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Article abstract

Douglas Glover posits that good fiction contains a rough tension between postmodern concerns with the structure of language and the meaning, or "aboutness," of the narrative. The philosophical premise of Glover's "My Romance" and "Iglaf and Swan" rests on the Sartrean notion that desire is ultimately a longing for nothingness. The "aboutness" of each story is the absence created by the death of a child, which triggers in the parent an existential confrontation with, and a desire to fill, the resultant void of nothingness. The narrative then becomes an allegory for the writing process itself. Just as the dead child becomes a symbol of absence with which the parent futilely seeks unification, language is only ever a linguistic signifier that can never reflect pure meaning. The desire to bridge the gap, or void, between signifier and signified can only be achieved through an ethical recognition of the other, which Glover demonstrates at both the thematic and textual levels.

# Romancing the "Mysterious Bonds of Syntax": Allegory and the Ethics of Desire in Douglas Glover's "My Romance" and "Iglaf and Swan"

Adam Beardsworth

> Desire is a lack of being[;] … it bears witness to the existence of lack in the being of human reality.
>
> — Jean-Paul Sartre

Theorizing the ambiguous relationship between desire and experience, Jean-Paul Sartre realized desire's precarious, if not paradoxical dependence upon the tension between presence and absence: desire's very insatiability testifies to its origins beyond objective conciliation. It is upon this philosophical premise that Douglas Glover hinges his short stories "My Romance" and "Iglaf and Swan." In both stories, Glover explores the epistemological problems that arise when those objects that we desire most are traumatically displaced only to reveal the lack that lies at the core of being. Reluctant to revel in postmodern incertitude, Glover's stories demonstrate a compelling movement from a confrontation with desire and nothingness, to a realization that the only redeeming desire, however ephemeral, is that which one finds in an "other," or in the recognition of a mutually intrinsic desire for the infinite in one's object of love. Demonstrating a concern with the proximity between the compulsion to satisfy sensual appetite and the inclination towards linguistic expression, Glover allows his exploration of longing to extend beyond the parameters of his narrative and into the realm of allegory. From the self-reflexive title "My Romance," with its coy allusion to both narrator and author, to Iglaf and Swan's tragic conflation of the desire for the other with the will for literary acumen, Glover's stories

foreground an ostensible preoccupation with the link between desire, art, and death. Recognizing language as central to all experience, Glover, in "My Romance" and "Iglaf and Swan," allegorically invokes writing as a medium compelled by insatiable desire, a manifestation of our human impulse to objectively inscribe our fascination with the pure loss, death, trauma, and love at the limits of human experience.

In his essay "The Novel as Poem," Glover, following Vladimir Nabokov, makes a critical distinction between a novel (or story's) "aboutness" and the formal methods used to deliver its plot:

> When Nabokov makes a distinction between "what the book is about" and our "artistic appreciation" of the book, he is separating our reading of the subject, story and characters — the book's aboutness — from our appreciation of the book's so-called artistic qualities, the details we would notice if we looked at a novel the way we look at a painting. (12)

Recognizing that in the postmodern novel, "Reality, meaning aboutness, the good, God and the self are pushed away into the realms of the unconscious, the unspeakable and the unfathomable," and have been replaced by a concern with the structures of language, Glover, in a later interview, nevertheless acknowledges that good fiction ultimately resides in the two categories' mutual co-dependence: "Every novel contains elements of both in a rough tension with each other" (Bryson 3). It is precisely this "rough tension" that informs "My Romance." Glover opens his story with death, the most human of events; thus on its literal level, the story is "about" death. However, by emphatically beginning with death, as traumatically evoked in the sentence "Our boy Neddy died when he was three months old," Glover simultaneously invokes an encounter with the philosophical and linguistic structures that belie and inform not only his narrative, but indeed all existence. The tragic loss of the infant Neddy opens us to the absence at the existential core of both the story's nameless narrator and his wife Annie. No longer the tangible object of their desire, Neddy comes to symbolize that desire's lack. Confronted by this lack, Glover's narrator and his wife are thrust into a traumatic realization of the incommensurable nature of desire within the realm of presence, a realization that ruptures their faith in the measures of objective experience and plummets them into a difficult search for recovery in a life marked by absence. Paradoxically, it is also this moment of loss that forces each char-

acter to experience desire in its purest form for the first time. The narrator's intense longing for his lost son demonstrates that

> The "object" of human desire is neither the object that saturates a need (which, as Sartre also says, is never anything but a "state" closed in itself) nor the fixed and preestablished object of instinct; it is, properly speaking, their negation…. it is the vanishing "object" of the symbol, an infinitely variable and vicariable object, because it is always already deferred and "metonymized" in the ideal signifier that annuls it. (Borch-Jacobsen 201)

When Neddy dies, he becomes the negated object of his parents' natural desire. His absence from objective experience establishes him as an ideal signifier that has been infinitely deferred. The strength of their parental desire for contact with their son, however, is increased exponentially by its incommensurable nature. What was once a yearning that could be appeased by being in their son's presence is radically reconfigured as a yearning for Neddy's ideal symbol which, having been negated at the moment of his death, remains perpetually absent. For both the narrator and Annie this desire for the absent Neddy evolves into a complex and psychologically damaging relationship with the impossible: to remain estranged from Neddy's presence, in the absence of proactive forms of psychological mediation, will only exacerbate their profound distress; to give in to their desire for reunification with the absent Neddy, they must also become negated objects, positing their desire as a longing for the impossible absence obtained only in death. The establishment of such a link between desire and death allows Glover simultaneously to evoke the story's emotional "aboutness" by making apparent the emotional reality of such loss, and to heighten the story's philosophical concerns by commencing an investigation into the primordial nature of desire: he allows the "rough tensions" between form and style to dictate the pattern of the narrative.

The story's structural pattern commences with the narrator's search for self-recovery. Faced with unspeakable grief following the loss of his child, he feels an overwhelming desire to have his son back; yet in so doing, he paradoxically desires a negated object, an absence. As Borch-Jacobsen notes, "to say that desire desires to be desired means that desire (the subject) desires itself as desire (as subject): it wants "not to be" an object — or, more simply, it wants not to *be*. Desire is desire of nothing,

desire of the impossible, desire of death" (203). In becoming aware (at least subconsciously) that his desire for Neddy can be reconciled only from a subjective perspective and is, therefore, insatiable within the living world, Glover's narrator cannot understand "how anyone could live through such sadness" (23). The void created by Neddy's absence is symbolized by the narrator's persistent urge to return to Neddy's room and contemplate his mobile: "I was playing 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star,' watching the bears and stars circle above the place where Ned would have slept" (24). The mobile circles an absence, the place where Neddy would have been. As the narrator contemplates the empty space beneath the mobile, the object of his desire is no longer Neddy, it is the sign of Neddy as the negated ideal symbol which, after the child's death, can only signify absence, configuring the narrator's desperate longing as a desire for nothingness, for the impossible. Like the "prickly-pear" nursery rhyme in Eliot's "The Hollow Men," the mobile above Neddy's crib spins round and round in an endless cycle, suggesting the hopeless search the narrator will endure as he struggles to reconcile the void left by his son's death.

Once confronted with this impossible desire for absence, both the narrator and his wife, unable to console each other, are forced to search for means of coming to terms with Neddy's death on their own. As the narrator writes, "Neither of us could abide the chilly emptiness we had fallen into, yet neither of us had the least idea how to climb out" (24). For his part, the narrator eventually seeks to fill this void with an extramarital affair with Neddy's former pediatrician. In Dr. Tithonous, Glover's narrator finds someone who has also been crippled by loss and who is desperate for reprieve from grief. Haunted by her sister's death from leukemia and her husband's departure soon thereafter, Dr. Tithonous, like the narrator, seeks to consolidate emptiness. The two find temporary solace for their heartsickness in a sexual relationship. Aware of his longing's association with a desire for pure desire, Glover's narrator nevertheless finds in Dr. Tithonous an object, an individual with whom he can share in a doomed search for the fulfillment of that pure desire. The proximity between the desire for pure desire, or pure nothingness, and sexual desire is one that has not gone unnoticed by psychologists and literary theorists. Once an individual has resolved the inherent similarity between the object of desire and the manifestation of its subject, he or she must then find a means of seeking this desire within the actual world; however, "The problem … is that … this signifier [of pure desire] must be

'sexualized,' made into an erotic 'object,' so that the doctrine of desire can be reconciled with analytic experience" (Borch-Jacobsen 204). On one level, that object becomes, for Glover's narrator, Dr. Tithonous (and vice versa); yet the matter is more complicated than this. Since each has confronted the pure desire that is absent within, the desire that each now seeks is one that must be subjectively manifested while, paradoxically, symbolized by an object capable of embodying the "subject by not being the subject" (Borch-Jacobsen 204). For the narrator, this signifier is the Lacanian phallus, "not the organ of sexual pleasure, whether penis or clitoris, but the transsexual 'simulacrum' … of its common absence; not the man's erect penis or the woman's fertile womb, but the sterile crescent of desire, the symbol of their impossible conjunction" (Borch-Jacobsen 204).

The presence of the phallus as signifier of this paradoxical desire is made evident during Dr. Tithonous's compassionate arrival following Neddy's death: "Dr. Tithonous cradled her head and whispered. She touched my wife's breasts, she kissed her temples, she felt the baby's cheek with the back of her hand. … I caught myself in Annie's full-length mirror against the closet door. … I had an erection, I suddenly noticed. The wild incongruity of this almost drove me to my knees" (27). The narrator's erection functions as both a symbol for, and a manifestation of, the problematic desire for an object reflected in the absence at the core of the subject. It suggests at once a physical desire for conciliation with the lost object, and a realization that such conciliation, as signified by the crescent-moon phallus (only a partial circle, a desire not completed) is impossible. In the phallus, the subject recognizes a demand within him- or herself to both retrieve desire and to be the object of desire: "the object is 'annulled' in its particularity and 'raised … to the function of the signifier' of the other's love. Now it is an object in which the subject loves himself (a signifier in which he signifies himself)" (Borch-Jacobsen 208). Given that such self-signification is an inherently subjective experience, the consummation of a pure desire with an "other" object of desire is impossible. Thus, although Glover's narrator and Dr. Tithonous recognize each other as objects of desire and desire each other's presence as a means of filling the absence left by their respective traumatic experiences, the subjectivity of their respective desires alienates them from the possibility of objective conciliation. Instead, their desires return in the alienated form of the "other" as object of need, forcing them to either continue to at-

tempt to satiate them sexually, or to admit that true consummation cannot be obtained in the object of need, that it exists only in negation.

Plagued by the knowledge that sexual desire, as signified by the erotic phallus, is merely a substitute for the lost object, the narrator seeks a means of coming to terms with his crisis. However, any such conciliation, as Glover seems to acknowledge, is impeded by the self's status as a being within language. Given that the absent object of desire resides in its linguistic negation, knowledge of that object is complicated by the object's corroboration with linguistic systems. Though in Freudian terms desire begins the moment the child is born into language, desire does not end at the moment of the child's death; rather, the absent object of desire remains present linguistically as a signified permanently removed from its signifiers. However, Glover does not use such philosophical structures simply to interrogate the nature of language and reality from a poststructural perspective; rather, he does so to capture the sense of longing and confusion that such structures instigate within the human psyche: he allows them to contribute to the story's "aboutness" while simultaneously using his investigation of such structures to reflect and inform the writing process in a self-reflexive manner. The story's title "My Romance," for example, functions as a double signifier, literally suggesting the narrator's complicated relationship with the notion of romance and allegorically suggesting Glover's own "romance" with the interstices of language, death, and desire. Other such self-reflexive moments are casually weaved into the narrator's dialogue: "Language is a machine of desire. It works along an axis defined by hope and future. When there is no hope, no imaginable future, the mysterious bonds of syntax, the wires that convey the energy of meaning from word to word, disintegrate" (26). Here Glover's narrator draws an overt correlation between the hope required for one to continue within the world and the hope required for language to signify on a meaningful level. Given that desire requires the illusion of potential unification with a linguistic signified, either present or ideal, one can surmise that desire itself cannot exist without language, "the mysterious bonds of syntax."

Such an assertion draws an overt correlation with the practice of writing in general, and the practice of writing "desire" in particular. As Maurice Blanchot posits, "Language can only begin with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself. … This formulation explains why litera-

ture's ideal has been the following: to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing" ("Literature" 43). Just as the narrator's desire begins with absence, with the lack created by Neddy's death, and just as his insatiable desire — as manifested in his affair with Dr. Tithonous — demonstrates an unrequitable urge to unite with that absence, Glover's text itself functions as a "machine of desire": it perceives the absence of meaning at the centre of understanding and desires to fill that absence by writing it, an act that ultimately proves itself as impossible as the narrator's desire for reconciliation with the ideal object. Both the narrator as desiree and Glover as writer are determined by the paradox of negation, always at the limit of desire's fulfillment and aware of that fulfillment's essential impossibility. In the same say that the narrator's desires return to him in an alienated fashion following his affairs with Dr. Tithonous, the writer's desire for articulation of the absolute is immediately subverted by that desire's linguistic grounding. As Blanchot asserts in "The Essential Solitude":

> The writer belongs to the work, but what belongs to him is only a book, a mute accumulation of sterile words…. The writer who experiences this void simply believes that the work is unfinished, and he believes that with a little more effort and the luck of some favorable moments, he — and only he — will be able to finish it. And so he sets back to work. But what he wants to finish, by himself, remains something interminable, it ties him to an illusory labor. (65)

The writer's work returns to him in the alienated form of the book, forcing him or her to recognize the disconjunction between the object of his/her labour and his/her desire to articulate the void, to express meaning beyond "sterile words." Thus he/she goes on writing, demonstrating a fascination with absence, with the infinite not unlike Glover's protagonist's compulsive desire for union with the void left by his lost son.

On the level of "aboutness," Glover's narrator finds himself searching for solace on the literal margins of society. His affair with Dr. Tithonous, for example, takes place on "Route 9," on the margins of the city at a "little motel called the Royal which climbs up a shattered limestone ridge and hangs in a state of instability and tension with the scrub pine, sumac and poison ivy trembling down the steep slopes" (28). This search for self at city limits exists in "rough tension" with Glover's "artistic qualities" by metaphorically linking the literal limits with Derrida's notion of margins as sites that decry the limits of linguistic and social

experience. Writing, within the paternalistic logos of Western civilization, exhibits the traits of exile, "an 'orphan', one whose 'welfare cannot be assured by any [paternal] attendance or assistance'" (Derrida qtd in Norris 41). Though Glover allegorically invokes this sense of writing as "orphan" by orphaning the narrator's son through negation, he furthers the allegory by introducing the narrator to a liminal character living on the margins of society, the scapegoat figure Mike. Mike is described as a "loner, which is short for a divorced part-time woodcutter who spends most of his time gambling at the harness track or riding around the Devil's Den on his four-wheel ATV, getting drunk" (30). As a scapegoat, Mike exists on the edge of society and serves as a reminder of that margin: he is a deviant tolerated by society only in the hope of keeping average individuals from falling into a similar state of alterity. Traumatized and bereft of his object of pure desire, Glover's narrator comes to identify (briefly) with Mike and his marginalized status. However, Glover's invocation of Mike as a scapegoat figure extends beyond the text's literal level. Mike also allegorically reflects writing's relationship to the presence of pure speech and thought. As Norris notes, "if writing ever presumed … to deny the paternal law of speech, then it would have to be accounted a bastard son, or an orphan deprived of all natural hereditary rights. For it is the passage of authority from fathers to sons … that ensures … the maintenance of properly exercised power in family and state" (40). Though he is neither an orphan nor a bastard, Mike's status within the paternalistic family line has been disrupted by his ambiguous relationship with his parents. Ben and Marge, for example, "have a Brazilian grey Monkey named Michael, which they keep in Mike's former bedroom in the owner's suite" (30). Mike's status within the family line, in a cruel and perverse sort of fashion, has been usurped by his parents' pet monkey. This misalignment of lineal privilege is exacerbated by the fact that Ben and Marge tell the narrator that "they made a will giving the motel to the Brazilian grey monkey instead of Mike, though they made Mike the executor" (32). In a twisted manner Mike's parents ostracize him from paternal lineage, dislodging his place within the conventional family paradigm, which liminalizes his familial authority and renders him a scapegoat on the margins of a society dominated by that same paternalistic logic. Just as writing can only ever exist as the bastard son of pure presence or speech, Mike's relationship with social authority is one of exile and marginalization.

As Derrida contends, "writing is in some sense a *scapegoat*, a necessary evil that society tolerates only in the hope of preventing worse ills" (Norris 42). In Mike, Glover's narrator is confronted with a vision of the limits, of the proximity to the margins of accepted logic that his compulsion to fill the void left by Neddy's death has brought him. It is therefore significant that the place to which the narrator travels with Mike is "a tract of wild country called the Devil's Den," loosely symbolizing a place at the limits of existence, proximate to the death and anguish associated with its metaphoric name. It is also significant that it is while with Mike at the Devil's Den that the narrator first begins to confront his paradoxical and compulsive desire to fill the void left by Neddy's death: "I tell Mike this thing with Neddy has put me in a state. I ask him if he thinks Annie has the moral edge on me because she just sits in the nursery weeping, zonked on Zoloft and Restoril she gets from Dr. Tithonous. I tell him I can't stand to be with her, that I am scared to death of really feeling as bad as I feel" (32). Although Mike offers very little in terms of language-based comfort, his presence as a scapegoat helps the narrator realize that his affair with Dr. Tithonous will not, ultimately, appease his desire. His trip to the absolute margins with Mike functions as a deconstructive act that allows him to see that his relation to the absent object of desire within his own family paradigm is infinitely problematic and ultimately incommensurable.

This realization instills in the narrator an awareness that it is from this flawed relation with the absence at the core of his life that he must begin to redefine his status within the world and, more specifically, his relationship with Annie. Just as language comments upon the presence of its signified by using eternally marginalized signifiers, Glover's narrator, while in the presence of the marginalized Mike, comes to the understanding that he too functions as a signifier, never able to adequately describe or satisfy the object of his desire and, thus, never able to fill that void. This realization comes to a head when the narrator returns with Mike to the motel following their sojourn to the Devil's Den only to watch Mike banish the grey Monkey that had usurped his place in the family lineage: "I can only think how heroic the monkey looks in contrast to his human brother, how satisfying a prospect his night of freedom and violent death seems.… This is the old romantic trap, I think. In what sense can it be true that the monkey's brief, sweet sojourn in the Den can be more real, more authentic, than a life in a warm cage?" (36). Here the narrator re-

alizes the inherently romantic properties of his impulse to fill his lack through deviant behaviour, both on the literal margins of society and the moral margins of ethical responsibility. The banishing of the monkey symbolizes the banishing of his desire to fill the lack through his sexual liaison; it stands as a figurative deconstruction of this possibility and allows the narrator to see that in order to go on living in the face of this sadness, he must nurture a more ethical existence that both acknowledges the absence at the core of being and accepts the paradoxes and suffering often created by that absence: he must seek an ethical means of existing within the "warm cage" of his marriage to Annie and in his life within civilized society. This all becomes clear to the narrator in the days that immediately follow his trip to the Devil's Den with Mike: "I am sick in bed for three days after this bout of drunkenness…. But it wakes me up, wakes up my moral being.… I am not going to get through this and what I am doing with Dr. Tithonous is wrong. I mean I am going to get through it. I am alive, after all. But my life has changed irrevocably" (36). It is this awareness that allows him to determine that he must cut his losses and begin to forge a new relationship with the world, one that should ethically begin with his wife, Annie.

Annie, for her part, also faces an epistemological crisis following the death of her son. While the narrator seeks to distract himself from his grief through his desperate sexual relationship, Annie falls into a deep depression that borders on madness: "Annie would wake in the night, choked with sobs, her milk seeping through the cloth of her nightgown. 'The baby's hungry. He needs to eat,' she would whisper, then curl into a tight, convulsive ball, a spasm of despair" (23). Like the narrator, Annie also comes to desire the pure sadness created by Neddy's absence. As Julia Kristeva suggests, "For this type of … depressive, sadness is in reality the only object" (qtd. in Lechte 185). In Annie's case "The melancholic does not search for meaning (constituted through a synthesis of signifier and drive affect); rather, despair or pain (*douleur*), is the melancholic's only meaning" (Lechte 185). However, Annie eventually comes to realize the inherent impossibility of resolving her grief in such a destructive manner. While her husband learns that he must resign to the world as a system that, like language, is incapable of creating a union with pure objective understanding, Annie appears to realize that participation in the world, which comes only through participation in language, will ultimately be the only means by which she can come to terms with her grief. As Kristeva

posits, "language begins with a *dénégation* … of loss.… 'I have lost an indispensable object which happens to be, in the last instance, my mother', the speaking being seems to say. 'But no, because I accept to lose her, I have not lost her (here is the *dénégation*), I can get her back in language'" (qtd. in Lechte 186). Glover suggests that Annie ultimately realizes the rehabilitating potential of such a *dénégation* when she, recognizing her husband following his trip to the Devil's, confronts him with the simple words "Hey, you" (40), suggesting that she has resigned herself to desire's incommensurability in sadness and, like him, is poised to begin again from that point of instability.

How to begin again, to posit a solid relationship in and with the world while remaining aware of the epistemological void at the centre of existence becomes the next obstacle. Both Glover's narrator and Annie, having travelled to their own respective limits, recognize that the only object into which they can put their faith, trust, and belief in the possibility of a future marred by grief is each other, a tenuous but nevertheless proactive resolution. They must learn to distinguish between raw need and a desire for the other, one that can help deepen an individual's understanding of, and relationship with, the world. According to Emmanuel Levinas, desire for the other cannot be sated if it is treated as a thing or object, which is ultimately what causes the narrator to realize that his longing for Dr. Tithonous, as an object of need, cannot satisfy the void at the core of his existence. Rather, "the metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can complete it. It is like goodness — the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it" (Glover 34). Both the narrator and Annie come to realize that their desire for Neddy cannot be sated. They also realize the self-destructive consequences of allowing that desire to lead them to avarice and melancholy. Therefore, they recentre their desirous impulses upon each other, deepening their understanding of the void that they both desire by attempting to experience that loss within each other. By recognizing and welcoming each other's vulnerability, both the narrator and Annie allow their own vulnerability to be called into question, simultaneously acknowledging their respective weakness and recognizing that without each other, they cannot viably endure in the world. Quoting Levinas, Peter Sedgwick notes that this "'welcoming of the other by the same' … initiates an ethical relation because such welcoming necessarily brings with it a challenge to the autonomy and freedom of the I. In thinking the other I must think what

is different from me, and in doing this I allow myself to be called into question" (182). This recognition and engagement of the other constitutes an ethical relationship because "the same must allow itself to be challenged by the other in the very recognition of him or her…. As such, it is 'concretely produced,' and this concrete engagement challenges the primacy of ontology that is characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition" (Sedgwick 182). Both Annie and the narrator have confronted ontological difficulties; in their desire to continue in light of the knowledge that presence can never be fully understood and that their desire for their lost child can never be satisfied, they turn to each other, an ethical gesture that forces each to confront his or her own relationship with absence while being supported by their relationship with each other. Glover evokes this understanding when his narrator, following his affair with Dr. Tithonous, recognizes the lost face of Neddy in that of his wife (i.e., in the face of the other): "And all at once I feel a welling up of love for Annie, love and passion and desire.… I want just to touch her and go on touching her for the rest of my life.… There has never been anything else I ever wanted and nothing more I will ever want" (40). The narrator realizes that this desire is an ambivalent one, wholly based upon his recognition of the other. Nevertheless, in the face of his loss, he feels ready to submit to this ambivalent, ethical desire, one that he gives the name of love:

> Beyond us there is a void, and inside us there is a void. At the centre, the self is inscrutable. We ride the dark lunar surfaces of unknown objects our whole lives…. And yet between this void and the shallow dogmas of psychotherapeutics there remains some residue, some faint sediment of — what? The thing you can't see for looking at it, the thing disappearing at the corner of your eye, the thing not conceived in any of your philosophies…. This is the place where love resides, if love resides. (40)

In each other, the narrator and Annie recognize love; it is through this recognition that they can transcend, however ephemerally, the grief and anguish instigated by their loss. The ethical recognition of love in the other helps them overcome the separation of the signifier and signified and, in so doing, subverts the compulsive desire to do so through other less ethical and more self-destructive means.

"Iglaf and Swan" deals with a similar recognition; however, it is

approached from a perspective that is almost opposite to that of "My Romance." Whereas Annie and her husband's recognition of the ethics and responsibilities of desire occurs at the story's conclusion, providing it with a tenuous sense of closure, "Iglaf and Swan" probes the difficulties that arise when the ethical recognition of love in the other becomes subordinate to the demands of the self. Glover foregrounds these concerns by placing the moment of ethical recognition at the story's outset rather than at its conclusion as in "My Romance." As his omniscient narrator proclaims, Iglaf and Swan, following a "potluck supper and open mike poetry reading … became lovers…. Near dawn they fell asleep in each other's arms, but then Swan woke up, wrapped a sheet around her breasts … and stared at him. What was she trying to make out? What had disturbed her sleep?" (47). Like Annie and her husband in "My Romance," Swan here experiences a desire capable of transcending, if ephemerally so, the need to selfishly satiate compulsive human urges: she is awoken by the ethical recognition of love in the other. Iglaf is almost simultaneously awoken by a similar burning compulsion: "The fierceness of her regard woke Iglaf from a dream…. Something in her face turned his heart to stone. He knew that he loved her. He knew that she loved him. But he knew Swan would never stay. His life was over in that moment" (47). By beginning "Iglaf and Swan" at this point of recognition rather than concluding with it as in "My Romance," Glover shifts the focus of the story to an exploration of the inherent difficulties of maintaining such an ethical love over the course of time, a prospect that both Iglaf and Swan recognize as doomed from the moment they recognize love in each other's faces. Iglaf considers it a Schopenhauerian "romantic gesture" that finds glory in a "life of misery," and Swan accepts the "light of love" with a "flash of loathing" that culminates during their lovemaking: "with a rush of gratitude, he took her in his arms, and they began to make love again, slowly, despairingly. She wept this time. It hurt when he moved inside her, though she whispered 'I love you' over and over as his passion rose. When it was over, she loathed herself as well" (48). Clearly conflating love and self-loathing, Glover here implies that co-extensive with the recognition of ethical love in the other is the sense of persecution experienced as subject of the other's gaze, what Levinas identifies as the inherent responsibility of obsession: "In obsession, the self's responsibility is, as it were, a deficit. Its recurrence breaks open the limits of identity, the *prin-*

*ciple* of being that lies in me, the intolerable resting in oneself proper to definition. Such is the ego's responsibility for what it did not will, that is to say, responsibility for others" (89). Though both Iglaf and Swan have much to gain from their realization of love, they also immediately recognize that with their obsession comes a self-persecution caused by the weight of responsibility towards the other that they, as subjects, must now attempt to endure.

Although ostensibly about the troubled relationship between Iglaf, Swan, and their daughter Lily, Glover once again allows his story's "aboutness" to allegorically reflect the theoretical concerns of writing and language. By endowing each of his central characters with literary ambitions, he immediately draws parallels between compulsive desire and the compulsion to write, suggesting that the responsibility inherent in the former may compromise the subjective impulses of the latter. In Iglaf's case, for instance, the responsibility of loving Swan figures itself as a form of capitulation to an existence that restricts the primacy of the self, a realization that leads him to speculate that "maybe he had never really had the courage to be himself, a poet, an adventurer. That he had needed a way out of that terrible struggle, that he found the lesser vision comfortably definite" (48). Glover's association of an ethical, responsible love with a "lesser vision" is ironic. For Iglaf and Swan, however, it aggravates the "rough tension" between their literary and social lives. In spite of the intensity of their initial desire, the lovers grow to feel as though their responsibility to each other has compromised their responsibility to their creative impulses; the demands of the relationship metamorphose from a source of love and a recognition of the ethical status of the self in the face of the other, to a source of resentment and an excuse for failed literary ambition. "I lost myself," Swan asserts, "in my marriage" (49).

The tension between Iglaf and Swan's tormented love and their personal literary ambitions allows Glover to explore the proximity of human emotional desire to the desire for a sense of self conceived through literary production. Neither productive nor particularly ambitious, Iglaf and Swan blame their stilted literary careers on the limitations imposed by their relationship. Feeling unfulfilled and burdened by failure, each then turns to less ethical and often outright lascivious means of satisfying both their sexual and creative impulses. Iglaf, through his vocation as a high-school English teacher, deliberately conflates the two in order to lure students into sexual relationships: "Iglaf put on weight, wore vests

and threadbare second-hand tweed jackets, smoked a pipe and affected a world-weary wisdom which he used to seduce a series of female students. Twice he nearly got fired from his job, but each time Swan saved him by sitting through the internal inquiries holding his hand" (49). By adopting the shallow and stereotypical signifiers of authorial integrity, Iglaf enacts his quest for the satiation of his desire (and, thus, for personal fulfillment) upon the bodies of his adolescent students. Missing from his Humbert Humbert-style self-delusion and literary affectation is the presence of a signified — a body of works that justifies the persona he has adopted; rather, Iglaf, in the absence of creative production, attempts to satisfy his ambition through predatorial sexual relationships with his students.

Similarly stifled by their relationship, Swan also seeks solace in extramarital affairs. Spending her afternoons working in a futon store, she becomes involved with her boss Kreuzen, a Czech émigré old enough to be her father and "also bitter, lost" (48). Reiterating the proximity of literary and creative desire, Swan, unfulfilled by her sexual affairs with Kreuzen and discontented in her marriage, enrolls herself in a creative writing course as a means of stimulating her imaginative impulses, a decision to which Kreuzen responds with brutal honesty: "'You never stopped writing poetry. You're just not very good at it…. You use art and your lives as excuses for each other'" (49). Feeling somewhat unburdened after splitting with Kreuzen, Swan nevertheless falls immediately into the same pattern of using her art as an excuse for her life, and vice versa, by beginning an affair with her creative writing instructor, a man who has much in common with Iglaf:

> The writing instructor had published one book of poems years before and showed no promise any longer of writing another. He was married but made a practice of sleeping with at least one of his students each term, in fact had come to think of this as one of the requirements of his profession. At first he had seen his student lovers as the bright new stars who would rouse him from his artistic slumber…. But now he resented Swan for her naive hopes, her sentimental and self-serving little poems and her lovely body. (50)

Like Iglaf and Swan, the poetry instructor substitutes sexual satisfaction for creative desire; the negative effect it has upon him suggests the parasitical nature of such a relationship. Though Swan initially derives new energy from both the relationship and her engagement with creative practice, her lack of quality production precipitates a return to the same pat-

tern of need-fulfillment. This constant struggle for self-expression, either through literary production or, more commonly, sexual liaisons mimics the complex relationship between compulsion, pleasure, desire, and torment inherent in the writing condition. "Some people suffer," as Maurice Blanchot asserts, "because they cannot express completely what they feel. They are distressed by the obscurity of their feelings. They think they would be relieved if they could turn the confusion in which they are lost into precise words" ("Dread" 3-4). On one level, this is precisely the case with both Iglaf and Swan. Lost in the responsibility of their marriage and incapable of determining a sense of self through writing, they turn to sex as a means of shoring themselves against the ruinous potential of their longing. On another level, however, their conflict of desire and expression signifies a complicated relationship with absence. Alienated (at least in their own minds) from the aesthetic ambitions of their youth by the responsibility of their love for one another and, eventually, their daughter Lily, both Iglaf and Swan find themselves on the margins of literary and aesthetic considerations, a situation that fills them at once with contempt for the lack of conviction that allowed them to slip so far from the course of their ambition, and with an even greater compulsion to satisfy their literary ambitions through literary productivity. This launches them into a "more and more comical condition — of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it…. Whatever [the writer] wants to say, it is nothing. The world, things, knowledge, are … only reference points across the void" (Blanchot, "Dread" 5). The fact that Iglaf and Swan have nothing to say (or write) places them in an obscure relationship with nothingness; their writerly compulsion, devoid of inspiration or direction, becomes only a compulsion to speak an essential nothingness, a compulsion that is, of course, paradoxical: for nothingness taken as an end can manifest itself only as a desire for annihilation. It is their realization of this tension between their literary impulses and nothingness and their dread of its epistemological implications that causes them to turn away from writing and towards sex as a means of satisfaction.

By identifying this relationship between writing, nothingness, and sexual desire, Glover evokes the writerly disposition less as one connected with a particular vocation than as metaphor for a fundamental human condition. Iglaf and Swan's personal torment is at once linked to their lack of literary devotion and evocative of the torment experienced by

writers attempting to come to terms with creative desires that are inherently incommensurable. These allegorical implications are made most clear by the presence of their daughter Lily. Alienated by her parents' separation and forced to endure their contemptuous self-pity and compulsive respites in the arms of lovers, Lily is forced to endure worldly burdens that are well beyond her years, making her at once insightful and profoundly alone. Also interested in writing, Lily intuitively connects it with death even in childhood: "She had a fantasy, a vision of her own death, and her father coming upon her writings in an old trunk under her bed, weeping at the beauty of her words" (52). Mystified by her "frigid, hysterical travesty of a family" (53), Lily also intuitively associates love with death: "She thought the forced cheerfulness of her parents, seated across from each other at the dinner table, was love, but love made her feel as if there were an iron belt around her belly, linched tighter and tighter each day. Love made her want to die" (53). In direct opposition to that of her parents, Lily's relationship with the nothingness at the centre of experience is hyper-developed, a fact that both informs her youthful writing, and leads to her eventual suicide. For Lily, "Nothingness had a voluptuousness she found nowhere else in life. She became greedy for it the way others become greedy for sex…. Nothingness became her lover" (55). Robbed of her youthful innocence, Lily's romanticization of nothingness, on one level, is a response to her disaffected relationship with her parents; in Kristevan terms, she finds a measure of support in her solitude until, ultimately, she retreats fully into that which provides her precarious support: "The depressive mood constitutes itself as a narcissistic support, negative to be sure, but nevertheless presenting the self with an integrity, nonverbal though it might be" (Kristeva 19). On an allegorical level, Iglaf and Swan's neglect of their daughter can be explained as a writerly response to her as the product of their work. In the same manner that Blanchot suggests the book is the mere accumulation of a writer's words that, providing no sense of finality once completed, leaves the writer feeling that writing more is the only means of filling the void across which he or she stares, Lily is the product of Iglaf and Swan's desire, a desire that they each conflate with literary ambition. Though both acknowledge Lily as the product of their love and work, both also feel unsatisfied with Lily-as-product. In each, the compulsion to create, manifested sexually and through failed attempts at self-expression, remains interminable and supercedes their ethical responsibility to their daughter. It takes Lily's

suicide to make Iglaf and Swan realize, if only briefly, that their selfish ambition contributed to their daughter's death. It also briefly revives the ethical recognition of the other that had initially caused them to fall in love and led to the creation of Lily: "When they made love, finally, they wept and said Lily's name. They had never before felt so close, and the closeness aroused them. Without saying anything, they both knew they wanted to make another child, to call back the girl that had died, the family they had never had" (56). Following Lily's death, Iglaf and Swan recognize that their failure of ethical responsibility led to the neglect of their daughter and to her eventual suicide. However, this moment of recognition is brief and their compulsion to "make another child" overcomes their mourning for the absent Lily. Lily's death quickly becomes reconstituted as a moment of tragedy meant to reflect and inform their doomed-artist dispositions: "they only wished that the moment could go on and on and on, that they could exist forever on the cusp of someone else's death, that they could always feel this important, tragic and redeemed" (56).

Both Iglaf and Swan exploit their daughter's suicide as a means of aligning themselves with tragic literary history and substituting their daughter's death for their own literary sterility. Iglaf often "invoked Lily and the names of other poetic suicides and somehow managed to imply that he was one of them, only not quite dead yet" (57). Swan had Lily's poems published, drawing comparisons between her daughter and other female poetic suicides such as Plath and Sexton. She then gave public readings of Lily's work, often forgetting that "they weren't her poems. She felt like herself, beautiful and poetic, the centre of attention, with the lights shining down and her strong, unflattering voice declaiming the words of the one person she had truly loved (who, in those moments, did not seem distinguishable from herself)" (58). The suggestion that Swan had difficulty distinguishing her love for Lily from her love for herself in these literary moments reinforces the selfish ambition demonstrated by both parents and serves only to highlight how literary and sexual desire took precedence over their ethical responsibility to those they most loved.

Ultimately, Lily's suicide appears to make Iglaf and Swan recognize, at least on a nascent level, their mistake. For a mature Swan, "Words like fate and history and love slip through her head but find no place to catch and hold…. Beyond the words, there exists only a mys-

terious emptiness…. She has gotten it wrong, but what if she is wrong about getting it wrong?" (60). In Iglaf's case, the "phrase 'aborted dreams' sticks in his mind, and he remembers a dream from long ago, something about a book he had read or written" (60). Recalling the dream he was awoken from on the night he fell in love with Swan, Iglaf is also startled by an epiphany. These epiphanic moments suggest a recognition that literary desire is ultimately devoid of signification in the human sense; their compulsion to play the role of tragic artist has doomed them to "belong to the shadow of events instead of the object, to what allows the words themselves to become images, appearances — instead of signs, values, the power of truth" (Blanchot, "Essential" 67). The human contact that transpires in this final scene seems to awaken them to the fact that their failure was in their reaching beyond the limits of ethical responsibility: "In her confusion, Swan reaches for Iglaf and touches his wrist protectively. Iglaf feels her touch and falls silent. The warmth of her hand seems a balm for all his wounds" (60). This recognition of a tenuous faith in the other as the only means of ethical reconciliation comes too late. It does, however, reinforce Glover's link between the human condition and the writing condition. Like writers overly absorbed by the activity of decrying an essential absence, Iglaf and Swan, through a compulsive search for an essential literary self, nearly deny their own desire for presence in the world, an act that proves at once impossible and destructive.

In both "My Romance" and "Iglaf and Swan," the characters' ethical epiphanies, whether fully realized or not, provide an instance of resolution for Glover's writerly allegory. The assertion that only in the ethical recognition of the other can the division between signifier and signified be overcome suggests a resistance on Glover's part to allow the self-reflexive, writerly concerns of his narrative to be fully subordinated to the realm of linguistic play. Rather, by invoking this ethical conclusion, Glover appears to suggest that for self-reflexive, postmodern fiction to function proactively, it too must recognize its other in "aboutness," in the rough tension that defines its relation to its hermeneutic "other." By navigating this interstice between desire and language, fiction of the heart and fiction of the postmodern mind, Glover betrays his own desire to transcend the two categories and to extend fiction closer to both its epistemological and ontological limits.

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