ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ

PHILOLOGIST

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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THEORIZING THEORY OR THE FUTURE OF THEORY

Nicholas Royle is Professor of English at the University of Sussex, where he teaches literature, critical theory and creative writing. He has previously taught at Stirling University, Scotland, the University of Tampere, Finland, and at the University of Oxford. He has published influential books of literary criticism, including *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (1990), *The Uncanny* (2003) and (with Andrew Bennett) the academic bestseller, the *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (4th edition, 2009). He is also author of a novel, *Quilt* (2010), and numerous works of short fiction. His most recent book is *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (2011). Other books include *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (1995, with Andrew Bennett), *E. M. Forster* (1999), *Jacques Derrida* (2003) and *How to Read Shakespeare* (2005). Royle has been an editor of the *Oxford Literary Review* since the late 1970s. He is a director of the Centre for Creative and Critical Thought at Sussex and organiser of Quick Fictions (see http://www.myriadeditions.com/edit.php?location_id=253).

Philologist: In the *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, you and your co-author Andrew Bennett have a somewhat different approach to writing on literary criticism and theory. Namely, your approach does not include periodization of literature, or the study of major movements and schools. What your chapters cover are terms like narrative, voice, laughter, the tragic, etc. Why have you opted for this approach?

N. Royle: We wanted to provide an introduction to literature that would be primarily about novels, poems, plays and short stories, not about critical jargon and theoretical schools. We take seriously Heidegger's contention that 'every mere *ism* is a mere misunderstanding and the death of history': we didn't want a book organized by terms like structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, new historicism, postcolonialism, or deconstructionism. It is not even enjoyable saying these words. They're all quite empty and uninteresting as 'mere *isms*'. What the Bennett and Royle book tries to do is to *read* – to offer readings of certain novels, poems and so on. Its principal concern is to respond to the singularity, the remarkable thisness of, say, this particular poem by Emily Dickinson ('A Bird came down the Walk – ') or this specific passage from a particular Shakespeare play ('It will come. / Humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep'). Bennett and Royle is a book that tries to immerse itself in the curious thickness *and* lightness of literature. It seeks to relay, to evoke and invite the reader to share a sense of what is rich and strange, haunting and thought-provoking, unsettling and exhilarating about a specific literary work. Of course we are also teachers and we want the readings we offer to open up onto more general questions about meaning, experience, pleasure, suffering, ethics, religion, politics and so on. We want readers to develop a knowledge and critical appreciation of what is meant by 'tragic', 'comic', 'realism', 'omniscient narrator', 'self-reflexivity', 'synecdoche', 'Russian formalism', 'jouissance' and many other terms which critics and theorists

use. But our way of trying to do this is, we hope, not conventional or merely conforming to the familiar or routine. All of the chapters in the book (34 in the most recent edition) are deliberately short, aimed at provoking thought and launching ideas, not at providing anything like an exhaustive account. And some of the chapters, as you say, come under quite standard-looking headings (such as 'Voice' and 'The tragic'), but others are perhaps less obvious ('Secrets', 'Me', 'The uncanny', 'Pleasure', 'Ghosts').

Philologist: These days we are witnessing ideas that literary theory should not be taught at universities. What is the place of literary theory in undergraduate studies?

N. Royle: I hope I might already have begun to answer that question. Theory, if it simply takes the form of *ism*-izing, of the regurgitation of a string of boring or intimidating sorts of abstractions, has no place in the university or anywhere else. The most interesting and, I suspect, most enduring critical and theoretical writing tends in fact to be sharply aware of the potential lifelessness of 'theoretical discourse'. And the most compelling critical or theoretical writing is often 'creative' in peculiar, unexpected ways – think of certain texts by Barthes (*Camera Lucida*, for instance) or Blanchot (*The Writing of the Disaster*) or Cixous (*Stigmata*). It is clear, indeed, that the days of 'Theory' (with a capital 'T') are long gone: I'm not sure when the first book called *After Theory* or *Post-Theory* appeared but I guess it was at least fifteen or twenty years ago. I cannot in the space of this interview get into detail about how what came to be called 'Theory' was in fact given its impetus largely by kinds of thinking (deconstructive, psychoanalytic, Marxist) whose principal concern was precisely to question and transform every complacency about a theory/practice distinction. As Derrida said in one of the

interviews in *Positions*, back in 1971: 'In the field of the a deconstruction of philosophical oppositions, the opposition *praxis/theoria* must first be analyzed, and may no longer simply govern our definition of practice.' I think that it is a good thing that 'Theory' courses have been disappearing. But this is not to suggest that the authors, texts, arguments and ideas associated with 'Theory' are dispensable. On the contrary, I believe we are in greater and more urgent need than ever of what could, for the sake of brevity, be called deconstructive thinking – not only for literary studies, but for reflecting on the very purpose of a university, for thinking about global politics and justice, nationalism and sovereignty, the environment and climate change, non-human animals, the continuing oppression of women in so many parts of the world, and so on.

Philologist: What is the place of meta-theory in academia and how important is it for critical thinking skills in general?

N. Royle: I'm not sure I can say or write the word 'meta-theory' without wanting to laugh, since it sounds very much like one of those empty-sounding abstractions I was referring to earlier. I am not sure whether 'meta-theory' is a very interesting or helpful term – I think if I were an undergraduate just starting her degree in literature or philosophy or some other humanities subject and I was confronted with a lecturer trying to tell me about 'meta-theory', I'd just want to die – or at least walk out of the lecture theatre. Todorov somewhere talks about an Edgar Allan Poe story (I think it's 'The Angel of the Odd') as a 'meta-uncanny' tale. This makes me smile, again, because I think that uncanniness, if there is any, is all about the 'meta-'. The truly uncanny is always also 'meta-uncanny', if you like, and any theory worthy of the name is likewise 'meta-theory'. Nevertheless, I do think that 'meta-' is a valuable prefix in certain ways. It's potentially

crucial to be alert to 'metalanguage' (language about language) or to the 'metadiscursive' (to do with self-reflexive discourse, or discourse about discourse). I don't think that one can really develop a strong critical sense of the contemporary novel, or indeed of the history of the novel, without an appreciation of 'metafiction' (fiction about fiction).

But the definition of such terms is never straightforward. 'Metalanguage', at least as this emerges in the writings of Heidegger, Lacan and Derrida, has to be construed in terms of a strange logic: it is at once necessary and impossible. It has to be possible to talk about talking, or (as in the case of Middle East peace negotiations) to have talks about talks. Of course there is something quite desperate about the idea of 'talks about talks', but the phrase can also remind us that talking about talking is not nothing. If there weren't some sort of metalinguistic or metadiscursive dimension, in fact, nothing could get done. 'I must end this interview soon' would be an example: I'm talking about 'this interview' as if it existed at a distance, in a sort of separate or different language or discursive realm, and if I couldn't do this I couldn't make that commitment or keep my word. At the same time, there is a certain impurity, a compromise or sleight-of-hand going on, for it is clear that my saying 'I must end this interview soon' is also manifestly part of the interview. It's the same with the case of the argument in which one person says to the other, 'I can't believe we're having this conversation': this remark is not neutral or external to the argument, it participates in it. So what we have is this strange and powerful double-logic: metalanguage as necessary but impossible, necessary *and* impossible. A corresponding situation is at work with regard to 'metafiction'. As I have tried to explore elsewhere (see 'Memento Mori', in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. Martin McQuillan (New York: Palgrave,

2002), 189-203), the term 'metafiction' is very recent. Its first recorded usage is in 1960. The historical, cultural and linguistic aspects of its emergence call for careful critical reflection and analysis. And at the same time there is clearly a way in which every novel or short story is metafictional – that is how, after all, *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* get off the ground and what keeps them going.

Looking for metafictional, self-reflexive or self-referential moments (there, you see, I have thrown a cluster of irritatingly jargonesque phrases into the air: I'm sorry, I hope you see why), looking for instances of where a poem or novel explicitly refers to itself is often one of the best ways of getting into the richness and complexity of a reading. I don't have any special investment or interest in technical vocabulary for its own sake: I'd happily write about Shakespeare's 'The Mousetrap' (in *Hamlet*), for example, without resorting to terms like 'metatheatrical' or 'metadramatic', but they can be helpful, if deployed with a sympathetic ear for one's reader. In the end, though, it's not so much a matter of 'theory' or 'meta-theory', it's a matter of *reading*. That's where, in my view, critical thinking skills are developed, enhanced, brought into play.

Philologist: You have recently published a book with the peculiar title *Veering: A Theory of Literature*. What does 'veering' refer to and what aspects of literary theory do you cover in this book?

N. Royle: This is a book I worked on over a number of years. For as long as I can remember, indeed, I have been in love with the word 'veering' – with the sound of the word, its meanings, its fields of reference, its ambiguities and shifts of sense. In the UK the place where you are most likely to encounter the word first of all is in the BBC shipping forecast on Radio 4. You hear about conditions at sea around the British Isles, what winds are blowing, and whether

they are veering (turning clockwise) or backing (anticlockwise). This morning (8 April 2012) the Met Office forecast includes the following, for example, 'Viking, North Utsire, South Utsire, Forties: Southerly 5 to 7, veering southwesterly 3 or 4. Mainly moderate. Rain or showers. Moderate or good, occasionally poor at first' (http:// www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/ marine/ shipping_ printable.html). I don't usually go the Met Office website. I prefer to listen to it on the radio, if possible at night. I love it. As I say at one point in the book, as you listen to the shipping forecast you can find yourself 'feeling comforted by the sense that you are not out there, or, conversely, and perhaps perversely, by imagining that you *are* out there, braving the elements, in Coleridge's words, "Alone, alone, all, all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea!"' (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*). So veering, in this context, has the quality of something strange and unpredictable, intimate yet remote at the same time. It is very physical – it's all about the elements, the force of the wind and being at sea. And yet it is also just listening to a voice on the radio. Few things, to my mind, bring out the power of radio more hauntingly than the shipping forecast. So from my childhood, more or less, I have associated veering with voice, with the amazing solitude of radio, as well as with the wildness of the wind and sea, with large-scale physical events.

It took me a few years to realize that it was a book, but I suppose the project began with a lecture I was invited to give for a conference on 'writing environments', at Brunel University in 2004. A crucial early discovery for me was the fact that 'veering', the verb 'to veer' in the sense of 'to change direction', 'to shift round', 'to alter course', comes from the French verb *virer*, 'to turn', and that it is from this figure of turning that we get the word 'environment'. *Veering: A Theory of Literature* is very much a book about the environment, then, not only in a conventionally 'ecocritical' sense,

but also in terms of a more radical or, perhaps, more humble conception of environment (any environment) in terms that are not anthropocentric. Moreover one of the things that fascinates me about 'veering' is that, while it can refer to human beings, the word is also used of other animals. There is, I argue, nothing essentially human about veering. So the scope of the book is, in some respects, very broad: it is about the relations between the human and nonhuman animal, and the relations between literature and the environment. And so it goes all the way out, as well as all the way down. The universe itself is 'veering round', as D. H. Lawrence puts it. Veering, as I try to elucidate it, goes back to questions of the *clinamen* or swerving of atoms in Lucretius, as well as forward to contemporary scientific thinking about time and space.

It was exhilarating as well as maddening to work on this project. I was amazed by where the word 'veer' turns up and how it gets mobilized in so many works of literature. It's more or less everywhere – I explore examples in the writings of Ben Jonson, Milton, Coleridge, Tennyson, George Eliot, Melville, Wilkie Collins, Thomas Hardy, James Joyce, Sylvia Townsend Warner, D. H. Lawrence, Elizabeth Bowen, J. H. Prynne, Amitav Ghosh, Don DeLillo and numerous others. In the book I am also very interested in the history of 'veering' as a word in English. The poet John Dryden appears to be the first writer regularly to construe love or desire as veering. In the course of the nineteenth century 'veering' comes to be used widely as a way of referring to psychology and interior space: a person can veer in their thoughts or feelings or opinions. Wordsworth, as far as I have been able to determine, is the first person to describe himself as veering (in Book 4 of *The Prelude*): this internalization of veering is, I suggest, linked up with particular conceptions and possibilities of 'self' and with the development of modern

psychology and psychoanalysis. At the heart of *veering* in this context is a notable ambiguity: you can veer on purpose, in particular to avoid something; or veering can be the opposite, a sudden loss of control. There is something unsettling about this double-meaning: it's very Freudian in a way, recalling Freud's interest in what he called 'the antithetical meaning of primal words'. It is partly along that line of think-ing that I seek to show how veering is intimately linked up with the uncanny. Readers will, I hope, see numerous associations and affinities with my earlier book on that subject.

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