

NICHOLAS ROYLE (2011) *VEERING: A THEORY OF LITERATURE*. EDINBURGH: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN: 978 0 7486 3654 9.

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As I read *Veering: A Theory of Literature* I was constantly over-taken by thoughts of process; of how this book came to be; of how the author gathered up such diverse examples of the use of this odd little word and idea, *veering*, from Henry James, Norman McCaig, Elizabeth Bowen, Herman Melville, D.H. Lawrence, Jacques Derrida, Don DeLillo and Theodor Adorno – to name a few. Nicholas Royle claims at its opening that it is ‘a twisted love story’ and ‘a theory of literature,’ emerging from his fascination with ‘one word: “veering”’ (1). Then I realised that the emergence of such perplexing thoughts *as one reads* is precisely what this book is concerned with. If one reads honestly, then one ‘veers’ from emotion to thought to pleasure to frustration to anxiety and back again. This is a book about veering that *veers* constantly. At every twist, turn, drift and slide, Royle’s book is a challenge and a joy; for what it insists upon, above all, over and over, is that reading should be an adventure without maps, a kind of wondrous deterritorialization of language and expectation that enacts and examines ‘literature and its relation to the world’ (1). At a time when, as he puts it, literature is seen ‘as increasingly peripheral, a diminished thing’ (1), this book, practises modes of veering that are always creative and critical, literary and theoretical whilst being ‘awkward, inadvertent, clumsy’ as well as ‘beautiful, graceful, canny’ (4).

With deliberate echoes of Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Derrida’s most playful works such as *The Post Card* (1987), and with traces of Debord’s psychogeography (see Knabb, 2007), Royle develops an innovative style of ‘critical literature’ seen in earlier work, such as *The Uncanny* (2003), *In Memory of Jacques Derrida* (2009), or his essay ‘Blind Cinema’ (2005), bringing a fresh

approach to reading and writing which refuses to 'repress the force' within it (18), preferring to respond always to the rhizomatic possibilities of the texts he studies. For Royle, theory is not about containing the text, slotting literature into pre-formed systems of thought or politics, or its 'instrumentalist' uses for specific ends (96) but rather in finding angles of vision and lines of flight that respond to its wondrous possibilities and surprising twists and turns. As he puts it, too often established theories, such as perhaps structuralism or Marxism, have caused the 'enclosure of "literature"' whereby its energies are 'confined or reduced' (5), whereas veering looks toward 'the unexpected or unpredictable' (4), 'a new riskiness and uncertainty of control' and a 'resistance' to any sense of the 'finished' text (28-9). After all, as he puts it in a memorable phrase, 'Writing about Proust is like rolling up a sleeping bag and trying to fit it in a matchbox' (24) and so one should not be restricted or curtailed to its divergent possibilities and energies. This approach, Royle argues, 'offers new ways of thinking about literary narrative. To speak of veering is to invite another kind of dynamism into critical thinking', (28). Part of this dynamism is to reveal, he claims, that 'veering is not only human,' for, 'it goes, as it were, all the way down and all the way out. It is about literature, but it is also about anthropocentrism, the environment, space and time' (5).

It is perhaps through such moments of critical veering that Royle suggests the relevance of his approach to the wider field of cultural studies, despite the fact that his intention in this book is quite clearly to define a new 'literary turn' (2). However, one might, for example, see how in reading a film the concept of veering could be usefully employed to see how affective moments carry one into and out of a scene through connected registers of light and sound, words and silence, stillness and movement, emphasising not the enclosure of filmmaking, but the possibility of its spectral quality of layered suggestion and 'living on' beyond the industrial, mechanical process itself. Echoing Deleuze's *Cinema* books (1986; 1989) with their dynamic and risky engagement with cinema as image-idea, veering might serve other fields beyond the literary in similarly exciting and stimulating ways.

Royle's book follows the 'sway' of texts to see where they lead and what they open up through language and image; understanding always that a great book's 'resistance to being finished' is central to its affect and purpose (29). In doing all this, Royle works through poetry, novels, drama and the essay as differing forms all receptive to this approach; seeing, for example, along with Adorno, the merit of

the essay as a 'writing that goes off' (61) in different, unpredictable directions and which the attentive and sensitive reader must be prepared to follow. In the end this is the creative power of the whole book too.

However, *Veering* also has moments of personal recollection that help propel its labyrinthine structure; of Royle's mother suffering from Alzheimer's or digging into the spectral history of his home in Sussex, or even recalling a trip to the dentist that fills him with fear, looking up to a man wearing 'big glasses like a snooker player', with ghostly echoes of Laurence Olivier in *Marathon Man* (Schlesinger, 1976). Such veerings, however, work to disrupt our notions of authorised, 'official' literary criticism and allow us insight into the writer as someone in touch with digressive reality, willing to open himself up in the same way he asks literary texts to. His purpose always though is to take us back to reading and 'to re-inflect the question of "theory" in the wake of new attentiveness to the literary' (68). This is ably demonstrated as the book dedicates three of its final chapters to the exploration by veering of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Herman Melville's 'Bartleby' and a selection of D.H. Lawrence's writing.

In the chapter on *The Turn of the Screw*, Royle 'turns' or perhaps 'veers back' to a consideration of the book he set out to write about, he informs us, in his first published work *Telepathy and Literature* (1990). In a careful reading of the novel, Royle shows how 'turning' works to elucidate and enrich the experience of the text as James' language *doubles* itself, adding to the ambiguous and delirious qualities of the maze-like work. Similarly, he offers an even more detailed reading of 'Bartleby' and its 'wordlife', ultimately concluding that it is 'the first modern ghost story' for it 'compels us to reckon with ghostliness that is a condition of perception and experience, not merely the ghostliness of some projected afterlife' (168).

Throughout the book, Royle argues for critical writing constructed of essays that are engaged in 'essaying, experiment, trying out, expedition' (68) and at every turn *Veering* achieves this goal, producing endlessly intriguing and always surprising readings of both familiar and unfamiliar texts. Through careful but open readings Royle demonstrates how the literary 'involves phantom voices, the return or even "first" coming of the dead, anachronicity and mourning, apparitional magical thinking-writing, the ghosts, the vertigo and vertigoing that *only happen to you*' (102; italics in

original). Through this approach to reading literature is always alive and mutable, touching us as individuals in ways that connect us with the world and all its environments, past, present and future. One criticism would be that of all the genres of writing he examines, there is no space for a discussion of memoir or autobiography that arguably deals with that which ‘*only happen[s] to you*’. Following Derrida, as Royle clearly does, these forms, found so much in the French philosopher’s later works, such as *The Work of Mourning* or *Memoires for Paul de Man*, would have lent themselves to the types of veering explicated here. It would have added something to *Veering* to see Royle confront directly and theoretically the relations of memory and life-writing to the wider literary turn he seeks to define. The other small point of criticism would be that the claims made early on about the book’s contribution to environmental writing seem to be less persuasive and really only register as asides rather than a determined argument. However, as with my sense of how veering might be utilised in other fields discussed above, it might be for others to develop Royle’s contention that ‘The human animal is not at the centre of the world’ (3). These are minor criticisms in an otherwise fascinating and challenging book full of leaps of imagination, ‘turns’ and ‘veers’ that, as a reader, you cannot wait to follow.

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