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Fictions of the Wikipedian Fact: Facticity, Authority, and 21st-century Fiction

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This article considers the effect that Wikipedia has had on fiction of the 21st-century, and proposes that one distinctive feature of Wikipedia's influence on this period has been the tension it has put on how novelists conceive of the relationship between facticity and authority. The first half of the article looks at how facticity and authority work on Wikipedia, drawing illustratively from Olga Tokarczuk's Nobel Lecture (2019) and Ben Lerner's short story 'The Hofmann Wobble: Wikipedia and the Problem of Historical Memory' (2023). The second half consists of a comparative reading of engagements with Wikipedia in Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) and Tokarczuk's *Bieguni* (2007; trans. *Flights* 2017), in which I consider the two novels' contradictory responses to Wikipedia: *Ducks* as a turn towards the authority of the self, *Flights* as a valorisation of the self's engagement with the other.

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By any measure, the rise of Wikipedia is one of the most significant events in public culture in the first 25 years of the 21st century: it provides free encyclopaedic content in 358 languages, consistently ranks among the top 10 visited websites globally, is subject to relatively limited censorship (as of January 2026 it is only fully blocked in China, North Korea, and Myanmar), and despite being written and edited entirely by volunteers has become trusted and praised for delivering on its techno-utopian promise without compromising its principles ('List of Wikipedias – Meta-Wiki' 2025; *Wikipedia* 2025, 'List of most-visited websites'; *Wikipedia* 2025, 'Censorship of Wikipedia'; Cooke 2020). Wikipedia has come closer than any encyclopaedic project to delivering the maximum amount of information to the maximum number of people, and it would not be overstating the case to say that, in much of the world, it has made a substantive impact to the knowledge economy, especially in areas like education, research, communications, and technology. Looking to the century's next 25 years, its impact will only be entrenched, since the licensing of its content under 'Creative Commons Attribution–ShareAlike (CC BY-SA)' means that it can be and has been legally scraped for the training of the Large Language Models (LLMs) and other so-called 'artificial intelligence' tools that will determine the near-future of the internet (*Wikipedia* 2025, 'Wikipedia:Copyrights – Wikipedia'; Gerner 2023).

Scholars of encyclopaedism have been presented with a gift: we have witnessed first-hand a revolution in the dominant encyclopaedic paradigm; and indeed there has been significant and rigorous study of Wikipedia's history and operations, its place within the history of encyclopaedism, and its distinctive style of encyclopaedic discourse.¹ The way that 21st century literature has registered the rise of Wikipedia has yet to be substantively considered, however. As has been argued elsewhere,² the history of literature and the history of encyclopaedism have long been interconnected, and the two forms are productively read in relation to each other – but it is as if we have been waiting for a 'Great Wikipedian Novel' to provide the occasion. In the (merciful) absence of such a gimmick, we now, 25 years since its founding in January 2001 (*Wikipedia* 2025, 'History of Wikipedia'), have the vantage of historical perspective – and I would like to use the occasion presented by this special issue not just to argue for the critical utility of reading Wikipedia as a significant and constitutive intertext of 21st-century literature, but to make a case for understanding Wikipedia and its rise as one of the period's major epistemic contexts.

¹ See, for example, the essays in Reagle and Koerner (2020).

² See particularly Yeo (2001), König and Woolf (2013), Rudy (2014), Saint-Amour (2015), and Ward (2025).

This is a claim made more or less explicitly by two widely received contemporary authors in recent periodising reflections on the contemporary moment. In her 2018 Nobel lecture, ‘Czuły narrator’ (2019; trans. ‘The Tender Narrator’), Olga Tokarczuk observes that Wikipedia might have seemed to Enlightenment thinkers as ‘the fulfillment of the dream of humanity’ (Tokarczuk 2019: 9), but indicates that its ultimate outcome may actually be to demonstrate the limits of that particular dream. Equally, Ben Lerner discusses Wikipedia from the standpoint of his time as an editor and contributor in his 2023 autofiction ‘The Hofmann Wobble: Wikipedia and the Problem of Historical Memory’, as he loosely fictionalises his experience of running an ‘ever-expanding phalanx’ of fake Wikipedia accounts;³ for Lerner, Wikipedia is an artefact of ‘the combination, maybe a dialectic, of cynicism and idealism, of alienation and techno-optimism’ that informed the late 2000s and, through LLMs, will shape the immediate future (Lerner 2023a). Drawing on Tokarczuk’s and Lerner’s analyses, I propose that we can productively understand the distinctive epistemic impact of Wikipedia in terms of a rebalancing of the relationship between facticity and authority – and, building on Mary Poovey’s important work on the history of ‘the modern fact’ (Poovey 1998), I contend that the Wikipedia revolution has borne a new iteration of ‘modern fact’: the ‘Wikipedian fact’.

In what ways, then, do we see Wikipedia’s impact on and in contemporary fiction? In the latter half of the article, I propose that the Wikipedian fact might be understood as one of the ghosts in 21st-century fiction’s machine, and to that end provide a comparative reading of two 21st-century novels with extensive engagements with Wikipedia: Lucy Ellmann’s *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) and Tokarczuk’s own *Bieguni* (2007; trans. *Flights* 2017). By approaching these two novels as responses to the Wikipedian fact, I propose that we find two dialectically implicated literary responses to the Wikipedia revolution: a retreat into the authority of the self, in the case of *Ducks, Newburyport*, and an experiment in narrative authority beyond the limits of the self, in the case of *Flights*.

NPOV: Facticity and Authority on Wikipedia

The guiding premise of this article, then, is that one of the effects of the rise of Wikipedia has been the development of a distinctive epistemic context in which contemporary authors write and with which they engage (and, in some cases, are concerned to defamiliarise). Identifying this new context in terms of facticity is a central conceit of

³ Wikipedia user Gwern claims, on the ‘Talk’ page of Lerner’s own Wikipedia entry, to have uncovered the details of Lerner’s actual conflict-of-interest editing (*Wikipedia* 2025, ‘Talk:Ben Lerner’).

Tokarczuk's argument in 'The Tender Narrator': she proposes that we now 'live in a world of too many contradictory, mutually exclusive facts, all battling one another tooth and nail' (Tokarczuk 2019: 8). For Tokarczuk, Wikipedia – for all she 'admire[s] and support[s]' it (Tokarczuk 2019: 9) – has driven the wider sense of confusion, paranoia, and isolation that she sees characterising the contemporary. That said, it is indicative of how naturalised Wikipedian encyclopaedism has become that Tokarczuk does not need to spend any time in her lecture explaining what exactly Wikipedia does that has enabled 'the fulfillment of the dream of humanity' – and so, in order to understand how it has facilitated a distinctive epistemic context, it is helpful to revisit what exactly makes Wikipedia, as an encyclopaedia, so significant.

Wikipedia is widely, and correctly, understood as an encyclopaedia to which anyone can contribute: you can find information on it, and you can just as easily change information on it. That this is a major innovation in the history of encyclopaedic thought and practice and in the history of 'the modern fact' becomes clear when considering how epistemic authority functions in Wikipedian encyclopaedic discourse. Despite what one might expect of an encyclopaedia written by anyone, Wikipedia is not a complete free-for-all: it is governed by an extensive and rigid range of policy, with frivolous changes likely to be removed quickly by one of its bots or volunteer editors, especially if the page is a popular one.⁴ The principles that underpin Wikipedia's policies are known as its 'Five Pillars':

1. Wikipedia is an encyclopedia.
2. Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view.
3. Wikipedia is free content that anyone can use, edit, and distribute.
4. Wikipedia's editors should treat each other with respect and civility.
5. Wikipedia has no firm rules. (*Wikipedia* 2024, 'Wikipedia:Five pillars')

As Zachary McDowell and Matthew Vetter put it, the 'Five Pillars' 'act as the basic structure of thinking about what Wikipedia is as well as providing a guide to assess how policies, guidelines, and behavior should flow from them' (McDowell and Vetter 2022: 2). For all its differences with an earlier project like *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Wikipedia's claim to be part of the encyclopaedic tradition is indisputable. Like all modern encyclopaedias,⁵ it is populated according to what is deemed sufficiently important, or 'notable'. The 1911 *Britannica* itself was a source that early editors absorbed into Wikipedia and built

⁴ For an overview of Wikipedia's policies, see: *Wikipedia* 2024, 'Wikipedia:Policies and guidelines'.

⁵ As Robert L. Fowler has demonstrated, the etymology of the term 'encyclopaedia' refers to a practice that is selective, not exhaustive (1997: 27–29).

from, meaning that Wikipedia has directly evolved from the *Britannica*.⁶ Jimmy Wales, one of the project's founders, introduced the project at its outset as a 'competitor' to the *Britannica* and *World Book*, while at the same time couching his aspirations for Wikipedia in unambiguously Diderotian terms: 'Imagine a world in which every single person is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing' (Roblino 2004). Reflecting on the state of Wikipedia by 2011, Jake Orlowitz writes 'What I saw in Wikipedia was not a threat to knowledge, as many pundits claimed and dismissed, but a deep and evolutionary transformation of the search for knowledge that had driven philosophers for millennia...not "the *Britannica* killer"; it was the *Encyclopédie* reborn in a digital age' (Orlowitz 2020: 128). Per the essays in Reagle and Koerner (2020), the belief that Wikipedia's fundamental innovation to encyclopaedic practice is a renaissance of the Diderotian spirit animates a great deal of Wikipedians.

Wikipedia's fundamental innovation, of course, is the ability for anyone to contribute to and edit its content, regardless of credential. As Jim Giles wrote of his 2005 finding that the *Britannica* and Wikipedia have effectively equal levels of factual accuracy, 'Considering how Wikipedia articles are written, that result might seem surprising. A solar physicist could, for example, work on the entry on the Sun, but would have the same status as a contributor without an academic background. Disputes about content are usually resolved by discussion among users' (Giles 2005). While this finding may be surprising, and was certainly contested by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. (2006), this level of accuracy is a direct outcome of Wikipedia's policies, which define 'notability' in terms of 'verifiability' and 'reliability'. On Wikipedia, a topic can only be notable, and therefore warrant inclusion, if it is verifiable among reliable sources; per its 'General Notability Guideline', 'A topic is *presumed* to be suitable for a stand-alone article or list when it has received *significant coverage* in *reliable sources* that are *independent* of the subject' (Wikipedia 2024, 'Wikipedia:Notability').⁷ Although this selective principle is common to all modern encyclopaedic projects, Wikipedia's 'General Notability Guideline' goes a step further than any previous modern encyclopaedia by proscribing any author's individual epistemic authority to determine notability, regardless of credential or argumentation. Epistemic authority is therefore located off-platform, in extant verifiable and reliable sources. This means that a fact presented on Wikipedia is, according to its policy, never factual by virtue of an author's epistemic authority ('I am

⁶ 'Starting in 2006, much of the still-useful text in the 1911 *Encyclopaedia* was adapted and absorbed into Wikipedia. Special focus was given to topics that had no equivalent in Wikipedia at the time' (Wikipedia 2024, 'Wikipedia:WikiProject Encyclopaedia Britannica').

⁷ This guideline specifically pertains to 'whether the topic may have its own article': content of articles is determined by different guidelines (Wikipedia 2024, 'Wikipedia:Notability').

an expert and I deem this information notable and factual') but by virtue of its citations and references ('Extant reliable and verifiable sources indicate that this information is notable and factual').

As Poovey argues in *The History of the Modern Fact*, what is modern about 'the modern fact' is its tendency to blur a distinction 'between an evident particular and a particular that constitutes evidence': while this was an important distinction for early modern natural philosophers, Poovey proposes that 'the modern fact' registers 'a tendency... toward privileging "facts" that were *both* observed particulars *and* evidence of some theory' (1998: 9). In this, 'the modern fact' is inscribed by a debate about the relationship between description and interpretation, or the possibility of objective data and the sense that any data point is always already an act of interpretation. As Poovey puts it, on the one hand, there is 'the desire that some unit of value- and theory-free representation [might] be available for producing systematic knowledge about the social and natural worlds', while on the other there is the belief that 'description, whether numerical or not, never was—and never can be—freed from the theoretical assumptions that seem implicit in all systematic knowledge projects' (1998: xxv). But if 'the modern fact' privileges facts that encompass both description and interpretation, the Wikipedian fact *only* values interpretation. Indeed, the 'General Notability Guideline' means that inclusion in Wikipedia is necessarily always evidence of notability in Wikipedian terms: since there is no original research on Wikipedia, and since notability depends on reliability and verifiability, it follows that the only facts on Wikipedia are those which meet, or prove, its notability criteria.

Wikipedia itself stands as proof of the efficacy of this decision: since there are typically more people with access to reliable and verifiable sources than there are credentialed authors of said sources, Wikipedia's approach to encyclopaedic content has proven more scalable than any previous encyclopaedic effort. That this is a disruption to (or innovation of) the norms of facticity in modern encyclopaedic discourse is borne out by the many examples in every scholarly field of 'big names' failing to assert their epistemic authority on Wikipedia. In contemporary literary studies, we might think of Philip Roth's 'Open Letter to Wikipedia', in which he complains of his inability to correct a conjecture on the page for *The Human Stain* (2000) about the novel's provenance in the life of Anatole Broyard by virtue of his authority as the novel's author (Roth 2012). Of course, by publishing in *The New Yorker* an open letter that explained the novel's provenance, Roth produced precisely the type of reliable and verifiable source that was needed for the correction to be made. It was not so much that Roth himself 'was not a credible source' as the Wikipedian proscription on the contributor's epistemic authority that counted him as any other Wikipedia user. While the credentialed authority of authors

has historically been important in determining who writes encyclopaedic content (or, in the case of many early modern encyclopaedias especially, who is plagiarised), what makes Wikipedia's encyclopaedic discourse distinctive in the history of encyclopaedism is that it removes authorial credential entirely from the encyclopaedic project.⁸ While the *Britannica* has continued to solicit contributions from credentialed experts – always one of its major marketing points, and now one of its unique selling points – the only credentials required by a Wikipedia contributor and editor are basic literacy in one of 358 languages and an internet connection. Understanding this is what led Emily St. John Mandel to one of the sillier literary stunts on Wikipedia: an interview with *Slate* to confirm her divorce, which could then be used to update the 'Personal Life' section of her Wikipedia page (Kois 2022). Roth's *old man shouting at clouds* and Mandel's *millennial updating her profile* are trivial but clear examples of how Wikipedia's fundamental innovation works: proscription of individual epistemic authority and its substitution with reliable and verifiable extant textual sources.

So how do we get from the Wikipedia revolution to Tokarczuk's account of the world as consisting of 'too many contradictory, mutually exclusive facts'? It is important to recognise that the proscription of individual epistemic authority does not mean that Wikipedia's encyclopaedic content itself bears no epistemic authority. Indeed, facticity without authority seems an incoherent proposition: without authority, which can be established through original research and reasoning as much as credential, how would one distinguish a fact from any other statement? Authority of some kind is a necessary component for communication of a fact; but, if Wikipedia cannot trade on authors' epistemic authority, or the kinds of authority conferred by original research that are not a feature of encyclopaedic discourse (argumentation, analysis, etc.), then with what authority can a Wikipedian fact be communicated? The Wikipedian answer comes in the 'Neutral Point of View' guideline: 'All encyclopedic content on Wikipedia must be written from a neutral point of view (NPOV), which means representing fairly, proportionately, and, as far as possible, without editorial bias, all the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on a topic' (*Wikipedia 2024*, 'Wikipedia:Neutral point of view'). This is to say, in the absence of epistemic authority by individual credential, original research, or argumentation, it is the claim to neutrality that produces the effect of epistemic authority in Wikipedian encyclopaedic discourse: on Wikipedia, neutrality is the epistemically authorising credential. And in Poovey's terms, if the 'General Notability Guideline' means that the Wikipedian fact is always 'evidence of some theory' (i.e. Wikipedian notability itself), 'Neutral Point of View' means that that evidence will

⁸ On plagiarism in early modern encyclopaedias, see 'Copyright and Public Knowledge in Yeo (2001: 195–221) and 'Preparing an Encyclopedia' in Loveland (2019: 129–63).

be authoritatively factual by virtue of its presentation of all notable perspectives on that fact. In this, Wikipedia's article on *The Human Stain* is now exemplary: Roth's proposed correction to the comments on its provenance are now contained in a discrete section titled 'Alleged resemblance to Anatole Broyard' (Wikipedia 2025, 'The Human Stain') which contains the narrative of the critical speculation about its provenance in the life of Anatole Broyard until the open letter – the neutral point of view, for Wikipedia, being the representation of all notable, reliable, and verifiable views. In its platonic form, the Wikipedian fact tends to privilege the notable aspects of the debate about the fact as much as it values the notable fact itself.

Generally speaking, encyclopaedic content itself does not deal with such metacritical reflection, but what is manifestly distinctive about Wikipedian facticity is how its epistemic authority is an effect of a claim to neutrality: epistemic authority on-platform is created by pointing at epistemic authority off-platform; 'Neutral Point of View' thereby becomes an 'epistemic virtue'.⁹ Wikipedia achieves the effect of epistemic authority through the mechanism of neutrality even as its content actively proscribes any claim to epistemic authority. As such, we can understand the Wikipedian fact as a version of 'the modern fact' that is only articulable in terms of its notability to the Wikipedian paradigm and is authoritative inasmuch as it makes an epistemic virtue of signalling the existence of authority somewhere else.

The success of Wikipedia and its justified admiration make it only more important to reckon with its consequences: it is a regime of facticity with so wide a circulation as to make for an epistemic context with significant ramifications. After all, notability, reliability, and verifiability are not neutral concepts, and neutrality is not an ideal without politics. That the Wikipedian fact defers to epistemic authority only from textual sources generates omissions in coverage (see Gallert and Van der Velden 2013); but an equally intractable problem is created by the epistemic authority that has accrued to Wikipedia itself, despite itself. In a media ecosystem ever more flooded by opinion journalism (see Kavanagh et al. 2019), the archives and institutions that Wikipedia relies on are increasingly partisan, and Wikipedia is vulnerable to journalism with lower standards for verifiability and reliability than Wikipedia itself. In an interview with Scott Tong, Lerner explained how Wikipedia can be used to disseminate hoaxes:

Let's say you make a crazy edit that says Teddy Roosevelt was a bocce enthusiast, and then somebody picks that up somewhere else in the internet, you can have

⁹ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison describe 'epistemic virtues' as 'norms that are internalized and enforced by appeal to ethical values' (2007: 40).

misinformation that then circulates in other domains of the internet. And then as soon as it appears on other sources those other sites *become* sources, so there's this weird way in which you can watch with Wikipedia at an incredibly accelerated rate the way that mythologies or misinformation can, through this kind of echo chamber, harden into fact. (Lerner 2023b)

Wikipedia's deferral of epistemic authority to off-platform sources while bearing the effect of epistemic authority provides a backdoor through which hoaxes can become Wikipedian fact: misinformation can be laundered as factual by virtue of inclusion on Wikipedia. One can think of the many hoaxes that circumvented Wikipedia's reliability and verifiability rules—from the murky world of conflict-of-interest editing (Pinsker 2015) to frivolous in-jokes (the coati is popularly known as a 'Brazilian aardvark', Sepp Blatter's middle name is 'Bellend', Creamfields is headlined annually by a band named Creme). The article on 'Emperor Henry II, Holy Roman Emperor' is a perfect example of how this can work: as Mark Thakkar uncovered, in 2019 an anonymous contributor added to the page that the Emperor was also known as 'St Henry the Exuberant', which hoax is now promulgated in at least six published books (Mark Thakkar [@brunellus] 2024). For all the warnings that might come with Wikipedia usage, its model can accelerate the circulation of misinformation in public discourse.

In 'The Hofmann Wobble', Lerner explores this phenomenon through the story of a Wikipedia editor who undertakes a project to 'reframe' topics such as war, taxation, and climate on Wikipedia in 'progressive' terms. For Lerner, this amounts to a permission structure for progressive actors to avoid material struggle, and the eponymous fictional 'Hofmann wobble' is a figure of this indictment: Lerner's narrator proposes that, if he were to theorise it, a 'Hofmann wobble' could describe 'a period of instability in our collective metaphorical frames, a moment of possibility and peril...which in turn alters the Overton window' (Lerner 2023a). Although he explains in detail how he could go about establishing 'the Hofmann wobble' as a Wikipedian fact, 'the Hofmann wobble' that Lerner instead writes narrates how progressives in the early 21st century convinced themselves that technocratic liberalism would create progressive political change. Like the 'nudge theory' of behavioural economics that captured the liberal imagination in this period (van der Heijden and Kusters 2015), 'progressive reframing' is about as politically effective as moving around icons on your iPhone screen without asking any questions about the nature of the iPhone. As Lerner's narrator argues, Wikipedian facts alone cannot create material political change, or even provide an especially effective defence against the status quo: 'was the political problem in his lifetime that the facts were concealed? Weren't the secret prisons open secrets? Was the problem that people didn't know what Exxon did?' (Lerner 2023a).

Lerner's analysis of the fact-world Wikipedia has created speaks to Tokarczuk's sense, in 'The Tender Narrator', of the contemporary world consisting of 'too many contradictory, mutually exclusive facts': for her, the internet itself is 'completely and unreflectively subject to market processes and dedicated to monopolists, controls gigantic quantities of data used not at all...for the broader access to information, but on the contrary, serving above all to program the behavior of users' (Tokarczuk 2019: 9). In Tokarczuk's view, the key lesson of Wikipedia is that 'Our ancestors' were mistaken to think that information in and of itself would be emancipatory:

it has turned out that we are not capable of bearing this enormity of information, which instead of uniting, generalizing and freeing, has differentiated, divided, enclosed in individual little bubbles, creating a multitude of stories that are incompatible with one another or even openly hostile toward each other, mutually antagonizing. (Tokarczuk 2019: 9)

The idea that information might 'naturally' translate to 'ubiquitous wisdom' depends too much on the Enlightenment's liberal model of humanity as inherently 'rational'; equally, in this context, we might ask if a 'Neutral Point of View' is as epistemically virtuous as the Wikipedian fact supposes it. Tokarczuk adds that 'Information can be overwhelming, and its complexity and ambiguity give rise to all sorts of defense mechanisms – from denial to repression, even to escape into the simple principles of simplifying, ideological, party-line thinking' (Tokarczuk 2019: 8, 10). If Wikipedia has made for a new epistemic context in the 21st century, then it is one that links Heather Houser's 'infowhelm' with Zara Dinnen's 'digital banal': a digital encyclopaedia that, by virtue of its distinctive regime of facticity, has become the most comprehensive and widest circulating encyclopaedia in history by far, and with which we have become 'unaware of the ways we are co-constituted' (Houser 2020: 1; Dinnen 2018: 1). In Ellmann's and Tokarczuk's creative responses to this context, we find two highly suggestive, dialectically implicated responses to this emergent context.

Disambiguating *Ducks, Newburyport*: Facticity, Authority, and the Self

Facticity is the structuring concern of Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport*. The novel consists of close to 1,000 pages of its protagonist's interior monologue, rendered as a single sentence of agglomerating 'facts' that, the protagonist thinks in the final clause, 'doesn't [sic] bear thinking about' (Ellmann 2019: 998). As the first lines of the monologue make clear, in the absence of full-stops or even, for the most part, line breaks, the phrase 'the fact that' takes on a syntactic quality:

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...(Ellmann 2019: 12)

One of the effects of this repetition is to establish the ‘fact’ as the novel’s primary syntactical unit, over and against either the grammatically complete sentence or any accepted definition of a ‘fact’ – since many of the narrator’s facts are not facts at all, but a mishmash of observations, remembrances, and opinions. Equally significant is the ultimate disjuncture that Ellmann establishes between facticity as the primary form of thought and its affective burden: the reader bears almost twenty-thousand such facts only to learn that they *do not bear thinking about*, as if the novel itself is a thought about something that can only be borne as a colloquial admonition against thinking about something.¹⁰ As a figuration of bourgeois, liberal consciousness in the contemporary U.S., the novel’s style renders alienation as an alienation from facticity as such.

In an especially revealing moment, representative of the metafictional play Ellmann weaves into the novel and on which its critical capacity depends, the protagonist thinks:

...the fact that Ben keeps firing more facts about Pluto at me, the fact that I think there’s maybe too much emphasis on facts these days, or maybe there are just too many facts, the fact that the Hungarian police fire tear gas at children...(Ellmann 2019: 319)

What constitutes a ‘fact’ in this passage is not consistent, and one might reasonably wonder whether the narrator would find there to be a more appropriate emphasis on facts, and that facts would be rather less alienating, if she were less willing to count everything that occurs to her as a fact. But, of course, this slippage in the bounds of facticity is essential to the novel, and can be read as responding to the same phenomenon that Tokarczuk observes when she describes the world as consisting of ‘too many contradictory, mutually exclusive facts’. Drawing on Poovey’s taxonomy of ‘the modern fact’, one might note that Ellmann’s first quoted ‘fact’ (that her son is telling her facts about Pluto at that moment) is a ‘singular experience or observed particular’ and that the third (she has remembered a 2015 news story about Hungarian

¹⁰ One might also note that it is extraordinary to hear such a distinctively British phrase used by an American, even if she did spend a year as a child in London.

police attacking refugee children at the Serbian border with tear gas (*BBC News* 2015)) is ‘evidence for some theory’ (Poovey 1998: 9), and that together they constitute the two types of fact that are brought together under the category of ‘the modern fact’. But while the protagonist’s first and third facts are distinct types of fact, the second (she wonders if there is too much emphasis on facts nowadays, speculates that there are too many facts) is neither an ‘evident particular’ nor a ‘particular that constitutes evidence’, but an opinion framed as a fact (‘the fact that I think...’). In the protagonist’s second fact, which is really an opinion, we see Ellmann making Poovey’s ‘modern fact’ (which privileges “facts” that were *both* observed particulars *and* evidence of some theory’) by casting as a fact (‘the fact that’) an opinion (‘I think’) of an observed particular (‘there’s maybe too much emphasis on facts these days’) that is evidence of some theory (‘or maybe there are just too many facts’). While *Ducks* presents as a litany of facts to the extent that it makes the ‘fact’ its primary syntactical unit, it simultaneously draws attention to the contingencies that the term ‘fact’ smooths over. As Lerner points out, within the Wikipedian paradigm there are routes by which opinions, hoaxes, and fictions can ‘harden into fact’ – and by breaking through repetition the internal coherence of the fact as an epistemological unit, *Ducks* disambiguates the fact as a category. Indeed, Ellmann’s ‘Proviso’ at the beginning of the novel that ‘This is a work of pure supposition’ (Ellmann 2019: 7) braces her reader for the fact that the subsequent facts are hypothetical, inductive, and not necessarily with evidence.

Ellmann’s disambiguation of the fact is, I contend, a response to the fact-world of Wikipedia. This link is made explicit in one of the protagonist’s children, Ben, who is introduced as ‘[knowing] so much for a little kid, maybe *too* much’, and is characterised accordingly across the text (‘the fact that, according to Ben, you are never more than four feet from a spider [...] the fact that, according to Ben, eight and a half billion tons of plastic has been produced worldwide since the fifties [...] the fact that phthalates cause hormone imbalances, cancer, and birth defects and, according to Ben, Americans are full of phthalates’) (Ellmann 2019: 13, 394, 679, 928). Importantly, the protagonist reveals late in the novel that ‘Ben hardly does any chores around the house at all, except read to me from Wikipedia maybe’ (Ellmann 2019: 818), explicitly linking his precocity to Wikipedian encyclopaedism; retrospectively, it seems plausible that his ‘firing more facts about Pluto’ at the protagonist may be reading to her from Wikipedia. In any case, in this engagement with Wikipedia, Ellmann invites us to read her protagonist’s facts in relation to Wikipedian facticity.

What makes *Ducks*’ creative engagement with Wikipedian facticity so important to the novel, however, is the foil it establishes with the promise of truly unalienating authority that the novel suggests can be found through motherhood – and this becomes

evident when considering how the novel's critique of encyclopaedic practice contrasts with its own aspiration towards totality. Ellmann's protagonist gives a conspicuously vertiginous moment roughly mid-way through *Ducks*:

...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, the fact that there are seven and a half billion people in the world, so there must be seven and a half billion of these internal monologues going on, apart from all the unconscious people, the fact that that's seven and a half billion people worrying about their kids, or their moms, or both, as well as taxes and window sills and medical bills...(Ellmann 2019: 514)

Ellmann's protagonist can only understand the vastness of the scale she indicates by humanising the 'seven and a half billion' monologues in terms of the sameness of 'taxes and window sills and medical bills', but the novel itself makes an ostensibly different gesture towards totality. Immediately appended to this thought is 'the fact that animals must have some kind of monologue going on in their heads, even if it's more visual than verbal maybe' (Ellmann 2019: 514), and in this Ellmann indicates that *Ducks*' two strands – the protagonist's monologue and the narrative of the mountain lioness and her journey through the area, which breaks up the interior monologue that forms the novel's bulk – can be made to work dialectically as a method for thinking towards totality.¹¹

For Ellmann, this dialectic takes place *against* or *despite* encyclopaedic thought: while the protagonist's monologue illustrates how Wikipedian facticity has made for an overwhelming and incoherent fact-world, she finds no nostalgia in the preceding encyclopaedic paradigm, as demonstrated by a pair of images that offer a deeply alienating portrayal of what the encyclopaedic paradigm associated with the *Britannica* has come to mean in the 21st century. Close to the novel's beginning, Ellmann's narrator recounts a dream in which her husband wins an encyclopaedia:

...the fact that I dreamt Leo won a nice encyclopedia set, old, in dark blue bindings, and it was all about Germany, the fact that there were many volumes of it, the fact that it had been published in the thirties, and Leo'd won it for some ad slogan he wrote in high school...the fact that I wish I'd dreamt up the *slogan* instead of the dark blue encyclopedia, the fact that meanwhile Leo dreamt our whole family had new blue shoes and he had to testify to Congress about them...(Ellmann 2019: 100)

¹¹ For different approaches to the relationship between the two narrative strands, see Pesce (2024) and Cohn (2025).

The narrator's dream is not just of a distinctively 20th-century form of encyclopaedia – printed, multi-volume, blue bindings, clearly reminiscent of the *Britannica* notwithstanding its limited subject matter – but a clear, if tongue-in-cheek, re-working of the dream of *Britannica*-ownership that Joyce depicts in *Ulysses*, from the husbands' shared name (Leo/Leopold Bloom), shared apparent interest in advertisement copy, and shared vision of their juridico-political importance (in Leo's dream).¹² Read as an allusion to the association of the *Britannica* with bourgeois aspiration in *Ulysses*, Ellmann's protagonist comes across rather less credulous about the virtues of encyclopaedia ownership than Leopold Bloom: encyclopaedic culture is dependent on marketing, and knowledge of the latter might even be more practically useful than the knowledge associated with the former. This moment demonstrates Ellmann's engagement with the histories of both encyclopaedic practice and encyclopaedic fiction. Later in the novel, this engagement turns into a critique, when the narrator recalls another encounter with encyclopaedic culture, in the form of a card she received with an image of a kitten on an encyclopaedia:

...kitten, the card Anat sent me, the fact that it's a photo of a kitten but the kitten actually looks kind of *dead*, or at least anesthetized, the fact that how else could they have gotten it to fall asleep like that, lying on its back on top of the books, rest in peace, RIP...(Ellmann 2019: 366)

Once representative of a muscular and aggressive world picture and associated with bourgeois aspiration, the encyclopaedism of the 20th century has, in the 21st, been resigned to kitsch. If Ellmann's narrator's dream of her husband winning a 20th-century encyclopaedia betrays some cynicism about such encyclopaedic projects, the image of a 'dead kitten on an encyclopedia' (Ellmann 2019: 370) provides a pessimistic vision of the fate of 20th-century encyclopaedism: coopted into the aesthetic regime of *cuteness* that, as Sianne Ngai puts it, is '[the] aesthetic par excellence of what Jacques Rancière calls "the sleep-filled life of the world of consumption" induced by the "soft totalitarianism of the world of commercial culture"' (Ngai 2012: 54). For Ellmann, it is as if the encyclopaedism of the 20th century has reached a limit point in the 21st at which its utility is entirely kitsch: it stands at best for the somnolent acceptance of the world as we find it and at worst as the residue of the toxicities of modernity in which we have to live. If cuteness, as Ngai has it, is 'an aesthetic disclosing the surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings, ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities' (Ngai 2012: 1), then Anat's card affords

¹² See the 'Ithaca' episode of *Ulysses* (Joyce 1986). For an analysis of 'Ithaca' in terms of encyclopaedism, see: (Ward 2017).

Ellmann's narrator an image that tries to moor her horror and disgust at the world's barbarism in a cuteness that is simply too uncanny to convince. Of course, the image is particularly significant in the novel for the way it speaks across to the lioness' narrative. While Ellmann's narrator fixates on the 'dead kitten on an encyclopedia', *Ducks* as a novel insists on kitten life beyond the anthropocentrism of cuteness and somnolent consumption: 'The kittens' dreams ranged more freely [...] for kittenhood is about enclosure and escape' (Ellmann 2019: 371). *Ducks* provides at once an epitaph for 20th-century encyclopaedic practice and a call for fictions that can identify its limitations and imagine worlds beyond it. That the lioness can only be reunited with her kittens in the 'Big Cat division of Columbus Zoo' (Ellmann 2019: 617) stands as a powerful figuration of the predicament the 21st century imagination has made for itself – as if one can only imagine beyond the zoo in spite of the zoo.

Yet if *Ducks*' figuration of the two narratives is Ellmann's method towards totality, it is ultimately one that valorises the authority of maternal kinship as transcendent. After all, the fact is that the protagonist and the mountain lioness are mothers searching (literally and figuratively) for their children in order to 'love them and save them and feed them and teach them and never let them go' (Ellmann 2019: 959): this is the resemblance that unifies the two worlds, and as such the root from which the novel's totalising capacity springs. Indeed, in a gesture towards possible futures, the novel's final two facts are that 'Stacy [the eldest daughter] seems to feel some kind of rapport with that woebegone creature' and that this may be because she feels either 'fierce and free, or caged and cowed [the lioness]', indicating that the poles between which Stacy's life will be lived are those of the cats (and of 'kittenhood') (Ellmann 2019: 998). The implication of the novel's method towards totality, I propose, is that the authority of the mother and the integrity of maternal kinship bonds, human and animal, emerge as the novel's stabilising counter to the contemporary's regime of facticity – as if a transcendental motherhood can provide the stable authority upon which an unalienating facticity might be based. While the revelation of the sad circumstances of the protagonist's mother's death is presented as the primary cause for the protagonist's



Figure 1: Tabby kitten sleeping on a German encyclopaedia. Possible source for Ellmann's 'dead kitten on an encyclopedia' (Ellmann 2019:370). Photo: S. Born/juniors@wildlife, Image ID: BRB8H7 (2 August 2010). Alamy. Individual license.

self-described brokenness, in the attack on their home by the neighbour Ronny, which makes for the novel's climax, Ellmann presents a highly symbolic image of the renewal of this maternal authority:

...the fact that it was Jake who then had the bright idea of pelting Ronny with apples, the fact that he started us all off, and soon everybody was pelting Ronny with apples, the fact that it turns out apples are a great outlet for fury, or maybe I've always known that, and *that's* why I make all these tartes tatin, the fact that, all in all, what *teamwork*, what good old American know-how and can-do spirit, good old American *apples* too, well, South American, the fact that we'd *won*...(Ellmann 2019: 971)

Although she has to be reminded by her son, the protagonist realises that she has 'always known' that apples, the symbol of humanity's mother's illicit knowledge, are 'a great outlet for fury', and they thereby become the tool with which she and her children triumph over Ronny. Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) is a key reference point for the protagonist, and this moment rewrites that novel's 'Indians in the House' chapter, in which the family, in the absence of the patriarch, watch in terrified silence as Indians enter their home and eat their cornbread.¹³ In Ellmann's telling, however, the successful fightback against the home invader is the occasion of matriarchal renewal, shoring up the family unit and its integrity against malevolent outsiders even in the absence of the loving father (as in Wilder, the patriarch is at work during the home invasion). *Ducks* emerges as a response to the contemporary world that looks to reauthorise the family unit, presided over by the maternal self, as the ultimately legitimate authority.

Constellating *Flights*: Facticity, Authority, and the Other

If *Ducks* is a bombardment of ambiguated facts, the narrator of Tokarczuk's *Flights* notes a change in the epistemic quality of the world in a rather more subtle fashion. In a short section titled 'Sanitary Pads', Tokarczuk provides a striking image of the extent of this new epistemic context: the narrator recounts finding 'entertaining little facts' on the packaging of her sanitary pads, and recalls some of the facts she's learnt: 'In the bathroom, where I unwrapped the entire box of these pads with their curious teachings, it hit me like a revelation that this was yet another part of the project of the

¹³ Another plane along which Ellmann inverts Wilder's novel is race, since the fightback is started by Stacy, whose father, Frank, is himself of unspecified Indigenous heritage; as the protagonist thinks, this may be a source of 'her courage' ('the fact that she's Mocchi the warrior girl'), notwithstanding 'the fact that it's hard to believe it's from Frank', who the protagonist characterises as feckless and deadbeat (Ellmann 2019: 978-79). I am grateful to Shawna McDermott for her specialist knowledge of Wilder and fin-de-siècle US children's literature.

great encyclopaedia now coming into being, the encyclopaedia that would encompass all things' (Tokarczuk 2017: 108). While the new epistemic context is in the foreground of *Ducks*, in *Flights* it is somewhere in the background, jolting the narrator with reminders of her immanence within an episteme that has made even menstruation a site of epistemic virtue. Notably, 'Sanitary Pads' comes shortly after a section discussing Wikipedia explicitly, and taking Wikipedia as that 'great encyclopaedia' it is also notable that some of these facts are readily disproven popular myths (Leonardo da Vinci did not invent the scissors, the average human body does not contain enough sulphur to kill a dog, etc.). So, building on her critique in 'The Tender Narrator', what perspective on Wikipedia does Tokarczuk give in *Flights*?

In the section on 'Wikipedia', the narrator describes it as 'mankind's most honest cognitive project', but insists on its hard epistemic limitations: 'After all, what it has in it can only be what we can put into words—what we have words for. And in that sense, it wouldn't be able to hold everything at all' (Tokarczuk 2017: 78). The narrator instead proposes:

some other collection of knowledge, then, to balance that one out—its inverse, its inner lining, everything we don't know, all the things that can't be captured in any index, can't be handled by any search engine. For the vastness of these contents cannot be traversed from word to word—you have to step in between the words, into the unfathomable abysses between ideas. (Tokarczuk 2017: 78–79)

As Katarzyna Bartoszyńska argues, in this moment we can detect how Tokarczuk understands 'the difference between Wikipedia's denotative, descriptive project and the specifically literary, figurative properties of fiction' (2021: 70). Indeed, the narrator ends the section by suggesting that such a collection might be both 'anti-matter' and 'anti-information' (Tokarczuk 2017: 79). To this we might readily add 'anti-fact', and consider the example of the sanitary pads' facts: the fact which the narrator is 'most struck by' is that 'The strongest muscle in the human body is the tongue' (Tokarczuk 2017: 109). This is untrue in at least two ways – the tongue is neither a single muscle nor stronger than muscles such as the masseter or gluteus maximus – but by highlighting without explanation that this fact is the one that most strikes her, the narrator invites the reader to approach the fact figuratively, as non- or anti-factual. After all, how is this fact measuring strength? It is true that other muscles are physically stronger, but no other muscle groups make an equivalent contribution to human voice and expression – and does that not make it particularly strong? What is striking about this fact, in terms of facticity, is its literal incorrectness and its metaphorical resonance, and in this, it has an epistemic authority that lies in the domain of the figurative. This incorrect fact,

in the context of *Flights*, legitimates the epistemic authority of the figurative. In the anti-facts that make up fiction, it is the ability to read for epistemic authority beyond the positivist paradigm of the Wikipedian fact – the epistemic context of ‘the great encyclopaedia now coming into being, the encyclopaedia that would encompass all things’ – which emerges as the most important.¹⁴ Just as the narrator is struck by and, by implication, thinks with the sanitary pad’s factual error, making of it not simple misinformation but a kind of truth expressible only as fiction, so does *Flights* as a novel employ anti-facticity as a method towards developing a complex picture of the world as such. Indeed, in an early section the narrator bemoans the positivist methodology that underpins the traditional psychology she studied, which she critiques for teaching ‘that the world could be described, and even explained, by means of simple answers to intelligent questions’ (Tokarczuk 2017: 17). Rather than expect the epistemic authority of ‘simple answers’, the narrator of *Flights* indicates that readers should look for truth in the novel’s anti-facts.

That the novel is an experiment in the relationship between facticity and authority is signalled by its first 10 sections. As Bartoszyńska has observed, the narrator’s form evolves in stages across the novel’s opening sections, from the first-person singular in the first five, to the implied first-person plural in the sixth, to a third-person that experiments with free indirect style in the seventh and eighth, to an omniscient third-person in the ninth, before returning to the first-person singular in the tenth, thereby demonstrating ‘a shift from a personal mode to an authorial one...a movement along a spectrum of possibilities that explores, via form, the questions of epistemology and identity’ (Bartoszyńska 2021: 74). What is suggestive about this, I contend, is that it is also legible as a spectrum of possible relationships between epistemic authority and facticity: the shift from first-person observance of the other to third-person authoring of the other can be read in the terms Poovey gives for facticity as one from description (‘observed particular’) to interpretation (‘evidence of some theory’).¹⁵ What this ‘spectrum of possibilities’ also illustrates, then, is the different ways that authority is necessarily encoded in the communication of information, and, in the refusal to settle into any of these modes over the course of the novel, Tokarczuk indicates the necessity of employing the full spectrum of authorial possibilities. In this, the novel makes a case for employing description and interpretation dialectically as a methodology towards

¹⁴ Tokarczuk restates this concisely in ‘The Tender Narrator’: ‘I have never been particularly excited about any straight distinction between fiction and non-fiction, unless we understand such a distinction to be declarative and discretionary. In a sea of many definitions of fiction, the one I like the best is also the oldest, and it comes from Aristotle. Fiction is always a kind of truth’ (2019, 11).

¹⁵ We might also think of this as the movement from ‘event’ to ‘experience’ that Tokarczuk describes in ‘The Tender Narrator’: ‘Events are facts, but experience is something inexpressibly different...Experience is a fact that has been interpreted and situated in memory’ (2019: 11).

understanding the world; to this end, creative encounters with otherness – anti-factual renderings of otherness – are necessary and transformative. Importantly, this is explicitly presented as the output of a solitary writing self – a process the narrator herself describes as ‘solitary confinement’ and ‘controlled psychosis’ (Tokarczuk 2017: 19).¹⁶

The narrator explains that in the discipline of psychology she would find that she ‘didn’t know how to listen’ to her patients: ‘I didn’t observe boundaries; I’d slip into transference’ (Tokarczuk 2017: 20). As a writer, albeit ‘never...a real writer’, the narrator finds that she does not have to ‘explain’, and therefore has space for creative engagements with otherness: ‘life would turn into incomplete stories, dreamlike tales, would show up from afar in odd dislocated panoramas, or in cross sections—and so it would be almost impossible to reach any conclusions as to the whole’ (Tokarczuk 2017: 18–19). The novel, I propose, explores this desire for wholeness and ‘conclusions as to the whole’, and presents the synthesis of its incomplete, dreamlike, and dislocated anti-facts as the only method by which the self can begin to grasp the whole: not Ellmann’s turn inward to the authority of the self, but a turning of the self outward, beyond its limits, to find authority in the existence of the other.

The name the novel gives for this method is ‘constellationality’, which is introduced in the section titled ‘Travel Psychology: Lectio Brevis I’. The narrator reports speech from an earnest but unengaging lecturer that effectively describes the novel’s method:

‘...foundational idea,’ he was saying, ‘is constellationality, and right away the first claim of travel psychology: in life...there exists no philosophical primum. That means that it is impossible to build a consistent cause-and-effect course of argument or a narrative with events that succeed each other casuistically. [...] in reality, in order to reflect our experience more accurately, it would be necessary to assemble a whole, out of pieces of more or less the same size, placed concentrically on the same surface. Constellation, not sequencing, carries truth.’ (Tokarczuk 2017: 83)

That the lecturer seems also to be describing the structure of *Flights* as a novel is not ambiguous, and I would go so far as to argue that providing pieces out of which the reader can ‘assemble a whole’ is indeed *Flights*’ method towards totality: among its constellations of sections representing a spectrum of authorial modes, a reader can find figurations that, like the human tongue, add up to more than the sum of their parts. Read as a constellation of sections ‘of more or less the same size’ by a narrator concerned with the epistemic authority afforded by different narrative modes that manifest different

¹⁶ Indeed, that the narrator is at best idiosyncratic and at worst problematic has been observed by scholars from James Wood (2018) to Stephanie Bird (2024).

engagements with otherness, *Flights* comes to look like an experiment in assembling a whole by describing and interpreting a miscellany of information. And importantly, this puts it in direct contrast with the positivist fact-world of Wikipedia.

Conclusion: The Wikipedia Era?

As creative engagements with the epistemic context of the Wikipedian fact, *Ducks* and *Flights* differ drastically; however, when considered in terms of the totalising possibilities of their novels, they can be understood as dialectically implicated. Indeed, for all the differences between *Ducks* and *Flights*, one should observe that each valorises literary thinking against encyclopaedic practice – and in this they each sit comfortably in a generic lineage of encyclopaedic fiction dating back to the beginning of the novel. While the totalising possibilities of *Ducks* turn on the transcendent authority of maternal knowledge and kinship that are figured through a reassertion of the integrity of the authorial self, the narrator of Tokarczuk's *Flights* takes her reader towards the expansive possibilities of creative engagement with the other; and in this, both authors demonstrate two critical poles with which we might understand a 'Wikipedia era' of 21st-century fiction.

Yet, given the scale of the shift in encyclopaedic paradigm seen over the last 25 years, might scholars of contemporary literature not expect more, and more obvious, examples of literary engagement with Wikipedia? The modernist response to the 1911 *Britannica* was extensive: Dorothy Richardson's *The Tunnel*, Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*, and Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*, for example, build out of critiques of it, while plundering it was a key method of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Jorge Luis Borges' *Historia universal de la infamia*. Indeed, the *Britannica*'s importance to modernism is belied by the number of late 20th-century writers who invoke it to figure a relationship to the early 20th century – whether the sight-ruining edition of J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* or Lord Darlington's 'complete set' in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, to say nothing of its appearance in Audre Lorde's *Zami* and C.L.R. James' *Beyond a Boundary* (Coetzee 1998: 30; Ishiguro 2009: 60; Lorde 2018: 13; James 2013: 28). But while the 1911 *Britannica*'s effects are explicit in 20th-century literature, could the same yet be said of 21st century literature's relationship to Wikipedia, beyond the examples above? To what extent does Wikipedia inform the epistemic context and quality of 21st-century fiction? And, more speculatively, as we look to the LLM-shaped future of 'Answer Engine Optimisation', might we need to consider these first 25 years of 21st-century literature as a discrete period of the new Wikipedia era?

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