

SURVIVING THE METAPHORICAL CONDITION IN *ELLE*:  
DOUGLAS GLOVER'S IMPERSONATION OF THE FIRST  
FRENCH FEMALE IN CANADA

**María Jesús Hernández Lerena**  
*Universidad de La Rioja*

(This is the point in history where we are transformed. Before, we had a word and an explanation for everything; henceforth, we shall only discover the necessity of larger and larger explanations, which will always fall short. What we know will become just another anxious symbol, a code for what we do not know.)

(*Elle* 2003: 98)

**1. Introduction: "An imperial affliction sent us of the air"<sup>1</sup>**

This essay attempts to explore how the current critical atmosphere may affect the writing and reception of contemporary narratives, in particular the novel *Elle* (2003) by Douglas Glover. "I am not immune to the symbolism of events", remarks Marguerite de Roberval in *Elle*, a character who assimilates her own life in terms strikingly similar to those used by feminist and postcolonial theorists in their analyses of the injustices of male hegemony and of European imperialism.

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1. Emily Dickinson's "There Is a Certain Slant of Light".

Marguerite's life was documented in her time by the semi-fictional account of Marguerite de Navarre (1558) and the record of André Thevet (1575), it was kept alive through the centuries and, in our time, a number of poems, plays, juvenile fiction, and documentary books have recovered a story which also interests many internet pages. By choosing to produce a novel about a historical figure surrounded by legend and by many versions, Glover has chosen to pause on a site of intense analogy and iconicity in Canadian culture. Marguerite de Roberval, a French woman, is abandoned by her uncle –a general commissioned to spread the Catholic faith in Canada and to build fortified towns– on an island off the north shore of St. Lawrence in 1542. This third expedition to Canada was a failure –even Jacques Cartier returned early against orders–, and caused such general disillusionment (no precious metals were found) that the colonization of Canada was put off for half a century (see Parkman 1983: 145-174 or Dickanson 2001: 93-96).

Marguerite represents thus an extreme geographical and historical isolation because her experience happened before “things started to happen”. She is the ideal figure, part true, part legend, to take us back again to the shaky origins of a nation and whose image we can construct as a trope for a foundational moment. She was, after all, the first French settler in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

This situation gives Glover the opportunity to construct a female separated from cultural constraints, at the mercy of a hostile land and of new cultural values, those of the Inuit. But her “strandedness” is only one layer in meaning: every element in this story possesses a high degree of intertextuality in relation to universal literature (abandoned women in classical literature, the descent into hell, and so forth), and particularly within Canadian history, literature, and critical practice. Namely the woman as metaphorical of the Canadian colonial condition (marginalization, invisibility, search for identity), the relationship between women and the wilderness (the female bond with nature as different from a typified male perspective), the importance of the woman's travel tale and the pioneer journal, the failures and cruelties of colonization, the paradoxes of the foundation of the Canadian nation, the heroification of failure, the reluctant immigrant, the rhetoric of the North (as both empty and fulfilling), and the particular hardships of the Labrador coast (see, for example, *Creation* by Katherine Govier).

All these themes have been fictionalized and theorized almost simultaneously in Canada in such a way that fiction is expected to respond to the issues prioritized by criticism by providing stories which partake of its games and concerns. The fact that from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards all the arts have had to

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2. Gudrid, a Viking woman, is considered to be the first European woman in America. See Johnston (1973: 1-20).

exist alongside overwhelming amounts of criticism has caused critics (see Dillard 1988: 98-101 and Slemmon 2001:107) to claim that an awareness of criticism encourages a great deal of postmodernist and postcolonial fiction.

In this essay I would like to look at this overlapping phenomenon as a dialogue which informs our interpretation of fictional characters. The intercourse between fiction and theory has created a community of paradigms whose appeal is inextinguishable: motifs are unearthed again and again, sometimes to be parodied, sometimes to extract their lyricism. *Elle* forms part of a prominent tendency in Canadian literature of creative revisions of autobiographical truth; the palimpsestic nature of this slice of Canadian history allows us to observe how the silence of the erased experience is refilled with contemporary words.

I will explore the intersections of this dialogue between two discourses –fiction and criticism– by focusing on Glover's construction of Marguerite's meditations, on the language she uses, and on the nature of her involvement in the events that radically changed her life. I would like to find out whether the weight of current ideology on gender and on the postcolonial stance alters in any way the conditions of the storytelling itself and its basic capacity to engage the reader emotionally. In the process, an additional aim comes to the fore, and that is the description of the relationship between community experience (historic blunders/hardships endured by early female settlers) and intimate experience (the tragedy of an individual).

## **2. Marguerite de Roberval: History's footnote expanded to life**

The story of Marguerite de Roberval closely resembles the sad beginning of humanity (according to the Bible). Due to the first woman's challenging and thoughtless behavior, both man and woman are sent off into a realm of hardships and death. Marguerite de Roberval sinned aboard the ship that was bringing the first French settlers to the New World, and is left on a daunting island of Newfoundland, The Isle of Demons, to perish with her lover in the wilderness. Thus, she reenacts the origins of civilization within a context of Canadianness. The history of European colonization produced in 1542 a chapter analogous to the banishment of Adam and Eve, the first exiles on earth, although Marguerite's story slightly varies from the *Genesis*. Marguerite's lover, a nobleman, is weak and soon dies. Also both Bastienne, Marguerite's aging nurse, and later Marguerite's baby, whom she delivers alone on the island. Marguerite has to survive in a cold, uninhabited, and unknown place of endless winter. Her feat is one of loneliness, she was left to her own devices in a geographical dimension of life where the days become an eternity of nothingness. She was taken to Canada before Canada existed, and left behind when the first French explorers (Jacques Cartier and Sieur de Roberval) were escaping from Canada homebound.

The power of the event makes us instantly visualize a number of exotic images: a woman attacked by demons in the form of beasts, a woman defending two graves with her arquebus, a woman hunting bears, a woman giving birth alone on an island, an aging woman rescued by fishermen. Although there have been many versions of this event throughout history, the fluctuating details have not defocalized the story but instead have contributed to solidify it. Whether the emphasis has been on the theme of love and fidelity in adverse circumstances, the tale of a female Crusoe, the tragedy of a banished court woman in the wilderness, or the cruelty of the tyrannical Sieur de Roberval towards his young female relative, the events have crystallized as the story of a woman stronger than her male partner punished with utmost isolation in a brutal wilderness.

The fascination we feel when encountering the previous situations and topics is paradoxically rooted in the fascination over uncertainty. Arthur Stabler (1972: 63-64), who has tracked down the legend over the centuries, is surprised by the fact that it is a story with a record of tellings when evidence should only allow a footnote.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the story is rooted upon the thrill we feel at just the mere possibility that it might have been true. This possibility makes the story truly real because we are placed in a position of wanting to “rescue” Marguerite from forgetfulness, we are given the chance to restore to reality what has been erased by the flow of history. By means of our sympathy, we can clearly imagine “how it must have been” or “how it must have felt” and almost unquestioningly believe what others have said about how it really was (or even readily contribute our own version).

The first three accounts of Marguerite de Roberval’s life were written in the sixteenth century by a queen, Marguerite de Navarre (Francis I’s sister), a Royal Cosmographer, André Thevet, and a writer of tragedies, François de Belleforest. Their versions show to what uses this historical event was put. Marguerite de Navarre in *Heptameron* (1558) (published fifteen years after the event) makes it a case of female strength, religious faith, and wifely fidelity, an *exempla* where a faithful wife decides to abandon Roberval’s ship with her banished husband, an artisan who had betrayed Roberval. According to Navarre (1991: 522), Marguerite de Roberval lived like animals in bodily terms, but like angels, in the spiritual sense, and her perseverance was rewarded by her rescue and repatriation to France, where she became a teacher of aristocratic children. According to Stabler (1972: 30), Marguerite de Navarre altered the facts to avoid scandal: Roberval was one of her brother’s favorites and the event was too recent to cast Roberval as evil. That is why she used commoners for the main roles, a very unusual literary practice at the time.

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3. For archival evidence of Marguerite’s existence see Stabler (1972: 25-32).

André Thevet, in his *Cosmographie Universelle* (1575) claimed to have heard the story from Marguerite herself –he also claimed to be a relative of Roberval’s–, and he did not need to conceal the true identity of the protagonists because Roberval had already died: Thevet’s emphasis was on the sinful nature of the act between two lovers, and on the relationship between Marguerite and the demons, ghosts, and beasts (mainly bears) inhabiting the island. Thevet, sometimes considered not thoroughly credible in his accounts of the new world –“all-believing Thevet”, Parkman (1983: 169) calls him–, has been gaining more credibility over the centuries. He is the only historian who, for example, gave the exact date and place of Roberval’s death.<sup>4</sup> He was also the only writer who said that Marguerite did not want to leave the island after her exile (1575: 1020). Thevet accused the two others (mainly Belleforest, who managed to publish the story ahead of him) of distorting the facts and of plagiarism.

François de Belleforest, who had also claimed to have heard the story from Marguerite herself, used Marguerite for romance in his *Histoires Tragiques* (1572). Deceived by the singing gentleman who courts her, Marguerite yields to his desires and becomes pregnant aboard the ship, believing herself to be married. Her brother, Roberval, takes revenge and leaves them on the Isle des Demons. Temporarily, and before lover and child die, they manage to live in an idyllic leafy palace of their own making. None of these three versions gave the name of the lover.

Although there have been some plot variations, later stories of Marguerite after the sixteenth century shows two main common characteristics:<sup>5</sup> All authors claim truthfulness in their tale (“I give the tale as I find it”, says Parkman 1983: 170), and they all make alterations and introduce embellishments by just making logical implications based on their sources. For example, in a very popular novel of the nineteenth century, *Les Vrais Robinsons* (1863), Ferdinand Denis and Victor Chauvin claimed in chapter one that Marguerite and her admirer were married because they read the word “spouse” in Thevet’s *Cosmographie*. Stabler has recorded how the story has been constructed through the centuries again and again, and how its constructiveness precisely derives from the fact that all authors have claimed a sound historical source. Old mistakes continued and new ones were made, things said poetically were repeated by later historians as cold historical fact. We have to take into account that the sources that authors quoted were mainly those of the sixteenth century, where the historical was made to

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4. Stabler (1972: 31, 5) confirms that Thevet’s account of Roberval’s assassination has documentary support.

5. The variations are whether Marguerite was married or not, whether the consummation was aboard the ship or later, also the name of the actors, and the length of time that the child survived.

blend into the literary.<sup>6</sup> The story becomes, thus, a site of interesting pieces of confusion; it becomes, paradoxically, a piece of historical evidence supported by the imagination.

Other authors have taken up the story after Stabler's record stopped: for example Elizabeth Boyer, George Woodcock, Anne Hebert, Shirley Barrie, and Douglas Glover.<sup>7</sup> And the story keeps flowing both ways, at the same time a display of historical eagerness and an account of a woman's ordeal. It is a labyrinthine path that has had Marguerite registered in medieval cosmographies, fashioned by a novel *a-la-Hollywood* –John Clarke Bowman's *Isle of Demons* (1953)–, and eventually appropriated by postmodern practices. A story which was turned into a palimpsest because every author's right to creativity was disguised as sound citation of sources (up to Douglas Glover's account). This continuing effort to imagine the plight of a Renaissance woman at the earliest stage of colonization can be regarded as a rarity, in view of the neglect of the Renaissance in theories on the formation of Canadian identity. According to Warkentin and Podruchny (2001:10), the study of imperialism has been severed from its Renaissance and early modern context:

Possibly we have not paused often enough to attempt the act of historical imagination invited by such comparisons [between structures of knowledge coming from the classical tradition and first peoples]: envisioning Canada through the eyes of the people of the Renaissance who came here from France, England, Spain, Portugal, [...]

We can recognize Douglas Glover's basic structure in Thevet's account; also some other elements that he takes from certain versions, either to give structure to the story or for playful purposes. For example, Glover reverses the situation between Marguerite and her lover aboard the ship as it is described in George Martin's long poem *The Legend of Marguerite* (1887). In Martin's (1995: 32) poem, Marguerite has become a nun after her adventure and tells her story to her congregation. She assures that she and her lover had been praying on the ship. Glover, however, opens the book with a scene in which Marguerite is literally raping her seasick lover in order to forget about her excruciating toothache, and she reaches her climax when recollecting her witnessing the public burning of an apostate nun. From Thomas G. Marquis's *Marguerite de Roberval* (1899) Glover is likely to have taken Roberval's death at the Church of the Innocents. But to trace how Glover reproduces or purposely distorts his sources is not relevant here, since

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6. See Hulme and Youngs (2002: 31-32) for a discussion of the problem of credibility in the earliest travel writing.

7. Boyer's (1975 and 1983) are documentary novels. Woodcock's (1977), Hebert's (1990), and Barrie's (1997) are plays.

our interest in the oldest fictional romance of European colonization of the New World is to find out how, or why, it has come alive again and how our contemporary cultural coordinates have interfered in the telling.

The past uses given to Marguerite were as exempla, as history, or as romance. The story was appealing because of its being a curiosity of the first French travels to Newfoundland and also because of its edifying potential. Even Jean Johnston looks at the story as proof that a person could live, or survive, in the New Land. According to Johnston (1972: 2), Champlain used Marguerite's life as a theory that "a colony could live off the land", and so it proves that her life had not been wasted.

What had been left out of the story so far is what engendered Glover's novel. He shows the failures of an incipient empire, he fuses the terrors of the Bible and the terrors of colonization, he includes reminiscences of other abandoned women (both classical and Inuit). He uses the story to show the effects of medieval feuds on a virgin land. The stories so far had had history –conceived of in very abstract terms, as the bare chronological lines of European conquest–, but no context. They had included personal details, but not social details, and they had made reference to other historical or literary sources, but not to how other women have been fabulated in history. Additionally, the religious indictment was a main interpretive line, but it was offered without theological explanation. Elaborations and judgments rested, naturally, on unexplained assumptions because they were shared and unquestioned by the societies that produced them. The story was given in a decontextualized vacuum, its attraction resting mainly on the internal strings of its plot. But Glover's version rests on internal commentary, that of a character-narrator surprised by the incongruity of the rules she has to abide. Doing so Glover provides the reader with historical, social, and religious context. As a consequence, and without significantly altering the events, the story is at points turned into hilarious comedy; its traditional appeal as tragedy somewhat subverted.

Marguerite, although previously held up as a model of female strength, had also always been a heroine of submission, courageous because of her attachment to a man. In Glover's version she is not a heroine of submission: she causes her own downfall because of her libidinous desires, then she experiences life according to the Inuit perspective, and she eventually takes revenge on her uncle. In literally showing Marguerite becoming a bear woman and also in showing her accomplishing retaliation, Glover writes a second and a third part into the story (so far inexistent), and therefore completes it in a feminist and postcolonial sense.

We may wonder whether this overly explicit postmodernist practice is a simple pouring of new models into an old story in order to tune the tale to contemporary epistemology and ethics. Or perhaps we can consider the novel

to be a critique of current parodic methods of recuperating the past in fiction. Since the heroine is endowed with a contemporary critical vocabulary to express her thoughts and feelings, and she shows an intense awareness of ideological issues as they are posed today, we come to realize that Glover is turning the story into an essay, or better, making critical discussion of postcolonial and gender issues the main aspect of the narrative flow. The nature of this hybrid discourse reflects to a very great extent how we extract value from narrative nowadays.

### 3. Contemporary theory at work

Feminism and postcolonialism –and cultural studies in general– have effected a profound ideological awareness that has changed our reading habits. We tend to use novels now to describe how cultures construct their particular realities, how they devise their systems of evidence; how language, fiction, and social practices impose or create strategies of empowerment and of survival.<sup>8</sup> The individual, the character in a fictional work, has become more context than it ever was because identity is seen in its “situatedness”.<sup>9</sup> A large portion of criticism today traces how the realm of the personal and the private is inextricably fused with a reality of immense variety according to the coordinates of gender, class, ethnicity, and historical context. In opposition to critical practices prior to feminism, for example, the human condition is seen now not exclusively in the character of emotion itself or in the turns of psychology, but in how personal experience is implicated in political, social, familial ways of organizing life.

This mode of addressing the past, guided by an awareness of the historical injustices to huge sections of the population, favors the interest in certain kind of plots and in certain theoretical approaches. Nikolas Rose (1997: 224, 238) claimed that the invasion of the language of the psy-sciences (psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, counselling, etc) has shaped the way we think about ourselves and the way we explain other people, that this language “makes only certain ways of being human describable, and in so doing makes only certain ways of being human possible.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly, feminist and postcolonialist languages are also shaping the way we understand ourselves and literature, fostering a notion of reality and of literature pregnant with issues of male power and European imperialism, within a

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8. See Atkinson (1990:1-4), Warkentin and Podruchny (2001: 8), Debora Doxtator (2001: 44), Quadflieg (2004: 29), Fernández Prieto (1994: 117).

9. See Nicholson (1990: 8-9), Fuss (1989: 20), Spelman (1996: 176), Haraway (1999: 188-193).

10. See also Coward (1985:129,131) for an elaboration of the idea that we understand ourselves in terms of a vocabulary.



more general postmodernist context concerned with the relativism of truth and the textual nature of the past.<sup>11</sup>

Writers clearly respond not only to a predominant style of thought but also to certain vocabularies and their grammars. A mode of fiction invaded by the questions posed by theory is clearly recognizable everywhere and highly visible in Canadian literature. For example, novels responding to the label of historiographic metafiction, also fictional auto/biographies, set out under the premise that history is text, and new realities are sought out of new combinations of facts (a postmodernist orientation) or erased realities are sought in order to be given new life (a feminist orientation).<sup>12</sup> The reader knows that contemporary fiction explicitly serves the purposes of subverting the rigidity of available ideologies. This is not new, the novel has ironically included the theoretical worries of its practitioners since its beginnings, either in the form of overt narrators discussing methods to fictionalize characters or in the form of characters openly illustrating the author's ideas.<sup>13</sup> The difference is that now criticism itself claims narrative status.

Some of the models we bring to a reading of a feminist and/or a postcolonial text are: the stress on the hidden and marginal, the parody of master narratives, the decline of transcendental subjectivity, the exposure of the distortions produced by customary cognitive models, etc.<sup>14</sup> This is a shared discourse which guides readers and critics in looking for value in narratives. Sometimes this search becomes openly described at the outset by the critic: "I employ novels to show how they stage social contradictions and strive to resolve them" (Sharpe 1993: 21-22), or "I derive from each novel an allegory of reading that stages the problem of defining Indian women's agency according to the terms of a rational discourse of subject constitution" (23). Even: "If reversals were possible and causes could be made to follow effects, I might say that Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* to enable my reading of race, gender, and colonialism" (28).

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11.. "None of us escapes the legacy of a colonial past and its traces in our academic practice." (Sharpe 1993:19).

12. See Curti (1998:9-15) and also Perreault (1995: 133) for a discussion on how feminism and postmodernism overlap but follow different directions.

13. In *Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749) by Henry Fielding, the narrator continually discussed the problem between narrating time and narrated time, for example. Shklovsky remarked that the parodic novel is the most typical novel in world literature. (quot. by Kuester 1992: 12). An example of characters dramatizing an epistemology (in this case naturalism) is found in *Sister Carrie* (1900) by Theodore Dreiser. In this one-way novel characters only do, say, or think that which deliberately illustrates the author's ideas.

14. See Curti (1998: 2) for a list of common theoretical elements that preside criticism today. Also Curti (1988: 4-6) for a meditation on the dangers derived from the fact that marginalization has become central.

We observe in the latter statement the paradoxical effect described by Jonathan Culler in *The Pursuit of Signs* (1983: 169-187): events do not exist prior to the narrative, events are produced by the narrative, they are the products of discourse. Events are brought about by a thematic appropriateness, they are the attempts to make something mean, that is, they are the products of a perspective. If we apply Culler's view to our discussion on the role of mainstream critical approach to fiction, we could say that criticism itself, that is, the demand for assessment, creates the event (it considers what an event should be). Running parallel to this idea is the notion that the past is produced by the present, it is contingent upon the present -one of the basic tenets of contemporary epistemology (see Slotkin 1987 or White 1989).

Thus, writers choose topics, and so create events: we may think that the existence of Marguerite de Roberval enabled Glover to put forward his reading of empire, humanity in the Renaissance -a Renaissance that feels like the Middle Ages-, the role of women, and Canadianness. Marguerite's story becomes a site which makes these conflicts observable. Again, the present has made the past possible. Given the great interest in observing how character is caught up in social strategies of power distribution and marginalization, we may think that Glover has served this familiar structure of meaning to us, and that he has even facilitated our interpretation by making his main character intellectually aware of the scheme that has entrapped her:

I have sufficient education to be aware of certain fore-shadowings, signs, omens, parallels, prognostications and analogies. Classical literature teems with stories of extreme child-rearing practices: young single girls left on rocks or deserted islands or thrust into dark tunnels as punishments or sacrifices or simply for their nutrient value vis-à-vis whatever slaving monster happens by.

I am particularly reminded of the Greek princess Iphigenia, whose father Agamemnon put her to death on a lonely beach on the shaky theory that this act would ensure decent sailing over to Troy, where he hoped to win back his brother's runaway wife Helen (another woman led astray by her heart in a world of men). It is a male thing, I suppose, not to be persuaded from murder by the threat of revenge, pangs of conscience, pity, justice, the tug of family affection, not to mention the purely unscientific basis of the premise that killing a virgin will cause sunshine and warm, westerly breezes. Surely Agamemnon must have known this would come back to haunt him. (32)

Our familiarity (readers' and critics' familiarity) with a set of critical models and attitudes enables writers to incorporate them, -in this case the parodic strategies- not only as additions which explain the interpretive dynamics of the fictional world, but already as parts of the plot itself, moving

units which do not pause the narrative (they are not digressions), but that contribute to its forward movement. The plotline in *Elle* precisely consists of its heroine cultural reading of two cultures (the French and the Inuit) in the sixteenth century. The narrative marches forward not only by its events in the literal sense (an event is a change) or by the stream of her consciousness (the moods and the psychological turns of her mind), but by her appreciations of the culture that brought her where she is (an evaluative activity). In the early twentieth century the modernist rejection of the artificiality of plotting produced fictions which revolved around almost immobile characters and contributed fragments of their life.<sup>15</sup> But whereas in modernist fiction the character was the “patient”, that is, the observed reality (the writer explored the effect of reality on the characters and their state of mind), now the character has become the “doctor” (the critic).

In *Elle*, Marguerite's re-vision has become the plot itself, which is not mobilized by a search for awareness, the main motto in modernism, but which constitutes itself as the advancing stages of a cultural study.<sup>16</sup> It is not narrative as expression of ideology, as DuPlessis (1985: x) has put it, but ideology expressed as narrative. If the mainstream hero of modernism in the twentieth century was the artist, more and more the hero and the heroine of our time is the critic.

The proposition “if you approach a story analytically, it will disappear” (Bonnie Burnard 1999: 10) no longer rings true. Douglas Glover brings that kind of judgmental attention to the story by having a first person narrator with analytical superpowers. Marguerite can uproot the rhetorical strategies of the dominant discourses, of which she is a victim.

We said in section II that, in order to represent Marguerite, only romantic and historical discourses had been used: she was seen as a victim, not as an originator of events, and she had not been connected to the phenomena of colony, gender, or Canadianness. Since the story was fascinating without a need for context, it was not necessary to make it representative of a society. But once Marguerite is taken to the realm of the marginal (in the sense of the powerlessness of her gender and as an exile from her patriarchal society),<sup>17</sup> and to the realm of the historic (she forms part of a foundational moment in the history of the yet non-existent Canada), she becomes an analogy, a symbol of the

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15. For a discussion of this narrative strategy, see Mendilow (1952: 46-7, 209), Frank (1968: 59), Mickelsen (1981: 66).

16. See Honeywell (1988) for a study of the kind of metaphysics involved in eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century plots.

17. For the status of white women travelers in the age of imperialism, see Bassnett (2002: 227). For the status of British gentlewomen in the wilderness, see Korte (1996: 147-162).

disadvantages of her sex and of the vacuities of national construction.<sup>18</sup> She is made to live in an allegorical space, a space infinitely spelled out by criticism. And she complains about this repeatedly in the narrative, for example: “I have become a metaphor or a joke, a piece of language sliding from one state into another (like my changing Emmanuel - this sudden fluidity is one effect of entering a New World). It is an ironic position, being neither one thing nor the other.” (137). And later on, she adds: “This is the style of the anti-quest: You go on a journey, but instead of returning you find yourself frozen on the periphery, the place between places, in a state of being neither one nor the other. Instead of a conquering hero, you become a clown or fuel for the pyre or the subject of folk tales.” (167). “Am I a pun or a simile?” She says on another occasion. “Alas, my legend already grows at the expense of my true story” (181).

Is Marguerite then only available to us as allegory?, is it possible to disengage her from layers of analogies so that we can look at the individual? By making her the representative of the failures of colonialism and by making her think about herself in terms of postmodernist/postcolonial language -“I am infected with otherness” (156-7), she says-, it would seem that Glover is depriving us of an intimate, purely personal contact with her: “I have founded an unofficial colony in an unofficial Canada. Or I have saved Canada from officialdom; unfortunately, no one knows this, which is the nature of unofficial non-histories (and anti-quests).” (148)

This last example is a case of a hysterical use of terminology when attempting to describe postmodernist narratives, which may lead us to conclude that Marguerite is a victim of the language of parody itself, a language which disregards meta-narratives and has a penchant for the prefixes “un”, “anti” and “non”. She is made to live as allegory and as parody at the same time, that is, she is an analogy with loud metaphorical resonance, a cultural motif, and she has been inscribed in the past ironically (within a non-foundational moment in Canada). Additionally, she has been given command of current academic clichés. We recognize this structure, for example, in George Bowering’s *A Short Sad Book*, where the author plays with the clichés that have dominated the study of Canadian literature and history.

Marguerite shows all the marks of a feminist icon. She fully represents what Virginia Woolf (1957: 47) said about Woman: “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance: practically she is insignificant”. Although her figure recurs in history, folklore, and literature, in practice Marguerite was under the tyrannical command of an older male relative, she was the one punished for having committed a sin

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18. Analogues are certain historical figures or events that embody preoccupations within a culture. They become paradigms, for example, martyrdom, failure, achievement, etc. For the implications of historical analogues, see Kuester (2002: 491-495).

(not her lover), and she was rejected by her own society when she manages to return to France.<sup>19</sup> She also shows all the marks of a colonial icon taken up by postcolonialism. First, she inhabits a contact zone and experiences many of the clashes between two cultures:<sup>20</sup> “[w]hen two civilizations meet, first, they exchange corpses” (177). Second: she is taken aback by the cruelty and ignorance of the European leaders (the kidnapping of natives, their slavery, the agony of Comes Winter, the native girl). Third: She is lead to desperation because of the inability of languages (both hers and others’) to enable people to communicate successfully. Throughout the novel she is most obsessed by the native words as she has learned them from Cartier’s lexicon. But the words refuse to function when she eventually contacts the natives of the land where she has been deposited. Besides the grotesque misunderstandings her words provoke, her experience is immensely sad:

I try to speak. I try to recall the savage word for friend. In my confusion, I think I tell him to come to bed. It does not matter. He doesn’t seem to understand. They speak a different language here. Or maybe M. Cartier made up those lexicons out of his imagination. Or maybe the savages purposely misled him. Okay, okay, let’s give him aguyase, I have bird shit on my face. Tell him it means friend. And I think how ripe the world of translation is for lying, betrayal, misrepresentation and fraud. It is always thus when one encounters another – child, father, friend, enemy, savage, astral being. A world of confusion, just like love. (78)

Every paragraph of the novel is dense with critical examination conveyed by means of the unprejudiced logics of a bright child who confronts the incongruities of her time. However, she thinks in terms of the criticism we consume in our time. She is surrounded by hordes of analogies: “Have I mentioned the ship-coffin analogy?” (58) Sentences like this one crop up frequently in the novel and often function as a refrain, endowing the narrative with lyricism.

Is Glover parodying the only possible dialogue between our time and the past? We mean this dialogue to be parody and analogy since they are recurrent fictional methods to recreate the past. Perhaps, the author is emphasizing the fact that we

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19. Glover includes other unwanted women left on rocks to die both in classical literature and in native myths, unwanted females who, however, play a very important role in their culture’s systems of belief (see *Elle* 90).

20. See Pratt (1992: 4,6). Contact zones are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other”. See (*Elle* 77-82) and (116-119) for a dramatization of Marguerite’s surrealistic encounters with the Innu. Examples of other postcolonial recurrent elements are: the deceptiveness of maps (28), the greed of imperialism (26), the domestication of the native inhabitants (32, 190), the harmful effect of universals (35), the failures of imperial plans in Canada (73-74).

cannot see others but through our current conventions.<sup>21</sup> Given the fact that the novel has great potential to constitute itself not only as a statement against our repetitious methods to interpret, but also as a tract on the limiting reality of the European Renaissance, and, additionally, as an entertaining parody of historical figures, does the heroine lose ground as a fictional character? Since all three levels of discourse (the epistemological critique, the historical analysis, and the parody) focus on perspective rather than on plot, is the reader engaged in the fiction itself at all? Is the heroine just a device to produce parody at different levels?

The answer to that question would be that she is not. Her fictionality is never undermined nor do we ever feel detached from her suffering just because she absorbs our approach to the issues of her time. And this is so because in *Elle* we have a character making a case for the reader: this is how Glover has managed to turn criticism into narrative. The character literally suffers the consequences of ideology, and because she is aware of it intellectually, she can express it verbally. The narrative is the commentary itself. The plot becomes the heroine's unrelenting cultural reading, and the narrative advances by contributing more and more factual evidence (Marguerite's experience with the individuals of two very fallible societies). Step by step, she is affected by the incongruity of all kinds of discourses, from the religious to the familial.

But, do we feel Marguerite as a manufactured composite or as "real"? After all, she is seen as a victim of our methods to retrieve and understand the past ("she is not immune to our analogies"), and, simultaneously, she uses this very same intellectual framework to expose social injustice. The complications of her twofold entanglement with theory (as a victim and as an accomplice) could perhaps make her lifestory irrelevant. However, this is not so. Her dimension as an intertext is always permeated by her ordeal as a lost creature in a fearful place, and this juxtaposition creates a hybrid discourse that sends the reader in different directions at the same time, without ever losing track of her agitation. The anticlimactic hilarious details of surrealistic situations are made to co-exist with Marguerite's suffering of hunger, cold, and separation. Each level of discourse (the parody and the personal account) come close together in a textual battle of sentence against sentence, leading the reader towards different kind of responses at high speed in a dazzling way.

#### **4. The disturbing powers of a first-person narrative**

The heroine is undergoing a plight that gives her the opportunity to dissect her society and to apply irony to every bit. She is both experiencing subject and

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21. For the idea that we can only understand what suits our conceptual needs, and that we cannot see beyond our own culture, see Doxtator (2001: 40-44) and Morantz (2001: 50, 65).

speaking subject, and these two ways of inhabiting the narrative create two distinct kinds of discourse which have to share the same textual space, itemized in almost autonomous paragraphs.

The sun glows like an armourer's forge. It glints off the water into my eyes, so that everything seems doubly illuminated, flat and insubstantial under that awful light. Does God's sure hand extend this far beyond the stink of civilization and the throw of language? Does he visit Canada? The expedition's three chaplains, along with the symbols, sacraments, rites, holy wine and wafers of religion, are sailing away from me. Now there will be no one to bless my corpse when I am gone. (39)

This paragraph, whose internal structure is similar to many others, shows the following elements: first, a physical description of the place as Marguerite perceives it; second a parody of religion; third, a lamentation of what it will mean to be alone in the island. Most paragraphs in this novel work like this one: the attack on ideologies and the personal experience closely follow each other textually, sometimes it is the personal feeling or perception that acts as a frame, sometimes it is the indictment that opens and closes the paragraph. They are never allowed to monopolize the reader's attention because they succeed each other continually after occupying a small section of the text, sometimes just a sentence. The awareness of colonial issues goes hand in hand with the expression of sorrow on the part of the character "as a person". The effect is that different kinds of responses are demanded from the reader at a hysterical speed; the reader experiences a continual overlapping of modes of addressing the material of the story without finding a point of rest.

Each paragraph is self-contained, establishing its own independent sphere or interest and expectation. Each represents a war between two attitudes: self-assured and anxious. The following example illustrates how paragraphs in the novel build up as a battlefield of opposing voices:

After a while, a line of black clouds issues from behind the range of purple mountains. Night falls. It begins to rain. These are recognizable events but otherwise disconcerting. The three of us huddle on a bed of damp evergreen needles and moss beneath a rock overhang. Lightning flashes now and again. In the shadows, we spy every kind of animal from bears to chimeras, not to mention the monopods, amazons, mermaids and giant crocodiles that inhabit this region (according to our leading cosmologists who have deduced these facts from Scripture and the words of Aristotle). The night grows chill. I am fairly certain that death would have been preferable to spending time in Canada. (41)

As seen in the previous example, this paragraph also starts with the physical experience (the fear, the discomfort, the cold), it moves towards exposure of ignorance, and it ends in a parody of nationalistic cliché mixed up with a very grim experiential prospect. And the next one starts anew, every chunk of narrative a scene of conflict between two kind of discourses, each one pestering the other in such a way that the character's critique (criticism is the result of mental distance which enables the thinker to express judgments) will always be undermined by the character's constraining situation. And the other way around, the narration of grief will be troubled by the inclusion of humor. Every paragraph focuses on a different event, feeling, object, or idea, but it would be difficult for the reader to remain in only one position for long. This is a disturbing reading experience because it does not allow the reader to conclude which of the two voices (tragic or comic) one has to respond to primarily. It is an unstable position because one kind of language does not invalidate the other completely, it only exposes the reader simultaneously to two different mechanisms of comprehension.<sup>22</sup>

Allusion to national identity disquisitions and the grotesqueness of the European Renaissance rub against the impact of painful reality. Parody is made to clash with real suffering, that of a woman on the brink of desperation at every turn. Glover's achievement is to make the first-person experiencing voice so haunting that, when there is no humor (very rarely, and mainly in the second half of the novel), the narrative becomes unbearably distressing. Occasionally, Glover manages to blend these two discourses: sometimes the vocabulary of criticism and of personal testimony merge poetically when Marguerite thinks about the people who died because of colonization:

He takes me to see Donnacona's grave, with its diminutive stone cross, in a secluded churchyard. And I am reminded of the little graveyard on the Isle of Demons where Richard, Bastienne and Emmanuel rest forever (though their graves have no marker). I think also of the graves at Trois Pistoles, which Dado Duminil told me of, and the colonial cemeteries left behind by M. Cartier and the General. The idea of all these unvisited graves on the peripheries of other worlds haunts me. (180)

Although, in general, Glover never lets lyricism or parody dominate the narrative or become an independent force; each sentence always unsettles the mood of the previous statement:

In idle moments I recall a savage girl living on M. Cartier's farm at Limoilou. Her parents had offered her to the captain as a gift for the return

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22. According to Kuester (1992: 8, 43, 122) parody is not a genre, it is a mechanism, a rhetorical strategy.



voyage his last time in Canada. (Evidently native child-rearing practices are as thoughtless and irresponsible as those of the French. Dare we ask if her name means Iphigenia in the tongue of the Hochelagans?) [...] I saw her only once, in shadow, at the back of a large room lit by a fire, bent so close to her needlework that she must have been almost blind. [...] Dull, pocked skin, lank, thin hair, eyes blank from terror and loneliness—no less marooned in France than I in Canada. (66)

In this paragraph, sharp commentary is enmeshed in the tale of suffering, and it seems that neither discourse is contaminated by the other. Parody cannot muffle the voice of the immediate approach to existence. Righteousness of thought gives confidence and comfort (and a kind of intellectual superiority), but the sight of torment gives a tug at the heart, which somehow throws the humorous tone off-balance. Thus, the fact that Marguerite envisages her experience in terms of critical terminology –“I am infected with otherness” (156-7)– does not really diminish the impact of the experience she is undergoing. Perhaps it makes it more real because we recognize the experience in the way contemporary criticism has codified it and made it familiar.

Although it is almost impossible for Marguerite not to be a symbol, Glover has been able to weave her attacks on western civilization with her factual and perceptual conditions of existence. The cultural tract does not alleviate the affliction, it does not de-emphasize the shock: on the contrary, it shows that “the knowledge, the explanation, does not quite fit the sight” (Berger 1972: 7). That is, the critical statement, however humorous, falls short in the face of reality, and it does not heal. When Itslk, Marguerite’s Innu lover abandons her, she says “my knowledge of his reasons does nothing to soften the blow of his absence.” (96)

Ultimately, the novel seems to be a meditation on the inability of words and discourse to convey experience. The real story of Marguerite is that she lacks the words for what she has lived. She considers discourse as entrenched in the logics of its own arguments, creating awful teleologies that do not bear any relationship with humans:

And all the optimistic descriptions of the hereafter, with its hierarchies of angels and the risen dead, with God as king, are unwarranted applications of Aristotle’s argument by analogy. The throw of language is seductive. Sentences march like fanatical soldiers over cliffs. (107-108)

Especially in the second half of the narrative, Marguerite’s mind is continually assaulted by the idea that language has no capacity to express what life is: “there don’t seem to be words in any language to explain what has befallen me” (164). “It occurs to me that if I have learned anything it is that the universe gives no clear

word as to its state, that our lives are bracketed in fog". (194). "[T]he nature of life, in my experience, being that of astonishing the participant" (116).<sup>23</sup>

Although in command of the explanation and of the wit of parody, she realizes that reality is not tamed even when we get enough perspective. Her terror is "unspeakable" when she is about to give birth alone (100). When the child dies, a few hours later, she says: "What I feel -words fail. Burn these pages." (104). This is how Glover makes her "real" (personlike, like traditional characters): in Marguerite's heartfelt rejection of language, Glover is creating a space for her apart from postmodernistic language-based games. We can even say that the author has contributed to the feminist project against the limiting available categories of identity; in an exemplary way, he has expanded a woman's potentiality as hero.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Marguerite lives in two dimensions all the time: "Were this narrative an allegory, which it is not" (116) she says, pointing at the very conventions that make her exist imaginatively in our mind, as a semiotic field which gathers several symbols. However, she is not only "elle", a cultural artifact, but Marguerite, a woman caught in extreme circumstances. Glover has made it possible for this second dimension to surface by capturing her desperation and enabling the reader to look at her as an eye-witness. But especially by giving her extraordinary powers of insight, because *Elle*, the novel, precisely rests on the sophisticated analysis that a particular woman can make of her environment.

By rendering in detail the effects of male cruelty on a woman, Glover has momentarily liberated his heroine from a symbolic habitat and has served her to us in flesh and bone, and he has done that without renouncing to include parody, which is constructed both as an exposure of a male-oriented culture which destroys women and nations, and as a spur for the reader to meditate on the stereotyped ways we dialogue with the past. This novel is an example of our current stance, it shows that criticism permeates narrative vocabulary and structure without alienating us from the characters.

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23. Typically, Glover does not let these serious meditations go untouched by irony. Here is the list that Marguerite's doctor gives her to read: "Hippocrates, *On Dreams*, Plotinus, *Inexpressible Things*, Artemidorus, *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, Dinarious, *Unknowable Things*, and Hipponax *Things Better Left Unsaid (Peri anecphoneton)*." (187)

24. See Heller's (1990:120-123) acknowledgement of a common feminist project of creating novels which expand women's psychic possibilities and potential as heroes.

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