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LITERATURE

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# Soliloquy as Love and Change: Molly Bloom and *Ducks, Newburyport*

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to examine two stream-of-consciousness soliloquies delivered by the heroines of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) in order to underline the possibility of reidentification and change of one's mindset by means of language. Firstly, the background for the significance of the two characters is outlined since both are presented as fleshed-out female characters that struggle with the reality of their lives. Then the two heroines are respectively positioned in a discourse outlined by Roland Barthes in his *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978), which identifies solitude as the main obstacle in the act of loving. Thus, in the two soliloquies, elements of Barthes's discourse, called 'figures,' are identified in order to outline and analyze each woman's situation. Despite their differences, both everywomen prove, each in her own way, that the seeming overthinking about a given situation can lead to personal empowerment through an act of (self-)loving, reconciliation with and acceptance of one's worries regardless of whether the struggle takes place in Dublin at the beginning of the 20th century or in the 21st-century America. The two women's escape from the dissatisfying status quo suggests the universality of experience and shows that soliloquy may be deployed as a helpful tool in a moment of crisis in one's personal life.

**Keywords:** Molly Bloom, *Ducks, Newburyport*, Barthes, love, reidentification, soliloquy

## 1. The Female Heroines: An Introduction

Female protagonists have been taking various forms of representation. Countless memorable female characters could be named, especially if one considers the 19th-century classics and their varied portrayals in terms of nationality, social position, age, character, or fate. The 20th and the 21st century proved to be no less rich in distinctive fe-

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male characters. One area where such unrestrained creation is realized especially well (though often contested) is the Joycean, and post-Joycean literary space.[1] In his works, as Suzette A. Henke wrote, "the virgin/whore dichotomy breaks down […] under the weight of the fully human, three-dimensional personalities that emerge" (1980, 17). In "A Painful Case" from *Dubliners*, Mrs. Sinico figures as a caring woman who "urged [Mr. Duffy] to let his nature open to the full" (Joyce [1914] 1983, 110); in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the bird-girl's "eyes had called [Stephen Dedalus] and his soul had leaped at the call" ([1916] 2000, 186), thereby equating her charm with influence, if not dominance. What thus emerges is, on the one hand, the universality of the female experience; on the other, its uniqueness.

Among others, the aforementioned characters have oftentimes been subjected to critical analyses and interpretations, and continue to figure as a starting point for discussions about womanhood in a given society at a given time. This sustained interest leads to thinking about literary heroines through the lenses of feminism, gender criticism, psychoanalysis, queer theory, or gynocriticism, which is evidenced by such seminal works on womanhood in literature as Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), or Toril Moi's *Sexual / Textual Politics* (1985). In the preface to her equally impactful book, Mary Eagleton, writing about feminist literary theory, points to the fact that "[t]here is no single, direct road […], but there are many fascinating parallel routes, interchanges, detours and crossroads." This correlates with the abovementioned approaches in that they all are "preoccupied with the diversity of the moment, the richness of and dialogue between different positions" ([1986] 2010, xiii). Most importantly, in one way or another, they stress gender imbalances, analyze female agency and their representations in subject–object binary, and focus on the creation or dissolution of their identities in the fictional world.

In 1922, Joyce introduced, though perhaps not at first glance, the strongest and most memorable heroine in his corpus—Molly Bloom. The milestone for modernist literature, *Ulysses* is considered a classic of world literature, inventive and subverting literary traditions with its stylistic idiosyncrasies, challenging language, and thematic erudition. Not incidentally, in the recent *The Cambridge Centenary Ulysses*, Catherine Flynn writes about its "reimagining of the novel as a genre" and "constantly reinvent[ing] itself" (2022, 2). Depicting one ordinary day in Dublin, 16 June 1904, the book focuses mainly on Leopold Bloom encountering friends and strangers, visiting shops, pubs, a beach, a brothel, etc. Starting his day at 8:00 am, his endeavors into the rich cosmos of Dublin lead to his return home only after 2:00 pm the next

[1] Following Leszek Drong, who focuses on recent Irish fiction, the term includes, among others, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* by Eimear McBride, stylistically similar to parts of Joyce's *Ulysses*. This characteristic paired with the "deploy[ment of] realism to make larger […] historical and/or political claims" (2019, 3) creates a possibility of regarding *Ducks, Newburyport* as yet another fitting example, although one embracing non-Irish reality.

day. This event also marks the ending of the novel, the significance of which will be analyzed later.

Leopold Bloom, after the night filled with alcohol, comes back home with his friend, Stephen Dedalus and the two have a conversation about their differences, drink cocoa, pee in unison, and after Stephen's decline of Leopold's proposition to stay the night, part. Thus, the physical presence of third parties ends and now, until the end—that is, the rest of the penultimate and the last chapter—the text is concerned only with the Blooms' relationship. The character of Molly, as the penultimate, seventeenth chapter "Ithaca" comes to a close, starts to receive more attention on the level of the text, and at the same time—what is fully realized in the last chapter "Penelope"—obtains significance in relation to the whole and gets properly outlined as a character in her own right. Until that time almost ignored and of little importance, she becomes the nexus between previous parts of the novel and the nucleus for discussions about *Ulysses*' female representation. As Heather Cook Callow (1992, 151) informs us, this has long been a polarizing issue, since some critics pointed out stereotypical depictions of Joyce's heroines in general—Mary Ellmann accused Joyce of reducing Molly Bloom to a "formless utterance," a consequence of an unfair analogy of "soft body, soft mind" (Ellmann 1968, 74–75)—while others appreciated shedding light on the existences under male hegemony and perceived it as a feminist stance—according to Flynn, Luce Irigaray's understanding of Molly language is that it "transgresses the syntax and grammar of patriarchal speech" (2022, 887). The last chapter is significant insofar as the female voice is concerned, for it is there that Molly's thoughts and feelings, in an overwhelming cascade, become accessible to the reader; also, they signify a turning point in the novel's development, and the female–male imbalance becomes reversed. Now, by means of stream-of-consciousness narrative, readers enter the other side of *Ulysses*' reality, one expressed not by "the consensus of a male Dublin whose authoritative view, upon reflection, seems more and more questionable," (Callow 1992, 151) but by "Molly's thoughtful silence" (Callow 1992, 156).

It is a silence in terms of audibility, for during Molly's interior self-expression the couple lies in bed late at night (Leopold is sleeping) and does not communicate. However, in terms of topics, intensity, and significance of the soliloquy, it is anything but silence. During the soliloquy, Molly uninterruptedly utters eight "sentences" lacking punctuation and separated only by paragraph breaks, which altogether create meanderings regarding her and her husband's infidelity, the changes in their relationship throughout the years, their children, and various other minutiae. Worth mentioning here is the vulgarity of her language which might have been a conscious decision on Joyce's part to link her inner life with a certain powerfulness. Such a view on Molly's strong language shares, for example, Maria Angeles Conde-Parrilla, who noted "[Molly's] rebellion against social norms by employing censored terms" (Conde-Parrilla 1996, 213). Notwithstanding its qualities, the soliloquy, despite the author's remark that it lacks structure, as a whole presents a question, a search for an answer, and finally an answer (Hastings 2022, 240). But the question, rather than the one posed

by Hastings ("[…] will Molly satisfy her husband's request for breakfast in bed?"), is whether she will choose love despite her current situation—unsatisfying and seemingly entrapping.

Almost a century after the publication of *Ulysses*, British-American author Lucy Ellmann published *Ducks, Newburyport*. The book was met with critical acclaim, winning the 2019 Goldsmiths Prize; Erica Wagner, the chair of the prize, justified awarding *Ducks* by stating that "Ellmann remakes the novel and expands the reader's idea of what is possible with the form" (Cox 2019). The parallels between *Ducks* and *Ulysses* drawn by the commentators are not accidental since both represent the maximalist, encyclopedic genre of fiction (MacVeagh 2023, 4).[2] Moreover, the focus (at least partial in the case of *Ulysses*) on the female experience is their common thematic element. Here, the narrator-protagonist is an everywoman, an Ohioan baker whose every thought concerning the state of the world, death, climate change, her children's safety, and terrorist attacks, along with recipes for cakes and random song lines, are registered creating a never-ending stream of associations. The woman's world revealed out of thousands of "the fact that" clauses, through which the heroine conveys the pieces of information, is the one of worry both about the real and the imagined. She, similarly to Molly, though under different circumstances, is a woman entrapped in her current position. Her quandary is not whether, after years of unsatisfactory (co)existence, she is willing to stay with her husband, but whether she has enough strength and hope to continue existing despite the constant threat the contemporary world poses from all sides.

Regarding the social and individual positions of the two female characters—confused, alone with their worries, and through words trying to reach a conclusion—it is only natural to analyze their relationships, agency, mental state, anxieties, and hopes. The paper positions the two heroines in the philosophical framework outlined by Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, allowing us to see them in light of their indirectly expressed love, instead of as marginalized, oppressed, or troubled. In this reading of the texts each woman is understood to be an "amorous subject"—"the lover, presented dispersed in the spray of figures in which he or she consists, [who] comes together in love: a single being but a host of figures" (Heath 1983, 101)—for whom the world, people closest to them, and sometimes they themselves function as "amorous objects," that is "the loved object as desire for total fulfillment, paradisical unity" (Heath 1983, 104). Following Barthes, their "[lover's] discourse exists only in outbursts of language, which occur at the whim of trivial, of aleatory circumstances" (Barthes 1978, 3)—which, in turn, corresponds with the stream-of-consciousness technique used for both characters' self-expressions. What underpins this approach still more is Barthes's note that "the lover's discourse is in a sense a series of No Exits" (Barthes 1978, 142), visible both in the exhaustive continuity of the characters' narrations and the situations they grapple with; to use Alain Badiou's words from

[2] Worth mentioning here is also the fact that Lucy Ellmann is the daughter of Richard Ellmann, James Joyce's biographer.

the foreword to Byung-Chul Han's *The Agony of Eros*, this seeming inescapability is a perpetual "catastrophe for the ordinary balance of the subject" (2017, viii).

The aim of this paper is thus to study the two soliloquies through the selected figures—the lover's discourse's elements—which will allow for a better understanding of the issues of agency, identity, and individualism in the (then) contemporary world as experienced by the two heroines. The analysis will also serve as proof that, in a moment of crisis, both characters are fundamentally governed by love, which, despite the circumstances, empowers them.

## 2. Molly Bloom: Love as the Answer

At the beginning of Molly's soliloquy, she utters the word "Yes" to which, as becomes evident by the final word of the book, despite countless meanderings, her narration eventually returns. In this view, her first word—being at the same time her answer to the last question posed by Leopold in the previous chapter: "Where?"—may be taken as an affirmation, a harbinger of acceptance. But before that happens, she begins with speculations about her husband's infidelity. This leads Molly to think about Mrs. Riordan, toward whom Leopold years ago had made the same request in order to get closer to her. This, along with her knowledge about Leopold's possession of pornography, transmits the feeling of distress. Quickly she deduces, due to her husband's request for breakfast, that his relationship with the woman is unimportant:

> Im sure by his appetite anyway love its not or hed be off his feed thinking of her so either it was one of those night women if it was down there he was really and the hotel story he made up a pack of lies to hide it planning it (Joyce [1922] 2011, 872)

The constant back and forth between accusing and understanding Leopold, along with the ongoing criticism of his neglect toward her, sets the mood for the majority of Molly's soliloquy. While theorizing the desire to be engulfed, Barthes posits that "[t]he image of the other—to which I was glued, on which I lived—no longer exists" (Barthes 1978, 11), and in the same way Molly realizes that what she has once known no longer exists in the same form—namely, her image of Leopold and her marriage; in fact, it is she who was unfaithful, having recently had intercourse with Hugh Boylan, and thus making Leopold a cuckold.

In Barthes's terms, one of the many figures in the lover's discourse is the absence, which Molly partially generates with her act. "Amorous absence functions in a single direction, expressed by the one who stays, never by the one who leaves: an always present *I* is constituted only by confrontation with an always absent *you*" (Barthes 1978, 13)—Leopold's absence is emotional, as well as, in a sense, physical, since a "complete carnal intercourse, with ejaculation of semen within the natural female organ" have last taken place nine years prior (Joyce [1922] 2011, 869). Additionally, "[h]

istorically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary. Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence […]" (Barthes 1978, 13–14). For the most part, this corresponds with Molly and Leopold's situation but—as is *Ulysses*' tendency—paradigms often get subverted, which is why in this instance, unlike Homerian Penelope, Molly does not fully conform to the outlined scenario and seeks connection outside of her marriage.

Out of this need emerges the evidence for the amorous subject's endurance in time of crisis and her simultaneous transmuting of the negative feelings into "the great imaginary current, the orderless, endless stream which is passing through [her]" (Barthes 1978, 7). Thus, in response, Molly "manipulate[s] it: transform[s] the distortion of time into oscillation, produce[s] rhythm, make[s] an entrance onto the stage of language" (Barthes 1978, 16) in order to reconcile with the situation she finds herself in. Molly, as well as the heroine of *Ducks*, recognizes the different manifestations of absence that constitute her present.

The in-text present in which Molly's thoughts are delivered is "that difficult tense, [it] is: a pure portion of anxiety" (Barthes 1978, 15) caused not only by the absence of her amorous object but also by the worry about trivial matters which are, arguably, masked by her obscene language and contents of her mind. The feeling of anxiety is thus yet another element linking the two female characters together, but while in *Ducks* this figure is self-evident, Molly reveals it only momentarily. An example can be found in the following passage, in which she contemplates buying a new corset and worries about her body:

> and one of those kidfitting corsets Id want advertised cheap in the Gentlewoman with elastic gores on the hips he saved the one I have but thats no good what did they say they give a delightful figure line 11/6 obviating that unsightly broad appearance across the lower back to reduce flesh my belly is a bit too big Ill have to knock off the stout at dinner or am I getting too fond of it (Ulysses [1922] 2011, 888)

The two heroines' participation in the lover's discourse inevitably produces one more manifestation of anxiety: "the lover's anxiety: it is the fear of a mourning which has already occurred, at the very origin of love […]" (Barthes 1978, 30). Yet for Molly, mourning is not an anticipation of the future event intrinsic to the very existence of a given amorous object and then losing thereof, but her reality, since she had already lost her son Rudy at the age of eleven days. This, in effect, propelled the couple to "minimize the chances of getting pregnant again for fear of losing another child" (Hastings 2022, 242). Now, it might be argued whether Molly's unfaithfulness and her contemplation of sexual encounters with Boylan and other men from the past are the result of grief and dissatisfaction, or whether they exist parallelly and independently. This is, however, of secondary importance regarding further examination of Molly's state during the soliloquy. An apt observation has been made by Jean Kimball, who writes

that "Molly's references to the sexual satisfaction that she has secured from Leopold in the past are admittedly much less explicit than her recital of dissatisfactions with her present situation" (Kimball 1994, 459). This fact then could be supplemented with another figure outlined by Barthes—fulfillment—which he defines as unspoken, "so that, erroneously, the amorous relation seems reduced to a long complaint" (Barthes 1978, 55). This is significant insofar as Molly's position as an amorous subject goes, for it presents us with the latent textual layer, or at least a possibility for the later embrace of the "paradisiac image of the Sovereign Good, to be given and to be received" (Barthes 1978, 54). But until then, she needs to process the abundance of flashbacks and ruminations by herself.

If one were to paraphrase the question Molly ultimately seeks an answer to, one could summarize her mental endeavors as an attempt to understand—to understand her husband, herself, and the world around her: amorous subjects in their various forms. This striving for comprehension takes place on two levels: the first one represents the essence of her self-expression, so "to understand" her general position and arrive at an answer; the second one emerges through seemingly unnecessary bits of information, the articulation of which may be allowing her to formulate her sense of self and maintain integrity. This latter form of understanding appears in instances such as when she further ponders her body: "I must do a few breathing exercises I wonder is that antifat any good might overdo it" (Joyce [1922] 2011, 888) (sudden mention of "breathing exercises" again points to the figure of anxiety outlined earlier), or when she is casually expressing her attitude toward cats: "I hate their claws I wonder do they see anything that we cant staring like that" (Joyce [1922] 2011, 907). The phrase "I wonder" actually appears twenty-two times throughout her soliloquy, which may not be an abundant amount, but it certainly draws attention to itself, and thus to Molly's uncertain position and simultaneous inquisitiveness. Phillip F. Herring referring to the "Penelope" episode states that "[Joyce] is attempting to portray the soul of a woman in such nakedness and completeness as has never been achieved before" (Herring 1969, 59). Arguably, it is exactly what he achieves, at least when it comes to Molly. Regarding understanding, Barthes asks: "[…] is that not to divide the image, to undo the *I*, proud organ of misapprehension?" (Barthes 1978, 60), to whom Molly, striving in those moments for reinterpretation of her own identity, appears to be directing yet another "Yes."

Toward the end of the previous chapter, it is narrated that, before going to sleep, Leopold kisses Molly's hindquarters—"He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump" (Joyce [1922] 2011, 867)—which then reverberates in Molly's eighth sentence in which she expresses further annoyance with her husband's romantic/sexual practice: "never embracing me except sometimes when hes asleep the wrong end of me not knowing I suppose who he has any man thatd kiss a womans bottom Id throw my hat at him after that" (Joyce [1922] 2011, 925). At the same time, which may be read as a sign of the upcoming reconciliation, she characterizes Leopold as "a madman nobody understands his cracked ideas but me" (Joyce [1922] 2011, 925). What becomes a focal point for this component of her experience is the

figure of "contact." Concerning the kissing, Leopold as an amorous subject would be in opposition to the lover's discourse; for Molly, however, the act is tiresome, it is merely "a frenzied activity of language: to institute, on each furtive occasion, the system (the paradigm) of demand and response" (Barthes 1978, 68). It is so because of the act's echo found in her language, but also regarding her amorous object whose attitude toward her, as Stephany Lyman notes, "have ultimately negated her very person. As a consequence, her role as wife and lover has been gradually subverted" (Lyman 1983, 195–196). Molly is thus neither the person someone would want her to be, nor the person she would want to be. All in all, Barthes's identification of the lover's discourse as a sphere of personal loneliness proves its relevancy (Barthes 1978, 2).

As Molly's soliloquy comes to a close, her preoccupation with the theme of the Earth and 'the natural' becomes frequent and more strongly pronounced. For example, her thoughts about her aunt and uncle's naked bodies and intercourse are casually-toned:

> my uncle John has a thing long I heard those cornerboys saying passing the comer of Marrowbone lane my aunt Mary has a thing hairy because it was dark and they knew a girl was passing it didnt make me blush why should it either its only nature and he puts his thing long into my aunt Marys hairy etcetera (Joyce [1922] 2011, 924)

Moreover, by drawing a parallel between "houses round behind Irish street" and herself—and by doing so rejecting the idea of getting constrained—Molly gets closer to her final answer: "[…] like those houses round behind Irish street no but were to be always chained up theyre not going to be chaining me up no damn fear once I start I tell you for their stupid husbands jealousy why cant we all remain friends over it instead […]" (Joyce [1922] 2011, 924). Further on, she identifies women as the rational sex whose care, as is generally understood, signifies love:

> yes because a woman whatever she does she knows where to stop sure they wouldnt be in the world at all only for us they dont know what it is to be a woman and a mother how could they where would they all of them be if they hadnt all a mother to look after them (Joyce [1922] 2011, 926)

The fragments accumulate transforming their explicit and implicit meanings into the version of Molly who is ready to escape the constraints of the dissatisfaction, oppression, and up until this point powerlessness governing her present situation, that is the lover's discourse's solitude. After all, she gets closer to herself and, eventually, "Molly's praise of Nature" (Voelker 1976, 43) examined by Joseph C. Voelker in his article, results in "an immanence so complete that it might replace transcendence" (Voelker 1976, 41).

Thus, the last word of the book, the explosive "Yes," marks not only the moment of Molly's finding the answer to her question, but it also functions as a catalyst for her reidentification. As becomes visible through her language, in the moment of crisis she

turns to love. Now, participating in the lover's discourse as an amorous subject, she no longer identifies only with this side of the binary; her husband and her world, likewise, stop functioning as sole amorous objects—since that point onwards, she perceives herself as both subject and object of her love and desire. Her decision to not leave her husband is by no means an act of self-betrayal, but an act of conscious self-assertion; in Barthes's words: "a new view of *I-love-you*. Not as a symptom but as an action" (Barthes 1978, 152).

## 3. *Ducks, Newburyport*: To Acceptance Through Facts

In *Ducks, Newburyport*, the heroine delivers her soliloquy in a way at once similar and dissimilar to that of Molly Bloom. Parallels between the two appear, for example, in their preoccupation with the theme of nature. But while in *Ulysses* it obtained the symbolic level by Molly's act of self-love, in *Ducks* nature could be seen as a participant in the narrative due to the repeating images of birds, the narrator's constant worry about climate change, or the parallel narrative about the lioness and her cubs which the main stream-of-consciousness part of the text is interspersed with. Nature for Molly is a foothold helpful in her reidentification; for the *Ducks*' narrator, it poses a threat and is a sign of people's disconnection with it. This is why in her stream-of-consciousness soliloquy, preceded by the repeating clause, random pieces of information "explode in an indeterminate order, one after the next: [they represent] the very disorder of Nature" (Barthes 1978, 81).

Similarly to *Ulysses*, the heroine's soliloquy offers the familiar use of repetition. The pattern of opening the soliloquy with a certain word or a phrase which functions as a harbinger of its later significance, then repeating it throughout the whole, and ending the soliloquy with that particular word or phrase but this time signifying resolution, appears also in *Ducks*, though probably incidentally as well. Barthes's words offer additional input and description of both thought processes: "[M]y first *yes* [or *the fact that*] is riddled by doubts, love's *value* is ceaselessly threatened by depreciation: this is the moment of melancholy passion, the rising of resentment and of oblation. Yet I can emerge from this tunnel […]," (Barthes 1978, 24) the two heroines appear to be saying. This structural parallel suggests also the parallel of personal transformation.

Having listed numerous "anthropogenic crises" found in *Ducks*, Mark Bould states that "[the book] establishes their typically unacknowledged presence in and impact upon ordinary, if still relatively privileged, lives. By repetition and accretion, the Anthropocene unconscious emerges into visibility" (Bould 2021, 43). Concerning *Ducks*, the accumulation of the conveyed information can be differentiated between the specific and the general. The former—as above, in terms of the state of the Earth—would be assigning a given piece of information or the heroine's thought to a category, for example: baking; the latter, however, would embrace the totality of the narrator's experience, creating—as it in fact does—an intimate portrait of a woman who, through

her "facts," is eventually led to the acceptance of her present position and the focus on the love available.

The narrator's musings are repeatedly directed inward and outward, in a rather balanced ratio, which cannot be said about the tone of her remarks. She indeed sees the good in the contemporary world—"the fact that sometimes people really go all out for each other, like, for the public good, common weal, commune […], the fact that sometimes it's not just each man for himself" (Ellmann 2019, 36)—but more often than not she conveys the feeling of disappointment, especially about herself: "the fact that I always knew I wouldn't make much of a mother" (Ellmann 2019, 85). The countless facts about her surroundings are supposed to ground her but all they seem to do is deepen her discontentment and result in the withdrawal of the self. This effect on the narrator, along with the fact that the novel "gestures towards capitalist sacrifices […] while hinting at recent shifts in terms of cultural fragmentation" (De Bruyn 2023, 1488), supports reading of her story as "the love story (the 'episode,' the 'adventure') [which] is the tribute the lover must pay to the world […]" (Barthes 1978, 7). Thus, the heroine is stuck in her head, stuck in a place collapsing before her eyes, and oftentimes guilt-ridden by her very existence: "the fact that nothing you do seems innocent anymore, the fact that even baking a pie has many ramifications" (Ellmann 2019, 21). Those complexities of inhabiting the contemporary Earth, one of the narrator's amorous objects, direct us to Barthes's definition of the figure of "contingencies"—according to it the world experienced by the narrator takes the form of "factual nucleus whose consequences intersect the amorous subject's will to happiness, as if chance conspired against [her]" (Barthes 1978, 69). In effect, the more she overthinks, the worse it gets.

Although rarer, fragments expressing positive feelings of the narrator are present but not without prior articulation of grief regarding the untimely death of the heroine's parents:

> the fact that Leo never met Mommy, and that has always felt wrong to me, that they never met, the fact that Daddy would have liked Leo too, the fact that he would have called him "dynamic," high praise coming from Daddy, the fact that Leo's more dynamic than Colin Firth will ever be, the fact that he's kind of a cross between Stanley Tucci and Walter Matthau, Julia Child, *Bigger Than Life*, the fact that I still have a crush on Leo and it looks like lasting me for life (Ellmann 2019, 378)

Leo is the heroine's current husband, by whom she, on the one hand, feels unloved (but is able to "still have a crush" on him nevertheless); on the other hand, she merely acknowledges his presence in the view of the lack her parents' deaths left in her—"the fact that I have led a lonely bereft life since Mommy died, but I do have Leo on my side" (Ellmann 2019, 26). Thus, her 'normal state' consists of amorous relationships with the two objects coexisting through "gentle despair, active resignation" (Barthes 1978, 48). But as her narration comes to a close and she accepts her current position, her relationship with Leo starts to head in the right direction—"the fact that

Leo's agreed to join all the other 'suckers' on the highway, my way or the highway" (Ellman 2019, 997)—the grief, arguably, gets dispersed as well. Then concerning these two loves: toward absent parents and present husband, "it is in their difference, the model of an infinitely pursued difference, that I find the energy to begin all over again" (Barthes 1978, 103), the narrator appears to be saying. This, in turn, presents a possibility of considering the alliteration-, association-, and repetition-driven soliloquy as a tool and a site for familiarizing oneself with the rapidly changing (contemporary) world in which casual love to a husband, grief about what had been, and at that anxiety about what might be, all together fight for one's attention.

In *Ducks, Newburyport* the figure that is the most persistent and striking is the figure of "demons" through which, following Barthes,

> language snowballs, without any tactical thought of reality. I seek to harm myself, I expel myself from my paradise, busily provoking within myself the images (of jealousy, abandonment, humiliation) which can injure me; and I keep the wound open, I feed it with other images, until another wound appears and produces a diversion (Barthes 1978, 80).

This emotional self-harm and acts of self-deprecation which the amorous subject engages in is best illustrated by the passage from the beginning of the book, in which the heroine openly calls herself names while reproaching herself for her inability to commit to the house chores:

> the fact that I gotta do the dishes before everybody's up, I gotta, the fact that I'm a slob, slob, slut, tramp, cock, brontosaurus, pterodactyl, raptors, T-Rex, shrunken heads, yellow toy tractor, the fact that it really doesn't take all that long to do a few dishes, ten minutes tops, big deal, so why all the resistance, the fact that every day I have to force myself, like ten times a day, the fact that I don't exult in housework somehow, but dirty dishes are depressing, Anat always said, and I don't want the kids to be depressed by them, or Leo either, or me (Ellmann 2019, 18)

Any care the heroine expresses toward her amorous objects is thus proved not to be the one of affirmation, as could be expected, but the one filtered, as always, through certain facts about the world she is unable to cope with. Her identity is tainted by the outside influence and she needs to find a way out. The fragmentation of the self—fueled by the death of the parents, the deteriorating state of the Earth, and covering oneself with the burden of reality—finds confirmation for its occurrence in the words of Dustin Purvis, who, examining the heroine's identity, points out that she "lives with and through facts in such a way that her ontological status as an embodied human is obscured by the habit of operating as an information collating subject" (Purvis 2023, 22). The interrelated "facts" of the narrator, certain obsessions and leitmotifs, inevitably create a network between the love subject and her love object: the world (perhaps the main love object, due to her constant worry about it). Now, this process of creating

the network of "facts" allows for identifying another of Barthes's figures, "informer," since upon release "into this network a suffering subject eager to maintain with his other a pure, sealed space […]; the network's activities, its exchange of information, its interests and initiatives will be received as so many dangers" (Barthes 1978, 138). The multitude of information and reoccurring thoughts that govern the heroine's existence effect in unobtainable want for pause and reconciliation with the present, which she—similarly to Molly Bloom—will not fully achieve until the end of her soliloquy; not until it reaches the singular dot.

The ending of the book informs readers about the heroine's family's plan to see the lost-then-found lioness in a zoo on the upcoming weekend. This is then complimented with the last words of the book: "the fact that Stacy [her daughter] 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). By those last "facts," the heroine for the first time perceives that which is unknowable and escapes her agency in a new way—no longer through anxiety about the future and grief from the past, but through acceptance obtained by the detailed processing of her thoughts. Regarding Stacy, who throughout the heroine's narration proves to be a rebellious teenager, she does not search for an answer using her "facts"; in the last clause of the book she states—however tautological the definition—a factual fact pertaining to her newly acquired perception. As an amorous subject, she realizes that "[i]t is not true that the more you love, the better you understand; all that the action of love obtains from me is merely this wisdom: that the other is not to be known" (Barthes 1978, 135). After almost a thousand pages of, after all illuminating, soliloquy, "the fact that I am *broken* [emphasis in original], heartbroken" (Ellmann 2019, 27) gets overridden by "the fact that maybe we all are [scared], but life has to go on" (Ellmann 2019, 292). In a word, through her inner contemplations, the heroine reconstructs her mindset about and attitude toward her amorous objects, the process best summed up by Barthes's "[*a*]*morous* sentiment: nothing works out, but it keeps going on" (Barthes 1978, 140). This change would allow her to exist in the present not through but despite all the facts about her reality—only after the text's end.

## 4. Conclusions

The two heroines, both representing the everywoman in a moment of crisis in the (then) contemporary world, prove that a change of perception and self-reidentification are obtainable through the use of words. They show that in order to escape from the status quo induced by one's oppressive reality one can turn not to the outside but to the inside and examine one's situation in detail so as to search for an answer, which would then allow for eventual transformation. Molly Bloom, finding herself in the solitude of the lover's discourse, gets her answer by directing her amorous feelings away from her other amorous subjects—toward herself. Empowered by this decision, she decides to

give herself and her husband another chance. The protagonist of *Ducks, Newburyport*, similarly struggling in a position of retreat, overcomes her feelings of anxiety and hopelessness about the present by stubbornly stating the "facts" about her life until, through love and language, she arrives at the acceptance; she reconciles with the ever-changing (and worsening) nature of the world and eventually is able to seize what her current life has to offer. Thus, what the two heroines ultimately express through their soliloquies is that even while overthinking and overwhelmed, one is still able to endure and overpower the negative, to liberate oneself through the act of (self-)loving, and escape the lover's solitude.

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