

---

## THEORISING TELEPATHY AND UNCANNY IN NICHOLAS ROYLE'S QUILT

---

**Aneesh Kumar C**

Budhanoor,Chenganoor

Kerala,India

---

### **Abstract:**

The term 'telepathy' is of quite recent origin. A few years ago it was not to be found in any of the standard dictionaries, and its use was confined to the small circle of investigators who were pursuing experiments in thought- transference, and WHO regarded the society for Psychical analysis of European country as their centre of influence .The ancient writings of India give us many instances of the effect of one mind upon another in a distance. In India, especially, has the assumption in 'thought-transference' prevailed from past times. Literature is uncanny. It is a paradoxical concept that disturbs the way we think and feel,. The uncanny has to do with a sense of strangeness, mystery of eeriness. Reading Royle's novel, we have to take the novelist at his word when he expresses the thought that the telephone can be "novel- friendly" and invites us to accept its call. Freud related the notion of uncanny to 'what is frightening', to what awakens 'dread and horror' (Freud219). 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. 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', Quilt 157).

**Keywords:** Theorizing, Telepathy, Uncanny, influence etc

The term 'telepathy' is of quite recent origin. A few years ago it was not to be found in any of the standard dictionaries, and its use was confined to the small circle of investigators who were pursuing experiments in thought-transference, and WHO regarded the society for Psychical analysis of European country as their centre of influence.Some authorities have most well-liked the term "Telaesthesia," which freely translated , means "perception by the senses at a distance"(Atkinson3). Another preferable term is "Telementation" which , freely translated means "mental action at a distance" (Atkinson 3) and the said term has met with considerable favour among scientific investigators of the subject.

'Thought-transference' isn't a brand new factor within the thought of the planet, although it may seem to the ordinary reader to be a recent discovery. Its beginning is lost in the haze of the

history of the primitive peoples of the race. The ancient writings of India give us many instances of the effect of one mind upon another in a distance. And the occult legends of alternative ancient peoples offer proof that the assumption within the result of mind upon mind at a distance was quite common. In many of the old occult writings we find traces of the almost universal belief in 'thought-transmission' and 'thought-force', and we have every reason to believe that the old alchemists were fully acquainted with the phenomena.

In India, especially, has the assumption in 'thought-transference' prevailed from past times. The English WHO lived through the nice battle in India within the last century have passed on to North American country several tales of the strange power of the native Hindus which enabled them to flash from one part of India to another the news of great battles and uprisings. It is recorded by those who passed through this great uprising that the Hindus were noticed to be agitated in a strange way about the time of the actual occurrences in so much distant elements of the land, and seemed to be fully informed regarding these occurrences, while the English were compelled to wait for days until their couriers brought them the news in the regular way.

While the latter years of the Society's existence has been devoted chiefly to AN investigation of the phenomena of 'clairvoyance', 'spirit-return', 'trance-mediumship', etc.; its first decade was almost entirely dedicated to the investigation of 'telepathy', 'thought-

transference', and similar phenomena. The early experiments of the Society are absolutely reportable, and these reports, that comprise many volumes, have given the planet a record of psychic phenomena of the best value of science.

The celebrated Sidwick experiments, conducted under the auspices of the society for Psychical Research in 1889 and 1890, excited great interest in scientific circles, and placed the subject of Telepathy upon a basis that science couldn't afford to refuse to understand.

'Telepathy' is one of the manifestations of what is generally referred to as the 'Uncanny'. When Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny" appeared in 1919, he had already made a reference to the Unheimliche, in Totem and Taboo (1912-1913a), as well as bringing up the "omnipotence of thought.". This shows that the question had interested Freud for some time.

Here there are passages on repetition compulsion as well as that foreshadow Beyond the Pleasure Principle, which was published a year later (1920g). A forum for intersecting propositions, the essay is also a compendium of references (Ernst Jentsch, Friedrich von Schiller, Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann) and yet, Freud does not reference the psychoanalytic literature on connected topics, such as Pierre Janet's déjà-vu, or Joseph Capgras's illusion of the double. The French, English, and Spanish translations of unheimlich all fail to recapitulate the principal regard to the acquainted, or family (heim, or home),

which defines and limits the notion of the uncanny.

Das Unheimliche is defined as ‘that particular variety of terror that relates to what has been known for a long time, has been for a long time.’ We are presented at once with a contradiction that analyst will nothing to alleviate since the acquainted mustn't be uncomfortable. This proposition is at the guts of Freud's ideas regarding the first pleasure- ego that coincides with the nice and rejects the dangerous. For danger is related to penetrating what's sealed, and strangeness- supported a plan analyst borrowed from Von Schilling- with the revelation of what ought to properly remain hidden because it is the bearer of transgression.

Literature is uncanny. It is a paradoxical concept that disturbs the way we think and feel. The idea of ‘keeping things the family’, ore of something that ‘runs in the family’ is at once familiar and potentially secretive or strange. As an adjective ‘familiar’ means ‘well acquainted or intimate’, ‘having a thorough knowledge’ etc; but as a noun it carriers the more unsettling, supernatural sense of ‘a spirit or demon supposed to come to a person, especially a witch, etc, at his or her call’(Eg. The demonic ‘familiar’ that is said to haunt Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre [1847]). (Bennett and Royle 34)

Here are a couple of examples of the uncanny. First: you walk into a room in a house you have never visited before and suddenly you have the sense that you have been there before and that you even seem to know what will happen next. Or, second

example: you are in some public places (a shop perhaps or a train) and you catch sight of someone whom you think looks rather disturbing, and then you realize that you have caught sight of this person reflected in a window or a mirror and that this person is yourself.

These examples could be described as so- called ‘real life’ occurrences. But are they in fact ‘real life? ‘ some times the ‘literary’ and the ‘real’ seem to merge into one another. On the one hand, uncanniness could be defined as occurring when ‘real’, everyday life suddenly takes on a disturbingly ‘literary ‘fictional’ quality. On the other hand, literature itself can be called a discourse of the uncanny (uncanny aspects of experience, thought and feeling).

For the Russian formalists, literature has to do with ‘defamiliarisation’. It makes the familiar strange; it challenges our beliefs and assumptions about the world and about the nature of ‘ reality’. Bertolt Brecht's argument that theatre should produce ‘alienation effects’ is an obvious analogy here. For Brecht , no actor is supposed to identify completely with the character he or she plays. Likewise the spectator is encouraged to feel dissociated, uneasy ,alienated. (Bennett and Royle 35)

Repetition is a key aspect of the uncanny. It involves a kind of ‘duplicity’ (both doubting and deception) within the familiar. The logic of the uncanny, whereby the familiar turns into the unfamiliar, is evident in the word ‘uncanny’ itself. ‘Uncanny’ is the opposite of ‘canny’, meaning ‘skilful’, ‘shrewd’,

'knowing' . But the word 'canny' shades into its opposite : in Scottish English in particular, 'canny' can suggest unnatural or excessive skillfulness, shrewdness, or knowing. This capacity for a word to contain or to turn into its opposite is what Freud elsewhere talks about as the 'antithetical' meanings of 'primal words'. Analysis of the word 'uncanny' is bound with an experience of the uncanny, an experience which disturbs any attempt to remain analytically detached and objective. The uncanny cannot readily be avoided or denied. The uncanny is also aligned with death. As a form of strange disruption ,questioning and uncertainty, the idea of the uncanny may be frightening, but it also continues to be an important and productive area for literary study. The uncanny is an effect. It is like a foreign body within ourselves.

Royle starts his novel *Quilt* with a phone-call: "In the middle of the night the phone rings, over and over, but I don't hear it" (3). The phone buzzes, but even if "plugged in" the system, to use a favourite phrase of Derrida's and Royle's linguistic telepathy, the first – person protagonist would not answer it ,as he knows it is the telepathic phone call of death: "First it is the hospital, then the police"(3).

Reading Royle's novel, we have to take the novelist at his word when he expresses the thought that the telephone can be "novel- friendly" and invites us to accept its call. Under the pressure of accepting his call, we are plugged in a medium that Avital Ronell defined as "somewhere between science, poesy and thinking" (Ronell 84.). Using technology, tele-

technics and the techno- mediatic, we need to accept its "many spectral effects, the new speed of apparition[...] of the simulacrum, the synthetic or prosthetic image," (Derrida 54).

In *Quilt*, death calls many times, or rather , as the narrator explains, "more times" than the people at the hospital where his father was "care to remember" (19). The protagonist is never asked whether he accepts the phone- call , a "staccato punctuation to a death-sentence"(39).Royle's character would not pick up the call: " it rings and rings, but I don't hear it"(17). The next day, when he goes to see his father, the bed is empty. The nurse pities him, offers him her support to impart the news of his father's death to anybody he thinks of calling:

There's a telephone here. If you want to call anybody, please feel free. 'call someone , yes [...] no matter, all the same, any random number, put me through, chance following the international country code, speak English, no, not a word, nary that, all awry ,telephoning home, no, never mind, already impossible, hallo, my father has died, he's gone, given the world the slip, I am sorry I can't linger, Tibet, I haven't phoned Madagascar. So many calls to make, call alarm system that is me, not in, not on, no one dead – end no, answer, not a world. I remain unmoving in my seat. (20- 21)

In his first monograph, Royle explored his fascination for the telepathic power of books and the fact that they "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 75). But in our epoch dominated by reality TV and its sensational treatment of news, he had proposed an alternative “reality literature”, which should be born from the duality between “a literary reality” and “ literature of reality” (“Afterword” to Quilt). For Royle, reality is not a summum of “ credible characters, places, experienced and events, furniture and food, sadness and street- corners, and so many other narrative details ,”(158).

As he is sorting out “ every object in the room, every item of their[his dead parents] clothing, every inch of their hair and skin” that endures scarcely longer than the time it takes to transport, a car- load of rubbish bags to the tip” (44), the novel’s main character, sometimes first – person narrator , a son looking for a father, wonders what to do : destroy or retain? (43) What does Quilt demolish? What does it retain? It destroys what could correspond to the superficial construction of reality by ‘reality TV’, the straightforward recounting of events that have occurred. Opposed to the rampant practice of television shows that trivialize the real by reducing it to ‘live’, superficial facts (important as they may be), “reality literature” aspires to a ‘deeper’ reality whose virtual possibilities , based on telepathy, spectrality and uncanniness, can be re(dis)covered via another kind of fictional language and narration.”( Joyce 93)

The house has its own signature that the protagonist loves: it is “ an olfactory imprint different from anything else in the world, irreproducible and

irreplaceable” (43). It needs to be kept, to be preserved, bottled and sold back to his mournful self” on a demented black-market of grief” (44). This reality is more profound, and it opens up the possibility of ghosts and telepathic communication. For Royle in “clipping”, the erawe are living in is that of haunting:”we find ourselves engaging with the “ethics of the spectral text”, “spectral and textual haunting”,and “ghostly narrative”(as distinct from narrative about the ghostly)” (Royle 1). Such a phrase awould call to mind “disorder” and it would “seek a place, a haunt, in which spectrality cohabits with writing, text and narrative” (Royle 1)

Performing a backward reading, from the “afterward” to the novel, one can see that Royle believes in in deconstruction and that ‘deconstruction must have the afterword that it cannot have’. The “Afterward” explains that the novel can be interpreted “ as a kind of weird telephone exchange” in an age when mobile phones speed up life and communication (“Afterward” in Quilt, 157). For Royle, mobile phones have the role of anticipating events and make postponement more complex (“Afterward” in Quilt,156).

In Quilt, when his father dies, after the protagonist sorts out his father’s possessions, he takes care of his fish (the rays). He embarks on an eccentric project of building a bigger tank for his father’s Potamotrygon motoro freshwater stingrays: Taylor, Audrey, Hilary and Mallarme. His aunt has told him that that the house cannot be sold him that the house cannot be sold for a good price with

that “kerplomp in the middle of it” (70). At his father’s funeral, the protagonist warns the other mourners in the house: “These rays have not had their stings removed and this is not, I repeat, not a touchpool”(73). At this point he starts making it bigger and Royle seems to warn his reader that his novel is not “a touchpool”. As the rays can sting badly, in its urgency of the real, the novel is an attempt to revolutionize linguistics, since it “makes trouble in and with language” (Afterward” in Quilt, 155). Hence the language that people know well may appear as a foreign language.

Royle reroutes the reader to new horizons of novel writing through language as he believes that “the novel has to resist and twist, accommodate and diverge” (“Afterward” in Quilt, 157).

The novel operates, as Nicholas Royle admits in his Afterword, “at top speed, gone before [one] can say”. It becomes the space of ‘quilting’ thinking. Examining Derrida’s “Che cos’ è la poesia?” in his text “Ouijamiflip”, Royle called it “hydrapoetics” or “hydrapoematics” (Royle 244). With oui-jamiflip, Royle “lost touch”, “flipped”, through telepathy and telepassion (Royle 247). Quite strangely Royle’s novel is itself a hydrapoetics that tantalizes the reader with its immobility. The immobility of the text is the immobility of the rays: “The ray is stationary even when it moves, shooting through water at unnerving speed, propelled by the pectoral fins that form the hem of the body, close to complete circularity, as the axis of the body remains unflinching” (39).

The four rays that the reader came across at the beginning of the novel become ray-ghosts and give birth to new ghosts: twelve more companions, Eagle rays (*Rhinoptera bonasus*), all with the ‘ray’ sequence, either graphically or phonetically: Larry, Gary, Harry, Andrea, Lorraine, Hardy, Cary, Marty Barry, Bryan, Ryan, Raymond. They inhabit the drawing room that the female narrator discovers in the absence of her partner, refurbished, having in the middle a circular couch, “surrounded from floor to ceiling by water”(146). They seem “underwater birds in phantom aviary”(147). When moving, they make the huge tank shift. The female narrator “loses all sense” of her elements in front of the new world her lover had created: “a world of braking and accelerating, altering shapes and directions, a busy submarine airport, [...] they looked like water-filled white paper bags, the next they were dreaming and slow-winged as flamingos, flapping up into the ether”(147). The reader starts losing any sense of plot and language. The dictionary is as out of place in the novel as the aquaria are in the house.

The protagonist has left the door of his novel – phone booth open, but did not come back. Similarly to Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he is “passing out of existence”(Joyce 93). From this moment on, the male character is relieved of his body, he becomes an apparition of the ethereal and the immaterial, or, in Derridean terms, he is inhabited and invaded by his own spectre (Derrida 134).

Royle's "Afterword" is a sort of quilt with "pockets of voices, feelings and thoughts" ("Afterword" in *Quilt*, 159), his novel might be regarded as an "Afterward" to Derrida's work, explained in another "Afterword". Royle's protagonist chats with his father about trivial things without realizing it is their last moment together. He feels the need to tell his father that his affection for him has not changed with the years as he grew up. No longer a child needing his father's protection, he can see that his aged father is the one who can no longer take care of himself and now needs his help (Barthes 72). He cannot help his emotions:

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 strain 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 (7)

Freud related the notion of uncanny to 'what is frightening', to what awakens 'dread and horror' (Freud 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*. The English definition of *unheimlich*, as revealed by the dictionaries of Lucas, Bellows, Flugel 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 *inquietant, sinister, lugubre, mal a son aise*, and Spanish as *sospechoso, de mal agüero, lugubre, 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 'demonic' 'gruesome' (Freud 246). Apparent death and the re-animation of the dead were the "most uncanny themes" (Freud 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.

'Telepathy' and '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" ('Afterword', *Quilt* 158). Telepathy and the 'Uncanny' have also been the hallmark 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 75). Royle's initial claim in his own eponymous monograph on the 'Uncanny' was that "the uncanny" could be related to epileptic crises and

manifestations of insanity or other forms associated with automatic life, such a trance or hypnosis (Royle 1-2)

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’, Quilt 157). Some sentences become uncannily longer as the hero’s melancholia turns into monomania, that form of partial insanity categorised by the insistence of an *idée fixe* (an idea or desire that dominates the mind; an obsession) taking control of the diseased mind. A novel creature is present to haunt the female narrator- partner, giving her ‘the 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” (148).

#### References:

- [1] Atkinson, William Walker. Telepathy- its Theory, Facts, and proof. Hollister: YOGeBooks 2010.print.
- [2] Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.
- [3] Bennett and Royle. Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory. Noida: Pearson, 2013. Print.
- [4] Derrida, Jacques. “I’m Going to Have to Wander All Alone.” The work of Mourning . Eds.
- [5] Pascale- Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001. 192-95. Print.
- [6] Derrida, Jacques. “Living on: Border Lines.” Deconstruction and Criticism. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979. 75-176. Print.
- [6] Derrida, Jacques. The Postcard : From Socrates to Freud and Beyond. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987. Print.
- [7] Freud, Sigmund. The Standard Edition of the complete Psychological Works. Trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. Vol. XVII. London: The Hogarth Press, 1916. Print.
- [8] Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: SUNY Press, 1966. Print.
- [9] Hillis Miller, J. “ The Medium is the Maker: Browning, Freud, Derrida, and the New Telepathic.” Oxford Literary REVIEW 30.2(2008): 161-80. Web. 12 Mar. 2018.
- [10] Joyce, James. A Portrait of the Artist as a young Man. Text, Criticism, and Notes. Ed. Chester G. Anderson. New York: Viking, 1964. Print.

---

[11]Kofman, Sarah, Freud and Fiction. Trans. Sarah Wykes. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. Print.

[12]Royle, Nicholas. "Clipping." Forum. University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts 7 (2008): 1-6. Web. 10 Mar. 2018.

[13]Royle, Nicholas. "Ouijamiflip." Oxford Literary Review 30.2 (2008): 235-56. Web. 10 Mar. 2018.

[14]Royle, Nicholas. Quilt. Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2010. Print.

[15]Royle, Nicholas. Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. Print.