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ABSTRACT

The paper dilates upon the uncanny similitude of the experience of mourning paternal death that Royle's novel *Quilt* anticipated for the author.

KEYWORDS *Quilt*; manta ray; mourning; autobiography; death; uncanny; reality literature

A state of apprehension predating my father's death by what somehow turned out to be eleven years, and for which there must be a specific tense, most likely the future perfect – the 'perfect' designation especially jarring in this light – characterised the volleys of concentration solicited when reading the softly spoken extensions of mourning in *Quilt*.¹ *Déjà vu* – the ironically unspoken term in Sigmund Freud's essay on 'The Uncanny' as Nicholas Royle remarked elsewhere – now free ranging in excess of the influx of the mere past into the ostensible present, led me to put the book down.² Too close to home, then: thirteen years after its publication in 2010, I read it again.

Is there any house that does not double the house? Can 'the house' stand intact as the scene of originary phantasy? The intrauterine waters to which we all wish to return lap against not only an ontogenetic maternal origin tale but a phylogenetic one of life in the seas in Sándor Ferenczi's speculative 'thalassal trend'.³ This singular not singular domicile has bothered me the whole time. How to put a foot down when you have been forewarned of the molluscular space underneath your 'descending shoe'?⁴

Writing in these environs, while the other place recedes into disrepair destined for a developer, portals spring up all over the shop. I can't predict them. The last transposition brought an inexplicably large photograph of my paternal great-grandmother (I think) into my house, not to lounge in the same place above the mantelpiece in a room that would then edge closer

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towards a mausoleum, and I would sit in place of the dead forever turning the television up. Rather, it found a spot at the top of the stairs in lieu of the window in the other house. Not until it was in place in this place did I notice the surface suddenly rippling. In the play of light moving across east and west through the hallway connecting bedrooms, that unnamed figure materialised and dematerialised: the cylinder glass announced its capacity to modulate reflections newly activating an otherwise incidental space.

Guppies; minnows; an Angel fish for sure. Something billowing black. Was it Phantom Tetra? No, Black Mollies. Common mollies, commonplace. Where, *what?* even, was that room it sat within, was housed within, that portal rectangle truly a horse of a different colour given that the nominal television set bulged in another corner fuzzing in black and white. The picture that tanks here, never settling in place, not dropping anchor, glints in the corners of attention. Not categorically coming to light, but flickering in the half-light, black light, ultraviolet, 'quicker than a ray of light'.⁵ That exorbitant and most specific and tailor-made aquarium keeps opening onto a banal scene that must have been. There is no lid on it.

That place cannot possibly have housed manta rays, the requirements for which – detailed at an apparently assiduous and yet hyperbolic length in *Quilt* – incorporate design materials, filtration equipment, lighting, food and gravel as if the elementary demand for scale that few public aquariums can square was nothing but a trifle. It is a persistent feature of both *Quilt* and Royle's work at large to combine a zoographical fealty with utter eccentricity. While it is virtually raining cats and dogs in the strange state of affairs that is the 'humanities' today, his 'bestiary' and the environmental attention consequently reoriented remains singular.⁶ This ray, that mole, and the other mollusc fly against more orthodox allegorical cloth trained to constrain animal figures into anthropomorphic morality lessons. In advance of wider recognition that deconstruction had always provoked 'the animal question', Royle's 1995 insight that 'there is nothing essentially human about language – that the track or trace is in a sense as much molluscos as human' somehow stuck with me, glutinously biding its time.⁷ That would be the 'massively unavoidable' time to which he once held Jacques Derrida to account, citing the occasion in *Spectres of Marx* mourning the poverty of democracy when the latter parenthetically broached the question of the animal only to defer it.⁸ All impossibility notwithstanding, mantas yet 'flap' in what feels like the memory of my childhood house manifesting when reading in dizzying retrospect the 'excarnation' that is that novel (if novel it be).⁹

'Wherever some autobiographical play is being enacted there has to be a *psyché*', Derrida happened to say in the nick of the massively unavoidable time that was the 1997 Cérisy-la-Salle *décade* on *L'Animal*

autobiographique.¹⁰ The mirror so invoked is the full-length dressing room technology, the one positioned to reflect your all, your naked truth, your top to tail, in circumvention of any editorial effrontery. Yet the capacity for such visual, conceptual and psychic revelation is 'untenable', Derrida reminds us, since all such autobiographical gestures are constitutively prone to the dehiscence of an auto-immune response.¹¹ Thus an attempt such as that of Lacanian psychoanalysis to rescue the psyche amplified in the *psyché* through recourse to an exclusively human structure of misrecognition cannot stay the general condition that is the 'auto-affection or auto-infection as memory or archive of *the living*'.¹²

If manta rays are capable of passing the mirror recognition test (and they are) perhaps *méconnaissance* is also a thing.¹³

More directly, more literally, more evidentially comparable would be the 'forsaken ghost of the garden' (forsaken for some, friendly for others of course).¹⁴ There is a certain state of dereliction, of experiencing parental decline, likely known to many readers. Yet this unfathomable familiarity, which must be some energy or force rather than a dated event, glances across surfaces, paper, glass, and flesh, nonetheless forming a delirious attachment to that 'great tank' on which he labours. There was another one – two – for certain, for real, outside on the grass in some relatively recent time, arriving from nowhere, sitting there accumulating algae: 'just in case' my dead dad mutters, 'haven't decided where they're going, yet'. I dare say there is a 'ludicrously anthropomorphic ego-projective perception' at work.¹⁵ I can't figure out how to properly rein in what I wanted to address, in 2010, under the borrowed heading of 'marine correspondence'.¹⁶

Royle calls it '*reality literature*'.¹⁷ We might imagine he is simply under a blanket – the 'living blanket' – under a quilt, with it pulled up over his head blotting everything out and that is after all one face of the grim reality of death incomprehensibly not happening and then also happening.¹⁸ She, the witnessing lover of the book, even says about the baroque transformation of the phylogenetic primal scene of his parents' bedroom that '[t]he sky had disappeared. It was a manta, the biggest ray, the strangest thing I had ever seen in a house'.¹⁹

Quilt sets in play such an intense sense of what happens when they start losing their marbles and then keep on losing them and all the sentences and types of sentences change. 'Rays to the ground' he says.²⁰ All the 'when' questions are moored early on, and then the question form itself provokes too much trouble, too much temporal floundering along with the feeling of accusation, so you just chat and sometimes they join in with the electric shock of a decision regarding what you are rambling on about.

Perhaps it is the 'dictionaray' that lights the exit signs? There is an exigency to depart from the very word 'Alzheimer's'.²¹ The first time I danced around it and the vertiginous chasm it wrought in the ground, the

second time it was shouted during the most absurd telephone call in the world.²² No, I don't. Yes, you do. It may be that the transgenic mice now bred for life and death in a laboratory will definitively change the sentence that is its fearful prophecy. But reality literature is already at work changing holes into openings. Neatly organised words remain restless, they can always switch places and are themselves switched by places, rearranged: such is the upset afforded to the vainglorious attempt to do things with words by a text like 'Signature Event Context'.²³ It is the green light to which *Quilt* whispers encouragement, soliciting every interior – even the most minimal – to exhume its essential library. One of the places that facilitated the writing of this paper in June 2023 was a wholly unlikely private library lined with books on hydraulic engineering and marine biology in an otherwise bypassed darkened room deep within the faded splendour of an erstwhile Grand Hotel in Italy, illuminated by a single round window. The opening, this continually opening 'new species of bestiary' has some other form of relation to the work of mourning. 'The ray is at the origin' he says.²⁴ I want to account for or just allow for the articulation this other scene or other relation brings without it collapsing into either absolute disintegration or a reparation dedicated purely to rectification, to putting things back together again. As you were. Will this have been what is called *play*?²⁵

Notes

1. Nicholas Royle, *Quilt* (Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2010).
2. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 178.
3. Sándor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, trans. Henry Alden Bunker (London: Karnac, 2005).
4. Royle, *Quilt*, p. 33.
5. Madonna's single 'Ray of Light', released on Maverick Records on 27 April 1998, repeats the refrain 'And I feel like I just got home/ And I feel ... /'.
6. I have nothing against cats or dogs, figuratively or literally (if we can be sure of the difference). I merely index the 'planned obsolescence' on which Cary Wolfe remarks with acidic caution in the opening of his 'What "The Animal" Can Teach "The Anthropocene"', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 25.3 (2020), p. 131.
7. Nicholas Royle, *After Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 33.
8. Nicholas Royle, 'Mole', in Lynn Turner (ed.), *The Animal Question in Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 181. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 106.
9. Royle, *Quilt*, pp. 81, 62.
10. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 50.

11. Derrida, *Animal*, pp. 50, 47.
12. Derrida, *Animal*, p. 47, *emph. added*. See also his specific remarks on the enduring attachment to human exceptionalism in Lacan's 'mirror stage' here: pp. 120–2.
13. Among the animals now thought to have passed Gordon Gallup Jr.'s 1970 'mirror self-recognition test' number corvids, elephants, great apes, cetaceans, horses, and rays. The specular assumptions that recognition through a visual technology entail might well raise eyebrows. See Marc Bekoff, 'Awareness: Animal Reflections', *Nature*, 419.255 (2022), published 19 September 2002, accessible online: <https://www.nature.com/articles/419255a>.
14. Royle, *Quilt*.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 85. Too close to home. My chapter for *The Animal Question in Deconstruction* took an altogether different insectile path.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 153, *italics original*.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–5.
22. The first time paternal, the second time maternal, in my case.
23. Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and Brighton: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 307–30.
24. Royle, *Quilt*, p. 118.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

Disclosure statement

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