

**WestminsterResearch**

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**Imaginary Intimacies: Death and New Temporalities in the Work  
of Denise Riley and Nicholas Royle**

**Colby, G.**

This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, Issue: 89/90: Death and the Contemporary (double issue) doi: 10.3898/NEWF:89/90.10.2016

The final definitive version is available online at:

<https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/new-formations/89-90/denise-riley-nicholas...>

---

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

---

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail [repository@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:repository@westminster.ac.uk)

Imaginary Intimacies: Death and New Temporalities in the Work of Denise Riley and  
Nicholas Royle

*Georgina Colby*

In 1998, Julia Kristeva curated an exhibit for the Louvre titled ‘Capital Visions’. The exhibition formed part of the gallery’s *parti pris*, or ‘biased view’ series. In *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* (2014), the book that emerged from her exhibition, Kristeva understands there to be two forms of relation to death in contemporary culture. There is the ‘imaginary intimacy with death, which transforms melancholy or desire into representation and thought.’<sup>1</sup> Such imaginary intimacy is opposed in Kristeva’s work to ‘the rational realisation’ of the act of capital punishment, the former epitomizing ‘vision’ in contrast to the ‘action’ of the latter. This essay positions Kristeva’s idea of an imaginary intimacy with death in relation to two contemporary literary responses to experiencing the death of a loved one: Denise Riley’s essay *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012) and her recent volume of poetry *Say Something Back* (2016), and Nicholas Royle’s experimental novel, *Quilt* (2010). Riley’s works and Royle’s work share a meditation on the impossibility of representing death within conventional narrative form. Both too offer insights into new temporalities that emerge in writing about death. By the term ‘experimental writing’, I refer to writing that disrupts conventional relations between word and referent and thereby obstructs conventional meaning. This essay argues that experimental writing has a unique capacity to inscribe death and create the textual conditions for the attendant non-linear temporalities that accompany the experience of bereavement.

The vital question of the representation of death has been at the forefront of a number of studies.<sup>2</sup> For Kristeva death is the ‘fundamental invisible.’<sup>3</sup> She compares modern painting, which copies objects from the external world in acts of representation with the Byzantine icon, which ‘inscribes the presence of a religious

---

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, translated by Jody Gladding [New York: Columbia University Press, 2012], p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> For example Sarah Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (eds), *Death and Representation* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, 4.

experience.' An icon, Kristeva argues, does not represent, rather 'it is taken in, it is absorbed, it is experienced: it translates an invisible world into its visible lines.'<sup>4</sup> In his 1984 book *Death Sentence: Styles of Dying in British Fiction*, Garrett Stewart takes up the paradox that writers meet when attempting to render the experience of death in language and literature. For Stewart, death is 'treacherous, excessive, the occasion of terror' but 'without being a renderable object of it'. This denotative absence inherent to death is such that 'the notion in the name of death, waiting untamed beyond any representation, remains, for all its attendant anxiety, unthinkable; for all its tenacity, in the root sense *untenable* - refusing containment either of content or by form - becoming in itself just a form or figure of speech.'<sup>5</sup> Death brings an intractable absence to literature for Stewart: 'it is the intransigent abstraction death that persists across literary history as a semantically unoccupied zone of utterance, at once linguistic horizon and void.'<sup>6</sup> In his rigorous work on the representation of death and absence in modern French poetry, Richard Stamelman calls attention to the relation between writing and loss. Citing Robert Hass he states: 'a word is an elegy to what it signifies.'<sup>7</sup> The dispossession at the core of representation, in Stamelman's view 'makes possible the creation of images, and, negatively as embodied in absence, death and loss animate the quest of writing and other forms of figuration.'<sup>8</sup> This essay explores the ways in which Riley's work, in its engagement with a-temporality and abstraction, and Royle's work, in its engagement with deep time and etymological layering, offer new forms of figuration of death through experimental textual practice. Experimental writing is able to represent denotative absence and the 'dispossession at the core of representation' of which Stamelman writes.

Denise Riley's essay *Time Lived, Without its Flow*, and her collection of poetry *Say Something Back* are works written after the death of her son. Riley proposes that there is an intimate alliance between the possibilities for describing and the temporalities we inhabit. Within contemporary culture she understands responses to death to be either silence or the 'sweetened overlay' of highly conventional

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 41-2.

<sup>5</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentence: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Stamelman, *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry* (Cornell University Press, 1990), ix.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21.

expressions of sentiment, each of which is a consequence of the 'impassable structural barriers to telling.'<sup>9</sup> Riley's and Royle's works offer depictions of the relation between death and temporality that are historically specific to the contemporary moment. This essay explores the way in which experiment with language and form is able to harbour the new temporalities experienced by, in Riley's work, the bereaved parent, and in Royle's work, the bereaved child, and to move beyond the 'barriers to telling' that Riley understands to be present in contemporary culture in the twenty-first century. In each of the three works discussed here, the engagement with the new experienced temporalities through experimental inscription gives rise to an imaginary intimacy with the deceased.

The phenomenological tradition has sought to think through the relationships between temporality and finitude. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers a theory of temporality aligned with his theory of existence as being-towards-death. Heidegger understands death to be a 'phenomenon of life.'<sup>10</sup> For Heidegger: 'If indeed death belongs in a distinctive sense to the Being of Dasein, then death (or Being-towards-the-end) must be defined in terms of these characteristics.'<sup>11</sup> Finitude is the prerequisite for authentic life and, in relation to this imbrication of finitude with authentic life; mortality is the condition for freedom. The basic structure of temporality for Heidegger is being-towards-death, in which, as Bruce Baugh has observed 'the future illuminates, determines and so is "prior" to the past and present.'<sup>12</sup>

In each of the texts examined here two temporalities operate: the time of the lived world (linear time) and the time of death and mourning (non-linear time). These two narrative temporalities position experimental writing in a certain dialogue with Stephen J Gould's work on geological time. When depicting death, Riley alludes to the natural world and physical law. Royle specifically refers to the concept of deep time and uses the metaphor of the ray to signify death's vast temporality. The unrepresentability of death can be brought into dialogue with the incomprehensibility of deep time. Each presents a temporality impossible to cognitively grasp. Gould

---

<sup>9</sup> Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Capsule Editions, 2012), 58.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2015), 290.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce Baugh, 'Death and Temporality in Deleuze and Derrida', *Anglelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities*, 5:2, August 2000; 73-83, p. 73.

remarks: 'Deep time is so alien that we can really only understand it as a metaphor.'<sup>13</sup> Gould articulates a well-worn dichotomy of the nature of history in terms of two temporal concepts: 'time's arrow', that is the idea that 'history is an irreversible sequence of unrepeatable events' in which '[e]ach moment occupies its own distinct position in a temporal series, and all moments, considered in proper sequence, tell a story of linked events moving in a direction'; and 'time's cycle' – events that have no meaning as distinct episodes with causal impact upon a contingent history. Fundamental states are immanent within time, always present and never changing. Apparent motions are parts of repeating cycles, and differences of the past will be realities of the future. Time has no direction.'<sup>14</sup> The experimental text holds the capacity to represent non-linear forms of time through experimentalism, and to thus offer unconventional narrative temporalities that are more akin to cyclical time and non-historical temporality than linear time, the time of history, and the time of conventional narrative.

The alignment of the time of death with geological time in Riley's and Royle's works renegotiates the relation between temporality and finitude. Deep time, as Gould observes, imposes a 'great temporal limitation ... upon human importance.'<sup>15</sup> The idea of an earth that has its origins at the onset of human rule, Gould points out, is compatible with human domination. Geological time is, conversely, threatening, putting forth 'the notion of an almost incomprehensible immensity, with human habitation restricted to a millimicrosecond at the very end'.<sup>16</sup> By aligning the deceased and the temporality of death with geological time, Riley and Royle offer a counterpart to the finitude of human death, opening the text into a different temporality that runs counter to the irreversible events of linear time that are documented in the texts.

Riley's and Royle's works are works of mourning centred upon the deceased. Each text constitutes a loss of self in the process of mourning the other. Such a positioning can be read in a certain counter relation to Heidegger's idea bound to 'being-toward-death' in *Being and Time* that only one's own death is authentic death.

---

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Geological Discovery of Deep Time* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

In a 2002 article, Simon Critchley challenges Heidegger's non-relational notion of death with 'the thought of the fundamentally relational character of finitude, namely that death is first and foremost experienced as a relation to the death and dying of the other and others, in being-with the dying in a caring way, and in grieving after they are dead'.<sup>17</sup> This is a position taken by Derrida. Derrida maintains the Heideggerian relation between temporality and finitude in *The Gift of Death* (1995). However, for Derrida it is the gift of death that 'puts me into relation with the transcendence of the other' and which 'gives me a new experience of death'.<sup>18</sup> For Derrida, it is the 'concern for death', it is 'this conscience that looks death in the face'<sup>19</sup> that is freedom. The relational idea of death as Derrida and Critchley conceive it is present in Riley's and Royle's works. Riley and Royle write about the undoing of the self, and the loss of the self in the process of grief and mourning. This symbiosis with the deceased involves a movement out of linear time and a movement into new temporalities associated with death.

### **A-temporality and Narration: *Time Lived, Without Its Flow***

In the opening lines of her essay, Riley explains: 'I'll not be writing about death, but about an altered condition of life.'<sup>20</sup> Riley contends that the death of a child causes a pluralising of temporality for the mother who outlives the child. The experience Riley found herself confronted with after the death of her son was 'of suddenly living in arrested time: that acute sense of being cut off from any temporal flow'.<sup>21</sup> This condition Riley terms 'a-temporality.' The curtailing of linear temporality, and the recognition of plural temporalities within a lived condition, opposes every assumption Riley had of lived time. Riley's allusion to her inherent apprehension of time as linear is characteristic, in Gould's view, of Western thought. He cites Richard Morris, in his work *Time's Arrow*, who observed the belief of ancient peoples that time was cyclic, whereas in the contemporary Western world people, in Morris's words 'habitually

---

<sup>17</sup> Simon Critchley, 'Enigma Variations: An Interpretation of Heidegger's Sein und Zeit.' *Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, Vol 15, Issue 2, June 2002: 154-175.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Wills (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>20</sup> Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

think of time as something that stretches in a straight line into the past and future.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, for Riley as a writer her experience of a-temporality ‘is also a question of what is describable, and what are the linguistic limits of what can be conveyed.’<sup>23</sup> Conventional narrative is imbricated with linear time. A-temporality cannot be expressed within a language that assumes a past and a future. The very act of writing was impossible for Riley for two years after her son’s death because of the relation to past and future that inheres in the act of narrating. ‘Describing’, she explains, ‘would involve some notion of the passage of time. Narrating would imply at least a hint of ‘and then’ and ‘after that’. Any written or spoken sentence would naturally lean forward towards its development and conclusion, unlike my own paralysed time.’<sup>24</sup> To live on in paralysed time is to live on ‘without inhabiting any tense yourself.’<sup>25</sup> Narration becomes ‘structurally impossible’, because, for Riley, as the movement of time stops for the bereaved person ‘so do all the customary ‘befores’ and ‘afters’ that underpin narration.’<sup>26</sup> In this condition any comprehension of sequence is taken away, and this has obvious linguistic implications: ‘A sentence slopes forward into its own future, as had your former intuition of a mobile time. But now your newly stopped time is stripped of that direction. Or, rather the notion of directedness is gone.’<sup>27</sup> A-temporality brings with it then a cessation of narrative time.

The experience of a-temporality is closely connected to an imaginary intimacy with the deceased. The suspended state of a-temporality is for Riley the temporality of her son’s death. In a journal entry six months after the death she articulates her son’s death as a ‘vicarious death’. She writes: ‘If a sheet of blackness fell on him, it has fallen on me too. As if I also know that blankness after his loss of consciousness.’<sup>28</sup> The experience and perception of a-temporality ushers in a revelation of the conflation of time with the self: ‘You *are* time. You are saturated with it, rather than standing apart from it as a previously completed being who was free to move in it.’<sup>29</sup> Taking up Merleau-Ponty’s work on the relation of time to the self in *Phenomenology*

---

<sup>22</sup> Gould, *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle*, 12; citing Richard Morris, *Time’s Cycle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow.*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

of *Perception* (1945), Riley draws the relation between linear time and self-presence. She cites Merleau-Ponty's idea that 'the explosion or dehiscence of the present towards a future is the archetype of *the relationship of self to self*, and it traces out an interiority or an ipseity.'<sup>30</sup> The relation between the sequence of time and self-presence is intricately related to the perception of a future. By contrast, the experience of a-temporality brings a loss of any sense of interiority and the experience of self-absence, a lived absence that is an intimate relation with the deceased. The inability to narrate parallels this absence. Throughout the essay Riley refers to 'the death' when speaking of the death of her son. This use of the definite article in place of the possessive pronoun 'his' is a way of voicing the failure of grammar when confronted with the task of inscribing death. 'The very grammar of death,' Riley observes, 'falters in its conviction in the same breath that the focus of talk, the formerly living person, himself disintegrates.' She states: 'Even the plainest 'he died' is a strange sentence, since there's no longer a human subject to sustain that 'he'.'<sup>31</sup> Any death, in Riley's understanding, seems to cause 'the collapse of the simplest referring language': 'As if the grammatical subject of the sentence and the human subject have been felled together by the one blow.'<sup>32</sup> This crisis of the referent that death engenders is a feature of the experimentalism of Riley's and Royle's works. The paradox of language, for Riley, is that the 'continuing possibilities for discussing the no longer existing person' persist so that 'a curious linguistic quasi-resurrection' emerges within language itself. This tension between the absence of the subject and the presence implicated in the structures of language when writing of the deceased pervades Riley's work. Within language, Riley notes, '[n]o subject can easily be conceived as extinguished. Language doesn't want to allow that thought; its trajectory is always to lean forward into life, to push it along, to propel the dead onward among the living.'<sup>33</sup> It is precisely for this reason that conventional language structures cannot accommodate death.

Philosophies of time and narrative alike fail to account for the new a-temporal condition. For example, the idea of time and narrative being imbricated with

---

<sup>30</sup> Riley, p. 60. Here Riley is citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1962), p. 410.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

interiority is fundamental to William James's idea of the stream of thought and the 'specious present' set out in the fifteenth chapter of *Principles of Psychology* (1890). Riley remarks that whilst philosophies of time understand 'how atomised instants of perception may be felt as an extended streaming,' the experience of a-temporality, 'this other feeling of a literal timelessness'<sup>34</sup> remains unrecognised. Riley does not specify which philosophies of time she is alluding to but it is pertinent to think through Riley's comments on a-temporality in relation to James's stream of thought and Henri Bergson's duration (*la durée*). The idea of the 'specious present', whilst it rejects conventional notions of time, implicates temporal sequence within the present moment. James defines the specious present as 'the original paragon and prototype of all conceived times, the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly aware.'<sup>35</sup> It is for James 'all my *direct experiences*, whether subjective or objective.'<sup>36</sup> As Gerald E Myers remarks: 'The fact that one word or note precedes the other is recognised during the enduring *now*, and thus the before-after relation is given in the present moment.'<sup>37</sup> Perception within the specious present is characterised by this simultaneity. This is a touchstone of modernist thought and experiment. A paradigmatic visual illustration is Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase* (1912) in which the multiple variations of the nude are held on one present temporal plane simultaneously. Myers observes that the Jamesian concept of the specious present 'not only allows but requires that the initial and final phases of the specious present be perceived simultaneously, and the intervening temporal relations are made noticeable within and because of those temporal boundaries.'<sup>38</sup> Riley's a-temporal perception is dispossessed of any before-after relations. It is a state of exteriority rather than interiority, and therefore does not share the temporal boundaries of the stream of consciousness; nor does Riley's a-temporal condition share the phenomenological relation between temporality and finitude that is ascribed to the living in Heidegger's thought.

---

<sup>34</sup> Riley, *Time Lived, Without its Flow*, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology: Volume One* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), 631.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 638.

<sup>37</sup> Gerald E. Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (London and New haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 146.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Riley's intent in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* is to document this experience of arrested time. The death of a child brings for the bereaved mother an experiential form of temporal defamiliarization, which is matched in Riley's work with a literary form of temporal defamiliarization. The Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky claimed that when the general laws of perception are examined it becomes evident that 'as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic.'<sup>39</sup> For Shklovsky, 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.'<sup>40</sup> The experience of a-temporality brings with it a form of temporal defamiliarization, which is accompanied by 'a vividly physical perception.'<sup>41</sup> The pluralising of temporality in this new condition is such that 'multiple possible temporal perceptions'<sup>42</sup> become apparent to Riley. At work in Riley's essay and poetry is a form of defamiliarization that takes Riley out of the perceptual habits of time, and through literary abstraction offers an inscription of a-temporality as it is perceived and experienced by the bereaved parent.

### **A-Chronicity and Abstraction**

Riley differentiates a state of 'a-chronicity' from the familiar idea that bereavement brings about a distortion of time. The feeling of 'a-chronicity' arises from the halting of sequence, a state in which there is 'no impression of any succession in events, there is no linkage and no cause.'<sup>43</sup> Unlike the distortion of time, a-chronicity has 'no traces of old temporal shapes, and it resists intelligible description.' Instead, the experience of a-temporality involves 'violently new and hitherto unsuspected states of temporal perception'<sup>44</sup>. Riley articulates herself as inhabiting 'this sharply distinctive life inside

---

<sup>39</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 2012), pp 3-25, this citation, p. 11. First published in 1965.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, 51.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

a new temporal dimension'.<sup>45</sup> The struggle to convey this state within language is realised in Riley's linguistic abstraction both in the series of journal entries in her essay, and in the volume of poems *Say Something Back*.

In Riley's works, imaginary intimacy works on two levels. It is the intimacy between mother and deceased child within the shared condition of a-temporality, and an empathetical relation between the reader of the text and the author of the work. Prefacing her journal entries, Riley takes up the problem with the typical response to her experience of outliving her child. She draws attention to the paradox inherent to the typical statement of sympathy 'I cannot imagine what you are feeling.' This is at once an expression of sympathy but also 'a disavowal of the possibility of empathy'. In response, Riley states her aim to convey 'this curious sense of being pulled right outside of time'.<sup>46</sup> The experience of the new a-temporal perception ushers in new modes of empathy. Riley states that she would like people to 'try to imagine' what she is experiencing, rather than to renounce the possibility of grasping her condition, and thus relegating those with dead children into the realms of the 'unimaginable.'

Riley's attempt to articulate the sudden transition into a state of a-temporality, a form of non-relational time, explains her repeated use of simile throughout her essay. Thus, for example, Riley describes herself being pulled outside of time 'as if beached in a clear light.' In his short essay on the text, Peter Riley comments on the way in which Denise Riley makes her experience known through the 'discourse of simile.'<sup>47</sup> Simile is able to inscribe the inexpressible condition of a-temporality through the comparison of the condition with often abstract yet renderable states. In simile the inexpressible condition of death is only ever articulated in terms of its approximation to something else, it is never directly represented, rather it is both gestured towards and shielded through analogy. Simile enables both inscription and abstraction, offering a form of figuration of a-temporality, whilst harbouring the impossibility of representing death. In her essay on abstract art, Catherine de Zegher notes that dictionaries derive the adjective 'abstract' from '*abstrahere*' 'meaning "to draw from, to remove, to separate," and define the noun "abstraction" as "the act or

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>47</sup> Peter Riley, 'Denise Riley and the Force of Bereavement'. *The Fortnightly Review*, 21 March, 2012. <http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2012/03/denise-riley-force-bereavement/>

process of abstracting: the state of being abstracted.’<sup>48</sup> Zegher observes: ‘Inherent to these definitions in art is the notion that preceding the abstraction there is something from which the form has been drawn.’ This could, Zegher remarks, be an object in the phenomenal world but it could equally be comprehended as ‘the formation of an idea apart from any perceivable object, understood that is, as thought itself.’<sup>49</sup> Abstraction offers a form of nonrepresentational writing. Riley’s form of figuration of arrested time linguistically resembles the aesthetic practices of abstract artists such as Hilma af Klint and Agnes Martin. Klint’s *Parcitali Series, Group 2, Section 4: The Convolute of the Physical Plane, Backwards, November 1916* (watercolour on paper) is part of a series of six monochrome watercolours. Group 2 section 4 is a yellow square with the word ‘backwards’ written in the margin of the painting. The stark yellow paint floods the canvas, at once illuminating and glaring in its brightness. Riley’s use of visual abstraction, using light and colour as denotative of her objectless state, is comparable to Klint’s practice. For her part, Agnes Martin achieved timeless form through abstraction. Martin understood painting to have the capacity to resist representation. Works such as *Morning* (1965) gesture to something beyond representation, which remains unrepresented yet acknowledged through the abstract work. In contrast to Riley’s essay, Martin’s work points to blissful states of mind. Yet the rectangular system of co-ordinates that resists any notion of sequence and before-after relations offers an illuminating comparison with Riley’s notion of a-temporality and aesthetic temporal suspension. As Zegher notes, for af Klint, abstract figuration is a mode of visualising the ‘ineffable and the super sensible in a metaphysical cosmology that deals with the universe as an orderly system and has its space-time relationships rooted in science and theosophy.’<sup>50</sup> In this work, the condition of a-temporality is an abstracted state of temporality.

Riley’s similes are modes of verbalising the ineffable and stand in contrast to the crisis of expression encountered in normal time in twenty-first century culture. A passage in which Riley recalls her inability to enunciate the word ‘ashes’ a day after Jacob’s death takes up the issue of simile:

---

<sup>48</sup> Catherine de Zegher (ed.), ‘Abstract’ in *3x and Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Hilma Af Klint, Emma Kunz and Agnes Martin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

In how many ways this folded-together state appears. You already share the ‘timeless time’ of the dead child. As if you’d died too, or had lost the greater part of your own life. As if a new ether of no-time stands still in your veins. That’s the over-arching ‘as if’. Then there’s an ‘as if’ of uttering, when the speech of the one left behind can turn staccato. That first day afterward, speaking by phone to the funeral director, I needed to yet could not get the word ‘ashes’ out of my mouth without a strenuous physical struggle. ‘Ah-aassh-aashhes’, came a dry stammer. As if uttered through sawdust.<sup>51</sup>

In the opening lines the simile gestures towards a shared experience with the deceased child in a concrete unambiguous relation of empathy and intimacy: ‘As if you died too, or had lost the greater part of your own life.’ Here ‘you’ addresses both Riley and the reader. In doing so, it very precisely invites the reader to imagine what Riley is experiencing. However, the experience of a-temporality then demands a further movement into abstracted language and imagery: ‘As if a new ether of no-time stands still in your veins.’ This use of simile is a movement outside of conventional language use to invite empathetic engagement with an experience outside of the everyday. It stands in contrast to the ‘as if’ of uttering, where ‘as if’ denotes incomprehensibility and impossibility, a state attached to living in the ordinary world. Riley’s recollection of her failure to enunciate the word ‘ashes’, as part of a necessary social exchange, registers a sense of the gap between her experience and ordinary language: ‘That first day afterward, speaking by the phone to the funeral director, I needed to yet could not get the word ‘ashes’ out of my mouth without a strenuous physical struggle.’ At this point, the perspective of the writing, distanced through a first-person factual account, removes the reader from the experience of a-temporality. The perspective then shifts back again and strives to close the distance between narrative voice and reader with the simile: ‘As if uttered through sawdust.’ What cannot be enunciated in the factual account, which positions the reader as a bystander to Riley’s struggle, is inscribed through the use of simile. The simile moves the narrative back into a-temporality and the folded-together state of the narrator and her deceased child.

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

Riley continues to reflect on her struggle with expression. Of her inability to enunciate the word ‘ashes’ she uses a vivid, abstract statement: ‘A cut fell between the thought and its voicing.’<sup>52</sup> The phrase gives materiality to the word ‘cut’ through the use of the verb ‘fell’, as if the cut were a physical object. The similes that follow voice the folded-together state of Riley and her deceased son. Once again, it is simile that has the capacity to inscribe a-temporality. Such expression is not possible in the given world that witnesses only Riley’s stammering. Riley’s physical incapacity to speak the words ‘disposal of his ashes’ in the social context is counteracted in this text through the use of simile. ‘As if’ the mouth ‘had itself become sifted up thickly with ashes.’ Ashes are not disposed of but rather the body of the mother is folded-in with the body of the child in an imaginary intimacy inscribed through simile. This for Riley, is a ‘transfer of affect’, which she compares to the ‘blurring of the physical edges that happens between lovers.’ It is an intimacy and a form of symbiosis made possible as inscription through the use of simile, and stands in contrast to the cut experienced between thought and voicing that the demand to enunciate precipitates.

The notes that Riley reproduces in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, a series of journal entries written after the death of her son, reveal the emergence of literary abstraction as a means to inscribe her experience of a-temporality. At the outset she explains that her notes are ‘condemned to walk around only the rim of this experience.’<sup>53</sup> The use of the word ‘rim’ again materialises the incomprehensible experience and once more offers a clear, tangible physicality to the impossible experience. Simile and metaphoric, physical language, defamiliarises Riley’s experience to offer a non-denotative yet vivid depiction of her states of perception in the condition of a-temporality. The simile embodies the idea of ontological disjunction - ‘as if’; where metaphor insists on ontological parity. Thus, in her first entry two weeks after the death she writes: ‘In these first days I see how rapidly the surface of the world, like a sheet of water that’s briefly agitated, will close silently and smoothly over a death. His, everyone’s, mine. I see, as if I am myself dead. This perception makes me curiously light-hearted.’<sup>54</sup> The ontological disjunction of simile marks the separation between the indifferent world and the a-temporality of the

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 14.

narrator's state. It is the indifferent world that is the subject of the passage, yet the abstract aesthetics of the passage locate the narrative in the a-temporal condition. The distance between the narrator and the world is unfathomable and within the framework of the inscription, immeasurable. The vastness of the planetary conception of the earth is brought into relation with, and is a means to achieve, abstraction. The allusion to the natural world brings together the state of a-temporality and geological deep time. The colossal perspective implicated in the 'surface of the world' indicates the spatial relation that accords to a-temporality and exteriority. The voice is far removed from what is being seen and perceived. The paradoxical state of the bereaved who has in part died, but in part is invigorated by the spirit of the child is evidenced in the clear juxtaposition of the two states in the line: 'You are cut down, and yet you burn with life.'<sup>55</sup> Abstraction and simile pervade the entries and give breath to the expressionless, objectless state. Thus, one month after the death Riley writes:

At the death of your child, you see how the edge of the living world gives onto burning whiteness. This edge is a clean strip of celluloid film. First came the intact negative full of blackened life in shaded patches, then abruptly, this milkiness. This candid whiteness, where a life stopped. Nothing 'poetic', not the white radiance of an eternity - but sheer non-being, which is brilliantly plain.<sup>56</sup>

Inexistence, non-being, is rendered a perceivable state through the objectless colour white. Any possible religious associations of the whiteness perceived by Riley are stripped away and brought into abstract visual radiance by the words 'brilliantly plain.' The transparency of celluloid gives a tangible apprehension to the parameters of Riley's perception of the world, which remains non-denotative and non-concrete. There is no object yet the objectless non-relational state is clear, and conceivable through abstraction.

The pervasive instances of simile are antithetical to the encounters with language in the everyday world that have no bearing on the condition of a-temporality

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 16.

yet persist in the structures of conventional language. Riley observes that ‘Unanticipated death does such violence to your ordinary suppositions, as if the whole faculty of induction by which you’d previously lived has crumbled. Its textbook illustration was always, ‘Will the sun rise tomorrow?’ But now that induction is no more, the sun can’t any longer be relied on to rise. And my son does not rise. This silly pun alone can reliably work its mechanical work.’<sup>57</sup> The ‘mechanical work’ of the pun parallels the mechanical conventions of language and the outside world in Riley’s work. In contrast to the work of simile, the pun’s only motility is within the bounds of definitive everyday meanings. Grappling with the absence of her child the pun is deficient in grasping the ineffable: ‘It stills seems ludicrous to decide, finally, that I shall not see that face on earth [...] More limp puns abound. You conceived the child, but you can’t conceive of its death.’<sup>58</sup> By contrast, in simile, the evasion of fixed meaning opens up space for the inscription of a-temporality. Five months after the death Riley writes:

Wandering around in an empty plain, as if an enormous drained landscape lying behind your eyes had turned itself outward. Or you find yourself camped on a threshold between inside and out. The slight contact of your senses with the outer world, and your interior only thinly separated from it, like a membrane resonating on the verge between silence and noise. If it were to tear through, there’s so little behind your skin that you would fall out towards the side of sheer exteriority.<sup>59</sup>

Simile is able to articulate the void here: ‘an enormous drained landscape’ is not directly conceivable, yet it voices a mode of perception, as does the abstract idea of being ‘camped on a threshold between inside and out.’ ‘A membrane resonating on the verge between silence and noise’ can be apprehended as a mode of perception. These geological, abstract images vividly render the inconceivable state of a-temporality.

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 19.

There is arguably more of struggle to represent the timeless time of death in the poetry. The physical language and abstraction found in the diary entries is not as present in the poetry, in which Riley wrestles with the conventions of poetry and elegy, as well as with the conventions of mourning in the lived world. Riley's 'A Part Song', first published in the *London Review of Books* in 2012, is a sequence of twenty poems often read as a companion piece to her essay. The sequential form of the body of work stands in tension with the non-sequential nature of Riley's notion of a-chronicity. The formal tension between sequence and a-chronicity mirrors the temporal demands of telling in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* that strain and constrain the writer's narration of a-temporality. A later poem, published after 'A Part Song', titled 'Death Makes Dead Metaphor Revive', takes up the relation between death and what she terms 'dead metaphor':

Death makes dead metaphor revive,  
Turn stiffly bright and strong.  
Time that is felt as 'stopped' will freeze  
Its to-fro, fro-to song

I parrot under feldspar rock  
Sunk into chambered ice.  
Language, the spirit of the dead,  
May mouth each utterance twice.

Spirit as echo clowns around  
In punning repartee  
Since each word overhears itself  
Laid bare, clairaudiently.

An orphic engine revs but floods  
Choked on its ardent weight.  
Disjointed anthems dip and bob  
Down time's defrosted spate.

Over its pools of greeney melt

The rearing ice will tilt.  
To make *rhyme* chime again with *time*  
I sound a curious lilt.<sup>60</sup>

The poem voices in poetic form the tensions between normal temporal flow and the a-temporality in which the poet finds herself existing. Riley's ironic choice of the 'hymn meter' for the poem is an aural analogue to the revival of dead metaphor that death brings. The poet repeats, parrots language under the feldspar, a transparent rock-forming mineral. Here, as in *Time Lived Without Its Flow*, the poet's existence in the stasis of a-temporality and removal from the world is brought into relation with motility and natural law. Time in the final lines is geological, measured by the thawing ice. At the same time the final lines foreground the artifice in the use of rhyme and conventional poetic forms of elegy and hymn, while pointing to the poet's own struggle to bring atemporal experience into language.

The abstract clarity in expression and imagery found in Riley's journal entries is present in the shorter poems in 'A Part Song', placed toward the end of the sequence. These poems address neither the poet nor the son:

xvi

Dead, keep me company  
That sear like titanium  
Compacted in the pale  
Blaze of living on alone.<sup>61</sup>

Here the use of simile, as in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, offers a mode of inscribing the ineffable. The image of burning titanium and the 'pale blaze / of living on alone' inscribe the objectless state and non-relative time of a-temporality, abstracted from the ordinary world. In the following poem Riley reaches an abstract harmony whereby the state of a-temporality is rendered in tetrameter with no recourse to the constraints of poetic convention:

---

<sup>60</sup> Denise Riley, *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016), 62.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Suspended in unsparing light  
 The sloping gull arrests its curl  
 The glassy sea is hardened waves  
 Its waters lean through shining air  
 Yet never crash but hold their arc  
 Hung rigidly in glaucous ropes  
 Muscled and gleaming. All that  
 Should flow is sealed, is poised  
 In implacable stillness. Joined in  
 Non-time and halted in free-fall.<sup>62</sup>

The sea that holds the deceased child's ashes is brought here into dialogue with the abstract physicality that Riley understands to be characteristic of a-temporality. This poem offers a site of imaginary intimacy through abstraction and contemplation of the natural world and physical law. There is no past or future in the lines, nor is there a subject. Mother and son are both present, 'Joined in non-time', yet absent as subjects in the poem. Time is frozen through the verbs 'suspended', 'arrests', 'hold', 'hung', 'sealed', 'poised', and 'halted.' Water is 'hardened', solidified, so that it does not move. The use of sea imagery creates an abstract sublimity, imbricated with geological time, which inscribes the state of non-time and pure exteriority.

### **Death and Deep Time: Nicholas Royle's *Quilt***

Nicholas Royle's *Quilt* confronts the impossibility of conventional narrative to accommodate the experience of death. Questioning the limits of the sentence, and collapsing narrative boundaries between the living narrator and the deceased father, *Quilt* traverses the boundaries between experience lived and an experience impossible to claim. In content and form, Royle brings the experience of death into relation with deep time. The novel is divided into three parts. The first part documents the father's death and the funeral of the father. In this part there is the collapsing of the language of the narrator with the language of the father and frequent instances of experimentation with inflection and word play. In the second part, the narrator clears

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 13.

the house and builds a ray pool. Here the experiment moves to infiltrating the prose with the language of the environment. In the third part the narrator detaches from reality and shifts to an obsession with the rays and language. Royle offers a mode of imaginary intimacy with death through bringing deep time into relation with experiment with form and language. In *Quilt* the work centres on the bereavement of a son after the death of his father. As in *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, there is a disparity between the time lived in the world and the time of the bereaved. The work opens with the lines: ‘In the middle of the night the phone rings, over and over, but I don’t hear it. First it is the hospital, then the police.’<sup>63</sup> These lines of the text are separated from the subsequent passage that moves back in time to the days before the narrator’s father’s death by an omega, the final letter of the Greek alphabet. The omega marks the end in the secular sense of the series of letters that form the alphabet, and, in Christianity is associated with the Book of Revelations, and the apocalypse. In Royle’s novel it is often used to separate sections of the narrative. The implication is that the writing that follows is positioned after the end, which is recurring.

The opening statement is repeated throughout the book, creating a circular structure to the text. In his Afterword titled ‘Reality Literature’ Royle comments on the distance between the reader and the narrator: ‘The reader hears what the narrator doesn’t hear. It is the novel calling. The novel is a kind of weird telephone exchange.’ That which Royle terms ‘reality literature’ is ‘writing that acknowledges this weirdness and goes somewhere that’s not foreseeable, either for the author or for the reader.’<sup>64</sup> The first omega is followed by the words ‘these things happen from time to time’. As with the opening recollection, the phrase is repeated throughout the book. Yet rather than folding the narrative back into one moment of linear time, the saying, spoken by the father and repeated by the son, gestures to a plurality of temporalities. In a later section the narrator draws on the phrase to suggest that a new temporality emerges from the experience of bereavement:

There is time given. It is a time that never existed before. It is as if your father’s phrase ‘from time to time’, apparently so casual, opens up like a

---

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Quilt* (Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2010), 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

cuckoo clock, intimating a time in between the one and the other, a mad gift. Even your employer proves unexpectedly benign, granting you compassionate leave (officially described as 'sick'), for as long as, so long as, what does the voice say? You try to recall the manager's exact words: three months, is it? What does it matter?<sup>65</sup>

This new temporality, a liminal time in between one and the other, is non-conventional and non-linear, and clearly positioned in contrast to established measurements of time ('three months, is it? What does it matter?'). It is a new temporality that is ingrained in the father's words that are repeated in the text. Here the use of the father's words brings the text into a certain relation with Derrida's *The Work of Mourning*, a literary paean to the philosopher's deceased friends. Of his chapter on Levinas, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas remark that citation in the text is being used 'as a form of interiorization.' They observe that 'the words of the dead are being incorporated not merely to become part of the text, to be 'in it,' but to act as a point of infinite alterity 'within' the text, to act as its law.' The editors continue: 'It would seem that Derrida's 'rhetoric of mourning' is borrowing from the schema of interiorization in order to convert citation from a gesture simply dictated by the genre into another consequence of the metonymic force of mourning.'<sup>66</sup> The father's words in *Quilt* operate too as a law that drives the text and open up a new temporality, which is the time of death and mourning.

The novel occupies the two differing modes of time, through shifting from conventional prose, which tells of the days and events before and after the death of the narrator's father, into linguistic experiment. The catalyst for the new language occurs in the opening pages when the narrator is helping his father to dress to go to the hospital: 'He's lying on the bed and he is my flesh, so simple, his body mine, and so difficult so com-pli-cated he'll say shortly in a portmanteau coming apart at the seams, just when it will have come to my mind most straightforward, so deluded.'<sup>67</sup> There is a 'transfer of affect' here from father to son. This intimacy precipitates the

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 82

<sup>66</sup> Pascale Anne-Brault and Michael Naas, 'Introduction' to Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale Anne-Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001), 21.

<sup>67</sup> Royle, *Quilt*, 4.

renunciation of conventional grammar: 'Give up the thought of the sentence, he seems to tell me, and I am in his grip, he mine.' Experiment with language is imbricated with the father's body: 'My father needs some new underwear and pyjamas. His incontinence, lack of time to get any washing done before coming to hospital. Sentences stop, leak, caught, soil themselves short.'<sup>68</sup> Experiment with language halts the linear time of the writing, opening up a new temporal and spatial dimension:

Yesterday I called the doctor in, he asked my father if it would be possible to go upstairs so that he could examine him on the bed and we all went up together, one by one, three bears, each of us holding onto the handrail as we went, the doctor remarking with admiration on its crafting, smooth but knotty trunk of a young pine fallen in the garden years ago meticulously bolted to the stairway wall by my father. Solid *silva*, yes, *silva silvam silvae*, the way words twinkle to other's uses, other to her, solid flesh, melting into dew, slivering into you. My father makes to lie down on his bed but the doctor asks him to lie down on the *other* bed, because it is closer to the window and he'll be able to see better.<sup>69</sup>

Here and elsewhere, the sequence of words that occurs in between sections of linear narrative transforms from word to word through inflection. The word solid folds into the Latin, 'silva' meaning forest, or woods. The familiar wood of the handrail is expanded through the Latin inflections of the same word, 'silva' (nominative, ablative, vocative), 'silvam' (accusative), 'silvae' (genitive, dative). The intimacy between the words generates the intimacy of the lines 'other to her, solid flesh, melting into dew, slivering into you'. 'Silva' does not mean handrail or the simple wood of a tree in Latin but forest, woods. The domestic handrail expands through the Latin to encompass the environment, a vastness of wood. A few lines later the narrator remarks 'we seem to be embarked on some new phase of language.'

The experimental writing in the novel is a form of 'environmental writing', a term Royle takes up in his work *Veering: a Theory of Literature* (2011). Royle's theory of 'veering' 'is concerned to interrogate and displace all thinking of an

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 5.

environment in straightforwardly anthropocentric terms.’ ‘If an environment *environs*,’ Royle states referring to the definition of ‘environ’ to ‘surround’ or ‘enclose’, ‘it does not merely environ the human.’ Importantly, at the core of Royle’s idea of ‘veering’ is a rejection of anthropocentrism in the recognition that ‘[t]he human animal is not at the centre of the world.’<sup>70</sup> Referring to Timothy Clark’s work as exemplary, Royle argues ‘nowhere is the need for rigour and inventiveness more urgently demanded than in the experimentations of environmental writing.’<sup>71</sup> Environmental writing in *Quilt* offers a form of writing about death. The narrator directly invokes John McPhee’s geological idea of ‘deep time’.<sup>72</sup> After a recollection of his father’s time in Tibet the narrator states: ‘To follow this yarn you have to go back into what is called deep time (as if there were any means of doing so).’ As is intimated by Royle, deep time, like death lies beyond human comprehension, as it is outside the sphere of human experience, and, more specifically, exceeds human conceptions of temporality and finitude. At the end of a passage detailing a brief history of the ray the narrator reminds the reader: ‘All of this keep in mind, took place in deep time (as if there were any other).’<sup>73</sup> Two comparable forms of temporality are present in *Quilt* that can be formulated in relation to Gould’s idea of time’s arrow and time’s cycle. Ordinary sequential time that tells of the father’s final days, the funeral, the clearing of the house, and the building of the ray pool can be compared to Gould’s notion of ‘time’s arrow’. The sections of experimental writing, the metaphor of the ray and divergent passages into philosophy and geology are comparable with ‘time’s cycle’. It is a non-linear form of narrative time that interrupts sequential time and holds the narrative in a new temporality that has no direction.

### **Unconformities**

Layering is fundamental to the concept of deep time. In geology such layering is termed ‘unconformity.’ A recent exhibition ‘Imagining the Unimaginable: Deep Time

---

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>72</sup> John McPhee was the first geologist to coin the phrase in his seminal work *Basin and Range* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).

<sup>73</sup> Royle, *Quilt*, 22.

Through the Lens of Art', held at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC from August 28, 2014 to January 2015, explored the ways in which art has the capacity to represent deep time. In his essay, the curator of the exhibition J D Talasek discusses engravings of unconformities, in particular John Clerk's celebrated engraving of Hutton's unconformity at Jedburgh, Scotland:

Added to the imagery constructed by geology is that of strata often visualised as a layered cross section of the earth's depths. Geologic cross section views often reveal unconformities, that are vast gaps in time of up to hundreds of millions of years where no rock exists to represent that time period. Unconformities depicted in cross sections have long been considered compelling field evidence for the vastness of time. John Playfair elegantly articulated the idea of unconformity in his 1802 *Illustration of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth*. Unconformity was depicted in John Clerk of Eldin's celebrated engraving *Hutton's Unconformity at Jedburgh, Scotland*. The engraving is a slice of earth made visible, a perspective that reveals strata and unconformity as, in Gould's words, "...the complex panorama of history that can be inferred from the simple geometry of horizontal above the vertical."<sup>76</sup>

The layering in unconformities inscribes the enormity of the temporality of deep time. As Talasek remarks: 'This visualisation of the earth is so powerful that it has become a metaphor of the vastness of time.' He refers to the work of geologist and photographer Jonathan Wells whose photograph *Boston Basin* (2005) illustrates a 16-mile-wide by four-mile-deep perspective of the Boston Basin, 'looking west towards downtown as if the viewer were positioned in the harbour.' Talasek observes: 'The large city seems minuscule in comparison to what lies beneath.'<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> J D Talasek, *Imagining the Unimaginable*. Catalogue for the exhibition 'Imagining the Unimaginable: Deep Time Through the Lens of Art', held at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC from August 28, 2014 to January 2015. Unpaginated. <http://www.cpnas.org/exhibitions/imagining-deep-time-catalogue.pdf>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Etymological erosion and layering in *Quilt* create a comparable perspective whereby the surface linear narrative is thrown into a diminishing relief by the environmental writing. Royle creates etymological layering through literary experiment. The title of the book *Quilt* is a singular example of such layering. In the final part of the novel the narrator reveals the etymological layering of the word 'quilt'. Earlier in the novel digressions occur into the history of the ray, and the discussion of the ray in Plato's *Meno* (offering intertextual as well as etymological layering). The ray is given its Latin name *Potamotyrgon motoro*. This assigns a temporality to the ray that exceeds the ordinary language in the text. In the third part it emerges that 'quilt' is a word that had been used throughout history interchangeably with 'ray'. The ray, the narrator states, 'is at the origin.'<sup>78</sup> The figure of the ray is linked by Royle to the Gothic: 'It's the ordinary spook. Plato was already onto that, in the ray haunting Socrates and Meno.' The Gothic here is defined here as 'a kind of anamorphic manifestation of the effects of the ray.' Drawing on the plethora of cloaks and shrouds in Gothic literature, the narrator states: 'It is necessary, however, to realise how integrally, how inextricably, this motif is folded into the figure or the property of the ray, the living blanket or quilt.' Comparing the ray to the bat, the narrator suggests that in the ray: 'What haunts is of greater scope, more minatory and dangerous, all enfolding, from another element.'<sup>79</sup> The etymological history of the ray is then offered, '*manta*' first emerged at the beginning of the eighteenth century and was used interchangeably with the word 'quilt.' The narrative expands on the ray and its appearance in literature and philosophy. Royle's etymological expansion of the word 'ray' is a means of shifting thinking about the Gothic to a secular platform through environmental writing. The narrator states: 'It is a question of a new imaginary, not a regression of into the vagary of animistic belief, a restituted primitivism, but a thinking of the ray as a force, a trace, whether buried or dancing, in quite a different understanding of the spectre and the wake.'<sup>80</sup> Royle employs archaeological and anthropological terms to articulate the idea of the ray: 'Like a dream of excarnation without any possible fossilisation, dream as impossible fossil, there is a naked cape and it is alive. Rays to the ground: starting off in the substrate. It

---

<sup>78</sup> Royle, *Quilt*, 118.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 119-120

is a matter of a new teratology, an enantiotropic animism that is radically non-theological, nanothinking through the ray.<sup>81</sup> Excarnation, the practice of removing the flesh from the bones before burial, is here attributed to an impossible fossil. Elsewhere it is ascribed to literature: ‘Excarnation is literature. Its music strips you. Literature is excarnation.’<sup>82</sup> The new teratology, a scientific mythology, is brought into relation with the idea of an ‘enantiotropic animism.’ The term enantiotropia (ἐναντιοτροπία) is a Greek compound word that translates as ‘a conflict of opposites’ and was used by Diogenes Laërtius in his précis of the philosophy of Heraclitus. The word has an extensive history and was taken up by Carl Jung who used the term to designate ‘the emergence of the unconscious in the course of time.’<sup>83</sup> Royle’s use of the figure of the ray is a means to offer a secular non-theological perspective on death. Deep time functions in the novel as a replacement for religious time and etymological layering emerges as a form of textual nonconformity.

Deep time is registered in the imagery, the conflation of the father with the ray, and in the inflections and transformation of meaning in the play of words. As the father is collapsed through language with the figure of the ray, the father is given presence through the text after his death. For Royle there is a reciprocal conflict in the ray’s relation to language. ‘Language wrecks the ray’, the narrator asserts, and a few lines later, ‘The ray wrecks language.’<sup>84</sup> Literary experiment is imbued with the ray and associatively with deep time. Intimacy with the father is created through the figure of the ray. In an early passage detailing the father’s preparations for hospital, the father is merged with the figure of the ray:

A miner yes, that thought is never far away. Underground, he carries it with him, for three years during the Second World War a coalminer day after day deep down in the dark and apparently relishing it, sheer subterranean strength, coming up for air at the end of the day face blackened, hot shower then tea at his digs, a couple of pints at the local, and bed, then before dawn down again into the earth, mole of my life. It’s as I help him now I have this searing

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>83</sup> Jung, C.G. ‘Symbols of Transformation,’ *Collected Works, 5, 2nd ed.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 709.

<sup>84</sup> Royle, *Quilt*, 33.

sensation, smell and feel the look of his body mine, mined out, to have to hold, every article exhausting and he has to rest, catch or fall back seeking breath, respite resources from somewhere unrecognizable. He insists on a vest and two pullovers even though it is the end of July, a hot summer's day. We get to the socks, he is lying down and his feet swollen, one of them worryingly red, a rash that runs up over his right foot to his ankle.<sup>85</sup>

Here deep time is evoked and conflated with the father's history through the phrase 'sheer subterranean strength'. Like the ray, the father is portrayed as 'coming up for air at the end of the day' from the mines. His father has resources 'somewhere unrecognizable.' The father and son merge in the play on words 'mine, mined out'. This intimate temporality runs beneath the surface narrative of the son helping his father get dressed. At other points in the text the idea of nanothinking, slownesses and spectralities that Royle associates with a 'new literature' and the working of the ray emerge through erosion and the creation of neologisms, a double play of erosion and the appearance of new linguistic forms. When clearing the house the narrative takes up the smell of the house: 'Uncapturable but ubiquitous, on every surface, on every object are the residues, the residutiful, residential odour that he recognises as not the father's but that of the house itself.'<sup>86</sup> Here the uncapturable nature of the odour plays out in the transformation of 'residues' to 'residutiful' and 'residential', neologisms that have no meaning. The pervasive nature of the smell is held in the continuation of the word residue into the neologisms that follow.

The new temporality in *Quilt* is not a-temporality in Riley's sense of the term. Rather it is a folding of the past into the present (the father into son), and the simultaneous alienation from linear time. At the outset the narrator states: 'That is where living backwards begins'.<sup>87</sup> In the house after the narrator's father's death the 'past' embeds the word 'post' so that past and future ('post') become embedded in the present: '*post*, post saying past all post past past the post. The room is almost knee-deep in junk mail, a choked sea of pointless post.'<sup>88</sup> The merger of post and past generates a diversion that merges the narrator's visiting lover with experiment with

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 26.

language: 'The post is past. Words come away. Letters capsize. She is digression, syncopation, asyndeton, ontradiction. Her 'c' curls off invisibly, leaving the shoreline of a new language: *ontra*.'<sup>89</sup> The lover's word 'contradiction' is truncated, eroded to produce 'ontradiction' a neologism with no definition but one that nevertheless implies a relation with 'ontic', real rather than phenomenal existence. Literary experiment is tied to the inability to comprehend linear time after the death of the father. 'The order' of the outside world and the demands of convention and bureaucracy are 'impossible to disentangle' for the narrator.' By contrast, there is 'the incredible world of the cottage, dead and surviving, stuffed with the past now present, the present now past, in a convulsion of lunatic tranquility.'<sup>90</sup> The narrator apprehends perception to resemble 'a strange mimosa' in which 'Everything seems shadowed, shadowing something else'<sup>91</sup> The mimosa is a sensitive plant with compound leaves that are sensitive to touch. Once again the natural world provides the metaphor through which the experience of the father's death is expressed. The environmental language and metaphor in the novel functions both to inscribe that which cannot be directly represented and to throw death into bas-relief. Deep time and environmental language emerge as a way of negating death. The narrator states 'life and time in truth never die'<sup>92</sup> and this infinity is bound to deep time. In the second part of the novel the narrator recalls a nightmare of 'unimaginable length and intensity.' He attributes this to his 'marine correspondence' with his lover, H. The latter part of the novel moves further away from the everyday happenings. Recalling the process of excarnation, the narrator states: 'Everything is being stripped away. I can't express it. It's a kind of magical sharpness, as if shadows have light [...] It has to do with that mimosa thing I told you about. It's a kind of upside-down space of coincidence, a portal.'<sup>93</sup>

The expansion of time that is signified by the ray pool functions as an inversion of the common 'anthropomorphic ego-projective perception of everything' that the narrator understands to be prevalent in contemporary culture. 'You come to experience this quite different thing,' he remarks, 'the murky registration that, in terms of deep time, in terms of the actual timeframe of life on the planet, half a hiccup

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 95.

ago, you were a lungfish yourself.’ This results in a reversal: ‘you dimly sense a sort of vast retelling, a turning shadow cast out over the waters in the flickering light of which the projection actually goes *the other way*’. The ‘refractively aleatory antics’ of the rays in the ray pool are ‘no different now from how they would have been a couple of hundred million years ago,’ and for the narrator, ‘show us frankly what or who we are.’<sup>94</sup> Time is measured in time akin to deep time in the third part of the novel. The final part of the novel opens: ‘It is scarcely seven weeks, still less than two months since the funeral. A week, a month, whizzing in an hour.’ Objects are given the brief lifespan of a mayfly: ‘Every noun is another ephemeroid.’<sup>95</sup> The narrator has switched to H. She describes the three days that she does not hear from him as ‘[t]hree oceans.’ The narrator embarks on a writing projects in the final part of the novel, ‘a work of lexicography devoted to the buried life of anagrams and homophones, each word with its own idiosyncratic definition [...] 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 estuary English.’<sup>96</sup> This emergence of a new language each word of which contains the ‘ray’ coincides with the birth of a giant ray in the father’s study. The transformation into the ray at the close of the novel is, as the narrator points to elsewhere, an allegory. It is at once an allegory through which the narrator is able to confront his father’s death, and a political allegory that tells of the need to move away from thinking about the environment in anthropocentric terms. The displacement of anthropocentrism enables the consideration of the father’s death in deep time, a temporality that has no end.

### **New Figurations**

To return to Kristeva, and her distinction between representation and inscription, what Riley and Royle offer in their contemporary works are two inscriptions. Death, impossible to represent, is inscribed through experimental practice. In each of the works addressed in this essay, the writer or poet offers literature as a space of compassion in response to living on in the world after the loss of a loved one. This space is bound to the experience of a new non-linear temporality. Riley understands

---

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 121.

her work to be part of what she terms a ‘literature of consolation.’ For Riley this is a literature of solidarity, offering a way for mothers who have lost their child to access a shared experience. We might think of the implications of Riley’s work in terms of the contemporary political climate in which thousands of parents are experiencing bereavement, forced displacement, and seeking asylum, as a result of war and conflict in Syria and elsewhere. One month after the death of her son, Riley writes in her notes:

This instant enlargement of human sympathy. It’s arrived in me at once. His death had put me in mind of all those millions whose children were and are lost in natural disasters, or accidentally killed, or systematically obliterated; no wonder that bitterness and loss of hope has filtered down the generations, and then the disengagement. Millions disorientated, perhaps, but this quiet feeling of living only just this near side of the cut.<sup>97</sup>

A literature of consolation might have the capacity to generate Riley’s felt ‘enlargement of human sympathy’ in the reader. In both Riley’s and Royle’s work imaginary intimacy with death has a close relation to the transpersonal. Embodying the timeless time of the dead, and inhabiting also the time of the living, Riley asks: ‘How to think historically about all those myriad lived temporalities that find themselves increasingly resonant and densely layered because they’ve come to include the time of others?’<sup>98</sup> Riley asserts that ‘As these temporalities are intermingled with each person, they’ll also run across and between people, so to speak, become transpersonal.’<sup>99</sup> Riley’s reference to transpersonal individuality here is Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* (1888). She draws the connection between the idea of transpersonal identity and a ‘de-centred being.’ Royle’s *Quilt* takes up this idea through environmental writing in his reversal of anthropomorphism. A new politics of experimental writing emerges in Riley’s and Royle’s works, which through linguistic innovation, offer a site of imaginary intimacy. The experience of the death of the

---

<sup>97</sup> Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, 15.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

loved one in Riley's and Royle's work is the catalyst for transpersonal individuality that goes beyond cultural boundaries through an imaginary intimacy with death.