Introduction

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On the 23rd June 2023 we held a one-day symposium at the University of Sussex, to celebrate the work of Nicholas Royle.

This was a singular event, unlike any other in my experience within or beyond the academy.

Its singularity stemmed partly from its unsteadiness of mood. It was in most ways an exhilarating occasion. We had taken the somewhat risky decision to squeeze thirty-eight academic papers into one day. We started at 9am sharp (with a rather psychedelic conversation between Peggy Kamuf and Hélène Cixous), and went through to 7pm, when we drank warm white wine from plastic glasses, before heading to an Italian restaurant, with a table booked for 34. Elissa Marder was charged with brutal time keeping – no paper to exceed 10 minutes, or Elissa would set off some kind of deadly alarm that would freak everyone out.

These circumstances produced a particular kind of intensity. Not just the intellectual energy of the papers themselves – although this was surely part of it – but also the pleasure of having so many friends, colleagues, writers and critics gathered together in one room. The experience of paper after paper following in such rapid succession produced a dreamlike state, which was enhanced by the time of year. It was midsummer, the day after solstice, and the sun was shining. Term was over, examining was finished, and a period of freedom stretched before us. But alongside this headiness, and woven into it, was a certain melancholy, of a Yeatsian hue. This stemmed from the fact that the celebration of Royle's work was also a means of marking his retirement from Sussex, where he had been teaching since 1999. Palpable in the air was what Frank Kermode has called the sense of an ending.[1] As paper followed paper, as the contours of Royle's thinking unfurled in the probing responses of thirty-eight colleagues to his body of work, as the long summer day stretched on, it felt that we were witnesses to something drawing to a close.

This was not, it seemed to me, a purely personal experience, a sadness arising from the conclusion of a single brilliant career at a single university. Rather, the combination of the heady, concentrated intensity with the sense of an ending had a much broader historical purchase. It felt not personal – or not only personal – but generational. The critics and writers who spoke, one after another, even though they ranged from late to early career, seemed to partake of a certain kind of generational possibility, to partake of that possibility, and to channel it, to manifest it. The event took place in a lecture theatre on Sussex University campus. From the windows you could see across the South Downs, the area of natural beauty

in which the campus is located. The university was founded in 1961, and moved to its current location near Falmer village in 1962. Its founding marked a moment in postwar European history in which a new social contract was emerging from the wake of the second world war. Asa Briggs, the first professor to be appointed to the university and its second Vice Chancellor, saw the university as creating a new 'map of learning', modelled, Briggs suggested, on the forms of interdisciplinary co-operation that became necessary in Bletchley Park in the 1940s, where Briggs worked on deciphering the Enigma Machine.[2] The kind of thinking that was required to defeat Nazism, Briggs saw, might also allow us to see past the catastrophe of fascism to a new welfare state, a new post-colonial world order, and a new model of international law. The creation of Sussex, among six other universities established in the 1960s, Asa Briggs writes in 1971, 'stands out as an expression of the hopes of the first years of the decade'.[3]

The founding of Sussex was part of a utopian moment in the 1960s, and it coincided with a set of new theoretical, political and philosophical possibilities, with which Sussex was intimately associated. The failed revolutions of 1968 might signal the disappointment of many of those utopian hopes, but the previous year (1967, the year in which Briggs took up the Vice Chancellorship at Sussex) saw the publication of three books by Jacques Derrida – *Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Writing and Difference* – which transformed the disciplinary landscape as profoundly as any other intellectual event in the twentieth century.[4] Derrida's work, as it found expression in this intense burst of publication, and then as it extended over the following decades, drove a deep transformation in our understanding of the relation between speech and phenomena, between writing and difference, a transformation that shaped the new disciplinary environment as it emerged at Sussex. It was Sussex, more than any other university in the UK, that nurtured the relations between what came to be called deconstruction and the movements with which it was associated – psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, new historicism, queer theory – the intellectual networks that gave rise to literary and critical theory as it was understood in the Anglo American academy in the later twentieth century.

When Royle came to Sussex in 1999, from Stirling, and before that Tampere, Finland, he joined a faculty that was in the late throes of this disciplinary reorientation. Royle himself had been deeply immersed in the intellectual community that had grown up around Derrida's thinking, since his time at Oxford as a DPhil student writing on Wallace Stevens, from 1979-84 (supervised by John Bayley). Royle was taught by Robert Young when he was an undergraduate at Oxford (which Young remembers in his contribution to this issue), and he became involved, from its inauguration in 1977, with the *Oxford Literary Review*, a journal closely associated with Derridean literary theory, and the venue of Royle's first publication in 1982 (Royle serves, today, as one of the journal's editors).[5] During his stints at Tampere and

Stirling, Royle's work developed through his relationships with other members of this community, with Derrida himself, with Hélène Cixous, with Peggy Kamuf, David Wills, Michael Naas, Andrew Bennett, Maud Ellmann and others. And when he arrived at Sussex, he joined his longstanding colleague Geoff Bennington (who left Sussex for Emory in 2001). He just missed Rachel Bowlby (who went from Sussex to Oxford in 1997). He missed Homi Bhabha, who went from Sussex to Princeton in 1992. He missed Gillian and Jacqueline Rose. But he worked alongside Alan Sinfield and Gabriel Josipovici, Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, and brought Hélène Cixous to Sussex as a visiting professor.

This was the history that was in the room, on that June day in 2023. Looking out over the Downs, at the landscape that seems so attuned to the idea of a university, the inauguration of Sussex seemed vividly present. And with this presence of Sussex's past, one could see the connected growth of a new way of seeing and thinking, with its roots in the Derridean explosion of 1967, but which encompassed too Marxism and psychoanalysis, feminism and queer theory, and which brought literature together with philosophy, politics and history to make possible a new map of learning. At the same time, and in tension with this history, one could feel the gathering forces that were making the expression of hope that Briggs insists upon in 1971 increasingly forlorn. The election of Donald Trump for a second term as US President was still in the future then. But Russia's war in Ukraine was already more than a year old. Brexit had finally taken place three years before. The rise of the far right across Europe and the US was already leading political commentators to see parallels between the 2020s and the 1930s. And UK education policy over the first decades of the twenty-first century had weakened the university sector to the extent that the utopian possibility associated with the creation of the new universities in the early 1960s seemed all but exhausted. The Research Excellence Framework, and its earlier incarnation (the RAE) had eroded the autonomy of the disciplines. The privatization of UK universities, with the introduction of fees under a labour government in 1998, and then the total abolition of the teaching grant under the Tories in 2010, had already led to the extreme instrumentalisation of higher education. The idea of the university as an autonomous critical sphere was giving way, in the process, to a model of higher education as the reproduction of the existing labour market, even as that market becomes increasingly inoperable.

There was, in the room, the sense of an ending, a sense of the ending. A sense that the generational possibility brought into being, as a reaction to the second world war, was yielding or had yielded to a new period in world history. And so the heady pleasure of the event was also attended with the kind of melancholy one feels when reading Yeats's 'Among school-Children', in which the hopeful eyes of youth look not forward to the future, but backward, to the aging educator. 'The children's eyes / in momentary wonder stare upon / a sixty-year-old smiling public man'; 'Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird'.[6] But if this is

the case, it is the nature of the papers that were delivered on that day, and of the essays that are collected in this issue, to make of this experience of ending a kind of possibility in its own right, a kind of beauty born of its own despair. This is in part because the work that we spent the day reflecting on and celebrating – Royle's body of work, as it animates and extends the work of deconstruction – is not extinguished by its encounter with ending, or with apocalypse (apocalypse, as it happens, was the subject of Royle's DPhil thesis on Stevens). Rather, it is powered by it. As Frank Kermode writes, in *The Sense of an Ending*, 'we have a deep need for intelligible ends'. 'We project ourselves past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle'.[7] The apocalypse, as Derrida writes in 1984, in relation to the sense of an ending associated with the 'nuclear age', does not happen. 'No Apocalypse, Not Now,' as the title of Derrida's essay puts it.[8] The apocalypse does not come, but 'the hypothesis of this total destruction watches over deconstruction, it guides its footsteps; it becomes possible to recognize, in the light, so to speak, of that hypothesis, of that fantasy, or phantasm, the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed'.[9] The encounter with an apocalypse that does not come gives rise to deconstruction, and to literature, and to the very possibility of literary thinking.

The sense of an ending that we all felt on June 23 2023 was not, then, so much the result of a project coming to an end as it was the medium of a certain kind of Royleian thinking, that took shape before us, as paper followed paper. While each of the papers was strikingly different, they collectively produced a picture or an impression of that many-sided thinking, as it unfolds within the fantasy or phantasm of ending, while extending past the threshold of the end into a new kind of future (a phenomenon that Derrida calls '*survivance*').[10] This collective thinking was guided, in part, by the figure of telepathy, which was the subject of Royle's first book, *Telepathy and Literature* (1990), and which recurs in many of the papers gathered in this issue. What kind of shared thinking does literature allow? How does telepathy take thinking past the boundary of the individual mind, or of the 'omniscient narrator', and into what Maurice Blanchot calls the 'space of literature'?[11] Royle's interest in telepathy is sustained throughout his subsequent work (there is a chapter in *The Uncanny* entitled 'The "telepathy effect"'), where it becomes part of his larger thinking about *strangeness*, the strangeness of literary experience (he calls telepathy in that chapter in *The Uncanny* 'this strange feature of literary fiction').[12] Royle quotes, on a number of occasions, a line that is shared, with slight variations, by Proust, Deleuze and Freud, a line which touches on this strangeness. Proust writes, in *Against Sainte-Beuve*, that 'Beautiful books are written in a sort of foreign language', a language which remains strange, even to itself.[13] Deleuze takes this line as the epigraph to his collection *Essays Critical and Clinical*, where he suggests that it helps us to understand 'the effect of literature in language'. 'As Proust says', Deleuze writes, literature

> opens up a kind of foreign language within language, which is neither another language nor a rediscovered patois, but a becoming other of language, a minorization of this major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch's line that escapes the dominant system.[14]

Literature, for Deleuze and Proust, subjects language to a kind of delirium, a kind of irreducible foreignness; and, for Freud, this same effect is produced by the work of psychoanalysis. For, Freud writes, 'we ourselves' (meaning psychoanalysts?) 'speak a language that is foreign'.[15] 'So much', Royle writes in *The Uncanny*, 'that we might try to think about the uncanny is condensed into this remarkable, cryptic and perhaps rigorously unreadable observation that Freud seems simply to throw off in passing'.[16]

Psychoanalysis and literature make language foreign to itself, put language aside from itself, in ways that resonate with the strangeness, the extended reach of telepathy. And this making unfamiliar of our most familiar relations with our language and our self is what lies at the heart both of Freud's *The Uncanny*, and of Royle's *The Uncanny.* The coming together of the strangeness of telepathy with the experience of the uncanny is at work in many of the essays published here (in a fashion which takes on its own telepathic logic). The essays touch on the range of Royle's work, from *Telepathy and Literature*, to *The Uncanny* (2003) and *Veering* (2011) to his books on Elizabeth Bowen (1995) (with Andrew Bennett), E. M. Forster (1999) and Derrida (1995, 2003, 2009), to his *Introduction to literature, Criticism and Theory* (2023, 6th ed.) (also with Andrew Bennett), to his generically mobile works of fiction and memoir, *Quilt* (2010), *An English Guide to Birdwatching* (2017), *Mother: A Memoir* (2020). And as they do so, they generate or bear witness to a Royleian complex, a set of vocabularies and thought-machines that are unique to him, and that are the consequence of his engagement with the relation between literature and theory as it extends from 1967 to 2023 and beyond. Mind reading, yes, and its association with the Freudian uncanny; the thought of the ghostly and the spectral; the experience of deferred effect; the quirks of the quick, as captured in the practice of quick fiction; the relation between human and nonhuman animals; the experience of veering; the work of mourning and memoir; the temporality of climate change. And these modes of inquiry are all contained within a thinking of the strange, literature as inescapably, wonderfully and fascinatingly *strange*.

The papers delivered on that day brought this range of thinking and writing to a peculiarly intense kind of presence, in a way that the essays collected here seek to capture and preserve. But the work that was perhaps most in the air on the 23rd June, was, appropriately enough, one that, at that time, did not exist. This was Royle's book, *David Bowie, Enid Blyton and the Sun Machine*, which some of us had read in proof, but which was not published until after the event, not until November 2023.

It was in keeping with the temporal effects of this event, and its relation with a sense of the ending, that this particular book should appear in this particular way. The reference to the book, repeated through the day, had a strange effect on tense, as captured in the title of David Wills's talk (delivered, on the day, by Zoom): 'Speculative Fiction: What Nicholas Royle will have written in *David Bowie, Enid Blyton and the Sun Machine*, which I haven't read'. It appeared out of time, and the book itself is in part a reflection on the untimely, and on the untimeliness of the ending. In an unclassifiable mix of genres, it offers a reflection on the work of Blyton and Bowie, which is also a love song to the sustaining power of art – of music, literature and painting. At its heart is an imaginary lecture series, given by an academic at the close of his career, who has recently decided to take 'voluntary severance'. The lectures, which discuss Bowie and Blyton, but which range widely over the history of art and literature, are entitled 'A Sense of the Ending' ('The phrase', the imaginary lecturer says, 'is in playful homage to Frank Kermode's celebrated book of 1967, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*').[17] Kermode, he says, 'was the examiner of my PhD, back in 1984', which was 'about imagination, war and apocalypse in the later poetry of Wallace Stevens' (p. 28). The dates recur. 1967 is the date that Briggs became the Vice Chancellor of Sussex, and that Derrida publishes his three books. 1984 is the date of Derrida's essay, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now'.

The lectures in *The Sun Machine* produce some of the melancholy that we all experienced on that day, some of the sense that a period in the history of the university has passed away. The book is in some respects an elegy to the university, to the space for reflection and literary thinking that it made available, and that both contemporary government education policy, and the wider dispersal of the utopian energies of 1961, are imperilling. The university, as it appears in *The Sun Machine*, is, in the words of Royle's late friend and colleague Bill Readings, a 'university in ruins'.[18] But if this is so, it is central to everything that happens in this book that the ending has not happened, that the university, as an idea and an institution, is still to come. The sun machine, as it is conceived in this book, is an apparatus for generating light, the light of that long summer day in June 2023, the light that is contained in the work of art. This is the light that shines in Wallace Stevens's poetry – the subject of Royle's PhD – as Stevens and Kermode come together, in *The Sun Machine*, to produce an apocalyptic sense, the apocalypse that has not happened, and that 'watches over deconstruction', 'guides its footsteps'. Stevens's poetry begins by 'perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world, / The inconceivable idea of the sun'.[19] 'How clean the sun' Stevens writes,

> when seen in its idea,
>
> Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
>
> That has expelled us and our images… (p. 331)

Stevens's poetry is a sun machine as, for Royle's imaginary lecturer, 'a book would be a sun machine. A work of light'. 'The book', Royle writes, 'generates, reflects and carries its own sun'.[20] *The Sun Machine* had not yet happened on the day of the symposium, but in its not happening it was only behaving, in exemplary fashion, as all literature behaves. Like every book, it was waiting to be read in order to happen, installing within itself a kind of deferral that is central to the way that a work of the imagination becomes its own power source, gaining access to the pristine space from which the idea of the sun itself originates, the way it shines when seen in its idea. Whatever sense of an ending suffuses the lectures which *The Sun Machine* contains, that sense has to contend with the fact that the book is always, only now, about to begin, that it has not ever yet begun, and that it is still in process of perceiving the idea of its own invention, becoming its own light source.

The papers that were delivered on the day of the symposium, and the essays that are collected in this issue, are a tribute to the light that shines in Royle's work. The community of thinkers gathered here – from across continents and disciplines – constitutes, in itself, a kind of university. It testifies to a continued investment in cross disciplinary literary thinking that is true to the spirit that inaugurated Sussex in 1961, and that lay behind Derrida's outpouring of ideas in 1967. It is true that in the Sussex lecture theatre in 2023 some things were drawing to a close; but only to the extent that the sense of an ending involves, necessarily, an address to the future. What thrills through this work is a kind of *survivance*, in Derrida's term. 'The survivance of a book', Derrida writes, 'is a living-dead machine'. It is a 'dead thing that resuscitates each time a breath of living reading […] makes it live again by animating it'.[21] This is a kind of life that lives on through its encounter with the Yeatsian dying of the generations, and that we draw on now, as a new world unfolds before us. That we commend, all summer long.

[1]NOTES

See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[2] See Asa Briggs, *The Map of Learning* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1961).

[3] Asa Briggs, 'The Distinction of Sussex', In *Times Higher Education Supplement*, December 31, 1971, p. 10.

[4] See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2016), trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge 2001), trans Alan Bass; Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomena: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), trans. Leonard Lawlor.

[5] See Nicholas Royle, 'Nor is Deconstruction, in *Oxford Literary Review*, 5 (1982), pp. 170-77.

[6] W. B. Yeats, 'Among School Children', in W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 1990), p 243, 244.

[7] Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, p. 8.

[8] Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', in *Diacritics*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer, 1984), pp. 20-31.

[9] Derrida, 'No Apocalypse', p. 27.

[10] See Derrida, 'No Apocalypse', p. 28: 'The only referent that is absolutely real is thus of the scope or dimension of an absolute nuclear catastrophe that would irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity, would destroy the "movement of survival," what I call "survivance," at the very heart of life'.

[11] See Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), trans. Ann Smock.

[12] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 256.

[13] Marcel Proust, *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other* Essays (London: Penguin, 1988), trans. John Sturrock, p. 93.

[14] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998), trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, p. 5.

[15] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, in *The Penguin Freud Library,* vol. 14, *Art and Literature* (London: Penguin, 1985), trans. James Strachey, p. 341.

[16] Royle, *Uncanny*, p. 19.

[17] Nicholas Royle, *David Bowie, Enid Blyton and the Sun Machine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), p. 28.

[18] See Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[19] Wallace Stevens, 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction', in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 331.

[20] Royle, *Sun Machine*, p. 38.

[21] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & the* Sovereign, vol. II (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011), trans. Geoffrey Bennington, p. 131.