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## THE COMMA AND THE CONDITIONAL: LUCY ELLMANN'S *DUCKS, NEWBURYPORT* AND THE PERFORMANCE OF THE QUASI-TRANSCENDENTAL

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Lucy Ellmann's novel *Ducks, Newburyport* formally enacts the quasi-transcendental – conditions of possibility that are simultaneously conditions of impossibility. Following Derrida's turn to James Joyce, whose equivocal writing disclosed what Husserl's pursuit of univocity suppressed, I read Ellmann's novel as a literary figuration whose formal articulation makes a critical phenomenological analysis possible. The analysis centres on the two most conspicuous devices of the novel's poetics – the comma's perpetual deferral of closure and the nominalizing refrain "the fact that" – while attending to the wider complex of techniques (listing, accumulation, and the counterpointed, period-bound sections following a lioness) through which the text configures meaning. I argue that this syntax exhibits the impossibility of the classical *epoché* for a consciousness constituted by the structures of late capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, while holding open the possibility of critical phenomenology in Lisa Guenther's sense: a mode of attending to how power and history shape lived experience, and of unbuilding those structures from within.

### KEYWORDS

Lucy Ellmann; *Ducks, Newburyport*; Jacques Derrida; Edmund Husserl; quasi-transcendental; critical phenomenology; James Joyce; parataxis

### Introduction

Lucy Ellmann's novel *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) presents the interior monologue of an Ohio homemaker across roughly one thousand pages, and in that monologue there is no full stop. The monologue is articulated instead by commas and by the use of the phrase "the fact that," which recurs many thousands of times. This narrative is only occasionally interrupted by a second, counterpointed narrative about a lioness searching for her cubs. This much smaller narrative is told in the third person and in conventionally punctuated sentences. In this paper, I argue that the novel's formal choices (the extraordinary lengthy sentence of the main text, and the punctuated lioness story) enact what

Jacques Derrida calls the quasi-transcendental: “the simultaneous condition of possibility as well as the impossibility of a system, a concept, a language, or a political body” (Kramer 2014: 522). Reading the novel through Derrida’s early engagement with Husserl, as well as through Derrida’s identification of James Joyce as the counterforce to Husserl’s pursuit of univocal meaning, I show that Ellmann’s comma-bound syntax demonstrates the impossibility of the classical *epoché* for a consciousness constituted by the structures of late capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, while nevertheless holding open the possibility of what Lisa Guenther calls critical phenomenology: a phenomenology that “attend[s] to the ways that power and history shape lived experience” (Guenther 2021: 6).

The terms of this claim need care, and setting them out precisely is the first task of this paper. In Derrida’s *Edmund Husserl’s “Origin of Geometry”: An Introduction*, Joyce’s writing is not itself a phenomenological treatise; it is the literary practice whose equivocality discloses what Husserl’s pursuit of univocity must suppress, and it takes Derrida’s reading to bring that disclosure into philosophical articulation (Derrida 1989: 102). The same division of labour structures this paper. Ellmann stands for us where Joyce stood for Derrida: her novel is not an analytic critique of phenomenology but a figuration of a consciousness saturated by its historical conditions. The critical phenomenology is performed in the reading, here, in this paper, which takes the novel’s formal features as its material. When I say, then, that the novel “performs” or “enacts” the quasi-transcendental, I mean that its formal techniques articulate, at the level of syntax and structure, a condition that philosophical prose can describe but struggles to exhibit. The analysis that renders this articulation *as* phenomenology remains the reader’s act.

Two further terms govern the argument. The quasi-transcendental, as I use it following Guenther, names historically contingent formations: global capital, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, idealizations of motherhood... that function like transcendental conditions in constituting experience while themselves being constituted historically, through the actions of the very subjects they constitute. The quasi-transcendental is therefore not simply another name for the Husserlian *Lebenswelt*. The lifeworld names the pre-given horizon of all experience. Quasi-transcendental structures, by contrast, are contingent products of power that could be otherwise, and are for that reason possible objects of critique and of what Guenther calls unbuilding: “there is no outside to capitalism, heteropatriarchy, or colonialism from which to critique these structures and forces from a distance; rather, we must diagnose, resist, and unbuild them from within” (Guenther 2021: 14).<sup>1</sup> Critical phenomenology, correspondingly, is

1 Václav Havel’s account of “post-totalitarian” power in “The Power of the Powerless” (1978) offers an instructive contrast here. Havel’s philosophy of resistance presupposes a “life in truth” available outside ideological structures. That is a natural world from which the falsity of an ideological system’s claims can be discerned (Havel 1978: 9, 11). In this respect Havel’s resistance aligns closely with the classical phenomenological

here understood positively: not as the denial of phenomenological description but as its extension to the conditions (historical, material, social), that classical phenomenology sought to suspend.

Derek Attridge connects Ellman's novel to Joyce (Attridge 2024). He argues that the novel inventively develops further the style of the unpunctuated, block-text monologue of the "Penelope" episode of *Ulysses* to capture the chaotic, rapid-fire flow of the contemporary mind (ibid: 92–95). In Attridge's view, this Joycean form uses arbitrary associations and lists to cultivate an empathetic readerly response to the protagonist's anxiety and dismay at contemporary culture, and also a recognition that such writing "brings home how much may be going on in one person's mind at a given moment." (ibid: 93). For critic John Day, the uniqueness of the text is not its length, but rather that no one has offered such a sustained account of this kind of mind, so deeply embedded in domestic life, before (Day 2019). Molly MacVeagh lifts this attention to demonstrate the salience of this novel for discussions of climate anxiety. She argues that the novel's fragmented structure constitutes a 'molecular form' uniquely suited to representing the porous nature of climate anxiety (MacVeagh 2024: 500–501); its maximalist text goes below the structures of the usual systems of narrative (at a molecular level) and can therefore upset them (ibid: 503). MacVeagh writes: "Ellmann's stream of consciousness takes habits and fears and apple pies and rolls them together, multiplies them by political-ecological crisis, and fires them at you erratically, until it's not exactly clear where the boundaries around such things used to be drawn" (ibid: 516).

What this scholarship already makes clear is that the novel's form exceeds any single device. My analysis of the comma and "the fact that" should accordingly be read as an account of the two most conspicuous devices within a poetics that configures meaning through a whole complex of means, nominalization, listing, accumulation, and the counterpointed punctuation of the lioness sections among them. The absence of the full stop does not, after all, mean the absence of sentences. What distinguishes Ellmann's practice, and what motivates the Derridean frame of this paper, is the specific horizontality of her syntax. Where Joyce's polysemy multiplies meanings vertically within the word, Ellmann's parataxis extends it horizontally along the sentence and it is this horizontal extension of delay (delay for Derrida is the deferral of meaning) that connects her form to Derrida's account of the quasi-transcendental. The paper proceeds as follows: section II reconstructs the philosophical frame: Husserl's confrontation with tradition in "The Origin of Geometry", Derrida's reading of that text, and the concept of the quasi-transcendental as delay. Sections III and IV analyse the novel's two most conspicuous devices, the comma and "the fact that", as syntactic articulations of delay and of facticity

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aspiration to the *epoché*. I have argued elsewhere for the timeliness of Havel's resistance writing; the position developed in this paper, following Guenther, denies precisely the outside his formulation requires. Resistance, like consciousness, operates from within the structures it opposes.

respectively. Section V turns to Ellmann's essays published around the time of the release of *Ducks, Newburyport*, to establish that these devices belong to a deliberate formal strategy. Section VI takes up the novel's structural counterpoint, the period-bound sections following a lioness, and the human and animal world contrast; this counterpoint, and the question of the natural world it raises, prepares the reading of the novel's ending, where in section VII I conclude by considering the ending, a movement of care between mother and daughter, as they visit the lioness, and by asking whether care can function as a critical resource within quasi-transcendental constitutions.

## From Pure Reduction to Quasi-Transcendental Structures

The classical phenomenological project depends on the *epoché*: the methodological suspension of the natural attitude by which the phenomenologist refrains from positing the world in order to describe how it is given to consciousness. Whether such a suspension could ever deliver a "pure" consciousness is a question Husserl himself confronted in the *Crisis of European Sciences* where the description of pure consciousness is acknowledged to be an abstraction rather than something given in experience (Husserl 1970: 256) – and it is the aspiration to this suspension, rather than any naïve achievement of it, that Derrida's early work presses upon. In Derrida's first published work, a translation of "The Origin of Geometry" (the English text of Husserl's chapter is published as an appendix to *The Crisis of European Sciences*), Derrida offered an introduction much longer than the essay he translated. Before we can look at Derrida's critique, we will briefly explain Husserl's position.

For Husserl, the phenomenological reduction aimed to secure apodictic foundations by achieving univocity, that is, a language capable of unambiguous designation. In "The Origin of Geometry", Husserl pursues this univocity not by examining consciousness in isolation but by investigating how ideal geometrical formations persist across historical transmission. A geometric truth, once established, becomes available to later geometers across different languages and cultures without loss of its ideal content. The question is how meaning constituted in one historical moment remains accessible and identical across traditions. Husserl seeks the conditions that make this persistence possible, the structures that allow ideal objects to transcend their empirical origins while remaining communicable. Yet even as Husserl pursued "presuppositionless knowledge", his late work increasingly confronted the paradox that ideal objects like geometric truths arise from and persist through historical tradition.

In "The Origin of Geometry," Husserl addresses this paradox directly:

The geometry which is ready-made, so to speak, from which the regressive inquiry begins, is a tradition. Our human existence moves within innumerable traditions. The whole cultural world, in all its forms, exists through tradition. These forms have arisen as such not merely causally; we also know already that tradition is precisely tradition, having arisen within our human space through

human activity, i.e., spiritually, even though generally know nothing, or as good as nothing, of the particular provenance and of the spiritual source that brought it about. (Husserl 1970: 354–55)

Importantly, even the *a priori* truths of geometry are discerned through the traditions in which the geometers of any age dwell. These traditions are not merely one generation mechanically passing information to the next, but rather spiritual accomplishments that arise through human activity. The ideal content of geometry depends on this traditional transmission for its very existence as accessible knowledge.

However, Husserl's project requires a regressive inquiry that would work backwards through this traditionary existence to access origins. The methodological tension is acute: how can phenomenology perform this regression when the "ready-made" geometry from which we begin is already fully embedded in "the whole cultural world"? Husserl's solution is the eidetic reduction which depends on the possibility of distinguishing what is essentially geometrical from what is merely traditional accretion. But if ideal formations exist through tradition and arise within our human space through human activity, can this distinction be maintained? The very conditions that make geometrical ideality possible (spiritual activity, traditional transmission, cultural embedding) also prevent access to pure, pre-traditional origins.

It is precisely this distinction that Derrida's reading of Husserl calls into question. In *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, Derrida identifies James Joyce as the counterforce to Husserl's project (Derrida 1989: 102). Where Husserl sought to reduce language to univocal clarity through regressive inquiry, Joyce pursued maximum equivocity through linguistic multiplication. In John P. Leavey's Coda to Derrida's *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, he describes Joyce and Husserl as "asymmetrical transcendental parallels" in Derrida's work; Husserl attempting to work backwards through tradition to grasp free ideality, and Joyce aggressively layering meanings to demonstrate language's irreducible historicity (ibid: 190). What geometry exemplifies for Husserl are "free" idealities, such as numbers, as distinguished from idealities "bound" to the lifeworld. Bound idealities are the bread and butter of literary discourse. But Derrida's turn to Joyce gives literature an epistemologically privileged voice for doing phenomenology. Derrida would later theorize this privilege explicitly, reading Joyce, and other literary figures, like Kafka, in a manner that differs in kind from his readings of philosophers and attending to literature's specific freedoms and demands (Derrida 1984; 1992; see also the writings collected in Mitchell and Slote 2013). Joyce's formal techniques do not simply represent the contamination of transcendental structures but actively disclose it in ways that philosophical prose cannot. The multilingual puns of *Finnegans Wake*, with their etymological depth and semantic multiplicity, show that the medium making ideality possible, language itself, simultaneously contaminates meaning with historical contingency and semantic instability. Derrida's own writing, of course, increasingly adopts

performative strategies for this same reason. If the medium of ideality is itself historical, then any bracketing performed in and through that medium is performed from a determinate historical position. That is, the attempt to bracket an ideology is made from a standpoint that ideology has helped to form.

Derrida's privileging of literary form as phenomenological disclosure opens the possibility that certain novels might make available what philosophy describes but struggles to exhibit. Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* operates in this space. While, as described above, the unpunctuated flow of Molly Bloom's episode in *Ulysses* clearly anticipates Ellmann's style, *Ducks, Newburyport*, shifts from Joyce's vertical polysemy to a relentless horizontal parataxis. Where Joyce's semantic density, for Derrida, demonstrated the impossibility of univocal meaning, Ellmann's thousand-page sentence makes delay itself the object of formal display: the impossibility of bracketing is exhibited in the syntax. This offers the reader a critical phenomenology within the oppressive structures of this moment.

The insight relies on Derrida's concept of the quasi-transcendental, which Sina Kramer defines as "the simultaneous condition of possibility as well as impossibility of a system, a concept, a language, or a political body" (Derrida 2014: 522). The pure *epoché* is impossible because consciousness cannot extract itself from the linguistic and historical conditions that constitute it. As Kramer observes, "the transcendental and the empirical would be mutually implicated, mutually contaminated and contaminating, and vulnerable to each other" (ibid: 538). This mutual contamination is not a correctable deficiency but the structural condition of all meaning-constitution. Central to this contamination is what Derrida theorizes as delay.

Here delay is the philosophical absolute, because the beginning of methodic reflection can only consist in the consciousness of the implication of another previous, possible, and absolute origin in general. ... In the lackluster guise of a technique, the Reduction is only pure thought as that delay, pure thought investigating the sense of itself as delay within philosophy. (Derrida 1989: 152–53)

Delay is not an obstacle to phenomenology but its structural condition. The reduction cannot access pure origins because any origin appears only through delay, only in the living present that is already contaminated by what precedes it. This delay connects to what Kramer identifies as the "fabulous retroactivity" of quasi-transcendental constitutions, where "the general economy will have been produced retroactively" (Kramer 2014: 548). Meaning is never simply present but is constituted retrospectively. Where delay points backward, as meaning is always lagging behind an origin it cannot recover, this retroactivity points forward. Constitution arrives from the future, installing what will have been the case. The two run in opposite temporal directions, and this counter-directionality will matter for the reading of the novel's ending. *Ducks, Newburyport* extends Derrida's insight in a crucial direction. Rather than multiplying meanings within the word, as Joyce does, the novel enacts the quasi-transcendental through formal mechanisms that perform delay. The comma,

for instance, in *Ducks, Newburyport*, perpetually defers the moment. Also, the nominalizing structure of “the fact that” that connects these delayed instances. These formal features articulate an alternative phenomenological material in which contamination figures as constitutive. Building on MacVeagh’s analysis, where “[t]he borders between object and environment, life and non-life... start to become less distinct at the micro-scale of molecular attention”, we might say that Ellman’s novel doesn’t even allow us to bracket a moment to a particular quasi-transcendental structure (MacVeagh 2024: 501).

### The Comma: A Syntax of Delay

Another formal feature of the novel is the absence of the period. Its main discourse contains grammatical sentences nonetheless, but it withholds the mark that would close them on the page. The period marks the completion of a statement: an articulation of arrival, the typographic signal that a unit of sense has been achieved. Not every full stop delivers definitive meaning, of course, but as a mark it offers respite from delay, and it thereby enables what Derrida would call a “metaphysics of presence”, a fantasy that meaning can be definitively fixed. The classical *epoché* depends on an analogous moment of arrest: the phenomenologist must stop the flow of the natural attitude, bracket empirical contamination, and access pure structures. The period performs this stopping on the page. Ellmann’s refusal of the period is therefore legible as a refusal of bracketing. The comma, appearing thousands of times throughout the text, marks connection, continuation, the persistence of flow. The comma also separates, marking entities as entities of the same order, and so makes lists possible. Where the period would close off meaning and allow the isolation of a completed structure, the comma perpetually defers closure as things as added together.

The comma thus functions analogously to Derrida’s concept of the trace, explained in *Of Grammatology*:

The instituted trace cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears as such and thus permits a certain liberty of variations among the full terms. The absence of another here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of another origin of the world appearing as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence within the presence of the trace, is not a metaphysical formula substituted for a scientific concept of writing. This formula, beside the fact that it is the questioning of metaphysics itself, describes the structure implied by the “arbitrariness of the sign,” from the moment that one thinks of its possibility short of the derived opposition between nature and convention, symbol and sign, etc. These oppositions have meaning only after the possibility of the trace. (Derrida 1997: 46–47)

The trace is hence the structural mark of non-presence, the formal sign that meaning is always deferred, always contaminated by what comes before and after. Thus, the trace of what appears always carries within it the mark of

what is absent, what has passed, what is deferred. This is not just philosophical wordplay but rather describes how signification actually works once we recognize that signs are arbitrary. The connection between signifier and signified is unmotivated. Arbitrariness is, for Saussure, the first principle of the sign and the very condition of its signifying function. Meaning can therefore emerge only through differential structures, where absence is constitutive rather than secondary. Traditional oppositions like natural versus ideological presuppose a world where signs might achieve presence. Derrida argues that “the beginning of methodic reflection can only consist in the consciousness of the implication of another previous, possible, and absolute origin” (Derrida 1989: 152); each thought implicates another, each clause opens onto what precedes and follows.

The connection between Derrida and Ellmann is striking. Consider how the narrator’s consciousness moves through a chain of associations:

the fact that I found an index card with Abby’s BBQ sauce recipe yesterday, in her own handwriting, and it fills me with, with, Yul Brynner, seed wheat, the fact that she says you need 1 lge. onion, 2 tbsp. butter, ¼ cup lemon juice, 2 tbsp. vinegar, 1 tbsp. Worcestershire, 2 tbsp. brown sugar, ½ cup water, 1 jar chili sauce, salt & pepper, the fact that maybe I’ll use it on some drumsticks today, freezer, animal-shaped ice cubes, water samples, urine sample, PCBs, the fact that wild killer whales have PCBs in them, and pregnant whales transmit the PCBs to the fetus, the fact that I haven’t got any chili sauce like Abby means, but I could use some Hunt’s and add a little chili powder or paprika... (Ellmann 2019: 37)

The consciousness presented here moves ceaselessly between maternal inheritance (“Abby’s BBQ sauce recipe... in her own handwriting”), domestic practice (“maybe I’ll use it on some drumsticks today”), environmental crisis (“wild killer whales have PCBs”), and commercial substitution (“Hunt’s”). No period arrives to close off this list, which the reader assembles into a network expanding into the text beyond my quotation. The comma ensures that grief, cooking, ecological catastrophe, and brand names remain inextricably linked through the structural impossibility of separation. The comma suspends the movement that the eidetic reduction would require by ensuring that another particular always arrives first. Each comma marks another empirical particular arriving to contaminate potential essence. The text accumulates delay and saturates the consciousness of the narrator.

Consider the following passage:

the fact that all in all we’re really just a normal Joy, Pledge, Crest, Tide, Dove, Woolite, Palmolive, Clorox, Roloids, Pepto-Bismol, Alka-Seltzer, Desitin, Advil, Aleve, Tylenol, Anacin, Bayer, Excedrin, Vitamin C, Kleenex, Kotex, Tampax, Altoid, Barbazol, Almay, Revlon, Cetaphil, Right Guard, Old Spice, Gillette, Q-Tip, Johnson & Johnson, Vaseline, Listerine, Head ‘n’ Shoulders, Safe Owl, Eagle Brand, Jolly Green Giant, Land O’Lakes, Lucerne, Sealtest, Clover, Blue Bonnet, Half & Half, Snyder, VanCamp, Wish-Bone, French’s, Skyline, Empress, Gerber, Nabisco, Heinz, Kraft, Quaker Oats, Sunkist, Purina, Vlasic, Oreo,

Shredded Wheat, Arm & Hammer, Jell-O, Pez, Sara Lee, Chock Full o' Nuts, Libby's, Pepperidge Farm, Fleischmann's, Morton, General Mills, King Arthur, Bell's, Reese's Pieces kind of household like everybody else... (Ellmann 2019: 15)

The narrator cannot separate her sense of normalcy from consumer products. She cannot access "household" as a pure concept apart from the cascade of brand names that constitute contemporary American domesticity. Saturation, admittedly, can also serve purification: Husserl's own imaginative variation multiplies the "profiles" of a phenomenon in order to disclose its invariant essence. But imaginative variation is meant to end. The variations run until the essence shows itself, and then they stop. Ellmann's list does not stop. It discloses no invariant "household" behind the brands; it produces only more brands. Accumulation here outruns any eidetic yield, and the truth the novel renders is that consciousness under late capitalism cannot perform the epoché, because it is formed through commodity relations (and all the other saturating structures). Even my choice to end the quotation where I did imposes a closure that the text itself refuses. And this, perhaps, is what the novel's extraordinary length is for: a phenomenology of a consciousness that cannot bracket must, in principle, go on, and the thousand pages are the formal measure of that impossibility. run until the essence shows itself, and then they stop. Ellmann's list does not stop. It discloses no invariant "household" behind the brands; it produces only more brands. Accumulation here outruns any eidetic yield, and the truth the novel renders is that consciousness under late capitalism cannot perform the epoché, because it is formed through commodity relations (and all the other saturating structures). Even my choice to end the quotation where I did imposes a closure that the text itself refuses. And this, perhaps, is what the novel's extraordinary length is for: a phenomenology of a consciousness that cannot bracket must, in principle, go on, and the thousand pages are the formal measure of that impossibility.

### **"The Fact That": Facticity and Situated Consciousness**

If the comma prevents closure, the repeated phrase "the fact that" enacts a different quasi-transcendental operation. The phrase nominalizes: it turns an event or thought into a static object ("the fact"), only for the comma to immediately set it back in motion. The operative opposition here is facticity and essentiality. Everything in the novel arrives marked as factual rather than essential. This runs counter to the aspiration toward apodictic certainty that directs Husserl's project, an aspiration phenomenology can pursue and be directed by without ever finally securing. The phrase performs what it names: these are facts, not essences; particularities, not universals.

It must be stressed, and here the Derridean logic cuts both ways, that facts and particularities enjoy no exemption from the deferral that undoes essences. To individuate a fact *as* this discrete fact would require precisely the demarcation, the pause, that the novel's parataxis withholds; each "the fact that"

is set back in motion by the comma before it can stabilize into a settled unit. The novel does not, then, replace essences with a new bedrock of particulars. It shows both poles of the classical opposition, essence and fact, caught in the same movement of delay. Ellmann's syntax refuses the arrest that either would require to stand alone. Additionally, 'the facts' themselves are rendered through the narrator's consciousness. They are as she understands them, and not as ideal concepts transferable across generations (as in Husserl's geometry example). Hence the facts of the novel are indistinguishable from impressions, and impressions are pressed upon, by and through quasi-transcendental structures.

The pattern of performing the quasi-transcendental is present implicitly as well as explicitly. For example, when the narrator recognizes that she does not possess certain knowledge, we see that even her ignorance, what she doesn't know, is constituted:

The fact that I'm a grown woman and I don't know the difference between hay and straw, or linen or cotton, or calico, or flax, or muslin, or porcelain and china, and all kinds of other stuff I can't even remember right now... (Ellmann 2019: 34)

This passage operates on three distinct levels, each revealing the quasi-transcendental constitution of consciousness. First, there is the ignorance itself: the narrator cannot distinguish basic material categories that structure everyday life. But the passage does not present this as a neutral epistemic gap. The phrase "I'm a grown woman" marks the second level: a self-judgment. She evaluates her ignorance as a failing, as something shameful given her age, her position, and her responsibilities. The judgment that a grown woman *should* know these things is not a universal standard but a historically specific expectation. It emerges from her situation as a white, lower-middle-class American woman whose identity is bound to domestic competence.

The third level is more radical. For the narrator to overcome this ignorance would mean to finally learn the difference between hay and straw and achieve something like an authentic encounter with "the thing itself." Even this aspiration is unavailable to her in the form she imagines it. The point is not that a farmer possesses what she lacks: no subject position affords unmediated access to the "hay-ness" of hay, and on Husserl's own terms the thing itself is approached through, not around, its adumbrations. The point is rather that her particular route to any such knowledge would pass through the very structures that produced her ignorance: perhaps through lifestyle media, through nostalgic ruralism, through the commodified authenticity of farmers' markets. It is worth noting that the narrator harbours a recurring fantasy of escaping the busyness of her life to a perceived paradise in an Amish community, where she imagines life would be simpler; a fantasy whose vocabulary of simplicity is itself supplied by the culture she would escape. She cannot bracket her way to the essential difference because the desire for such a position is itself historically constituted.

This pattern of constitutive mediation extends to the narrator's experience of her own body and maternal identity through the American healthcare

system. The narrator's past experience of cancer treatment operates as another quasi-transcendental structure, permanently shaping how she experiences time, presence, and motherhood:

the fact that toddlers don't criticize you so much, or at least not as artfully or hurtfully as teenagers do, the fact that toddlers show a little mercy, they really do, or maybe I've just forgotten what two-year-olds are like, the fact that I missed Jake's best years, being busy "embracing change," otherwise known as having chemotherapy, toothpicks, the fact that my oncologist told me to embrace change, maybe because she cost a chunk o' change... (Ellmann 2019: 25)

The passage reveals multiple layers of how consciousness is structured here. First, there is the temporal absence itself: she "missed Jake's best years." This is not a phenomenologically accessible past that could be recovered through recollection or imagination. It is a structural void, a permanent absence because she was "busy" with chemotherapy. The treatment itself was the containment of a lethal illness, which is no system's fault; what belongs to the American health-care system is the way that treatment became inseparable from the family's financial ruin. The medical care that preserved her life simultaneously created an irreparable gap in the maternal experience, which is continued through her very presence in the kitchen, at once unable to escape domestic servitude, but also baking to find a way out of their financial predicament. She cannot bracket her way back to those years; they constitute a hole around which her current relationship to her children must navigate.

Additionally, medical discourse itself colonizes her temporal experience. The oncologist's instruction to "embrace change" becomes unbearably ironic in retrospect. The "change" she was meant to embrace was not a positive form of growth or transformation but the violence of treatment. The contamination is enacted in a narrative sequence: "embrace change" arrives already ironized, and the next clause, by association, adds the further ironic turn of 'cost', "maybe because she cost a chunk o' change", so that the deferral of sense this paper has been tracking is performed here in miniature, meaning revised retroactively clause by clause. The astronomical expense of treatment and the way medical care under late capitalism extracts financial value from biological crisis cannot be separated from the clinical relationship itself. The oncologist's words carry both therapeutic authority and economic exploitation simultaneously. The narrator cannot access the purely medical dimension of her treatment because that treatment was inscribed within commodity relations.

Finally, the passage demonstrates how healthcare systems produce specific forms of maternal guilt as quasi-transcendental conditions. The phrase "I missed Jake's best years" carries a regret that shades toward self-accusation within ideologies of intensive motherhood: she frames her absence as a personal failing even while acknowledging it was necessitated by life-saving treatment. This guilt cannot be resolved through phenomenological reflection because it emerges from the contradiction between two quasi-transcendental structures that American women inhabit simultaneously: a medical system which

bankrupts individuals, and an ideology of maternal presence that demands women be constantly available to their children, lest they suffer the irreparable harms the narrator believes her absence may have caused. The narrator could not have satisfied both imperatives; her consciousness must therefore carry this guilt as a constitutive feature.

The healthcare system thus functions as a quasi-transcendental structure, being both the condition of possibility for the narrator's continued existence and the condition of financial ruin and maternal guilt. Even the desire to be the ideally present mother (itself an oppressive trope) is shaped by the same structures that made such presence impossible.

## Historical Violence and the Constitution of Consciousness

Guenther claims that quasi-transcendental structures like colonialism, anti-Black racism, and heteropatriarchy function by normalizing some habits of perception, cognition, and comportment while pathologizing others (Guenther 2020: 11–16). The narrator's consciousness operates within such structures. Her whiteness is never marked as a racial identity, precisely because it functions as an unmarked norm, and that very invisibility is a feature of white supremacy as a quasi-transcendental structure. However, Ellmann goes further than simply representing this condition; she formally enacts the complicity of this consciousness through the mechanism of the comma. The comma functions as a grammatical operator of equivalence, a flattening device that places all contents of consciousness on the same syntactic plane. This levelling is complementary to the horizontal parataxis: the same movement that defers closure also lays each item alongside the next, so that accumulation and equivalence are one operation seen from two sides. If we explore Ellmann's non-fictional essays, we can find evidence that the stylistic choices of *Ducks*, *Newburyport* constitute a deliberate formal strategy in her recent *oeuvre*. For example, in her essay collection *Things Are Against Us* (Ellmann 2021), across two essays she explicitly examines how consciousness is simultaneously determined by and determines the structures that constitute experience.

In the titular essay, Ellmann presents THINGS (repeatedly capitalized to mark their oppressive presence) as quasi-transcendental structures:

So THINGS, it must be said, are against us. But it's mutual. Humans are hostile to many THINGS, maybe even most THINGS. Our relationship with THINGS is discordant and haphazard. Our attitude to THINGS is intrinsically ungrateful. (Ellmann 2021: 24)

THINGS press upon consciousness, demanding recognition and structuring perception. These are not neutral objects waiting to be bracketed but rather the conditions of possibility for consciousness itself. We cannot think without THINGS, yet THINGS perpetually exceed our attempts to master them conceptually. This phenomenological investigation of THINGS contrasts with

the next essay in the collection, “The Underground Bunker,” where Ellmann shifts to “this”—the demonstrative that attempts to arrest the flow of THINGS into a singular, present object. Where THINGS proliferate and overwhelm, THIS tries to give a moment of specificity, albeit one defined by how things have catastrophically developed. The contrast between THINGS and THIS maps onto the formal distinction in *Ducks, Newburyport* between the comma’s endless accumulation and the period’s arrested presence. THINGS operate like the comma-bound consciousness of the narrator: multiple, excessive, resistant to closure.

You mean we massacred the Indians, enslaved the Africans, cut down all the trees, poisoned all the rivers and imprisoned all the animals for THIS, this hellhole of bombast and hamburgers and opioid addictions and cardboard-box houses and pretend ideas? (Ellmann 2021: 30)

The demonstrative THIS marks the terrible present that historical violence has produced. The syntax is telling: “for THIS, this hellhole of bombast and hamburgers...” The repetition from capitalized THIS to lowercase “this” performs a deflation from the totalizing gesture that would grasp the whole catastrophic present to the degraded particularity of “hamburgers” and “cardboard-box houses.” The comma puts genocide and hamburgers in the same syntactic space to say that this is the actual structure of consciousness under late capitalism: the capacity and necessity to process historical atrocity and consumer culture as equivalent data points.

Returning to the novel, this flattening is constant. School shootings, environmental collapse, and cinnamon bun ingredients occupy the same cognitive slot, separated only by the comma. This syntax performs the specific horror of the privileged, white, middle-class subject position: the capacity (and necessity) to process global tragedy and domestic trivia as structurally equivalent data points in the flow of “the fact that.” The comma does not just connect; it democratizes in a way that reveals the violent banality of the narrator’s world. The narrator cannot bracket her privilege because the ability for thought to slide from genocide to hamburgers is the formal expression of that privilege. Yet the flattening produces its own counter-effect: the list simultaneously deepens the reader’s awareness of the human cost sedimented in consumer well-being, of the inhuman foundations of ordinary comfort. Both axes, the vertical and the horizontal, remain at work; this is the law of language, which the novel exploits rather than suspends. The critical charge of Ellmann’s parataxis lies precisely in the tension between its levelling syntax and the unlevel history that syntax carries.

Ellmann’s theoretical position in *Things Are Against Us* suggests this flattening is not merely a personal failing but a structural feature of consciousness constituted by late capitalist THINGS, which, in that relationship between the modern consciousness and the world, creates the horrific “this.” The narrator’s consciousness is both “against” these THINGS (recognizing their violence, resisting their logic) and constituted by them (unable to think except

through their mediation). As Guenther notes on the quasi-transcendental condition: “there is no outside to capitalism, heteropatriarchy, or colonialism from which to critique these structures and forces from a distance; rather, we must diagnose, resist, and unbuild them from within” (Ellmann 2021: 14). Ellmann’s formal choices perform this within-ness: the text cannot step outside the structures it describes; it can only describe them from positions of immersion, letting the comma expose how consciousness flattens historical violence and domestic particularity into the same horizontal stream. The next step in connecting Ellmann’s novel to Guenther’s critical phenomenology is to show how the natural world fits into its depiction of one individual consciousness, and to demonstrate how the novel contributes to the unbuilding of quasi-transcendental structures from within.

### The Lioness and the Fantasy of Closure

The novel’s argument depends not only on the narrator’s comma-punctuated consciousness but on its counterpoint: the recurring sections about a lioness, rendered in sentences punctuated by periods. While the narrator’s discourse refuses to mark points of closure on the page, the lioness appears to achieve it in conventionally articulated discourse:

Hers was a life of resentments, suspicions and alarms. She had her satisfactions though: an opossum swinging upside-down from a high branch, the whoop of an owl, indicating dusk and the time to hunt, the sight of a dead sheep’s face, surrounded by tight woolen curls, a sip of clear cold water, nibble of grass, large white snowflakes disappearing into a black pond. And now, her infants asleep in the den. (Ellmann 2019: 307)

The periods here mark completed satisfactions. Each satisfaction arrives fully: the opossum, the owl, the sheep’s face, the water, the snow, the sleeping infants. However, we must be careful not to reinscribe a romantic Nature/Society binary by reading the lioness as a truly “uncontaminated” subject. The very form of this discourse raises the question of who makes this vision of the lioness, and to what end within the novel’s rationale. The lioness’s closure is not an ontological report on animal consciousness but a *textual effect*: a projected fantasy of presence, of a separate natural world accessible if we could only think our way to it. It is a vision closer to Romantic and Enlightenment figurations of nature than to anything phenomenological, and one the novel stages, I will argue, as a projection. Even the notion of “satisfactions” suggests this. The lioness occupies a position, which is not the same position as, say, the dead sheep’s.

This textual effect carries phenomenological weight for considering the place of the natural world in the narrator’s consciousness. The novel opens with the narrator encountering raccoons at her door, crashing over rubbish bins, and this threshold establishes the natural world as a persistent horizon for human consciousness. The horizon is not, however, pure exteriority, as

what remains other is still embroiled in human structures. The raccoons appear at the boundary of the domestic; the lioness eventually enters the zoo. These encounters form an arc moving from the wild approaching human habitation to the wild captured within it. They are not an outside, or an alternative to ideological structure (a natural world as the ground of experience or the like). They are too integrated, as the natural world here is constituted by the human world. The interventions of the lioness narratives thus perform a double function: they present the fantasy of phenomenological closure while simultaneously marking the limits of the narrator's historically saturated consciousness. The natural world maintains an alterity that human consciousness can approach but never colonize. The text figures the lioness to perform the *possibility* of the period, serving as the necessary structural foil to the narrator's delay. "And now, her infants asleep in the den"—the sentence closes to mark that the satisfaction is complete. The narrator, by contrast, cannot close a sentence about her children because her maternal consciousness is inseparable from anxiety about school shootings, medical bills, and gendered expectations, and everything else (THINGS and 'this').

The parallel between the two mothers prevents the analysis from collapsing into either pure historicism or recovered transcendentalism. Both consciousnesses are organized by maternal orientation. Yet the lioness represents the *dream* of a consciousness that could rest, that is, a consciousness that could arrest the flow long enough to place a period. By attributing this capacity to the imagined animal, Ellmann highlights its unavailability to the human subject situated in the quasi-transcendental web of late capitalism. The period marks what closure would require: a consciousness not immersed in the historical conditions the narrator inhabits, even though the lioness's story is about being subsumed into the human world.

To be clear about the work the human/animal contrast is doing in this argument: the claim is not that an essential world exists to which the animal has access and the human does not. No consciousness, on the account developed here, achieves the closure the lioness sections typographically perform; the periods mark a projected capacity, it is the narrator's world, and the novel's discourse, that furnish the lioness with her presence. The contrast is supplying the comma-bound discourse with the image of the arrest it cannot perform rather than reinstating the human/animal divide on which phenomenology has so often, and so problematically, traded. That the novel's most complete sentences belong to a captured animal is not a claim about animal minds; it is a diagnosis of what the narrator's own consciousness lacks and longs for.

## Conclusion: Can Care be Closure?

Ellmann's novel does not merely illustrate phenomenological insights but articulates them through formal mechanisms adequate to quasi-transcendental structures. As the preceding sections have shown, it does so through a wider poetics than the comma and the conditional alone: nominalization, listing,

brand-name accumulation, and the counterpointed punctuation of the lioness sections all contribute to this understanding. Where Derrida used Joyce's vertical semantic density to critique phenomenology's metaphysical foundations, Ellmann employs horizontal techniques (the comma's perpetual deferral, the nominalizing refrain's provisional framing) that make available to the reader what can only be descriptive in philosophical prose. By refusing syntactic closure, Ellmann prevents the bracketing that would allow genocide to be separated from hamburgers, slavery from consumer brands, ecological destruction from medical debt. The formal refusal of the period serves critical phenomenology's goal of making visible how oppressive structures normalize some habits of perception, cognition, and comportment while pathologizing others (Guenther 2020).

Yet the novel's conclusion performs something crucial for critical phenomenology: the possibility of working within quasi-transcendental structures not only to diagnose them but to find points of human connection that gesture beyond them (or, as Guenther says, "unbuild" them from within). The novel's ending demonstrates what this within-ness might achieve:

..., the fact that she's being swell about everything, the fact that I hope all her rebelliousness hasn't been completely quelled by trauma, or by her new role as our savior, big responsibility, There's always tomorrow, sweet and salty, black-and-white movies, galoshes, the fact that we're going to let Gillian do the Indian Mud Run too, and in the meantime, just to cheer everybody up, we're going to see the runaway lioness at the zoo this weekend, the fact that Stacey seems to feel some kind of rapport with that woebegone creature, the fact that whether this is because she feels fierce and free, or caged and cowed, doesn't bear thinking about (Ellmann 2019: 998)

This passage arrives after nearly a thousand pages of horizontal delay. The narrator plans to take her daughter to see the lioness, after following the story of the animal in the local news (the fantasy element of the animal). The visit is not innocent: its object is an animal just recaptured, and its motive is partly the family's own cheer. But the visit is motivated by the narrator's attention to Stacey's need for connection with "that woebegone creature." The ambiguity of whether Stacey identifies with the lioness's fierceness or her captivity "doesn't bear thinking about" because what matters is the vertical movement of attention itself: the mother looking toward her daughter, the daughter looking toward the lioness, consciousness moving through structures of care that momentarily cut across the flattening syntax of late capitalist equivalence. More than that, the decision to do something together hints at the possibility of connection in spite of the structures creating their possibilities. The point is reminiscent of Arendtian natality: the capacity, grounded in the fact that each of us is born and so enters the world as a beginning, able to initiate action whose outcome is not determined by what precedes it (Arendt 1958: 177–78). Who knows what mother and daughter might do together; the fact that they are together makes possible a trajectory other than the one the story has so far determined.

It might be objected, and the objection follows from my own argument, that care cannot function here as an uncontaminated normative resource. If the comma denies every content an exemption from the quasi-transcendental constitution, then care enjoys no exemption either: the narrator's care is shaped by the ideology of intensive motherhood examined in Section IV, by the consumer logic of the family outing, by the zoo as an institution of capture. I do not appeal to care as a criterion that escapes contamination, and this paper offers no principle, standing outside the structures it describes, for distinguishing good care from bad. What the ending performs is more modest and, I think, more consistent with the argument: an orientation, an attention directed toward others, operating within contamination without being reducible to it. This is what Guenther's "unbuilding from within" amounts to in Ellmann's novel, and it is why the conclusion invokes natality rather than normativity. Their trip together, through a care, is a beginning made possible, not a secured standard. Importantly, I find this ending to be exemplary of the sixth sense of critical phenomenology in Guenther's articulation: community organizing as "the relation between theory, action, and reflection that is explicitly oriented towards resistance, resurgence, emancipation, liberation, or some other way of trying to get (a little more) free" (Guenther 2021: 17).

Phenomenology, for Guenther, is an important emancipatory tool because it can identify, in lived experience, those moments available to us. Guenther writes:

The desire to restructure the world might sound naïve or utopian if we limit our revolutionary imagination to a sudden, instantaneous change on a planetary scale. But if we understand the meaning of world phenomenologically, as an open-ended context for meaningful experience with nested levels of intimacy and strangeness that sometimes overlap and sometimes conflict or crash against each other, then we must admit that the structure of the world is quite open to change – sometimes frighteningly so. (Guenther 2021: 18)

Literature here is not only an object for phenomenological analysis but also a phenomenal figuration whose formal articulation makes critical phenomenological analysis possible. The novel articulates an imagined experience; the reading, in turn, renders that articulation as phenomenology. On this division of labour, Ellmann's novel supplies a literary figuration of the quasi-transcendental, and the reading finds in its formal strategies an account of how care and connection function within structures that would deny their significance. The comma's thousand-page deferral culminates not just in a period but in a movement toward the next day, toward the possibility that consciousness, however compromised, can still orient itself through connection.

Let me close by stating what this examination has sought to contribute in each of the fields it touches. To scholarship on *Ducks*, *Newburyport*, it offers a formal account of the novel's syntax that neither reduces the comma to a stylistic curiosity nor inflates it into an unpunctuated "flow," and that specifies, against the general invocation of the Joycean, what is horizontal, paratactic,

and delaying about Ellmann's sentences in particular. To the use of Derridean concepts in reading literature, it offers a working example of distinguishing the literary performance of quasi-transcendental structure from its philosophical analysis, while insisting that the former genuinely discloses what the latter struggles to exhibit. To critical phenomenology, it suggests that literary form can furnish the field with articulations of situated consciousness finer-grained than its own descriptive prose – so long as the division of labor between figuration and analysis is kept in view, and the resources such reading recovers, care among them, are acknowledged to be as situated as everything the novel describes.

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Danijel Brenan

## Zarez i kondicional: *Ducks, Newburyport* Lusi Elman i performans kvazitranscendentalnog

### Apstrakt

Ovaj rad razmatra način na koji roman Lusi Elman *Ducks, Newburyport* formalno otelovljuje kvazitranscendentalno – uslove mogućnosti koji su istovremeno i uslovi nemogućnosti. Polazeći od Deridinog okretanja Džejmsu Džojosu, čije je dvosmisleno pisanje razotkrilo ono što je Huserlova težnja ka jednoznačnosti potiskivala, roman Lusi Elman čitam kao književnu figuraciju čija formalna artikulacija omogućava kritičku fenomenološku analizu. Analiza je usredsređena na dva najuočljivija postupka poetike ovog romana – neprestano odlaganje zatvaranja zareza i nominalizujući refren „činjenica da“ – uz istovremeno razmatranje šireg kompleksa tehnika (nabranja, akumulacije i kontrapunktno postavljenih, vremenski omeđenih odeljaka koji prate lavicu) kroz koje tekst konfigurira značenje. Tvrdim da ova sintaksa pokazuje nemogućnost klasične *epohe* za svest konstituisanu strukturama kasnog kapitalizma, bele supremacije i patrijarhata, istovremeno ostavljajući otvorenom mogućnost kritičke fenomenologije u smislu u Lise Genter: kao načina usmeravanja pažnje na to kako moć i istorija oblikuju proživljeno iskustva, kao i na razgrađivanje tih struktura iznutra.

Ključne reči: Lusi Elman, *Ducks, Newburyport*, Žak Derida, Edmund Huserl, kvazitranscendentalno, kritička fenomenologija, Džejms Džois, parataksa

