Joycean Form, Emotion, and Contemporary Modernism: Ellmann’s *Ducks, Newburyport* and McCarthy’s *The Making of Incarnation*

Derek Attridge

University of York

*Five types of emotional engagement with fiction may be identified in relation to the formal innovations of modernist novels. Two recent novels that owe their stylistic distinctiveness in part to the heritage of Joyce’s* Ulysses *draw on these possibilities in very different ways: Lucy Ellmann’s* Ducks, Newburyport *and Tom McCarthy’s* The Making of Incarnation*. The former inventively develops the style of the “Penelope” episode at great length, inviting the reader to share the protagonist’s dismay at several features of contemporary American culture, while the latter may be seen as the heir of the “Ithaca” episode, evoking an emotional response by indirect means rather than through a direct appeal.*

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**I**

The discussion of emotion and related terms—affect, feeling, mood, *Stimmung*—by commentators with an interest in cultural productions has, over the past quarter century, become as fluid and many-sided as the phenomena themselves. Are emotions named, subjective categories of feeling in contrast to the universal, pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive, non-subjective domain of affect?[[1]](#endnote-1) Or is pre-cognitive, bodily affect a historical phenomenon that only emerged (in the West) in the nineteenth century?[[2]](#endnote-2) Or, rather than attempting to distinguish between affect and emotion, should we try to compile a list of affects/emotions as the pre-cognitive ground of all feeling?[[3]](#endnote-3) Or is it simply a mistake to hypothesize the existence of a realm of affect that exists outside thought and nomination—are emotions perhaps indivisible fusions of the physical and the psychological?[[4]](#endnote-4)

When these questions are raised in the more specific context of literary studies, they bring with them the disagreements and contradictions evident in the wider field (and in the neighboring field of psychology). I won’t be attempting to bring clarity to the swirling sea of claims and hypotheses but will take as my starting point the conclusion reached by Alex Houen in his astute summary of the issues: “[W]e need to think of affect, language, and cognition as thoroughly conjoined yet open to various modes of interaction, coassembly, and fusion” (8). I shall use the relevant terms more or less interchangeably, though with some acknowledgment that “affect” suggests a more generalized feeling than “emotion.” By examining two contemporary works of fiction that could be considered “modernist” in their innovative use of form, I hope to show that the affective legacy of Joyce’s *Ulysses* is manifold: Lucy Ellmann’s *Ducks, Newburyport* takes the mode of the “Penelope” episode further while Tom McCarthy’s *The Making of Incarnation* builds on the achievement of the “Ithaca” episode.

Although many of the discussions of these topics make robust claims about the psychological-physiological phenomena themselves, when it comes to a consideration of the literary dimension that is their ostensible subject, they often leave many questions unanswered. One of the problems, and one that goes a long way back in aesthetic theory, is the frequent recourse to the phrase “the expression of emotion” without a clear explanation of how it is that literary works can be said to express emotion. Sometimes what is meant is that the author has used the creation of a literary work as a way of articulating, and perhaps discharging, certain personal feelings. Such an account may be valuable in a biographical study of the author, perhaps, but is of little significance when studying the work as a literary artefact. At other times, the phrase refers to the *representation* of emotions being experienced by an invented character (including on occasion a narrator functioning as a character)—though commentators often write as if somehow the literary work itself was experiencing and expressing the emotion. When it’s clear that the emotions in question are those of a character, their study forms a legitimate part of a critical analysis dealing with the work’s representation of entities in the world. A more complex case is that of literary autobiography, in which the emotions described may be those of the author but are represented by means of the same techniques as fiction.

But the suggestion that the literary work “expresses emotion” can also be a disguised way of talking about the *reader’s* emotions when engaged with the text. This opens a quite distinct area of investigation, though the distinction between represented emotions and felt emotions is not always maintained.[[5]](#endnote-5) When no sense of an individualized narrator emerges, for instance, any emotions evoked by descriptive passages (such as in the lengthy passages by Zola that Jameson analyzes in chapter 3 of *Antinomies* *of Realism*) are felt solely by the reader. In most fiction, however, we can identify emotions of both kinds, represented and felt, with complex relations between them. (We often project our feelings back into the work: we sense tedium or excitement in the writing when we are bored or animated by it.) It is the reader’s affective response that is my subject in what follows.

There is a long tradition of commentary on the reader’s (or listener’s, or viewer’s) emotions in response to literary works, one of the earliest and most influential being Aristotle’s discussion of the pity and fear evoked in an audience by the experiences of the characters in a tragedy. Discussions of the sublime, from Longinus to Burke, Kant, and beyond, move outside consideration of the emotion generated by the actions and feelings of fictional characters to the impact of large-scale phenomena. Phenomenological accounts, such as those by Roman Ingarden and Wolgang Iser, focus on readers’ responses (although their interest tends to be directed more toward meaning than toward affect), and the brief flourishing of reader-response theory in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s encompassed many different approaches to this issue. Any consideration of the ethical or political effectiveness of literary works is implicitly concerned with the emotional experiences of readers: unlike texts that produce changes in their readers through rational argument, literature brings about alterations in outlook or understanding by evoking powerful responses, in which emotion plays a significant part.[[6]](#endnote-6) And emotion, as we all know, is a stronger provoker of action than argument.

The following is a rough sketch of what I take to be the different categories of emotional response evoked by fictional texts. These categories aren’t watertight, but they will help us to register the enormous complexity of the feelings aroused by literary works, even those far removed from the thriller or the tear-jerker.

1. *Responses to factors external to the literary work*. These include such affective states as anticipation or disappointment on perceiving how few pages are left to read; irritation at the cramped print or pleasure in the attractive design; and frustration on not being able to remember the names of characters. (This category is one I won’t be paying much attention to.)

2. *Responses to the work as the production of a real author*. Here I would place admiration for the skill exhibited in crafting the work; disappointment when a work fails to meet the standards set by the author’s earlier works; and astonishment at the magnitude of the labor involved in writing the work. Also in this category are the emotions aroused as a result of biographical knowledge: we may feel compassion for an author who wrote under painful conditions, for instance, or be moved by references to emotional incidents in the writer’s own life.

3. *Responses to the work as the production of a narrator and/or an implied author*. Here, too, we may feel admiration for the verbal artistry on display, but this time not that of the actual author but that of the narrator or a presence behind the narrator (or both). (It’s often not possible to separate this type of admiration from type 2 admiration: in *Lolita*, for instance, we take pleasure in Nabokov’s verbal craft at the same time as taking pleasure—perhaps a somewhat dubious pleasure—in that of his first-person narrator Humbert Humbert). An inventive work of art also produces the hard-to-define feeling of new horizons opening up. Other emotions can include surprise or even shock at unexpected narrative turns; tension, perhaps anxiety, at the appearance of clues to some approaching calamity; amusement at a witty turn of phrase; satisfaction at the achievement of narrative resolution; and many more.

4: *Responses to the represented content of the fictional world, including characters, events, and scenes*. The emotions here are of a different order from those in 1 to 3, which are directly experienced: in this case, they are mediated by the fictionality of the work and controlled by the formal operations of the language. Empathy for a character can give rise to any number of emotions, whether shared with the character—such as joy, fear, trepidation, relief, boredom, excitement—or evoked by the character—such as admiration, annoyance, regret, amusement. The depicted events and scenes can also evoke a strong affective response: amazement, fascination, satisfaction, bafflement, and so on. To the extent that these are responses to the represented world and not to the unfolding of the narrative (which is not always an easy distinction to make), they are, as it were, “performed” emotions, feelings experienced from a slight distance. The happiness you might feel when Darcy proposes to Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, or the fear that might strike you when Magwitch starts up in the graveyard in *Great Expectations*, are not the same as the happiness or fear you would experience in the wake of similar events outside of a book.[[7]](#endnote-7) When the narrator is a character with a distinctive personality, categories 3 and 4 may be overlaid: we respond both to the verbal texture and to the fictional individual producing it. Thus our enjoyment of Humbert Humbert’s—and Nabokov’s—play with words can co-exist with repulsion at the character’s proclivities and actions. If the verbal resourcefulness of a character within the fiction evokes a pleasurable response—the utterances of Fevvers in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* would be one of numerous examples—our enjoyment of the language involves an appreciation both of the skill of the writer, whether we understand this as Angela Carter herself (category 2) or the implied author (category 3) and of the creativity of the invented individual (category 4).

5. We may sometimes have feelings about the feelings we are having (or not having); Sianne Ngai calls these “meta-feelings (*Ugly Feelings*, 14 and *passim*).

Different genres exhibit different relationships among these categories. In the realist novel, they are, for the most part, kept separate (though often concurrent). The narrator’s wise pronouncements on human nature in *Middlemarch* may instill a pleasant sense of approbation that will be distinct from our emotional engagement with the characters (in which empathy plays a major role). Even in a first-person narration, such as *Great Expectations*, different feelings are evoked by the world depicted and by Pip’s narration of that world, with its misapprehensions and retrospective judgements. And in all these cases we are likely to experience pleasurable admiration at the proficiency of the writer as a third strand of feeling. Amusement is usually an instance of category 3, the telling of the tale (think of Dickens’s descriptions of Jarndyce or Wemmick), although it is possible for characters or their doings to be comic as well: the bulk of the humor in P. G. Wodehouse’s Wooster chronicles comes from the narrator’s handling of the material (which includes granting Wooster very little insight into the comedy), but some arises from the incidents themselves—and not a little from the manipulations of Jeeves, whom one imagines silently laughing at the success of his stratagems. Satiric humor tends to increase the gap between our response to the teller and our response to the content: we respond warmly to Jane Austen’s narrator’s ironies, appreciations, and judgments while responding differently, but simultaneously, to the actions and words of her characters.

Modernist fiction often explores new relationships among these categories. When, for instance, the main content consists of events in the consciousness of a character, as in Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, categories 3 and 4 tend to merge: there is very little in the represented content that is not at the same time a narration of that content. In other works, emotional effects are largely produced by the controlling hand of the implied author, whether in subjecting the represented world to a poetic vision, as in Woolf’s *The Waves*, or shifting perspectives, as in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. Joyce’s *Ulysses* is a compendium of such explorations, from the comedy of Leopold Bloom’s interior monologue (do we laugh at Joyce’s brilliant evocation of a lively mind or at Bloom’s own energetic mental sallies?), to the parodies of “Cyclops,” in which the content counts for very little compared to our enjoyment of the style, to the craziness of “Circe,” where one moment extraordinary content is demanding our response and the next it is the verbal extravagance that is dominant. In the remainder of this essay, I shall investigate the affective dimension of *Ducks, Newburyport* and *The Making of Incarnation*, with particular attention to their development of the styles of *Ulysses*.[[8]](#endnote-8) In calling these novels “modernist” I’m trusting that it will be granted that the term refers more to a mode of writing, and its attendant emotional effects, than to a specific period.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**II**

In an interview with Stuart Evers, Tom McCarthy asserted: “You can no more ignore Joyce than you can Darwin. If you ignore Darwin, you’re a creationist, and this is where … the bulk of … the mainstream British novel is now: back in the 19th century.” Lucy Ellmann is on record as saying “Joyce changed my life, and my attitude to what literature could do” (Interview with Arshia Dhar). These two contemporary novelists build on very different facets of Joyce’s achievement, with different affective consequences. (For one thing, McCarthy rates *Finnegans Wake* highly, whereas Ellmann has stated that she has never read it.)

Just looking at an opening of Ellmann’s *Ducks, Newburyport* reveals its debt to the “Penelope” episode of *Ulysses*. When the reader first encounters the solid blocks of type that represent Molly Bloom’s nighttime ruminations and has to face the challenge of language without the usual signaling of sentence breaks and abbreviations, the feeling evoked often tends to be frustration—which would be an example of category 1. But once one has learned to read this version of English, the winningness and humor of the episode shine through, emphasized by the rapidity of thought enacted by the typographical peculiarities. Category 2 emotional responses—to the author himself—may include admiration for Joyce as writer, for his verbal skill, his stylistic inventiveness, his handling of comedy, his insights into human thought-processes. (I’m glad to say that these days we don’t hear quite so often about his insight into the “feminine mind.”) When we turn to categories 3 and 4, the affective response to the narrator’s verbal composition and to the represented world, we find that the two in part coalesce: Molly is the effective narrator whose fertile turn of phrase we take pleasure in and among the objects represented is her teeming mind. As for the people, places, and events that enter her thoughts, they are mediated for us by her distinctive mental style and forceful attitudes, so that we seldom respond to them as entities in their own right.

The emotions playing through Molly’s thoughts are constantly shifting as she replays memories, anticipates future events, and assesses the individuals she knows or has come across. Here, for instance, are her reflections on Leopold’s male companions:

theyre a nice lot all of them well theyre not going to get my husband again into their clutches if I can help it making fun of him then behind his back I know well when he goes on with his idiotics because he has sense enough not to squander every penny piece he earns down their gullets and looks after his wife and family goodfornothings poor Paddy Dignam all the same Im sorry in a way for him what are his wife and 5 children going to do unless he was insured comical little teetotum always stuck up in some pub corner and her or her son waiting Bill Bailey wont you please come home her widows weeds wont improve her appearance theyre awfully becoming though if youre goodlooking (*Ulysses*, 18.1275-84)

Scorn for the men in question is combined with protectiveness for her husband, which then morphs into affection. Then compassion for the Dignam family after the father’s death turns into mockery of Paddy himself, a comic snatch of popular song, and then disparagement of Mrs. Dignam. Finally, there’s a suggestion of self-admiration in the thought of the good-looking wearer of a mourning outfit. The affective response of the reader is likely to be, above all, amusement, mixed with admiration for the character’s forcefulness, especially as a woman in a male-dominated world. There’s perhaps also a degree of disapproval at her rather savage put-down of the Dignams. Our amusement is in part produced by Molly’s own verbal comedy—“his idiotics,” “comical little teetotum” (an example of category 3)— and partly by the character as created by the text, with her rapidly fluctuating judgements and forceful expressions (category 4).

Extended over a 24,000 word chapter, this lively and plausible articulation of the mental voyaging of a single character produces an unusual sense of empathetic involvement. It also brings home how much may be going on in one person’s mind at a given moment.

**III**

Exactly the same could be said about Lucy Ellmann’s *Ducks, Newburyport.*  Ellmann is the author of seven novels; this is the most recent, published in 2019. It is by far the most ambitious of her works, which are for the most part light-hearted comic novels playing freely with the conventions of the genre. *Ducks, Newburyport* is very long—the Galley Beggar Press edition runs to over a thousand pages and the excellent audiobook lasts for 45 hours—and for most of its length remains within the mental world of a single character. Its title refers to an event mentioned by this character at various points in the novel: when her mother was a two-year old child, she waded into a pond after some ducks and would have drowned had not her older sister, who couldn’t swim, gone in after her to save her (493, 504, 674). (Mary Ellmann, Lucy Ellmann’s mother and a well-known feminist author, was born in Newburyport, Mass., so it’s possible that the story of her near drowning is based on a real event.)

Reviewers have been quick to make the connection with Joyce, an association made even more tempting given that Lucy Ellmann’s father was the eminent Joyce scholar Richard Ellmann. The original paperback features a quote from *Cosmopolitan* on the front cover: “*Ulysses* has nothing on this.” This was replaced in later printings by a quote from *Vogue*, “A masterpiece like no other.” (Perhaps the marketing people felt that the reference to Joyce wasn’t helping sales.) The more specific debt to the “Penelope” episode emerged indirectly in reviews of the novel when the completely erroneous idea got around that the non-stop outpouring of thoughts occurs, like Joyce’s chapter, in eight sentences.[[10]](#endnote-10) (In correcting this misapprehension in an interview with Sian Cain, Ellmann was characteristically acerbic: “I’m planning to get ‘ONE SENTENCE NOT EIGHT’ put on my tombstone. That should settle the matter, right?”)

On beginning the novel, readers find themselves involved in a rather traditional, and conventionally told, story of a mountain lion and her cubs, seen from the mother animal’s perspective. But halfway down the second page, after a string of dots, something more surprising happens:

The fact that the raccoons are now banging an empty yogurt carton around on the driveway, the fact that in the early morning stillness it sounds like gunshots, the fact that, even in fog, with *ice* on the road and snow banks blocking their vision, people are already zooming around our corner, the site of many a minor accident, the fact that a guy in a pickup once accidentally skidded into our *garage*, and next time it could be our *house*, or a *child,* Wake Up Picture Day, dicamba, Kleenex, the fact that a pickup truck killed Dilly… (12)

We now find ourselves in suburban North America in an early winter’s morning, and we start to process the clues as to the personality and preoccupations of the character to whose thought-world we are being exposed. We’re in the presence of someone with strong opinions, the emphasis implied by the italics contributing to the sense of a spoken voice imbued with emotion. Of course, it’s not an exact transcription of thoughts—in fact, it sometimes sounds more written than thought (“in the early morning stillness”; “many a minor accident”)—but the reading conventions we’ve internalized allow us to interpret it as thought, as is the case with Molly Bloom. There are also many typographical features that belong on the printed page, such as figures in large bold type (representing shaped cakes) or musical notation.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The distinctive rhythm of this prose is created in part by the varied length of the utterances that follow the ceaselessly repeated phrase “the fact that.” Sometimes it is just a few words, sometimes several lines, forming a partly retrievable sequence of associations. These are interrupted at intervals by song titles or quotes from songs (italicized and enclosed in musical notation), quotes from poems, headlines (which often sound like internet clickbait—“9 Things You Never Knew About Miley Cyrus” (212) or “A Dad’s Heart-Wrenching Moment” (645)), a poster (199), and single items that often develop into lists.

These interruptions become part of the verbal world of the novel, expected though always surprising when they occur. There’s a short example of a list in the quoted extract: “Wake Up Picture Day, dicamba, Kleenex.”[[12]](#endnote-12) “Dicamba” is an herbicide, banned in some US states in 2017 because of damage caused by drifting. (Clues later in the novel reveal that it is taking place in 2017.)[[13]](#endnote-13) “Wake Up Picture Day” is explained only later in the work: it’s a sign that appears occasionally outside the children’s school, indicating that “you’re supposed to draw a picture as soon as you wake up, based on your dreams” (169). And we all know what Kleenex is. But what links these three items, presumably appearing in an unbidden string in the thinker’s mind? Here, as in many other places, we have to accept the randomness of thought, at least until a connection strikes us (which in my experience it frequently fails to do). *Ducks, Newburyport*, although it owes much to “Penelope,” is more faithful to thought processes in this respect: if we were able to listen in to another person’s thoughts we wouldn’t find the smooth sequence of related expressions, all making sense, characteristic of classic modernist stream-of-consciousness writing. (That Ellmann’s style may strike the reader as having *less* verisimilitude than the representations of Leopold Bloom’s or Clarissa Dalloway’s thought processes is testimony not to the greater accuracy of the latter but to the powerful illusion of mental experience that can be achieved by limiting the arbitrariness of sequential connections.)

What emerges from the onrush of words is a mind packed with memories, associations, verbal tics, hopes, fears, and much more—an ordinary mind, in other words, though never before represented with such comprehensiveness in a novel. If one had to defend the length of the work, it would be in terms similar to those one might give as an explanation of the length of the “Penelope” episode: only by the multiplication of items well beyond the conventional norms of the novel can the extraordinary richness of the mental world of the average human being be conveyed. As the character herself says halfway through the book, “the fact that I just realized that when this monologue in my head finally stops, I’ll be *dead*, or at least totally unconscious, like a *vegetable* or something” (514). Also reflected in the packed accumulation of factual detail is the barrage of information we now negotiate every day; it’s a novel for the Google age.

At the same time as responding to the gallimaufry of associations, memories, lists, soundbites, and other verbal matter, part of our emotionally-colored experience of the novel is that a personal history gradually takes shape. We learn that the woman whose thoughts we are following lives in the wonderfully named Newcomerstown, Ohio (a real place); is a professional baker working from home, having given up her job as a part-time college lecturer after a bout with cancer; is married to Leo, her second husband, whom she adores; has four children; and so on. When not expressing disquiet over the condition of America, especially the prevalence of gun crime and the despoiling of the environment, she’s worrying about her children, agonizing about her baking, marveling at Leo’s love for her, reflecting on her mother’s illness and death, and bringing to consciousness a dozen other recurrent personal preoccupations. (It doesn’t take a great deal of familiarity with Ellmann’s biography to realize that many of the features of her character’s life mirror those of her author.) A plot of sorts emerges as time passes, including a painful dental procedure, a roadside emergency in freezing weather, a flood, a runaway daughter, and—as if to justify all the woman’s anxieties about gun crime—a hold-up in the home.

As with the “Penelope” episode of *Ulysses*, responses to the novel are likely to include an initial category 1 feeling of intimidation by the ocean of type on most pages, to an even greater degree than would be the case with Joyce’s work. The more conventional lioness narrative with which the sequence of thoughts is interspersed—and which I’m not concerned with here—occupies only around 3 % of the text. Category 2 feelings might include admiration for Ellmann’s achievement in crafting such an immense, complex, entertaining novel. For readers with background knowledge there will also be poignant reminders of the too short lives of Ellmann’s own parents, who appear in not very disguised form. Her father died of motor neurone disease at 69; her mother was confined to a wheelchair for the last twenty years of her life after unsuccessful surgery for a cerebral hemorrhage and died of breast cancer, two years after her husband, aged 68. (A few readers, like myself, will have known the Ellmanns personally, adding to the poignancy of these moments.) But for most readers the emotional impact of the woman’s many expressions of her sense of deep loss will belong to category 4—a mediated sharing of the character’s affective experience.

Among the category 3 responses are the pleasures of recognition, both of items (mostly trivial) that trigger associations in the reader’s world and of items that have appeared before in the text. For much of the time, though, like “Penelope,” *Ducks* fuses categories 3 and 4: our amused enjoyment is equally at the associative energy of the verbal narrative and at the character’s own honesty, ethical fretfulness, and mental agility. Her predominant emotion is anxiety, but her thought processes often come across as funny, usually without meaning to be. To give a proper sense of the affective experience of reading the novel for those who don’t know it, one would have to quote several pages; I’ll have to restrict myself to a passage of a few lines:

…the fact that it’s getting so you’re nervous to be in any public place now, in case there’s a *shooter*, and that just doesn’t seem right, the fact that half of all fatal shootings begin as domestic incidents, *half*, weird, the fact that with kids around we often end up with a lot of over-ripe bananas, and that’s handy for banana bread, ivy patch, peaches in cream, Mommy, losing Mommy, buttercups, 🎜 *I am little Buttercup, sweet little Buttercup* 🎜, corns, swollen ankles, frostbite, lipstick, the fact that it’s really microbes that rule the world, and they’ll just readjust themselves if we nuke ourselves, I guess, my plight, plight my troth, the fact that, heavens to Betsy, I sure hope my current plight is not being repeated on sixty million other planets, the Milky Way… (241)

The woman’s disquiet about shootings—a recurrent topic in her thoughts—is mixed with astonishment (brought out by the italics), and the reader may experience a version of these feelings. But the unexpected shift to a concern with over-ripe bananas is unintentionally comic, and gives rise to a series of odd associations (include a snatch of Gilbert and Sullivan) which are also amusing—except that they include the sudden stab of loss as the memory of the “peaches in cream” she used to eat as a child with her mother gives rise to the painful thought “Mommy, losing Mommy,” a phrase that encourages a sympathetic response. There may be none of the intense emotional pull of the great realist novels, but the sympathetic reader is carried along on a dance of fluctuating feelings, invited to both laugh at the predicaments and obsessions of one person—as in “Penelope”—and to experience some fellow-feeling with regard to the state of the world today.

**IV**

“Penelope” is not the only episode of *Ulysses* lying behind *Ducks, Newburyport*. The woman’s wide-ranging curiosity and associative leaps owe something to Leopold Bloom’s interior monologue, and the lists—which can grow in length to a page or more—sound somewhat like the parodic lists in “Cyclops.” Consider, for example, the following report on a meeting to discuss the revival of ancient Gaelic sports:

Amongst the clergy present were the very rev. William Delany, S. J., L. L. D.; the rt rev. Gerald Molloy, D. D.; the rev. P. J. Kavanagh, C. S. Sp.; the rev. T. Waters, C. C.; the rev. John M. Ivers, P. P.; the rev. P. J. Cleary, O. S. F.; the rev. L. J. Hickey, O. P.; the very rev. Fr. Nicholas, O. S. F. C.; the very rev. B. Gorman, O. D. C.; the rev. T. Maher, S. J.; the very rev. James Murphy, S. J.; the rev. John Lavery, V. F.; the very rev. William Doherty, D. D.; the rev. Peter Fagan, O. M.; the rev. T. Brangan, O. S. A.; the rev. J. Flavin, C. C.; the rev. M. A. Hackett, C. C.; the rev. W. Hurley, C. C.; the rt rev. Mgr M‘Manus, V. G.; the rev. B. R. Slattery, O. M. I.; the very rev. M. D. Scally, P. P.; the rev. F. T. Purcell, O. P.; the very rev. Timothy canon Gorman, P. P.; the rev. J. Flanagan, C. C. (*Ulysses* 12.927-38)[[14]](#endnote-14)

The lists in *Ducks, Newburyport* sometimes develop a similar impersonal, self-generated quality. Here’s an example in which trade names function adjectivally to signal normality:

the fact that all in all we’re really just a normal Joy, Pledge, Crest, Tide, Dove, Woolite, Palmolive, Clorox, Rolaids, 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. (*Ducks* 15)

While continuing to provide an insight into the multiple associations that the human mind is capable of running through in a few minutes, the text starts to take a life of its own, as though it is no longer in the business of representing a character’s thoughts.

Many of the lists, however, while moving beyond any realistic representation of mental life, include moments of emotional power. In doing so, they become aligned with a different episode of *Ulysses*, an episode that has been much less influential on later novelists—one that Joyce said was his favorite, though he also called it the ugly duckling of the book: “Ithaca,” the penultimate chapter, in which Leopold Bloom takes Stephen Dedalus home with him in the small hours of June 17, 1904 (Budgen, *James Joyce* 258). The adjective commonly used to describe the emotional climate of this episode is “cold.” Joyce himself wrote to Frank Budgen that he was “writing *Ithaca* in the mode of a mathematical catechism … so that not only will the reader know everything and know it in the baldest coldest way, but Bloom and Stephen thereby become heavenly bodies, wanderers like the stars at which the[y] gaze” (*Letters* 159-60). Here’s a representative sample of the chapter’s catechistic style:

What lay under exposure on the lower, middle and upper shelves of the kitchen dresser, opened by Bloom?

On the lower shelf five vertical breakfast plates, six horizontal breakfast saucers on which rested inverted breakfast cups, a moustachecup, uninverted, and saucer of Crown Derby, four white goldrimmed eggcups, an open shammy purse displaying coins, mostly copper, and a phial of aromatic (violet) comfits. On the middle shelf a chipped eggcup containing pepper, a drum of table salt, four conglomerated black olives in oleaginous paper, an empty pot of Plumtree’s potted meat, an oval wicker basket bedded with fibre and containing one Jersey pear, a halfempty bottle of William Gilbey and Co’s white invalid port, half disrobed of its swathe of coralpink tissue paper, a packet of Epps’s soluble cocoa, five ounces of Anne Lynch’s choice tea at 2/- per lb in a crinkled leadpaper bag, a cylindrical canister containing the best crystallised lump sugar… (17.296-309)

Emotional it is not. Feelings aroused by this chapter might include admiration for the author for his refusal of novelistic convention (category 2) and surprise coupled with amusement at the narration (category 3). There are some moments that convey insight into the emotional state of the two characters involved, but category 4 affect is relatively weak. Perhaps this is an example of Ngai’s metafeeling: our feeling that we are not having, and are not invited to have, feelings.

Nevertheless, read in the context of the novel as a whole, the narration does more than simply present affectless catalogues. In this passage, for instance, many of the items on the kitchen dresser have emotional significance for Bloom, and offer readers both the pleasure of recognition (category 3) and a touch of empathy for the character (category 4). The moustachecup, we know, was a present from his teenage daughter Milly, about whom he is worried; the chipped eggcup was used to sprinkle pepper on his breakfast kidney just after picking up a letter to his wife from Blazes Boylan; and the comfits—as the next episode will reveal—were Molly’s attempt to disguise her breath after her liaison with Boylan. A little later Bloom is going to discover in the marital bed incriminating crumbs of the potted meat (already associated with both domestic bliss and funerary containers), and as for the basket of port and pears, an earlier episode showed Boylan purchasing it that afternoon. We are left to intuit Bloom’s emotions on seeing the evidence of his wife’s adultery, and in this very act share something of them. Further category 4 affect is provoked by the impersonal narrative voice’s choice of vocabulary: “bedded” and “disrobed,” for instance, are hardly neutral.

The lists in *Ducks, Newburyport* also often include items that trigger, in a similar way, a particular response by referring to an earlier emotional episode. The following is part of one of the longest lists; it occurs just before the end of the book and is introduced by the phrase “living in a country full of…”:

Edison Tower, Philly, Cincy, serial killers, alluvium, bedrock, glacial till, grass understory, blackberries, oaks, hickory and walnuts, Peolia, Elyria, delirium, Kenyon, Purdue, Notre Dame, Northwestern, NYU, subcircular, red moon, Grandmother Moon, Fruit of the Loom, Land O’Lakes, Land of the Free, KFC, tipi, PT, PTA, eyelash curler, styptic stick, Magnitsky Act, Miranda Rules, TXT ME, Paterson Falls, Sears, Swiffer, Oliver!, Esther, smallpox, Sophia Loren, Raquel Welch, Emma Woodhouse, Anne Elliott, Anne Shirley, parsing a sentence, trick-or-treat, peaches in cream, Builderbeck, Pick-Up Sticks, Shredded Wheat, Consolidated Life, 3:33, Sonny and Cher, Chicago World’s Fair, cheese wheel, potato cheese puffs, puffback, puffers, muumuu, phulu-pututu, bib ’n’ tucker, negligent homicide, plastic VW bus, Spelling Bee, banjo clock, Graham crackers, crayons, drawing contest, Beethoven, Philly Dip, grist to the mill, sejant, salient, dormant, rampant, rampage, Hellmann’s Mayonnaise, Fleischmann’s yeast, Fleishhacker Zoo, Brooklyn Bridge, Silent Sentinels, the Silent Treatment, matchwood paneling, hot dog vendors … (996)

Many of the items occur here for the first time and are the result of innocuous associations, but a significant number echo earlier occurrences, often with emotional overtones to which the reader may have an affective response, whether to share the same emotion or to experience sympathy for the woman, or both. “Peolia,” for instance, is the name of the fictional college at which the woman once taught, and which remains a source of anger and frustration. (This fictional name leads to a similar-sounding and actual Ohio town, Elyria.) “Styptic stick” has occurred frequently in the text and brings back the woman’s embarrassment at finding an object she assumed was used by her husband for some intimate, sexual purpose. One of the strongest positive emotional attachments signaled in the work is for the woman’s late aunt Abby (the one who saved her little sister from drowning); hers was the first Swiffer floor mop she had ever seen. “Peaches in cream” is a leitmotif that we have already noted, bearing powerful memories of summer mornings alone with her mother. A different complex of emotions is evoked by “the Silent Treatment,” a phrase that occurs repeatedly (always capitalized), most painfully associated with the problematic relationship the woman has with her teenage daughter. All these emotional associations invite a response from the reader, often compassion, occasionally amusement, always a little injection of pleasure at recognizing a familiar term in a sea of associations.

**V**

Tom McCarthy’s *The Making of Incarnation*, which appeared in 2021, is a rare example of a late modernist novel more indebted to the “Ithaca” episode of *Ulysses* than to “Penelope.” McCarthy’s first novel, *Remainder*, was published in 2005 by a small French art publisher after being rejected by mainstream publishing houses, and demonstrated that a novel could be a compelling read without the conventional norms of character and plot. It rapidly gained a following, especially after an article by Zadie Smith in the *New York Review of Books* hailed it as pointing the way to the novel’s most promising future. It was soon republished by a larger house. The works that followed, *Men in Space* (2007) (actually written earlier than *Remainder*), *C* (2010), and *Satin Island* (2015) all played with the conventions of the realist novel, though in different ways.

The title of McCarthy’s latest novel refers to an imagined science-fiction film aspects of whose production we witness, and also to the ever-present theme of the material body and its movement in space. There is little sense of a narrator whose own emotions might engage us. Technical language abounds, and the reader may well experience feelings of irritation at having to work so hard—especially on a first reading—at tracking characters and following plot developments through the web of unfamiliar vocabulary. There are pleasures of recognition, both internally as the threads of the narrative are dropped and picked up, and externally, as allusions are registered—the most prominent of these being the rewriting of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde* as a space opera, without, apparently, any of those involved in its production being aware of the close coincidence of characters and plot.

Such narrative drive as the novel possesses is created by the search, on the part of a number of agents, for the mysterious Box 808, one of a series constructed by Lilian Gilbreth (a fascinating historical character in her own right) as part of her study of the movements of the human body. At the climax of the narrative, Mark Phocan, one of those on the trail of the missing box, makes his way (with a stopover in Bergen to watch acrobats at work) to the house in Riga of Raivis Vanins, a retired Soviet physicist whose pathbreaking discovery the box is said to concretize. He meets Vanins but fails to get the information he is seeking; then later, returning to the house with the old man’s granddaughter after an outing, enters the aviary situated in the grounds. The granddaughter, with whom Phocan had earlier had a sexual encounter in this aviary, runs ahead, and we are given the scene that confronts him when he follows her into the aviary:

She’s kneeling on the ground inside their little bower; he’s floating above her like a saint or cosmonaut—or, rather, since the rope running between him and the beam, quite visible, belies the illusion of weightlessness, a Bergen acrobat, if you subtracted all the energy and motion. (*Making* 295)

Few accounts of the discovery of a hanged body could be less charged with emotion. Phocan’s obsession with bodily movement, and his memory of the recent visit to Bergen, trump any powerful affective response on his part. There is even an allusion to McCarthy’s earlier novel *Men in Space* for the astute reader to pick up. (Any flicker of pleasure at recognizing the reference might combine a category 2 emotion, since it is a self-reference on the part of the actual author, and a category 3 emotion, as a response to a narratorial device—if, that is, we can imagine a narrator familiar with McCarthy’s novels.) And yet in its avoidance of direct emotion the passage is all the more powerful: it requires the reader to do the work of transforming the oblique language into the horror of a suicide.

The discovery of the much sought-after Box 808 that ensues is, with typical McCarthian refusal of conventional climax, revealed only to the reader when one of the bird boxes in the aviary is described. It is seen by the pathologist who climbs a ladder to undo the rope from the beam, but we can assume that he pays no attention to the fact that it differs from the other bird boxes in having only two walls and no roof. And the description that follows is not likely to correspond to the pathologist’s perception:

Inside, a kind of bird-nest shape has calcified: a central twig that rises from a brackish mass of smaller ones, droppings and seed-husks and, once risen, banks into an anticlockwise turn; then, on completing this, reverses its direction to bank back the other way, clockwise, thereby describing in the air a kind of double-helix before dropping to rejoin its starting point. (295-6)

The scrupulous account goes on to register the “curvy white lines” on the floor, which “could be paint, or it might just be bird shit” (296). The reader alone is made aware that this is not a bird box but one of the three-dimensional models invented by Gilbreth to record human movement through space, the absence of which from all surviving collections of the boxes has generated so much searching. It’s a secret revealed to the reader by the falsely naïve narrator, and the complex feelings it arouses—satisfaction? amusement? disappointment?—belong to category 3: not a response to the object itself, which is curious but unexciting, but to the process of revelation.

The explanation for the mysterious letters “TT” that had accompanied Vanins’s excited announcement to Gilbreth that he had made a discovery that “changes everything”—the discovery encapsulated in Box 808—is provided even more indirectly. In a chapter entitled “The Molecularity of Glass,” we learn of Phocan’s departure from the scene of Vanins’s suicide and then encounter ten pages devoted to a single window in the professor’s study. This is the beginning of the description:

It’s a wood-framed window with four panes. The panes, as Phocan noticed two days ago, seem imperfectly matched to one another. And with reason: they’re not just of different ages but of different constitutions too. Three of them (from garden side: bottom left, top left, top right) are made of float glass—soda-lime-silica-constituted, bath-mixed, tin-bath-poured, roller-lifted, lehr-cooled and strainlessly annealed, machine-cut rectangles displaying a regularity, indeed sharpness, of light propagation with refraction kept right down at <1.5 per cent and scattering, reflection and such manner of distortions similarly minimised. The fourth, though (bottom right) has been cut from different quartz-cloth: cylinder-blown sheet glass, trench-swung, stand-cooled, heat-scored, flattened and hand-measured—tailored, as it were, to order, to the frame’s dimensions. (305)

As with the “Ithaca” example quoted earlier, there’s enjoyment to be had in the refusal to abide by the novelistic expectation that physical detail will be kept to a reasonable minimum and will serve the interests of the plot. We’re invited instead to relish the language of glass-making for its own sake just as we would relish the language of landscape description or the evocation of birdsong. But as far as category is 4 concerned, there’s little in the content that evokes emotion: it’s just a window with four panes.

However, as with “Ithaca,” the possibility that our feelings will be engaged is always there. The description of the window gives way to an extraordinary series of pages on ancient pottery as a potential recording device, the clay having captured the sounds in the air during the molding process like the grooves in a vinyl disk. This account is followed by the speculation that, given the liquid nature of glass, the one unreplaced windowpane might have recorded the events occurring in its proximity. Perhaps it even recorded the breakthrough moment when Vanins, watching his wife through the window, understood her game of swingball—or “tether tennis,” TT—as a “kinetic symphony” (314), from which grew his greatest insight into the motions of the human body in time. These pages are a fantasy of permanence and survival in the face of disappearance and loss that, although highly technical, produce an aura of sadness—including sadness at the fact that this is only a fantasy. It reminds us that most of the past is lost to us forever.

It would be wrong to say that the emotions evoked by the content in *The Making of Incarnation* are negligible. The lawyer Monica Dean’s research into Lillian Gilbreth’s work on bodily time and motion develops into an exciting quest, especially when she’s blocked by shadowy forces. Phocan, too, has to deal with elusive opponents in pursuing his lifelong fascination with the recording of physical motion. Some readers might be thrilled to learn about experiments in hydraulic chambers, wind tunnels, and other high-tech laboratory environments, while the account of military drone operatives carrying out remote killings would be chilling for anyone. The inner lives of a few of the many characters are revealed, at least in part, producing some of the emotional involvement of traditional novel. But more important than these category 4 responses is the category 3 experience of new possibilities—for fiction, for our understanding of, and feelings about, the world—opened up by this mode of narration. McCarthy’s achievement, to an even greater degree than in his earlier novels, is having built on the example of Joyce’s “Ithaca” to produce a work that invites the reader to relish—in what must count as an affective response—the power of language to operate independently of, though never entirely separable from, human needs and emotions.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Although, as I have suggested, there are similarities between Ellmann’s lists and McCarthy’s descriptions, their novels deploy the resources of the genre in very different ways to elicit affective responses. Neither could be said to be “typical” of late modernist fiction, except in their inventiveness; novelists continue to find new ways of engaging readers’ emotions. One response they all generate is surprise. The expectations founded on the reading of earlier novels (even Joyce’s) are constantly being challenged, and among whatever other emotions evoked, those associated with the arrival of the unanticipated—which might include delight, perturbation, wonder, and amusement—are never far away.

Notes

1. The most influential proponent of this view, drawing on Spinoza and Deleuze, is Massumi. Gatens argues that Massumi’s theory is based on a misreading of Spinoza. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jameson, in *The Antinomies of Realism*, presents an argument along these lines, associating the emergence of affect with the mid-nineteenth-century rise of realism (and with Wagner’s music). Jameson does not argue that what he is calling affects had no existence at all before being represented, but that being named “transformed” and “reified” them (34). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This account was ascribed to the psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins by Sedgwick and Frank. For a different reading of Tomkins, see Houen (6-7). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Leys, in a strong critique of Massumi’s use of neurological evidence, argues against the separation of emotion and meaning (“The Turn to Affect”). Her position is “that it is more correct to say that the affects are embodied, intentional states in which the question of the meaning to the organism or subject of the objects in its world is a central issue and concern” (“Trauma” 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ngai argues, unconvincingly to my mind, for an “objectified emotion” that she terms “tone,” a nebulous affect that can be identified neither with a character’s feelings nor those of the reader (28-30). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For an argument that literature’s distinctive power derives from the changes it effects in readers, see Attridge, *Singularity* (108-111, 114-22, and *passim*).Much of this discussion draws on arguments in this work and in Attridge, *Work*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Much ink has been spilled over this question. For a summary of the philosophical arguments, see Denham. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Contemporary Irish writers are particularly aware of Joyce’s example; for a discussion of the emotional effects of three novels that take inspiration from *Ulysses* see Attridge, “Modernism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The “New Modernist Studies” of the past two decades not only expands the chronological reach of modernism in this way but also abandons the formal characterization that I am retaining in this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “Sentences” is a misnomer, but the appellation has stuck. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On the writtenness of Molly’s monologue, see Attridge, *Joyce Effects*, “Molly’s Flow”, 93-116. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Sometimes just one word will interrupt the progress of a thought without developing into a list: “the fact that I guess he was quite the matchmaker, arsonists, the fact that…” (864). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For example, we learn of the death “last year” of Marni Nixon, ghost singer for many film musicals who died in 2016 (444), and we are told that Leo, the woman’s husband, is going to a 50-year commemoration of the 1967 Silver Bridge collapse in Ohio (424). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Most of the lists in “Circe” are more comic than this one, which lists actual clergy, almost all in Dublin, in 1904. Joyce does extract some comedy from the proliferation of post-nominal letters. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. This is not to suggest that Joyce is the only writer of fiction from whom McCarthy draws inspiration. Many other novelists—often themselves influenced by Joyce—have treated language as a resource that goes beyond the representation of human concerns.

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