

The Mom and the Many: Animal Subplots and Vulnerable Characters in *Ducks, Newburyport*

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1. Introduction: Sitting Ducks

Cementing her reputation as a writer of innovative fiction, Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) is an ambitious encyclopedic novel that updates modernist strategies for the twenty-first century while showing that human plots and nonhuman subplots can no longer be disentangled at a time when animals are exposed to pollution, function as overworked laborers, and eke out an existence at the edge of extinction. The main character's meandering thoughts about a family cat illustrate the novel's themes and formal strategies:

the fact that Frederick's luxuriating over there . . . , the fact that nobody can resist bending to talk to him and pat him, . . . but he doesn't *need* their pats, . . . he's not even noticing birds rustling nearby, . . . the fact that he's not thinking about the end of the world, . . . no sirree, . . . he's just thinking about his own life and he thinks it's swell, . . . the fact that I think animals think a lot, . . . they're the ones who have the *time*, . . . the fact that birds could think up whole novels in twenty seconds, I bet, livelier novels than Anne Tyler's too, . . . the fact that it's unbelievable but every single thing alive has its own . . . point of view, even a worm, or a jellyfish, . . . even a leaf has feelings, . . . the fact that all I want to do is achieve a little *contentment* . . . (Ellmann 2019a: 794–96)

This passage helps to position *Ducks, Newburyport* in the literary field via the reference to Anne Tyler, celebrated writer of novels like *Breathing Lessons* (1988) and *Redhead by the Side of the Road* (2020). Ellmann's protagonist appreciates her brand of domestic realism; she would like to read "an Anne Tyler" (Ellmann 2019a: 788) because these novels about American middle-class life feature "close families" and are "sort of calming, because you know nothing too awful's going

to happen” (790). Echoing existing critiques that categorize her as a conservative writer, however, the main character adds that “Anne Tyler’s from Baltimore, world HQ of the KKK, . . . but her books aren’t about that” and that her characters “scrape a living rinsing bottles or something unambitious like that, that you can’t believe a person can make a living out of, kind of like baking *pies*” (790). These remarks establish parallels with *Ducks, Newburyport*, which likewise centers on domestic life and a downwardly mobile protagonist who is a semiprofessional pie maker. But the allusions to racism, capitalism, and the end of the world intimate that Ellmann’s novel fits into a divergent literary project, which does not shy away from structural violence. The protagonist’s speculations about animal minds and fast “bird novels” further suggest that her narrative differentiates itself by abandoning the “slow pace” of Tyler’s books (791) and making room for nonhuman perspectives, the central topic of this article.

Though its manifold digressions make the text hard to summarize, *Ducks, Newburyport* tells the story of two mothers living in Ohio in the early months of 2017: an unnamed housewife who worries about her four children while baking countless pies and a wild mountain lion who makes dangerous forays into human territory in search of her missing cubs. The basic message is accordingly straightforward: “Moms are *important*, even if nobody else thinks so” (94). The human plot narrates routine occurrences like family meals, trips to the store, and the attempt to deliver numerous batches of pies but also dramatic episodes involving a flash flood, a runaway child, and an attempted home-jacking. These events are hard to identify and follow, however, as they are backgrounded by the housewife’s monologue, which records her train of thought in a single sentence that spans almost one thousand pages, has no chapter or even paragraph breaks, and is composed of innumerable subclauses introduced by the phrase “the fact that.” This stream of consciousness voices practical concerns about housework and crippling medical debt alongside lingering grief over the untimely death of the protagonist’s parents. But it also mimics digital platforms in zigzagging between random subjects like musicals, nuclear codes, and decluttering gurus as well as urgent topics like #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and the polarizing Trump presidency. Though this remarkable monologue points in disparate directions, its centrifugal digressions are reined in by centripetal themes and leitmotifs, in line with Stefano Ercolino’s (2014) account of the dual tendencies at work in maximalist literature. In terms of theme, the novel accentuates past and present forms of violence in the United States, with an emphasis on aggression toward women and ecologi-

cal endangerment, as illustrated by the mountain lion plot. In doing so, it brings to mind the fact that “slow violence” is an apt descriptor of “domestic abuse” in addition to systemic pollution, according to Rob Nixon (2011: 3, 16). The spiral is an example of the text’s leitmotifs, for this shape is linked to phenomena ranging from flowers and computers (Ellmann 2019a: 709) over the mother’s negative thought process (677, 729, 911) to the course of the lion’s journey (630, 801, 945) and other animal minds: “Do gorillas talk to themselves all the time like we do, . . . I don’t know . . . but *I* think in . . . dizzying spirals” (288). Through such refrains, the text clarifies its own form and unifies its materials; the mother makes “spiraling pastries while I myself spiral out of control like a whirling dervish” (495) and keeps “spiraling into a panic about my mom and animal extinctions and the Second Amendment” (515).

Ducks, Newburyport participates in two literary traditions that are relevant to my argument about its nonhuman imagination. Though its experimental energy chafes against the narrow parameters of identifiable subgenres, Ellmann’s novel is a form of climate fiction, for it addresses the “sixth mass extinction” (317), a flash flood triggered by “climate change” (593), and the subculture of “preppers” (186, 604). The narrative does not conjure up apocalyptic futures, however, nor does it overlook the uneven culpabilities and vulnerabilities of distinct human communities. It rather evokes what Stephanie LeMenager (2017: 225–26) calls the “everyday Anthropocene,” in which characters pursue “a project of staying home and, in a sense distant from settler-colonialist mentalities, *making* home of a broken world.” Because of its encyclopedic approach, it is also a textbook example of Heather Houser’s (2020) “infowhelm” texts, creative works that integrate and interrogate ecological data. If the content of Ellmann’s novel points toward climate literature, its form reconnects with modernism. For its epic stream of consciousness recalls both Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), and Ellmann (2019b) herself has stated that, while “it’s nice of people to take an interest in new writing,” “everybody knows readers would get more from reading *Ulysses* or Woolf.” In addition, she is the daughter of two critics who published groundbreaking accounts of feminist literature and James Joyce—and there are conspicuous similarities between these figures and the narrator’s parents in *Ducks, Newburyport*. The novel is consequently an exemplar of “metamodernism,” the trend in which the “experiments . . . of twentieth-century modernist culture have acquired new relevance to the moving horizon of contemporary literature” (James and Seshagiri 2014: 88). It follows from these observations

that Ellmann's text is akin to works such as Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) and Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016), as well as Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered* (2018) and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020). Yet it also performs a remarkable experiment with animal subplots, as this article will clarify.

The position of *Ducks, Newburyport* can be triangulated by investigating its remarks about another writer and summarizing its form and themes. But we may also opt for a route that is closer in spirit to this encyclopedic book and trace one of its leitmotifs, "sitting ducks." Ducks are mentioned several times; they make an involuntary appearance in the housewife's favorite restaurant, for instance, and are involved in a dangerous incident from her mother's past set in Newburyport. Readers also repeatedly encounter the phrase "sitting ducks," a famous idiomatic expression that refers to something or someone who is vulnerable to attack. The housewife uses the phrase to capture the emotional complexity of family life, in remarks on her first husband and his current absence from the life of his daughter Stacy, who is "stuck in limbo, sitting duck, waiting for Frank's next move" (Ellmann 2019a: 347). The expression returns in reflections on the mother's past professional life as a history professor and her current, equally thankless job as a pie maker. The first job was bad because "it wasn't minimum wage but pretty close, . . . the fact that you're a sitting duck if you're part-time" (811), and the second exposes her to criticism about her baking efforts and "unless you're upbeat enough, . . . you're just a sitting duck" (400). The leitmotif crops up again in a brutal scene of domestic violence involving her best friend: "[Cathy] was really a sitting duck in that car, the fact that he could've killed her easy" (757). And it reappears in descriptions of real-life events that happened in Zanesville and Gnadenhutten and involved the execution of escaped zoo animals—"[The owner] kept them all in tiny cages . . . and [the animals] were all in just terrible shape, sitting ducks for those police marksmen" (838)—and the slaughter of no fewer than ninety-six unarmed Native American people in 1782—"The Moravian Indians were just 'sitting ducks,' . . . they were all pacifists so they didn't put up a fight" (329). As this overview demonstrates, ducks are mentioned in the context of food and labor, past and present family issues, and unrelenting violence toward women, Indigenous people, and animals—the signature concerns of this novel.

But I will single out another passage because it again points toward the novel's sustained exploration of nonhuman life. As the next sections explicate more fully, *Ducks, Newburyport* pushes us to contemplate the lives and worlds of other

creatures. Though this passage centers on plants instead of animals, it provides another illustration of how the narrative integrates anecdotes about other forms of fragile life and their alien points of view:

that tree out back . . . that came down . . . last fall . . . now has branches starting to grow out of its side, . . . the fact that David Attenborough's always talking about tree competition in the rainforest, as if trees are . . . thrilled when any nearby tree dies, . . . Our Approach to School Bullying, but maybe there's also . . . tree empathy, . . . they're often siblings as well, . . . the fact that if a nearby tree's injured . . . , the other trees *feed* it . . . if that's true it means trees sort of think, and plan, and care, . . . "mommy trees," . . . the fact that maybe our trees have been missing their pal over there . . . , and they've been quietly *feeding* it somehow, underground, . . . maybe there's more going on in [trees] tha[n] we thought, . . . the fact that trees go into a dormant state at night, . . . if trees sleep, perchance they dream, . . . maybe they have wish-fulfilment dreams about abundant water sources, . . . they're just sitting ducks, . . . they can't get away . . . (714–16)

Repeating the "sitting ducks" refrain, this characteristic digression is prompted by the fallen tree and ponders its resurgent vitality in a way that underscores the precarious nature of plant life and its difference from human modes of embodiment ("they can't get away"). But it also discards reductive accounts of nonhuman competition for more imaginative views of plants and plant networks that draw on biology ("dormant state") and literature (Shakespeare's "perchance to dream") to speculate about tree perception and hypothesize about the parallels between human mothers, bullies, and siblings and their vegetal counterparts. And these analogies already hover in the background, seeing that the mother describes humans as sitting ducks throughout the novel. While the sweeping narrative of *Ducks, Newburyport* can be approached from various critical angles, this article will focus on its systematic inclusion of similar episodes about nonhuman worlds. This strategy is on display in the cougar narrative, but a closer analysis unveils a wide array of animal characters, all of which highlight human violence and promote a more convivial, "neighborly" mode of cohabitation with other critters.

2. Animals, Narratives, Characters

Before scrutinizing the menagerie of *Ducks, Newburyport*, we should contextualize its approach to multispecies storytelling by reviewing pertinent insights about extinction, narrative, and gender as well as anecdotes, characters, and attention. First, the human mother's monologue regularly addresses the vanishing of nonhuman species, and this means that Ellmann's novel participates in extinction discourse. As Ursula Heise asserts in *Imagining Extinction* (2016), the current,