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Peace Be With You?: Meditating Through Apocalypse in Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* and Jenny Offill's *Weather*

Abstract

This paper investigates the growing trend of (post-)secular religious desire in the context of two recent climate crisis novels: Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019), and Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020). The two novels follow the lives of stressed-out mothers as they each navigate the challenges of balancing family and the impending eco-apocalypse. As the novels focalize the human experience of exhaustion in the Anthropocene – while complicating it through entanglements with the more-than-human world – they both engage a post-secular bricolage of religious ideas and practices. The mother-narrators of *Ducks, Newburyport*, and *Weather* braid, in particular, a mix of Buddhist and Christian teachings to each construct a simultaneously fragmentary and hyperconnected form of eco-spiritualty to cope with and make sense of ongoing environmental apocalypse. The two novels differ greatly in their narrative structures; *Ducks, Newburyport*'s primary narrative spans nearly a thousand pages in a single-sentence stream-of-consciousness, while *Weather* is composed of numerous mini-paragraphs roughly the length of a Twitter post. And yet, the form of each novel reflects the meditative, attention-based spiritual practices upon which the narrator contemplates. Thus, in this paper, I draw on interdisciplinary approaches from attention studies and literary new formalism to explore how the two novels may offer new perspectives on the possibility of connection within and beyond the human, as well as alternative models of spiritual practice to help us endure the world as it "continues to end" (Offill, 198).

Keywords: attention, spirituality, meditation, Jenny Offill, Lucy Ellmann

1. Meditation, Apocalypse, and the Post-secular

Meditation and apocalypse may not be the two most common terms to put together. Throughout history, apocalypse has been most clearly associated with the imminent end of the world. According to Greg Garrard, the notion of an incoming apocalypse has been around for over 3000 years and was brought into common Western thought through Jewish and Christian religious beliefs bequeathed by the Iranian prophet Zoroaster.[1] More recently, within literary studies the notion of apocalypse as well as post-apocalypse has begun to be used as a way of describing literatures that depict an ending of life-as-we know it beyond the religious

[1] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 85.

eschatological sense, often due to climate-crisis-related events.[2] Meditation, with its internal focus, may seem incompatible with the outward urgency dictated by apocalypse. And yet, both Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020) and Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) suggest that meditation is an essential way of mediating the eco-apocalypse. Both are domestic novels focalized through the minds of working mothers concerned with the state of the world in Ttrump-era America. And while their topical concerns are quite similar, the stylistic differences between the two novels are glaring. Ellmann's novel has roughly a thousand pages to Offill's two hundred. Offill's text is composed of bite-sized sentences and mini-paragraphs; Ellmann's is almost entirely a single sentence. And yet, through these opposing forms, both novels emulate the feelings of exhaustion and infowhelm[3] that pervade modern Western life while creating a narrative meditation focused on interconnection. Both literary forms demand and encourage attention from the reader in a way that mirrors a post-secular spiritual practice.

'Secular' and 'post-secular' continue to be rather contentious concepts debated in the disciplines of religious studies, critical theory, philosophy, and history. For some scholars, the term secular does not necessarily describe a lack of religion, or a cultural phenomenon in opposition to religion, but the broadening of religious options and their contemporary combinations.[4] Other scholars have come to view secularism as an anti-(Christian)-nationalist movement, rather than an anti-religious one.[5] Tracy Fessenden, summarizing Jonathan Freedman's assessment of Amy Hungerford's work, writes that the "Problem of the Post-secular" has to do with the question of the sacred, and how, even in the context of literary studies, it "seems still to bewilder and hush."[6] Similarly, for many scholars, the definitions secular and post-secular are overlapping.[7] Thus, at the risk of oversimplifying the ongoing debates, in this paper, I use the term post-secular to describe the spiritual sensibilities expressed the texts. It is pertinent, also, to explain that while I map spiritual form and practice in contemporary narratives, I do not subscribe to the literary secularization thesis in which literary value becomes a stand-in mode for creating meaning in society.[8] Rather, I intend simply to explore how in an age of crisis, or so-called apocalypse, literature may mirror spiritual forms

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[2] Heather Hicks, *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (London: Routledge, 2020), 151–53.
[3] Heather Houser, *Infowhelm: Art and Environmental Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2020).
[4] Gil Anidjar, "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 60.
[5] Guy Ben-Porat and Yariv Feniger, "Live and Let Buy? Consumerism, Secularization, and Liberalism," *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 3 (2009): 297.
[6] Tracy Fessenden, "The Problem of the Postsecular," *American Literary History* 26, no. 1 (2014): 154–167.
[7] Jennifer Otto et al., "Book Discussion: Postsecular History: Political Theology and the Politics of Time by Maxwell Kennel," *Political Theology* 24, no. 3 (2023): 338–58.
[8] Fessenden, "The Problem of the Postsecular."

and invoke forms of spiritual practice that allow for greater connection with the more-than-human.

Perhaps, though, it may be helpful to note how my use of the post-secular engages with Charles Taylor's foundational three-sense exploration of the secular in *A Secular Age.* Taylor's first sense of the secular intimates a separation from church and state, the second a "a falling away" of religious practice and belief, and the third a change in "conditions of belief."[9] My use of the post-secular operates within rather than in contrast to Taylor's first sense of the secular; there is no denying the Western separation between church and state. However, it challenges the second and third senses. In the novels I examine, there is both a renewed form of spiritual and religious practice, as well as a reassessment of knowledge that challenges conditions of belief. Thus, with their bricolage of ideas and traditions, intentional lack of dogma, the exploration of ulterior forms, such as embodied or intuitive knowledge through meditation, the spiritual practices in *Weather* and *Ducks, Newburyport* fit within a post-secular schema. As I am using it in that the post-secular does not attempt to erase, ignore, or free itself from religious history. Rather, post-secular spiritual practice critically engages with and acknowledges the traditions from which it is derived. In the context of climate-crisis narratives, this post-secular spirituality interrogates the spiritual structures that it practices. Thus, I adopt a working definition of the post-secular to describe a loose form of yearning towards whatever may be deemed, explicitly or implicitly, as the sacred with acknowledgment of the tradition(s) which might bring one to these practices. Because meditation practices challenge our modes of attention and what we are attending to – that is our forms of knowledge – reading novels through this lens may be a helpful way of exploring how we might understand ourselves and the world amidst climate catastrophe. Attention is indeed the key word here. It is frequently the subject of studies of both secular and post-secular practice. Fessenden notes that "spiritual experiences and identifications that do take their distance, often insistently, from institutional religious forms are very much a part of the zeitgeist."[10] Similarly, Caleb Smith in "Disciplines of Attention in a Secular Age," writes:

> the distracted today turn to disciplines of attention, adapting the religious practices of older or distant societies to new situations that seem to have little to do with ritual or faith. Mindfulness training, transcendental meditation, regimens to sharpen our focus and extend our concentration – these are the spiritual exercises of our secular age.[11]

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[9] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2–3.
[10] Fessenden, "Problem of the Postsecular," 162–63.
[11] Caleb Smith, "Disciplines of Attention in a Secular Age," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2019): 884–909.

And yet, even when divorced from religious origins, attention-based activities hold some form of spiritual significance. These are the types of practices that I identify in the novels. I argue, counter to Smith, that such practices are deeply entangled with ritual and/or faith. Indeed, while the mcMindfulness trend[12] is something to be skeptical of, the turn towards attention-based spiritual practice in the context of the climate crisis indicates a growing desire for sacred connection. This form of connection may be, in some cases, a move towards God or a higher power, but it can be, and is perhaps more common in post-secular literary texts, "a horizontal dissolution" of "distinctions between subjects and objects."[13] In this, a post-secular form of transcendence, the "embrace of an impersonal order" is "sacred." According to Kyle Garton-Gundling, the non-duality of this form of connection to experience and existence, which I extend to the more-than-human, is a "sacred but nontheistic reality." Similarly, the societies from which such practices and beliefs are derived are not so distant; Western cultures are still saturated with the legacy of Christian spiritual practice even as it begins to mix with a multiplicity of Eastern traditions. It would be even more problematic to attempt to analyze practices of attention completely divorced from their historical devotional origins. Therefore, I identify the two traditions from which the spiritual practices in the novels are most clearly drawn: Buddhism and Christianity. While *Weather* and *Ducks, Newburyport* reflect on various religious traditions including Jainism, Judaism and Indigenous sacred practices, both novels return to various articulations of Christian and Buddhist attention practices. *Weather*'s for example, includes sporadic quotes from the desert fathers and direct transcriptions of Buddhist meditation chants.[14] Similarly, in *Ducks, Newburyport*, though the narrator does not meditate, she reflects on the act of meditation and expresses admiration for ascetic Christian traditions.[15]

2. Buddhist and Christian Attention-Based Meditation

In my discussion of the Buddhist inflections of the meditation practices expressed by the novels, I want to be careful to note that what I refer to as Buddhism are the forms of Buddhism that have been adapted into Western Anglophone cultures. These forms of Buddhist practice are

[12] Ronald E. Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (London: Repeater Books, 2019).
[13] Kyle Garton-Gundling, *Enlightened Individualism: Buddhism and Hinduism in American Literature from the Beats to the Present* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2019), 10.
[14] Jenny Offill, *Weather* (London: Granta, 2020), 45, 122, 186. The desert fathers were early Christian hermits who developed a practice of asceticism in the Egyptian desert in the 3rd century AD. Their practices and values eventually became the foundation of Christian monasticism.
[15] Lucy Ellmann, *Ducks, Newburyport* (Windsor: Biblioasis, 2019), 786, 504, 596, 198.

already fairly pluralist. In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David McMahan writes that "many lay Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers – not to mention Christians, Jews, Hindus, and secular people – now practice various forms of Buddhist meditation and mindfulness techniques."[16] McMahan continues to explain that these forms of "meditation and mindfulness are [now] presented as psychological, spiritual, or scientific techniques rather than as religious practice."[17]' (185). Still, Kyle Garton-Gundling argues that even in their uses in psychologyuses, the Western adaptations of dharmic religions are not unspiritual. Garton-Gundling claims they involve "involves gradual cultivation"[18] and an "embrace of an impersonal order that is also sacred."[19] These forms of Buddhist meditation are angled at a "oneness with a living cosmos, intuition, nondualism, and interconnectedness,"[20] and are quite different from earlier forms which are meant to encourage the opposite experience of detachment, and were historically reserved for monastic orders.[21] According to McMahan, these newer forms of meditation are used "to allow creative and compassionate forces naturally residing in the mind to flow forth unimpeded." [22] Thus, as contemporary meditation researchers note "the goal is not necessarily to focus on one thing or feel a certain way, but rather to observe the mind as it is,"[23] essentially to practice attention. As this is an act of observation, rather than judgement or evaluation there is an ease, or surrender. In the more traditional practices of Buddhist meditation, one surrenders to the Buddha-nature through *Dharma* and *Sagna.*[24] In less traditional forms, this surrendering is described as non-judgment and following the flow of energy or thought. There are numerous forms of mindfulness Buddhist-derived meditation, some including movement and some not. In the novels I analyze these practices include body-scan techniques and loving-kindness meditation (*mettā*), where one visualises love or energy sent out from the body into the world.

The other primary tradition that composes the post-secular bricolage of spiritual practice in *Weather* and *Ducks, Newburyport* is Christianity. As with Buddhism, there are multitudinous iterations of Christian practice, and I cannot hope to summarize or consider them all here. I will

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[16] David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.
[17] Ibid.McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 185.
[18] Garton-Gundling, *Enlightened Individualism*, 4.
[19] Ibid., 10.
[20] McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 78.
[21] Ibid., 233.
[22] Ibid., 184.
[23] David Sumantry and Kathleen E. Stewart, "Meditation, Mindfulness, and Attention: A Meta-analysis," *Mindfulness* 12 (2021): 1334.
[24] Maria Jaoudi, *Mindfulness as Sustainability: Lessons from the World's Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 32. Jaoudi translates dharma as the laws of the universe or the way the universe works; Sangha is translated as community.

focus here on elements of contemplative and meditation practices that are seen throughout numerous strands of Christianity, as they are used within the ascetic traditions explored in *Weather* and *Ducks, Newburyport.* As a practice within Christian traditions, meditation is intended to transcend denominational doctrine, and engage in the "interreligious ecumenical potential of contemplation."[25] While the primary intention of Christian meditation is traditionally to "realize the love of god,"[26] the practices and methods of the Christian contemplative tradition have long been of interest to academics and philosophers, and haves been closely associated with the post-critique in literary studies.[27] In her recent monograph, *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy,* Simone Kotva maps and, to some extent, argues against to some extent, the secularization thesis within the attention practices within the French spiritualism tradition.[28] Drawing on Simone Weil, Kotva describes "'attention' as 'waiting.'" This idea of waiting re-enhances the concept of meditation beyond the its secularized reliance "wholly on the will." In this understanding, attention is both active and passive; there is a willed direction of focus, but also a waiting for what might arise from the practice of attention.[29] For Christians it is the Grace of God that is welcomed in this attendance. However, in a post-secular context, it can be seen as inspiration or enlightenment, and suggests an openness to other forms of agency and knowledge, including that of the texts. Even Smith, who clings to the idea of meditation as secular, and continually reemphasizes the will and discipline, comes to admit there is an essential element of "surrendering" or "passive receptivity" in attention-based practices.[30] It is this tension between action and passivity in meditation and its capacity to reassess agency, knowledge and entanglement found in both Buddhist and Christian practices that I explore in the selected texts.

3. Meditation as Literary Form

We begin with *Weather* by Jenny Offill, the more accessible and more obviously religious of the two novels. Written in short episodic paragraphs, roughly the length of a twitter post, *Weather* is internally focalized from the perspective of Lizzie Benson, a middle-class librarian and mother living in New York City. Despite the pressures of numerous domestic concerns,

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[25] Daniel Patte, ed. *Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 276.
[26] Ibid., 276.
[27] Smith, "Disciplines," 886.
[28] Simone Kotva, *Effort and Grace: On the spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020),.2.Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy
[29] Ibid., 4.
[30] Caleb Smith, *Thoreau's Axe: distraction and discipline in american culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 175.

including her son's education and her brother's addiction recovery, Lizzie is pre-occupied with climate change, or as she calls it, "the acceleration of days."[31] Her concern for the environment is entangled with religious perspective and practice. The book opens with an epigraph in the form of a note from a Connecticut town meeting in 1640 which reads (italics original):

Voted, that the earth is the Lord's
and the fullness thereof; voted,
that the earth is given to the Saints;
voted, that we are the Saints.

The first paragraph of the first chapter then begins:

[T]he morning, the one who is mostly enlightened comes in. There are stages and she is in the second to last, she thinks. This stage can be described only by a Japanese word. 'Bucket of black paint,' it means.[32]

Thus, from the first pages these first pages the reader is introduced to forms of spiritual practice with which the narrator willth contendt throughout the novel. For Lizzie, care for the earth, and enlightenment are entangled. Through the fragmentary form, of Lizzie's spiritual sensibility is spurred on by her second job in which she answers listener emails for her former grad school professor's environmental podcast "Hell and Highwater." In the inbox of this email the climate crisis and a religious notion of the end times coalesce in a way that is symptomatic of American public religion. "Lots of questions about the rapture" are "mixed in with the ones about wind turbines and carbon taxes."[33] The way in which Offill places these questions as unintroduced interruptions in Lizzie's thoughts, framed visually in a box, adds to the eerie disparate feeling of the novel. The questions seem to appear out of nowhere: "What are the best ways to prepare my children for the coming chaos" interrupts a reflection on Lizzie's brother's desire to build a wall with a "beautiful door."[34] Though Lizzie begins by answering the more absurd questions seriously but with a touch of humour, as the novel progresses, so does her interest in spiritual topics. As she tries to find footing amidst her existential fear inspired by the climate crisis, she

[31] Jenny Offill, *Weather* (London: Granta, 2020), 18.
[32] Ibid., 3.
[33] Ibid., 26–7.
[34] Ibid., 93.

begins to wonder "how we might channel all this dread into action."[35] Her answer seems to be in spirituality; she visits a unitarian church, dwells on the thoughts of the desert fathers, attends meditation classes, and begins to pray.[36] Despite this, Lizzie does subscribe to a set religious tradition. Rather, the core tenet of her ambiguous faith is a sense of connection rather than salvation. Perhaps this is why she is drawn to the mystics, and why the narrative is constructed of fragments of wisdom to be connected by the reader.

On page forty-five, Offill incorporates a section of a meditation breath chant taken from the Buddhist book "The Five Remembrances" originally compliled in a book by Tich Nhat Han. It reads:

Breathing in, I know that I am of the nature to grow old.
Breathing out, I know that I cannot escape old age.
Breathing in, I know than I am of the nature to get sick.
Breathing out, I know that I cannot escape sickness.

This choice of this specific meditation expresses Lizzie's intense anxiety, as well as the Buddhist imperative of non-attachment. The fragmentary structure of the text creates a similar effect. The readers must loosen their attachment to narrative as they read the novel, for each fragment is no more than a short paragraph. Then, the topic shifts. With the meditation above, each fragment can be read as a breath, something to take in, consider and let go. According to Timothy Baker, *Weather*'s fragments are "not simply juxstaposed, but touch each other, creating new forms of relation. […] the fragmentary form allows her [Offill] to make new forms of connection as well as to discard information that may not be relevant."[37] In this, the reader must decide which elements to give their attention as they make connections. With narrative grounded in breath, Offill suggests that embodied being is perhaps the most important information.

The fragmentary meditative form leaves much unknown, and challenges which forms of knowledge are important in the context of the climate crisis. The narrator continuously combines scientific facts with spiritual wisdom, but when asked how she knows so much, her response is simply, "I'm a Fucking Librarian."[38] Despite Lizzie's copious knowledge, facts and

[35] Ibid., 137.
[36] Ibid., 122, 188.
[37] Timothy C. Baker, *New Forms of Environmental Writing: Gleaning and Fragmentation* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 170.
[38] Offill, *Weather*, 170.

knowledge are presented as less important than embodied experience. By the end of the novel, liturgy comingles with the questions, italicized within the narrative rather than separated by boxes. Formally the refrain of "peace be with you/ and also with you" found in church takes the same position in the narrative as "is it wrong to eat meat?" and "when will humans go extinct?"[39] Then, the novel ends in a surreal scene in which "visible and invisible worlds" previously described by a preacher collide.[40] The last fragment reads:

> He turns out the light, arranges the blankets so we'll stay warm. The dog twitches her paws softly against the bed. Dreams of running, of other animals. I wake to the sound of gunshots. Walnuts on the roof, Ben says. The core delusion is that I am here and you are there.[41]

The novel ends in a scene of harmony between the human and a domesticated animal. As the world falls apart around them, and she drifts off to sleep, Lizzie muses on the nature of reality. In the last breath of the novel, Lizzie returns to the interconnectedness of all things. Separation or difference is "delusion," and connection or unity is reality. As the world continues to end, we are in it together. Perhaps this is the only peace possible in the climate crisis.

Ducks, Newburyport, with its opposite form likewise suggests interconnection, realized through meditation, is a prospect of peace in the climate crisis. While Ellmann's narrator expresses eco-spiritual sympathies throughout the novel, however, unlike Lizzie, she is not a deeply spiritual person. Rather than through a character, the spiritual constructions in *Ducks, Newburyport* are developed as the forms of the novel engage the reader in a simulated practice of meditation. On the formal level, the lack of full stops and paragraphs that link all ideas in a continuous flow enacts the idea of interconnection and interdependence. But the experience of reading the text is more than this. As the novel's human narrator rambles on for nearly a thousand pages, considering thousands of "facts that," the reader must work to focus their attention and follow threads of plot dispersed among an overwhelming amount of daily information. As the readers observess the narrator's inattentive mind, they must choose which elements of information they retain, and which they let go, similar to a practice of mindfulness. This stream-of-consciousness form defamiliarizes the human mind, allowing the reader to do just that. While the narrator is harshly judgmental and non-meditative, the narrative structure which focalizes the busy mind

[39] Ibid., 198, 170.
[40] Ibid., 197.
[41] Ibid., 201.

of a stressed-out mother is a clear example of a mind "as it is."[42] As the reader observes the narrator's mind, 'facts' pop up continuously. She rambles:

> the fact that Elizabeth Bennet recommends only remembering things that please you, but that's not so easy, the fact that I don't remember much, and everything I do remember makes me sad, Resurfacing Announced, mindfulness, the fact that my memory is so intermittent that sometimes I just tell people I'm living in the Now, man, but they don't always fall for it, the fact that I don't know what mindfulness is […].
> I need to learn to let go, the fact that some people meditate almost constantly […] some people have microbial kitchen counters, or antimicrobial, and what good is that, and some people do both, the fact that they meditate and have microbe-resistant countertops. [43]

For most of us in the hyper-connected world which the maximalist novel so accurately reflects, meditation is incredibly difficult. Just like the human narrator, we are caught up in our heads, lose our train of thought and circle back to one idea and another. Thus, the narrator's mind can act as a stand-in for the reader's. While this mind likely has similar concerns to that of the reader, it is not their own. It is a fiction. The reader, therefore does not need to fight for control of its, but can observe the thought processes. This process of observation is not a 'contemplate nothingness' emptyheaded type of meditation to which the narrator of *Ducks* alludes, though it is possible to read the novel in this way, skimming sections of repetitive prose without absorbing anything. Instead, the rambling form of the human narrative of *Ducks, Newburyport* encourages the readers to focus their attention in an inattentive context. Reading a novel of this size takes much more than a couple of hours. There is also a physical and embodied component to engage with the novel, lugging it around or resting it on one's lap. It becomes a conscious choice to set aside time to engage with Ellmann's text. The act of choosing to engage with it – through repetition – becomes a practice.

With nearly one thousand pages of internal monologue, the reader observes numerous earth-related emotions, even as the narrator attempts to evade them. As the readers observes the narrator's uncomfortable feelings about the environment, they engage in a form of communal affect, a phenomenon similar to the 'communal crying' about which the narrator jokes.[44] Part of the meditative process demanded by its stream-of-consciousness form is the process of sitting with the awful – the negative experiences and emotions of the narrator – without judgement.

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[42] Sumantry and Stewart, "Meditation, Mindfulness," 1334.
[43] Ellmann, *Ducks*, 46, 786.
[44] Ibid., 504.

Here, the observation-based form allows the reader to engage with what Sianne Ngai and Nicole Seymour have described as bad or 'ugly' emotions about the climate crisis[45]. The narrative allows the reader to approach the narrator with a sense of compassion in these emotions, and perhaps extend that to themselves as well.

McMahan noted that the modernist stream-of-consciousness tradition, a literary legacy within which Ellmann writes *Ducks, Newburyport*, with its "'meticulous attending to the quotidian objects of everyday life and the precise interactions of consciousness with them"' is "'crucial to understanding the contemporary adaptation of Buddhist mindfulness practice."'. [46] As I have explored in Ellmann's text above, in stream-of-consciousciseness writing the "'moment-by-moment passage of human experience"' is presented "'in its uncensored density and ambiguity."'. This uncensored form allows for connections, epiphanies and even "'sudden spiritual manifestation[s] […] in casual, unostentatious, even unpleasant moments" in *Ulysses.*[47] The human narrator, towards the end of the novel, begins to engage in a more expansive perspective on the non-human in a section on trees:

> maybe there's more going on in [trees] than we thought […] trees go into a dormant state at night, the fact that if trees sleep, perchance they dream, and I wonder what their dreams are about […] if trees sleep and dream and eat and drink and blossom […] and experience euphoria and take care of their companions, then they must really want to live, just like we do.[48]

However, the reader does no't get to see if these revelations stick. The narrative ends shortly after, leaving ambiguity in whether or not the narrator's spiritual revelation might change her thoughts or behavior. Still, the narrative allows the reader to make connections and experience their own epiphanies.

Ellmann then complicates the meditative aspect of the novel with the cougar narrative. The rhythm of these passages – which Ellmann composes through varying sentence lengths, using fragments, and including paragraph breaks – better reflects the time and tempo of meditation practice. Where the human narrative presents the reader with the challenge of finding attention among the rambling thoughts of an exhausted and frequently disembodied mind, the cougar narrative engages in the reader in a more embodied mode of meditation. The placement of the

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[45]Sianne Ngai. *Ugly Feelings*. (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004), 214.; Nicole Seymour. *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 29.

[46] McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 222.

[47] Richard Ellmann quoted in ibid., 224.

[48] Ellmann, *Ducks*, 705.

cougar narrative, as interruptions in the human monologue, seems to suggest that alternative ways of knowing and living, such as an animalistic embodiment, may be an essential component to surviving the climate crisis. Though the human narrator does not have access to the conjectured thoughts of the mountain lion, the reader does.

The book opens with an address seemingly directed at the reader "'When you are all sinew, struggle and solitude, your young – being soft, plump, vulnerable – may remind you of prey.'"[49]. With this introductory animal proverb, the cougar – and by extension the natural world she represents – becomes a figure of wisdom who may harbor knowledge unknown to humans. This knowledge unknown, or at least forgotten, primarily resides in the animal body. The sensory focus in these opening lines (soft, plump) combined with the playful texture of the language through the poetic devices of alliteration (*s*inew, *s*truggle, *s*olitude, *s*oft; *you*r, *you*ng *p*lump, *p*rey etc.) and rhyme (you, sinew; may, prey) highlights both the complexity and immediacy of embodied animal knowledge. Though it is unlikely that the nuance of alliteration is available to animals, Ellmann's shift towards narrative simplicity, with a focus on sensory details in the cougar narrative highlights an animalistic way of being where embodied connection is immediate and not meditated through a constant torrent of thoughts. The narrator of these sections, who is not the unnamed human narrator of the monologue, notes "[w]hat we prize in poets, the lioness already had: every muscle toned to tread precisely, every sense alive to wind and moonshine and other creatures, whether rivals or prey."[50] This sense of aliveness and embodied interconnection is often the goal of meditation. The cougar narrative also encourages an embodied meditation. An early section of the lion text reads, "To be woken, biffed in the face by the paw of a sleeping kitten. The damp furry closeness in the crowded den sometimes gave her an over-warm sensation akin to nausea, or boredom." Here, the subject is not so much the mountain lion herself, but the sensations she experiences. The experience of being "woken" and "biffed in the face" is superseded by a "damp furry closeness" that the narrator describes as "akin" to both "nausea" and "boredom." These lines continue with the pattern of alliteration and consonance adding layers to the sonic attention of the narrative but also enacts a narrative flow through lion's body. In this the narrative engages in a process similar to the body-scan technique practiced in mindfulness meditation. In a body-scan, "attention is directed towards different areas of the body consecutively with an emphasis on noticing and experiencing any sensations, […] before intentionally disengaging and re-directing

[49] Ibid., 1.
[50] Ibid., 81.

attention to the next body area."[51] In the cougar scenes, body-focused prose flows smoothly through the cougar one sensation at a time, rather than compiling disjointed "facts" as in the human narrative.

The rhythmic embodiment of the cougar narrative extends beyond the individual animal body, however, to explore the corporeal and relational entanglement of all life. This movement mirrors the outward turn at the end of a mindfulness meditation, and the core of a loving-kindness meditation, in which one visualizes light and love spreading out from their body to the world. The cougar teaches her young not just to pay attention to their own embodiment, but that of all life:

> She would teach them the chill that comes before rain, and that rain has a smell, even before drops fall. […] She would show her cubs how to hide themselves in stillness: in shadows, in fog, bright sun.[52]

In this passage, along with the textural word play embodied awareness moves to senses inspired by external influence such as the "chill" and "smell" of rain that emerges "even before drops fall." These forces, however, are still alive and animate. In another scene, the animal muses - on tha thow "the wind is alive, likewise the sun, stars and moon" and how these forces can be used, "'the sun, to blind your quarry; the breeze, to cover your smell and the sound of your step."[53] . In these scenes, the focus moves from a distinct animal body to a larger community of life in which the lion participates and the distinct nature of that participation. This directional flow, from the individual to the larger world is a subtler expression of the entangled animism that the mountain lion explicitly teaches:

> All mountain lions are one. You are just one example of a lion. Mountain-lionhood is strong and immense, and goes beyond the individual. Each lion is part of a continuum, and privy to everything good and bad that happens to other mountain lions. You tough things out on your own, but you're linked to the pleasures, pains, and drama, the leap and recoil and lonely deaths of others. All living things are.[54]

This address is extended to the reader. Through the cougar narrative, the reader experiences the movement of meditation through the body to the larger 'Oneness.' This combined with the

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[51] Laura Mirams et al., "Brief Body-scan Meditation Practice Improves Somatosensory Perceptual Decision Making," *Consciousness and Cognition* 22, no.1 (2013): 348–59.
[52] Ellmann, *Ducks*, 103.
[53] Ibid., 396.
[54] Ibid., 397.

practice of attention necessitated by the human's ramblings not only displays the connection provided by mindfulness but allows the reader to experience it.

Certainly, however, the novel does not suggest, and neither do I, that we should become animals. Rather, what seems to distinguish the human from the animal attention is how intuition is learned for the human and comes in the form of waiting or in the gaps. The animal is already a poet, but the human must both practice attention and hold space – or grace – for receptivity. In the novel, the narrative gaps that allow the reader to engage in a small-scale practice of unknowing. In between the shifts from the human narrative to the cougar and vice versa, there are gaps created within the narrative. In a book that includes seemingly everything, what is left out it important. This pattern of eliding thoughts and events comes to a culmination in the final omission of a concluding scene. Though the human narrator implies that she and the cougar will meet – ending her monologue saying "'we're going to see the runaway lioness at the zoo this weekend"[55] – the novel ends before the meeting is narrated in either focalization. In this omission, the readers sitss uncomfortably and aware of their discomfort as they wait for an end that exists only in their imagination. Thus, the novel develops a spiritual form of hope, not in the actuality of narrated events forcing a conclusion, but in the possibility of the reader's receptivity and the grace of unknowing. This form of hope, which rests with the reader rather than being written in the narrative, evades the traditional despair/hope paradigm in its embrace of the unknown.

4. Conclusion: Peace Be with You?

When one's self-understanding is undermined by the threat of planetary failure caused by our own species, the insecurity is not just of what knowledge is valid, but who and what we are. In Ellmann's and Offill's novels the phenomenon of the everyday Anthropocene is normalized by the focus on mothers balancing work and family life, all while bearing the weight of an impending sense of climate "doom."[56] This sense of doom undermines not just knowledge or information, but all of existence. *Weather* and *Ducks, Newburyport*, show how meditative practice, even through literary form, can be a helpful way of exploring climate emotions and information. These novels experiment with form to create narratives that engage critically with the post-secular spiritual questioning brought up by the experience of living in a climate apocalypse. Even as the novels skirt around the language of the sacred, they challenge the reader to engage in a form of self-reflective awe that moves towards interdependence with the more-

[55] Ibid., 988.
[56] Ibid., 198.

than-human in a way that may just be more palatable for the post-secular reader. According to McMahan, such "interdependence implies a sacred matrix of mutual communality and coparticipation," which is "extended body of all beings."[57] Narratives like these these might allow us to redefine what peace may looks like in the climate crisis as a form of embodied endurance and connection.

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[57] McMahan, *Buddhist Modernism*, 173.

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