MERIDIAN CRITIC No. 1 / 2015 (Volume 24)

'Cloth speaks': Cloaks of Telepathy, Melancholia, and the Uncanny in Nicholas Royle's *Quilt*

Arleen IONESCU
University of Ploiești (UPG), Romania

Abstract: The article proposes a close reading of the debut novel, *Quilt*, written by Nicholas Royle, Professor at the University of Sussex and author of many books on critical and literary theory. *Quilt* unveils a fantastic experience of encountering death and explores the language of mourning as well as phenomena such as telepathy, melancholia, mourning, monomania and the uncanny. Within a broad psychoanalytic framework, the essay deals with a stranger notion of 'clothing' than the reader of an issue on 'The Discourse of Clothing' might expect: the mood of mourning, in which somebody dresses in black, is not only physical but, as it were, also psychical. Royle's writing and the uncanny strategies deployed by his mourning protagonist testify to a cover-up which also results in the estrangement of language. The narrator-protagonist's increasing obsession with his father's stingrays shrouds the text in a mantle of linguistic alienation from which there seems to be no escape but the unnamed narrator's final disappearance from the textual universe.
Keywords: melancholia, mourning, telepathy, the Uncanny, spectrality, Nicholas Royle, Quilt, contemporary English literature

This article will focus on the vein of mourning in Nicholas Royle's debut novel *Quilt*, that black mood of sorrow symbolized by the dark clothes with which the mourner covers his or her soul after the death of a loved one. Royle's unidentified protagonist is not only a mourner who wears black clothes, but he belongs to the community of those who irremediably lost not only their beloved parents but also a life and a language. 'Dark clothes' will therefore refer not so much to real garments as to symbolic attire which belongs to some spectral field and telepathy, wrapping the mourner's psyche to the point of making him lose his grip on reality. Thus, I will extend the notion of mourning clothing to a symbolic state that casts a more general veil, to an emotional condition that spreads over those who lost their near and dear, beyond wearing black clothes at funerals and

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

for a customary period of grieving. The novel's very title refers not to a specific item of clothing but to a kind of blanket or bedspread, traditionally three-layered, with a woven cloth top, a layer of batting for insulation, and a woven back.

As I have shown in my article "'Novel" Reality Calling and Telepathy in Nicholas Royle's *Quilt*' (see Ionescu, 2014, p. 109), *quilt* (as a noun) is the bed*cover* that conceals the Being-in-the-world and *quilts* (as a dialectal verb meaning *to swallow*) everything fiction meant before: *Quilt,* and its thin-spun web of like-sounding monosyllables ('*quill, will, kill, ill, kilt, wilt, quit, it*'), 'with all it covers and uncovers, as well as its distance from a world of simple surfaces and depths, concealment or revelation', displays what Royle's 'Afterword' to the novel will designate as 'the space of quilted thinking' (Royle, 2010, p. 159).[1] Moreover, '[p]erforming a backward reading, from the "Afterword" to the novel, one can see that Royle believes in deconstruction and that "deconstruction must have the afterword that it cannot have"'[2], since it is the 'true afterword' of a reinvented language and textuality to come (called 'Reality Literature'), woven (*textus*) of a new fictional fabric, with 'layers and pockets of voices, feelings, thoughts' (*Q*, p. 159, in the 'final parenthetical pouch').[3]

As a preamble to our discussion of what covers and uncovers the protagonist's existence and the novel's fictional idiom, a short account of its overarching themes of telepathy, melancholia and the Uncanny is necessary. Made up of *tele* and *pathe* or *patheia* meaning 'suffering', 'feeling', 'passion', telepathy is the purported transmission of data from one person to another through unknown sensory channels which are quite different from physical interaction. Psychologists conceived the human mind as a continuous whole that responds to physical stimulation. Its cognitive capacities are said to pick out entities that can be identified in a way that shows how they can be fitted into a single connected causal system. Hence, any connection with stimuli that were not related to the physical was considered to provoke a disorder of the mind that had to be treated. Some scientists even went as far as to suggest that telepathy is a symptom of conditions such as psychosis or schizophrenia. Freud's psychoanalytic theory provided a new answer to questions concerning clairvoyance and later on, parapsychology classified four different types of telepathy: 'deferred' or latent telepathy, intuitive (also known as retro-cognitive or precognitive) telepathy, emotive, and superconscious telepathy.

Freud's seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia" pointed out that there were fluctuating definitions of melancholia even in 'descriptive psychiatry', taking

---

[1] Henceforth *Q*, followed by the page number in the text.

[2] *Cf.* Derrida's own "*Afterw.rd*", in response to questions by Royle, mentioned in *The Uncanny* – and which also has a remark about a word not belonging to a "dictionary" (see Ionescu, 2014, p. 104).

[3] See Logan, 1982, for a landmark essay teasing out the sartorial etymological background of 'text', in particular in Roland Barthes's critical work.

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

on 'various clinical forms', out of which some 'suggest somatic rather than psychogenic affections' (Freud, 1920, p. 243). The Viennese psychologist associated melancholia with mourning, as they both manifest themselves when one loses a loved person or some abstraction to which the deceased has been reduced, and have a 'pathological disposition' (Freud, 1920, p. 243). Among the 'distinguishing mental features of melancholia', Freud listed 'profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment' (Freud, 1920, p. 244). Both melancholia and mourning are characterized by a 'painful frame of mind' and 'the same loss of interest in the outside world' (Freud, 1920, p. 244). One of the possible symptoms of melancholia is sleeplessness, which 'testifies to the rigidity of the condition, the impossibility of effecting the general drawing-in of cathexes necessary for sleep. The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies […] from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished' (Freud, 1920, p. 244).

For some forms of melancholia, the predisposition toward mania is noteworthy, as is attested by some cases which 'show the regular alternation of melancholic and manic phases which has led to the hypothesis of a circular insanity' (Freud, 1920, p. 253). The psychoanalytic method has proved successful in treating such cases, therefore Freud found it 'not merely permissible' but 'incumbent upon us to extend an analytic explanation of melancholia to mania as well' (Freud, 1920, p. 253). For Lacan, building on Freud, mourning is a process through which the mourner eventually comes to terms with the absence of the loved object, therefore being able to invest new objects with libido, whilst melancholia keeps him/her trapped in his/her loss and deploration. As Jean-Michel Rabaté has shown in his monograph on Lacan (2001), the implicit key of Freud's analysis is narcissism 'since the melancholic identifies his or her ego with the abandoned or lost object, an identification that blocks the process and freezes time' (Freud, 1920, p. 253).

Freud related the notion of the uncanny to 'what is frightening', to what awakens 'dread and horror' (Freud, 1955, p. 219). Disputing the reductive assimilation of the uncanny with the unfamiliar, and enlisting the help of Theodor Reik, he listed numerous ways in which the German *unheimlich* is rendered in different languages. Thus, the phrase 'an uncanny place' translates the Latin *locus suspectus,* Rost's and Schenkl's *Lexikons* give the translation 'strange, foreign' for the Greek *ξένος*. The English definition of *unheimlich*, as revealed by the dictionaries of Lucas, Bellows, Flügel and Muret-Sanders, is 'uncomfortable, uneasy, gloomy, dismal, uncanny, ghastly; (of a house) haunted; (of a man) a repulsive fellow', while according to Sachs-Villatte, French translates the term as *inquiétant*, *sinistre*, *lugubre*, *mal à son aise*, and Spanish (as shown by Tollhausen) as *sospechoso*, *de mal aguëro*,

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

lúgubre, *siniestro*. Another two Romance languages, Italian and Portuguese, 'seem to content themselves with words which we should describe as circumlocutions', whilst for Arabic and Hebrew the meaning of 'uncanny' is 'daemonic', 'gruesome' (Freud, 1955, p. 221). Apparent death and the re-animation of the dead were the 'most uncanny themes' (Freud, 1955, p. 246), which he illustrated with Snow White's opening her eyes after she was presumed dead or the resuscitation of the dead in accounts of several miracles included in *The New Testament*. In *The Post Card*, Derrida returned quite frequently to the schemas of the *Unheimlich*, which are met with resistance by the 'literary' (Derrida, 1987, p. 342). Referring to Lacan's axiom 'Truth inhabits fiction', Derrida expressed his doubts about such a subordination of literary writing to the purely illustrative function of demonstrating psychoanalytic truth, and instead reaffirmed 'literary fiction's eternally *renewed* resistance to the general law of psychoanalytic knowledge' (Derrida, 1987, pp. 426-427). Before him, Heidegger had also enlisted the Uncanny in his attempt to divest ontotheology of its concealing cloak: 'Uncanniness is the basic kind of Being-in-the-world, even though in an everyday way it *has been covered up*' (Heidegger, 1966, p. 277, my italics).

Telepathy, melancholia and the Uncanny cast long thematic shadows in *Quilt*, a novel about a reality that is not traditional realism's usual sum total of 'credible characters, places, experiences and events, furniture and food, sadness and street-corners, or other such narrative details', but 'telepathy and clairvoyance', the practice of 'reading the thoughts of others' ('Afterword', *Q,* p. 158). Telepathy and the Uncanny have also been the hallmarks of Royle's critical signature ever since his first critical monograph, *Telepathy and Literature*, in which he put forward the thesis that books could be telepathic; 'they can read your mind, see you coming from a distance, tell you what you are thinking, tell you what you have been perceiving all along without realizing' (Royle, 1991, p. 75). In his edited issue of the *Oxford Literary Review* on "Telepathies", taking his cue from Derrida's aphoristic quip in 'Ulysses Gramophone' that '[i]n the beginning was the telephone (Derrida, 2013, p. 51), Royle stressed that 'everything begins with the telephone, with telephony and telepathy' (Royle, 2008b, p. 239). Similarly, Royle's initial claim in his own eponymous monograph on the Uncanny was that 'the uncanny entails another thinking of beginning: the beginning is already haunted. The uncanny is ghostly' (Royle, 2003, p. 1). In his account, the Uncanny could be related to epileptic crises and manifestations of insanity or other forms associated with automatic life, such as trance or hypnosis (Royle, 2003, pp. 1-2). The two contrary facets of the uncanny were examined: the terrifying or gruesome aspect related to death and corpses, cannibalism, live burial, the return of the dead, and its positive side, when it can be seen as 'something strangely beautiful, bordering on ecstasy ('too good to be true'), or eerily reminding us of something, like *déjà vu*' (Royle, 2003, p. 2). *Quilt* can be seen as a spectral cover that is belatedly grafted on to Royle's theory of telepathy and the Uncanny. It attempts to penetrate other beings' thoughts without physical interaction and puts forward a different form of

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

narrative, which can be informed by the kind of literature that Royle defined as seeking 'a place, a haunt, in which spectrality cohabits with writing, text and narrative' (Royle, 2008a, p. 1).

In his own afterword to the *Post Card* known as "Telepathy", Derrida had drawn an analogy between the telepathic process and 'other "transpositions," other "conversions" […]: for example, the analogy with "speaking and listening on the telephone"' (Derrida, 2007, p. 242), imagining a terrifying telephone, telepathic transfer, and isolated lines (Derrida, 2007, p. 242). Royle's novel also begins with an ominous phone-call: 'In the middle of the night the phone rings, over and over, but I don't hear it' (*Q,* p. 3). This is the call that the reader can hear and that the protagonist would not answer because he knows it is the telepathic phone-call of death that haunts the novel from the very beginning: 'First it is the hospital, then the police' (*Q,* p. 3). And if we believe with Derrida that ghosts do not come merely from the past but can equally haunt us from the future, we can already detect how the protagonist of *Quilt* is himself also haunted by an impending future from the very first sentence (see for instance *Q*, p. 105, quoted *infra*).

The narrative then flashes back to the day before the phone-call, the moment when the protagonist goes to help his sick father and convinces him to go to hospital. Unable to control his emotions, he feels like confessing his love to his father, with whom he has an uncannily telepathic dialogue since he is at once near him and yet separated by 'an unfathomable distance':

> — I love you, Dad, I say, now standing up between his bed and hers, holding him by the hand.
> — I love you too, mate, he says, and the tears flow from me with renewed force, impossible to restrain, strain stain in tears. My father says: don't worry, it's all right. Or he doesn't, no, not that exactly. The precise words are delivered as if from such an unfathomable distance I hardly recognise them:
> — These things happen from time to time. (*Q,* p. 7)

The reader can infer that one of these 'things', not unlike the 'dumb reality' of the Lacanian *Ding* that no language can tame and symbolize, is death itself. Two years before, death had already struck when the protagonist's mother passed away. Father and son part only for the night with the hope that the next day will be better. Yet in the middle of the night, the phone rings continuously as a 'staccato punctuation to a death-sentence' (*Q,* p. 39), in an uncanny rephrasing of the novel's very beginning which sounds like a form of pathological repetition compulsion: 'It rings and rings, but I don't hear it.' (*Q,* p. 17). The next day, in a room with an empty bed, the nurse announces him that his father died in a strange accident, falling from his bed in the middle of the night. He returns to his father's house with a green bag of belongings, which represent the only clothes that are specifically identified in the novel. This catalogue gives him an uncanny feeling and

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

prompt him to wonder why some items of clothing 'merit capital letters and others not' (*Q*, p. 23):

> I see someone at the hospital has written on a slip of paper the date, his name, the letters R.I.P. and a list of contents, duly signed:
> 1 pair slippers
> 5 pair pants
> 1 pair pyjamas
> 1 vest
> 1 Belt
> 1 jacket
> 2 Hankies
> 2 Jumpers
> 1 Polo Shirt
> 1 Pair trousers (*Q*, p. 23)

After his father's demise, the bereaved son is left with a sense of loneliness and melancholy he will never get over. Obliged to prepare the house for the reception in his father's memory, he sorts out the remnants of his parent's life with his partner for a whole fortnight. The hardest task is to take care of the tank of rays his father had bought after the loss of his wife. As suggested in *Veering*, a critical study which Royle was writing at the same time as *Quilt*, published one year later, the readers were going to 'encounter many creatures veering' (Royle, 2011, p. 3). In *Quilt* the narrator at some point is 'veering about on the net' (*Q*, p. 113) and fish veer all over the house in huge tanks; bought in memory of the dead mother and father, they become a work of mourning that keeps nourishing the protagonist's melancholia. The monomaniacal urge to take care of the fish becomes a symptom of this devouring melancholia and it will emerge as the hero's only preoccupation. The manta, 'meaning "blanket" or "cloak"', 'first used to designate the rays now linked with that name [and] which 'appears to have been originally used interchangeably with "quilt"' (*Q*, pp. 118-19), looks like a sort of huge mantle that will eventually shroud everything. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes the ray as follows:

> Rays are distinguished from sharks by a flattened, disklike body, with the five gill openings and the mouth generally located on the underside. Rays are further distinguished from sharks by their greatly enlarged, winglike pectoral fins, which extend forward along the sides of the head above the gill openings. […] The ray's tail is generally long and slender and in many species bears one or more sharp, saw-edged, venomous spines that can be used to inflict painful wounds. (*The Encyclopaedia Britannica* , s. v. 'ray')

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

According to psychologists, there are several ways to escape melancholia, from conformism to daydreaming or eccentricity and general indifference, which becomes a kind of regressive moral insanity. In the grip of emotions, the protagonist's rational thinking is at first replaced by 'queerness' (see *Q*, p. 159: '*Quilt*'s a queer word'): embarking on the quirky project of building a bigger tank for his father's four *Potamotrygon motoro* freshwater stingrays bought from South America: Taylor, Audrey, Hilary and Mallarmé. With the help of his partner, he converts the former dining room into a pool filled with 2,078 gallons of water, a habitat meant to protect the fish. The aquarium, occupying most of the room, with some space left to access the kitchen, the drawing room and the staircase to the upper floor, makes it patent 'for at least a handful of guests' that 'the gangways around the pool are like the space in the earth around a coffin' (*Q*, p. 68). Indeed, the aquarium, a work of mourning, looks like a cryptic space doubling up as a sepulchre (see Derrida, 1986, xxi) and testifying to a 'contract with the dead' (Derrida, 1986, xxi) that the protagonist (a cryptophore who shuns reality) signed. 'The cryptophore', Derrida observes, 'engages itself toward the dead, grants the dead, as collateral, a mortgage within itself, a pledge within the body, a cystic pocket both visible (blatant) and secret, the spot where a thanato-poetic pleasure can always catch fire again' (Derrida, 1986, xxi). As Derrida further notes, in a passage which is presciently consonant with the protagonist's inheriting his father's property whose true ownership however soon devolves to the fish in 'unhomely' (*unheimlich*) fashion,

> the crypt is enclosed within the self, but as a foreign place, prohibited, excluded. The self is not the proprietor of what he is guarding. He makes the rounds like a proprietor, but only the rounds. He turns around and around, and in particular he uses all his knowledge of the grounds to turn visitors away. (Derrida, 1986, xxxv)

Just as the stingrays can inflict wounds, the novel too, in its urgency to mimic the real, can goad or 'sting' as it 'makes trouble in and with language' ('Afterword', *Q,* p.155). Attempting what Derrida called 'the impossible: to grasp through language the very source' from which it 'emanates' (Derrida, 1986, xxxiii), Royle's protagonist devises a language with which he populates his crypt. Here words are buried alive, their purely communicative function being deadened. Speaking of the language of the crypt, Derrida showed that words 'mark, on the very spot where they are buried alive "preserved", the fact that the desire was in a way satisfied, that the pleasurable fulfilment *did take place*' (Derrida, 1986, xxxvi).

Monomania engulfs the main character into madness and hallucination the moment the crypt starts to crumble and the dead return, the moment the phantom intrudes and fissures further the protagonist's sense of reality. He describes the evanescent apparition of his mother, who died two years before her husband. It is thus the protagonist's mother, rather than his recently dead father, who hauntingly

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

returns from the deceased, since the fish his father bought were in her memory. Sarah Kofman claimed that, in Freud's work, the 'woman functions as privileged trope for the uncanniness of unity and loss, of independent identity and self-dissolution, of the pleasure of the body and its decay' (Kofman, 1991, p. 56). Likewise, in her analysis of Freud's 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', Elizabeth Bronfen connected femininity with 'the need to acknowledge mortality' (Bronfen, 1992, p. 55). Moreover, it was Kofman's contention that the death drive had to be understood in terms of the way 'the forbidden mother' is internalized, an idea shared by Royle himself in *The Uncanny*, for whom 'the death drive has to do with the figure of woman' (Royle, 2003, p. 87).

In a collection of obituary speeches and essays aptly titled *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida was groping for a language in which to speak to the dead, of the dead and that the dead could use to speak to us. According to Davis, Derrida believed that 'to let the dead speak requires a self-probing, multi-layered textuality which both strains to give voice to the dead other and remains maximally lucid in the face of the impossibility of the endeavour' (Davis, 2007, p. 138). Royle's novel mirrors Derrida's quest and the narrator finds a way to speak to the dead. Sat at the kitchen table, driven by death, the figure of the mother is however alive and kicking, smoking a cigarette, as she used to in her youth. Almost annoyed that her husband passed away, she does not remember that she died physically after she had completely lost her senses and memory. Her voice permeates the text as an outer-world, surreal shroud:

> – *Alzheimer's*? she says, quizzically. That's an invention, dear boy, not my bag at all. Of course it has currency, as you quaintly call it. Don't get me onto currents. I lost my marbles. To each her own. I'm losing my marbles I said to you, I'm sure you remember (at which you nod). (*Q*, p. 101)

The hero has seen Death and, spectrally, 'the very anachronicity' of the word Alzheimer that produces 'the future it traces' (*Q*, p. 105). Shocked and unable to recover from this delirium, the protagonist of *Quilt* continues conversing with her, in a sequence where the referential fluctuations of personal pronouns betray the irreversible process of the protagonist's unhinging:

> – The last time I saw you, you whisper at her ear, a weightless wisp of her dead grey hair caressing your cheek, was two and a half years ago and you didn't recognise me. You were in a care home, past caring home. For months already you were powerless of speech, incontinent, reduced to liquid foods, unable to follow even fragments of conversation. (*Q*, pp. 101-102)

Such an encounter with Death in the maternal figure as an innocent little girl with blue eyes looking at him 'in complete possession of her senses' leaves the hero 'scarcely conscious' that they are 'standing embracing one another' and then that

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

he is left alone on the floor. 'The death drive is demonic and diabolical' (Royle, 2003, p. 88), Royle warned us in *The Uncanny* and as Freud was aware in the Arabic and Hebrew connotations of the word (see *supra*). After the ghost vanishes, the hero is left ravished by his own phantasies and he describes his behaviour as that of a neurotic unable to come to terms with reality, drawing the reader's attention towards his psychoneurotic symptoms. Explaining Freud's thoughts that margins between Life and Death are shadowy, Royle asserted that 'boundaries between sentences are at best shadowy and vague' and that 'the boundaries between clauses need not be claustrophobic (for surely that comma after Death is a charming superfluity, flourishing symptom and symptomatic flourish of a literary claustrophilia)' (Royle, 2003, p. 146). This is the feeling one gets when reading the radiography of the hero's claustrophobic encounter with death; he seems to undergo a death of his own, after lying in the crypt with his mother:

> I have met myself and my mouth is full of the taste of blood. I've bitten my tongue, I realise, coming round, and I see no sign of her or of the paper, the coffee mug, cigarettes or ashtray, not even a whiff of tobacco smoke remaining. I take a shower and feel cold, as if I'm dead myself, like Clarence: as if I were drowned. (*Q*, pp. 105-106)

In the light of Abraham and Torok's 'partitions of the crypt', Derrida stated in "Fors" that 'the cryptic fortress' can provoke a symbolic break, a fracture that will arrange 'internal (intrasymbolic) partitions, cavities, corridors, niches, zigzag labyrinths, and craggy fortifications' (Derrida, 1986, xx). In restructuring the inner spaces of the parental house, the protagonist has breached a corridor into the other world and his compelling insanity is connected to his desire to learn about the fantasies that dissolve his reality. The terrible hallucinations cause his partner to worry and advise him repeatedly to go to a doctor, yet he busies himself more frantically with a 'new project' (*Q*, p. 112), bearing on a huge manta ray that he had seen in a picture and that reminded him of 'the forbidden photograph in Barthes' (*Q*, p. 113), an allusion to the withheld, 'essential' Winter Garden photograph of Barthes's mother in *Camera Lucida*. The picture would reveal a dead manta ray 'yanked up on a crane', measuring seven metres and weighing eight tons (*Q*, p. 113). The giant creature in the photograph is the symbolic quilt that will eventually ensnare the protagonist's psyche; killed by hunters, and surrounded by 'strings, ropes, lines', shot twenty or thirty times, it seems to have 'caught its hunters rather than vice versa' (*Q*, p. 113) as much as it captivates the protagonist and captures his imagination. The doubly uncanny, death-like threat of photography was also evoked by Barthes in his discussion of the '*eidolon* emitted by the object', which he called the *Spectrum* 'because this word retains, through its root, a relation to "spectacle" and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the re-turn of the dead' (Barthes, 1981, p. 9).

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

Since the photograph reveals the 'terrible', the protagonist would rather protect his lover ('I *don't* want you to see this'; *Q*, p. 113). This 'terrible' can be aligned with what Maurice Blanchot described as the look that Orpheus saw in Eurydice before she vanished forever, the look that can neutralize, 'seize' and put 'to death, and to the unmeasured passion' that makes Orpheus 'infinitely dead' (Blanchot, 1993, p. 184). It is the look that the main character in Blanchot's *récit Death Sentence* had seen in his lover when she returned from the underworld. Yet this is a look about which writers should not speak, which photographers should not catch, because it is the crossing of the uncrossable: '[…] a second afterwards, perhaps two, they [her eyelids] opened abruptly and they opened to reveal something terrible which I will not talk about, the most terrible look which a living being can receive […]' (Blanchot, 1988, p. 20). This look is so ineffable that, in Derrida's terms, it is 'unnarratable' and 'forbidden': 'That which forbids (that which is forbidden) happens, comes about, without attaining, without happening in or to, the *récit*' (Derrida, 2011, p. 155). In *Quilt*, since while being hunted the manta gave birth to the baby manta that the captain holds in his hand, the protagonist equates the manta ray's eye with 'the mother's eye' that 'is looking at you, just as though it were alive' (*Q*, p. 114), a vision which is reminiscent of another lethal female gaze, Medusa's death-like stare. His partner compares his story to something she has read about hypnosis, disclosing that 'a dead eye in a photo might be a *trompe l'oeil* too' (*Q*, p. 114). She does not realize that she speaks to somebody who saw Death, yet she at least understands that he cannot be left alone anymore:

> [T]he horrifying conviction comes when he tells me about some writing project he's begun elaborating and proceeds to read it aloud to me over the phone. It is a work of lexicography devoted to the buried life of anagrams and homophones, each word with its own idiosyncratic definition, a dictionaray, yes, as he is pleased to declare: the world's first English dictionaray. It would be a verbal laboratory, a dictionary testamentary to the way the ray leaves its mark in everyday language, a vocabulary that might constitute a new species of bestiary, and generate an altogether other estuary English. (*Q,* p. 21)

Here we need to invoke against Royle's spectral language and array of words another spectre that Werner Hamacher summons in 'Lingua Amissa,' the ghost of Marx for whom '[c]loth speaks.' For Hamacher Marx spoke 'the language of cloth,' that is to say, he used 'two languages: the language in which the cloth expresses itself, weaves itself and joins with comparable fabrics, and another language which speaks *about* and *beyond* that cloth-language, loosens its weave, analyzes its relation to other, loosened weavings, entangling it in another categorial warp' (Hamacher, 2008, p.168). In Royle's *text*, it is not the manta-as-mantle or cloth per se that speaks but the title's polysemous quilt, weaving two languages and

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

making them overlap: on the one hand, the language of the uncanny that weaves the novel's spectral idiom, on the other, the 'patching' of a twenty-one page long excursus or 'dictionaray' into the body of the text. *Quilt* steers the reader toward new horizons of novel-writing through its unfamiliar, meandering twists and turns of language since, as Royle states in his 'post-script', 'the novel has to resist and twist, accommodate and diverge' ('Afterword,' *Q,* p. 157). Some sentences become uncannily longer as the hero's melancholia turns into monomania, that form of partial insanity categorized by the insistence of an *idée fixe* taking control of the diseased mind. And if we go along with Foucault's view that language is 'the first and last structure of madness, its constituent form', we can understand how the protagonist's language, with all its 'cycles,' unveils and 'articulates' the nature of his delirium (see Foucault, 1988, p. 100). Observing some of the protagonist's sprawling syntactic structures (which are themselves huge mantas that threaten to engulf a whole page), we are pulled into the reticular ways in which they concentrate on matters uncovering the object of the character's delusion and take the shape of an 'oneiric' world of phantasy analogous to dreaming:

> Watching is also to be watched, the singular oddity of bearing witness to these creatures sometimes buried and virtually out of sight in the substrate, eyes nonetheless kept free, pricked up like cats' ears, at attention in the quartz sand, again and again picked out after the event the realisation of another creature realising you, and at other times as if electrically surging, a trained-up veritable school of four, unforeseeably together, one by one or in ones and twos, ghost birds flapping up through the water, plapping at the surface and looking, yes, from the wings, in alary formation, indisputably on the watch at you, at where you are if not *at* you the body rising through the water seen in its pulsing forcing resurrecting swoop, showing its creamy white underside, the gill slits and mouth organized as a smile returning to the world dolphin-like yet phantasmic, this rearing up of a living white sheet of ventral alien face, then the superbly fickle jilting gesture, surfacing or retreating the flip and show of the dorsal view, the waving through the water of backs dark and gorgeous spotted, another world of eyes, the ocellate gliding, neither peacock, leopard, butterfly nor chameleon, but *motoro*, the rays all four the same variant or morph, name unknown. (*Q*, pp. 80-81)

Royle's language is tensed like a deadly shroud; it belongs to ghosts, the dead, the entombed, it utters untold traumas and becomes a means of gauging the hero's monomania. The syntax loosens up as sentences are warped out of the customary shapes and rules of English; it is as if the aqueous medium of the fish tanks had pervaded the linguistic medium of the text. Psychologists have defined monomania as hinging on the alleged cowardice to face the real world outside and this is precisely what the hero does: he leaves the house only to search for supplies and materials for the new fish tank. As he gradually absconds from the house (of the text), the protagonist defaults as a narrator and his partner is obliged to take

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

responsibility for the narrative. The hero's progressive madness and cover-ups of reality is compared by his partner to items of clothing that completely cover the character's existence: 'It is a question of veils, capes, sheets, shrouds, cloaks, blanket, quilts, mantles' (*Q*, p. 117).

A whole disquisition on rays had arrested the reader's attention up to the moment when it culminates in a fully-fledged mini-'dictionaray' of words incorporating and encrypting the phonemic sequence in the fish's name. The four rays that the reader had encountered at the beginning of the novel got new companions, twelve additional eagle rays (*Rhinoptera bonasus*), all carrying the same literal or phonetic assemblage of the word 'ray' in their names: Larry, Gary, Harry, Andrea, Lorraine, Hardy, Cary, Marty Barry, Bryan, Ryan, Raymond; they inhabit the drawing room refurnished with a circular couch which is 'surrounded from floor to ceiling by water' (*Q*, p. 146).

The 'dictionaray' lists the 'raw' lexemes containing the letters of the alphabet spread out to convey the sprawling shape of a ray, the fish that takes centre stage (or 'centre page') in *Quilt*. The 'dictionaray' is born from what Christine Berthin called, in a study on the melancholy of the crypt, 'a fantasy of incorporation'. In the analysis of the omission of the cherished dead, Berthin alleged that,

> [u]nable to let go of the loved object, the melancholic resorts to a fantasy: the object is literally incorporated in the subject, lodged in a false unconscious, kept away from indiscreet eyes. Incorporation de-metaphorizes language and takes introjection at face value: if to mourn is to digest or swallow up the loss in Abraham and Torok's phrase, incorporation in return ingests and swallows the object itself. (Berthin, 2010, p. 95)

The 'dictionaray' swallows ('quilts') not only the phonemes of 'ray' but also the cherished dead, the protagonist's mother after whose death the rays started to invade the house. It breaks words apart, distorts and twists meanings. It accommodates 'cryptonyms', to make use of Abraham and Torok's terminology, those phonemic presences of rays which, while rerouting words, have a soothing effect on their ad-hoc creator. It tranquilizes the mind and renders the body quiescent, as the one at the other end thinks that the protagonist is merely reading an extract from a work he has written, for instance:

> Ranarian
> Rabies
> Restrain
> Race
> Racy
> Rabbity
> Radiate

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

> Radiator
> Radiant
> Raise
> Raven
> Rayon
> Radically
> Rationally (*Q,* pp. 136-137)

If, according to Berthin, 'taking literally what mourning does figuratively, the melancholic obtains nourishment not from words but from an imaginary object incorporated within the Self' (Berthin, 2010, p. 95), we could say that the protagonist is nourished by the object incorporated within the words he pronounces, which also figure the abstraction of his dead mother. What the female partner become narrator – who has been taking centre stage more and more as the protagonist has increasingly retreated from reality – fails to understand is that he puts Death at bay or, to extrapolate further from Berthin, '[f]eelings of affection are absorbed in the object of affection' (Berthin, 2010, p. 96). The dictionary is the end result of such feelings; it is the object, made up of floating dead signifiers. It incorporates pieces of rays' corpses and eventually of his mother's body, whose death is thus redeemed and denied.

The protagonist's incoherence alerts the female narrator to the conviction that he can no longer be left alone as his discourse is marked by aposiopoesis, the figure of speech that deliberately breaks off sentences – and foretells of the discontinued last phone-call. Still on the (life, phone, fishing?) line, she tells him she is coming:

> It wasn't the best line. I remember saying it's not the best line and he thought I said best man. And at another moment he talked of a 'real surprise', so I thought, but actually it was, as he had to clarify, 'getting ray supplies'. Then he said, if I heard correctly, that he was 'after life' or 'after my life' or 'more life': the reception was very poor. The line went dead, or possibly he hung up. (*Q,* p. 144)

The receiver falls to the ground. She calls back but gets no answer. From dead language to a language with the dead, about the dead, for the dead, the reader is informed that 'the line went dead'.

The protagonist has left the door of his novel-phone booth open, but he is nowhere to be found. An ending hard to interpret both satisfies and frustrates the desire for narrative closure, since, not unlike Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the protagonist is now 'refined out of existence' (Joyce, 1964, p. 93), with 'no sign of anything anywhere' (*Q*, p. 149; final words of the novel). Relieved of his body, he becomes a tenuous apparition in an ethereal realm, an immaterial

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

entity, or, in Derridean terms, he is inhabited and invaded by his own spectrality (see Derrida, 1994, p. 134).

The man who made the phone-call (the former narrator) is no longer part of the novel, but he continues to call, even in the absence of words. A disembodied spectre, he is what Blanchot might call a body without a body. The house bears many traces of the departed owner who still haunts it *in absentia*. Neither 'someone', nor 'something', to make use of Derrida's definition of the spectre (see Derrida, 1994, p. 6), the manta that dwells in the 'translucent cave', once the space of the bedroom and the en-suite bathroom of the protagonist's parents, becomes 'the strangest thing' that the narrator had ever seen in a house. The manta sees the narrator before she can see it, showing the spectre's eternal vantage point (the one with what Derrida called a 'visor effect', therefore the position of being always behind) over those it haunts. In his analysis of *Hamlet* in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida showed that the ghost comes back in its armour, having both the former king's helmet and visor. Those who see the ghost cannot make out what its face looks like behind the visor, yet the ghost can always see the ones it haunts or, as Derrida put it, '[f]rom the other side of the eye visor effect, it looks at us even before we see *it* or even before we see period. We feel ourselves observed, sometimes under surveillance by it even before any apparition' (Derrida, 1994, p. 101). Not quite as armoured as Hamlet Senior's ghost, each of the fishy denizens of the giant aquarium is gladiatorially described as, among other appearances, 'a cloud-white cruise missile, a disembodied flamboyant cuff brandishing a rapier' (*Q*, p. 147).

Such a superior position is also the perspective of the psychoanalyst, who can always observe the patient's reactions without being seen by the latter. From this position of superiority, the narrator is being observed by a huge manta ray, the ghost of 'the forbidden photograph [of the mother] in Barthes' that the protagonist identifies as 'the puncturation of the punctum' (*Q*, p. 113), an oblique recall of the *sting*ray since Barthes had glossed the *punctum* of photography, the 'poignant' 'second element which will disturb the *studium*', as 'sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a [Mallarméan] cast of the dice' (Barthes, 1981, p. 27, insertion mine). In spite of being absent in all the pictures included in *Camera Lucida*, the mother is, as Berthin put it, 'the omnipresent "reference" behind all the images that arrest the son's eye and wound him, ever so gently. The paradox of the punctum lies in its metonymical force and its semiotic power: the punctum is the phantom, the shadow alongside the thing represented' (Berthin, 2010, p. 138).

A novel creature is present to haunt the female narrator-partner, giving her 'the most uncanny thing of all': the sensation of being buried alive in a manta cave, or under a manta cape 'black as night', channelling excessive and incongruous impulses: 'It seemed, indeed, bigger than the house, arching like a rainbow, majestically large, its great wings black and thin, conforming exactly with that cloak concealing nothing that its name implies' (*Q,* p. 148). If a crypt is meant to disguise

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

and hide a body (see Derrida, 1986, xvi), we may infer that the inner self of the protagonist has eventually been incorporated into the crypt hidden behind the quilt-like movements of the manta ray in its 'fantasmatic, cryptofantasmatic' form (see Derrida, 1986, xix). The ghost has been released in the (dis)guise of the traumatic *punctum* of the manta ray, whose sinuous jolts inscribe the text on the threshold of 'a new literature [that] does something new with people', with 'different slownesses and spectralities' (*Q*, p. 82).

Bibliography

Abraham, Nicolas, and Maria Torok, 1986, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy,* trans. Nicholas Rand, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Barthes, Roland, 1981, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang.

Berthin, Christine, 2010, *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts,* New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Blanchot, Maurice, 1988, *Death Sentence*, trans. Lydia Davis, Barrytown, New York, Station Hill Press.

Blanchot, Maurice, 1993, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.

Bronfen, Elizabeth, 1992, 'The Death Drive (Freud)', in Wright (ed.), pp. 52-57.

Davis, Colin, 2007, *Haunted Subjects, Deconstruction: Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead,* New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Derrida, Jacques, 1986, '*Fors:* The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok', trans. by Barbara Johnson, in Abraham and Torok, pp. xi- xlviii.

Derrida, Jacques, 1987, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, Chicago University Press.

Derrida, Jacques, 1994, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, with an Introduction by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, New York and London, Routledge.

Derrida, Jacques, 2001, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press.

Derrida, Jacques, 2007, 'Telepathy', trans. Nicholas Royle, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, vol. 1, Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp. 226-61.

Derrida, Jacques, *Parages*, ed. John P. Leavey, trans. Tom Conley, James Hulbert, John P. Leavey, and Avital Ronell, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011.

Derrida, Jacques, 2013, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', trans. François Raffoul, in Mitchell and Slote (eds.), pp. 41-86.

Foucault, Michel, 1988, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* trans. Richard Howard, New York and Toronto, Random House.

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)

Freud, Sigmund, 1920, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, vol. XIV (1914-1916), London, The Hogarth Press.

Freud, Sigmund, 1955, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, vol. XVII (1917-1919), London, The Hogarth Press.

Hamacher, Werner, 2008, 'Lingua Amissa: The Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida's *Specters of Marx*', in Sprinker (ed.), pp. 168-212.

Heidegger, Martin, 1966, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Albany, SUNY Press.

Ionescu, Arleen, 2014, '"Novel" Reality Calling and Telepathy in Nicholas Royle's *Quilt*', in *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 98-115.

Joyce, James, 1964, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson, New York, Viking.

Kofman, Sarah, 1991, *Freud and Fiction*, trans. Sarah Wykes, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Logan, Marie-Rose, 1982, 'Texte, Textus, Hyphos', in *L'esprit créateur*, vol. XXII, no. 1, pp. 69-78.

Mitchell, Andrew J., and Sam Slote (eds), 2013, *Derrida and Joyce: Texts and Contexts*, Albany, SUNY Press.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel, 2001, *Jacques Lacan: Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Literature,* New York, Palgrave.

Royle, Nicholas, 1991, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind,* Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Royle, Nicholas, 2003, *The Uncanny,* Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press.

Royle, Nicholas, 2008a, 'Clipping', in *Forum: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts,* vol. 7, pp. 1-6, available at http://www.forumjournal.org/site/issue/07, on 30 May 2015.

Royle, Nicholas, 2008b, 'Ouijamiflip', in *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 235-56.

Royle, Nicholas, 2010, *Quilt*, Brighton, Myriad Editions.

Royle, Nicholas, 2011, *Veering: A Theory of Literature (The Frontiers of Theory)*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

Sprinker, Michael (ed.), 2008, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, London and New York, Verso.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica, available at http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/492359/ray, on 29 May 2015.

Wright, Elizabeth (ed.), 1992, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*, Cambridge, Mass and Oxford, Blackwell.

BDD-A21040 © 2015 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:07 UTC)