Thought Leader

Nicholas Royle is Professor of English at the University of Sussex and founding director of the Centre for Creative and Critical Thought. Since publishing his first work of criticism – *Telepathy and Literature* – in 1991, his creative output has been consistently varied and rewarding, blurring any firm conception of form or genre. Royle remains most widely known, perhaps, for his *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, written with Professor Andrew Bennett. The book is a remarkably creative and ever-evolving project which appraises literature through a shifting array of lenses, prompting us to reassess what we ultimately mean by the 'literary' as distinct from other forms of writing. Research Outreach was privileged to speak to Professor Royle about his diverse output, and about his future projects.

Has it become a guide to literary studies that also provides critical reflection on the pressing issues of our time: truth and ideology, equality and social justice, climate crisis and mass species extinction. People from all walks of life email us, expressing their gratitude that the book exists. Andrew and I are grateful as well: the book is clearly different from anything either of us could have produced alone, and feels by now as if it has a strangely independent existence.

You recently wrote a memoir, of sorts, of your mother, *Mother: A Memoir* (2020). Did you find that the creative energy involved in 'life writing' differed markedly from the processes of critical research?

That's tricky. Questions of genre and distinctions between 'creative' and 'critical' are undoubtably significant, but I don't really think about them when I am writing. E M Forster once described novel-reading as 'voluntary surrender to infection'. Writing is like that too. I follow the writing's nose. One of the discombobulating things is that writing both takes and dictates time. When my mother died in 2003, I knew I had to write about her, but it was almost fifteen years before I could begin. And then when I did, I had no idea what I was doing. I was hardly conscious. It was very early in the morning. But within an hour – to my immense, heart-flooding surprise – I realised I was writing a book about her.

At the heart of Professor Royle’s work remains a deep appreciation for, and a keen sensitivity to, the uncanny nature of language. Whether he is discussing Jacques Derrida or psychoanalysis, animals or Jesus Christ, Royle’s work demonstrates a boundless sense of wonder at the very act of writing as a form of creation. More than this, his work reinvigorates that wonder in his readers. In a wide-ranging interview, we covered everything from life writing to the environment, and we learnt about his forthcoming projects, including a new work with the philosopher Timothy Morton.

You published a seminal introduction to literature, criticism, and theory, along with Professor Andrew Bennett, which has now been through a number of iterations. Has updating this text yielded any insights into the changing nature of literary study over the past two decades? The sixth edition appears next year. There’ll be new chapters on ‘Loss’, ‘Human’ and ‘Migrant’, as well as a new section specifically about the concept of ‘literature’. It has been a great privilege to work on this book over such a long period with my friend and colleague Andrew Bennett. Each iteration of ‘Bennett and Royle’ (as it’s sometimes called) is a full-scale revision: we reconsider every topic, every example, every sentence. The book began (back in 1995) with just 24 chapters; it now has 41. The new edition has challenged us to take stock of what – and how much – has been happening since 2016, not only in literary studies but in the world beyond. Increasingly, it

A life in literature

An interview with Professor Nicholas Royle

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it is what happens, for example, when people say ‘I love you’, declare war, make a promise, translate, have psychotherapy, tell a story differently, describe something in a new way. It’s a kind of magic’, as Freud says, and that’s why, it seems to me, thinking about writing – without being religious or mystical – is never far from questions of ‘magical thinking’ (animism, telepathy, the uncanny).

Your reading habits are ‘promiscuous’, voracious, and varied. Are there any new writers, of either fiction or non-fiction, you are excited about?

Ah, the old idiom ‘new writers’? I find it a bit disquieting, too easily in synch with the ‘proper’ or ‘true’ language in which to represent non-human animals. How might we shift towards ways of thinking and being in the world that are less anthropocentric? It seems to me that this is a question on which poets and novelists are especially helpful and insightful. A dizzy mix of joy and challenge, An English Guide to Birdwatching (2017) took six years to write. It was published as ‘a novel’, but it’s just as much a work of life-writing, bird-writing, critical elegy, dream ornithology, and so on. The challenge but also the appeal of the book is, I hope, implicit in the title: what on earth does it mean? Or, perhaps, what in the air does it mean? The book is an exploration of language, starting with the strangeness of birds ‘watching’ us, as well as vice-versa.

You once turned to the intriguing word ‘Veering’ as a lens through which to read a range of literary texts. Is there a word or phrase you’d enjoy using now as a door to a new form of reading?

Literary texts themselves give us new idioms, new buildings (sometimes – at least on first encounter – apparently doorless), new forms of reading. The figure of veering is fascinating first and foremost on account of how it shows up in the work of other writers – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Melville, Henry James, Proust, Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen, DeLillo, Helène Caucus, Armitage Ghosh and others. I enjoy on occasion, inventing new words or phrases (such as ‘cryptoplastic resistance’, the ‘telepathology of everyday life’, ‘iteraphonia’, the ‘retrolexic’, the ‘narrative’, the ‘oranment’, ‘ornicent narration’, the ‘ornimons of thought and ornomorphism’), but more fundamentally I feel traversed, driven, sent weaving in a lifelong fashion, by a desire to alter the way we think and feel about words, about what they might do. Words can and do change the world.