Grandmother's House We Go*, 1981, in which she continues, albeit in milder tones, her ironic characterization of middle-class society begun in *American Modern* and continued in *Reflections on a Mountain Summer*. In earlier works the key characters live in wry or eccentric accommodation to their perceived alienation from the mainstream of conventional family and social values. But in *To Grandmother's House We Go*, as the very title suggests, the younger generation at least has yet to reach any such stage of social or self irony. The controlling motif is a comic reversal of Glass's usual form of generational conflict. The disorder in this family originates in the children rather than the parents. Unable to handle their own freedoms, either in marriage, parenthood or career, they have a recurring dependence on what they take to be the permanent stability of home; they are bewildered when their elders begin to take a different view of the matter.

This is the most conventionally dramatic of Joanna Glass's plays to date in the sense that character and event are developed entirely within the realistic stage conventions of time and place. The occasion is Thanksgiving at the decaying family seat in Connecticut inhabited by the aging grandmother Emma, her elderly Irish maid, her retired brother Jared and her widowed daughter Harriet, mother of Paul, Beatrice and Muffy who are all guests for the occasion along with Paul's new girlfriend Twyla, a Californian real-estate agent. Glass's gift for sharp portraiture through dialogue provides a mini-gallery of social types amusingly drawn. The first half of the play is a leisurely paced series of expository conversations that establish the character, those present and those about to arrive. It eventually becomes apparent that each of the grandchildren has designs on Grandie's extended hospitality for their various recuperative needs. Her sudden death, however, provides an ironic twist to their hopes. While nothing is actually resolved of their emotional confusion or self-absorption, by the end of the play the virtue of self-reliance is asserted from an unexpected source in the person of their mother, Harriet.

Harriet emerges as another of Joanna Glass's independent minded women initiated with Natalie in *Canadian Gothic*. Widowed when she was thirty and forced to raise her children in her parents' home, Harriet, to all intents and purposes has hitherto lived subserviently to the other generations. Unlike Natalie, who made her child Jean a part of her own life, Harriet accommodated hers to her children's. Since their departure, however, like Natalie before Jean's birth, Harriet has become absorbed in her art, Christmas card designs for money, but has a more profound commitment to still-life at her leisure. Her children expect Harriet to carry on the family nurturing now that their grandmother is gone, but to their surprise their usually reticent mother makes a declaration of independence that confounds them all, echoing the spirit if not the circumstances of *Artichoke's* Margaret Morley.

Once more Joanna Glass is primarily delineating her characters through their individualized verbal fluency, ranging from grandmother Emma's wry gentility and Jared's clichés of art history (of which he is a retired professor) to the banal idiom of Twyla's trendy materialism. This is a play in which all but Harriet talk a good deal about themselves, creating an essentially verbal comedy of manners in which the dramatic action primarily emerges in character revelation, collision and response to unforeseen events. While *New York Times* reviewer Frank Rich pronounced Emma's death as "dramatically unearned"<sup>25</sup> and *New Yorker* critic Brendan Gill found the play more novelistic than dramatic in its slow unfolding of character and relationships,<sup>26</sup> in the context of Joanna Glass's other writing it seems quite clear that she was intending a new variation of her ongoing exploration of the ironies of speech as a revelation of character. In this play the loquacious agonies of the several self-dramatizers in this distraught family scenario ultimately pale in the face of the normally reticent Harriet's sudden articulation of her own response to them all. This is the real dramatic core of *To Grandmother's House We Go*, pointing to the realities beneath the surface of speech as Glass was soon to do

in *Play Memory*, in this case the realities of Harriet's own character and those of her egotistic off-spring.

Joanna Glass's most recent work, her second novel, *Woman Wanted*, published in May 1985, provides the useful basis for a summing up of her writing achievements in both drama and fiction to this point in her career. If *Play Memory* demonstrates the novelist integrating with the dramatist, *Woman Wanted* shows the dramatist integrating with the novelist. In the former, the catalytic character of the play is presented through the eyes of the daughter, Jean, the past turned into a dramatic present through Jean's on-stage narrative reflection. In the new novel, the action takes place entirely in an on-going present (similar to the contemporary scenes in *Reflections*) through the present tense speaking voice of the catalytic character herself, in the person of Emma Rowena Riley. Emma's interior voice relates the moment to moment activity of the novel as well as her own responses to it, almost as stage directions to the dialogue that it frames. This is a novel of both exterior and interior theatre, so to speak, a play-novel in which Emma is herself both dramatic voice, revealing the public and private dimension of self, and dramatist, revealing the other characters largely through her recording of their speech.

As the comedy *Artichoke* was in some measure antecedent to Glass's first novel, so *Woman Wanted* has its origins in a play, in this case a film script written and only apparently discarded in 1975. In bare outline, the plot of both film script and novel are much the same, telling the piquant story of the daughter of Boston Irish immigrants who is lately divorced from a homosexual husband, Michael Riley. For a few months following, Emma becomes housekeeper in New Haven, Connecticut to a widowed Yale physics professor, Richard Goddard, and his neurotic poet son, Wendell. Each fall in love with her largely as a result of the conciliatory role she is able to play for them, father and son having been at odds most of their lives through resentments relating to the late Marion Goddard. As lover first to Richard and briefly to Wendell, Emma discovers that what she herself most needs in this complicated surrogate family situation is pregnancy; she wants a child to give her life a personal identity and continuity that neither of these men, preoccupied with their own respective healing processes, takes into account. While Emma is an essentially old-fashioned young woman with traditional domestic yearnings, she also has a modern independent streak. Thus, at the point when she has in some probability achieved her goal, she silently retreats from the Goddard world, no longer "a blank slate aching to be written on" after the trauma of her own failed marriage, now content that one of the two men she has in different ways nurtured and loved is the father of her unborn child.

The novel explores the material more subtly and complexly than the play, particularly in its enrichment of the character of Emma through her extensive private as well as public speech. Emma's inner and spoken voice are of the same tone and quality, her thinking patterns presented as fully articulated dramatic monologues that flow seamlessly into the speech of her conversation with others. In *Woman Wanted* discursiveness is no longer a structural distraction as in *Reflections on a Mountain Summer*, but an established turn of mind in the mentally loquacious *Emma*. While she habitually draws on the reservoir of her past, such moments are always presented as part of the fabric of her present consciousness and are usually reconstructed in the immediacy of dialogue format. In this manner, off-stage figures of Emma's previous life, three in particular, become vivid speaking voices within the on-going mental theatre of her present. These include her ex-husband Michael, an actor and Harvard drop-out who educated her to the arts and in some measure to the manners of the genteel society in which she now finds herself; also her parents who function in something of an Archie and Jake choral role and, although physically absent, are as much a part of her present life as they were a guiding present in her Boston years. Peg, the sagacious Irish washerwoman, and Kevin, the aphoristic ne'er do well, (faint echoes of Ruth and Cam), seem to have endowed their daughter with a sense of humour

and a certain down-to-earth objectivity, qualities that help Emma, at the age of thirty-six, to survive this strange interlude while she grows towards her new sense of self and purpose.

Also, in *Woman Wanted* Joanna Glass develops a new variation on her characteristic central action of the escape interlude, this time seen from the perspective of the outsider character who, for better or worse, is the transforming agent in the lives of troubled people, such as Ben Redleaf in *Canadian Gothic*, for example, or Gibson McFarland in *Artichoke*. In this regard, however, Emma more resembles Winger Burns of *Reflections*, the character whose essentially normal instincts are what most benefit the unhappy Rutherford mother and son for a time: as lover-husband to Laura and surrogate father to Jay. Emma plays a complex combination of curative female roles for the two men of the Goddard household, as lover-wife to Richard and lover-mother to Wendell. The difference in her case, from what we are allowed to see of Winger's, is that Emma herself gains her own benefit from that interlude; even so, as enigmatically as Winger she eventually slips out of the lives of her misfits, leaving them unaware of the direction her life will now take. Joanna Glass's advance on the handling of such a situation in *Woman Wanted* is that here the absence of final confrontation is more richly compensated by the piquant dramatic irony emerging in the last third of her play-novel. For all his good will, Richard Goddard is infinitely less sensitive to Emma's own particular needs than even his son; instead, he is trying to make her over into a different person by offering her a Yale education. Wendell, on the other hand, while more aware of what Emma wants, is not only impossibly young (at twenty-three) but is also highly preoccupied with his poetic genius and its related complications. What the novel most effectively conveys, therefore, is a sense of widening discrepancy between what is said and not said aloud. In the rather flat characterization of the original film script, Glass had found no method for this second dimension, that of Emma's rich inner voice.

The combination of outer and inner in *Woman Wanted* suggests that increasingly Joanna Glass is finding fictional forms less constrictive than conventional realistic dramatic structures. In the light of this, the narrative elements in her plays may be seen largely as attempts to bring drama closer to the equivalent of fiction; the structure of *Canadian Gothic*, for example, is a foreshadowing in small of *Woman Wanted*. Yet without the dramatist's instinct for the immediacies and ironies of character revelation through speech and silence, her fiction would be much less vivid.

Not only is Emma Riley the most fully articulated of Joanna Glass's growing gallery of strong minded women, she is also the most resourceful in shedding the tenacious grip of unhappy elements in her past. With respect to this motif, initiated in the character of Harriet in *To Grandmother's House We Go* and also implicit in the narrating voice of Jean in *Play Memory*, Glass herself may be subsuming the loosening of her more obvious writer's ties to her Canadian past; certainly since *The Last Chalice* of 1976 she has initiated no new Canadian material (since *Play Memory* is the completion of that earlier play rather than an entirely new start). Her alertness to cultural dualities gives a strong direction to her work in its initial stages as does her dual preoccupation with fictional as well as dramatic forms to the later. However, in tracing the progression of her writing up to its present point, it seems more and more appropriate to view Joanna Glass's artistic progression as whole cloth, noting an increasing assimilation of cultural diversities in the themes and reconciliation of formal dichotomies in the structure with which she began as a young Canadian writer in exile.

## Notes

1. She became an American citizen in 1962 because she felt the need to vote in the country that had become her home. (Letter to Tim Porteous, May 23, 1974.) The chief sources of biographical and production information are from the Joanna Glass Collection, University of Calgary Special Collections, and from Joanna Glass herself to Diane Bessai.
2. Letter to Elliot Martin, July 6, 1971.
3. Published in *Winter's Tales*, 22, James Wright, ed. (London: St. Martin's Press, 1976).
4. Jane Somerville, "Reflections of Joanna Glass", *Globe and Mail*, October 16, 1982, p. 3.
5. "Playwright Joanna Glass draws on Canadian Roots", *Globe and Mail*, June 11, 1977.
6. Letter to Diane Bessai, December 12, 1979.
7. Registered copyright, April 13, 1966: revised title and some names, May 5, 1971.
8. From Audrey Wood to Joanna Glass, April 18, 1966.
9. Julia Maskoulis, "Themes Walk on Stage Out of Playwright's Life", *Montreal Gazette*, January 15, 1977, p. 35.
10. Letter to Joanna Glass, June 14, 1971.
11. The biographical nature of this piece, based on the playwright's experience in 1968 as social secretary to Francis Biddle (former attorney general) during the last year of his life, offended his widow Katherine. Joanna Glass withdrew the script from circulation as a result.
12. Letter to Lynne Meadow, March 14, 1973.
13. October 2, 1976.
14. See *Canada's Playwrights: A Biographical Guide*, Don Rubin and Alison Cranmer-Bung, eds. (Downsview: C.T.R. Publications, 1980), p. 77.
15. The Tarragon production was followed in the new year by Centaur, Montreal, January 6-February 2, 1977; Press Theatre, St. Catharines, January 12-22; Persephone, Saskatoon, April 22-May 7; Victoria Playhouse, Petrolia, July 2-August 11.
16. Other film scripts include *Surfacing*, 1976 (option relinquished); *Hagar's Children*, 1970.
17. In the interview with Gina Mallet (see note 13), Glass remarked that she sees "all life in terms of speech. People reveal themselves not in what they say but in what they choose to leave out". In my judgement,

however, it is the effort to combine public and private speech in certain works that gives Joanna Glass's writing its unique quality. For John Parr's response to these remarks see "Reflections of Joanna Glass", *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, No. 20, 1977, p. 169.

18. "Sassy in Saskatchewan?", *Toronto Theatre Review*, April 1977.
19. "Nuggets of theatrical gold", *Calgary Herald*, November 23, 1972.
20. Jack Kapica, "Light shines through Centaur productions", *Montreal Gazette*, November 28, 1975.
21. Letter to Elliot Martin, July 6, 1971.
22. For example, Dermot Summers, "Mannered Prose", *The Irish Times*, June 7, 1975, *Evening News*, July 3, 1975.
23. John Parr, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
24. Letter to Elliot Martin, *op. cit.*
25. "Theatre: Eva Le Gallienne in 'To Grandmother's House'". January 16, 1981.
26. "The Theatre: The Woods Beyond Hartford", January 26, 1981.

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*The Joanna M. Glass papers: an inventory of the archive at the University of Calgary Libraries.* Compilers: Jean M. Moore [and] Jean F. Tener. Editors: Jean F. Tener [and] Apollonia Steele. Biocritical essay: Diane Bessai. [Calgary]: University of Calgary Press [c1986]