

# Literary Theory— The Long and the Very Short of It

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## Review Article

*Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*

by Jonathan Culler

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For those of us in the literary studies 'game' who grow ever more baffled, if not outright scared, by the plethora of material being produced on literary theory every year the title of this book could not be more appealing. Is there not perhaps a hidden promise of the quick overnight 'fix' that will miraculously resolve all anxieties about this abstrusely conceptual, and often horribly philosophical area that those in the discipline find themselves increasingly forced to venture into in order to be sure that they and their ideas are still current and still making good academic 'sense'?

Culler's, book which is suspiciously about the same length, breadth and thickness of the dreaded and despised undergraduate's study guide (fitting snugly into the average sized top pocket of a shirt or bomber jacket), certainly bucks what would appear to be the current trend towards the mega-collection, a prime example of which would be the recently published anthology of theoretical material edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (1998). This all-inclusive 1000 page plus solid tome, which constitutes the absolute polar opposite to Culler's book on the literary theory book size spectrum, contains everything under the sun from Marx and Hegel, through Bakhtin and Horkheimer/Adorno to Malcolm McClaren and would seem to be an indispensable addition to the libraries of all those readers who are interested in literary theory or need to acquaint themselves with a representative slice or sample of theoretical writing that includes many of the most seminal pieces of analysis or inquiry. For quite different reasons, they should also think seriously about Culler's book, whose great merits (and minor failings) I hope to present in the course of this

review—never sacrificing depth for accessibility, it would make a useful addition to any literary student's or literary academic's library of indispensable theory texts. It certainly should not be dismissed out of hand—which might be the initial reaction of those who pride themselves on their knowledge of the terrain. Theorists and analysts of the postmodern (many of whom have, or believe they have, acquired the status of intellectual gurus) might be tempted to see in a work of such abbreviation, yet another troubling 'sign' of the consumer commodification of the academic world, the equivalent of such postmodern phenomena as the two-minute media byte, and the theme parking of cultural history, here taking the shape of a rather opportunistic exploitation of a particular market (undergraduates in literary studies flummoxed by the now inescapably theoretical bent of the field, as the 'monster' that is literary theory becomes an ever more important component of literary studies at even its most basic level).

Notoriously difficult to write, as I am sure many of us know all too well, introductions can be problematical—since it is the natural assumption of a reader that they point towards greater knowledge, in part the greater knowledge of an author who feels we are not up to encountering the main course, the thing itself: hard theory, at this stage. Pointing the reader on that road, (and for this reason they have to be very reader-centred) they can have a dangerous power, since they are likely to shape and frame reader attitudes for years to come. For this reason I am glad that Culler's introduction is nothing if not balanced and level-headed, qualities that he has managed to combine with an ability to be imaginative and innovative in his approach to conceptual issues and problems in the field. As his text proves: the subject, Literature, needs a theory that is prepared to move or think laterally: that it can be fluid and flexible enough to articulate a sense of what this most fluid, flexible and open-ended institution/ phenomenon can achieve. If it is in the nature of the subject, Literature, to demand innovativeness and subtlety from its theory (and theorists) then Culler certainly does not disappoint: innovativeness is the book's most impressive feature. This quality proves to be particularly important in allowing Culler to articulate a finely balanced both-and /neither-nor 'double' sense of Literature, of theory and of the relationship between them, which allows him to avoid the pitfalls of the usual chronological accounts, as well as the kind of ideological bias that has sometimes marred Terry Eagleton's forays into this area.

Whilst there is nothing in Culler even remotely like the polemicism we find barely beneath the surface of Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), Culler's and Eagleton's texts share a common appraisal of the corrective capacity, and for this reason the necessity of theory, particularly in confirming the constructedness and relativity of the notions of social identity that are so often 'naturalized' as part of the strategies of ideological dominance. Culler's sense of the possible abuse of theory as 'a source of intimidation' and 'resource for constant

upstagings' does produce the book's one moment of satirical inflection, as he mocks the unfortunate prescriptivism heard all too often in seminar and common rooms around the world:

'What? you haven't read Lacan! How can you talk about the lyric without addressing the specular constitution of the speaking subject/ Or 'how can you write about the Victorian novel without using Foucault's account of the deployment of sexuality and the hystericization of women's bodies and Gayatri Spivak's demonstration of the role of colonialism in the construction of the metropolitan subject? (p15)

Ultimately such voices do the discipline no favours. Discourse is power—and Foucault's analyses (that is simultaneously a critique) of discourse as power has with no small irony itself become a pretty potent power discourse for some upwardly mobile academic autocrats.

In my view, what we have in Culler's book is an instance where condensation and precision go hand-in-hand, producing a very small volume that is paradoxically (at times astonishingly so), a work of synthesis, one however that does not claim to answer all the questions, and in no way appears to wish to deny or limit the object of its inquiry. In fact, it presents a whole new re-contextualisation of Literature which emphasises literature as a 'paradoxical' institution, its own both-and/ neither-nor 'double' (to use the term I used earlier). The way he defines Literature raises all sorts of interesting issues/ questions and avenues for further thought and inquiry. On page 27 we are told that literature is 'an institutional label that gives us reason to expect that the results of our reading efforts will be 'worth it' (one can almost sense the Zen master's knowing smile at the impatient young deconstructionist desperate to see the text crack under the pressure of his desiccating intellect, and to observe its semiotic codes unravel, thrillingly unfold with the speed of a computer printout. On page 41 he tells us (and this should be taken as a salutary warning) that literature is as much cultural 'noise' as it is cultural information.

However one defines literature one should always err on the side of the hopelessly open-ended and totally implausible. As Culler points out—literature gives its name to both the utterly conventional *and* to the utterly disruptive. It is the only place where a Jane Austen and a Jean Genet can be said to have anything in common. And where, as readings change and new times and fashions give their own sense to literary texts, yesterday's prim and proper New England spinster, can become the unrepentantly Dionysian Madame de Sade of Amerhurst<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Camille Paglia's potent re-reading of Emily Dickenson's 'Sadean' poetry in the final chapter of *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickenson* (1992).

In articulating these positions (informed by a sense of the excessive and resistant qualities of language and linguistic meaning) Culler produces gem-like moments of incisiveness as he cuts through those standard old issues and debates that have outlived their usefulness<sup>2</sup>. His philosophical sensitivity to language<sup>3</sup> and to the way in which theoretical problems simply dissolve in the face of linguistic understanding reminds me of Wittgenstein, a problem-dissolving philosopher whose best work also tended to appear in slight volumes. Culler ventures into an area that seems peculiar to Wittgenstein when he presents the idea of the 'game' of Literature—that to play the (language) game of Literature one has to accept the symbolical and the paradoxical and eschew the literal and the obvious. Thus to answer the question 'what is Hamlet about?' in a way that *doesn't* immediately refer to symbolic meaning/ psychological truth or ideological forces shows that you are not versed in the rules of this particular game.

To put the matter of Culler's brevity less philosophically, what has allowed him to produce so self-consciously slim an introduction to literary theory is that he has simply trimmed off all the fat—avoiding all the non-issues and non-questions and cutting to the chase (or rather, to what he perceives the chase to be). Unerringly, Culler homes in on the crucial questions (of a philosophical, political or institutional nature) that have been posed by the impact of the new on established notions. The net achievement is surely to get readers (many of whom will be undergraduate students) to think more critically and self-reflexively about the wider issues that relate to the study of Literature and the reading and interpretation of literary texts. In an ideal universe (which contains at least one dedicated undergraduate student who reads and thinks, per university course per university) this will at least incline (inspire being no longer in the teacher's lexicon) students to raise their own questions of meaning and relevance. One of the more crucial questions regarding the continued status and meaning of Literature emerges from his analysis of the relationship between the study of Literature (since the advent of New Criticism characterised by the practice of 'close reading') and the developing field of Cultural Studies with its more natural

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<sup>2</sup> An example of such a false issue would be the issue of the 'inside' versus the 'outside' of Literature, that Tony Bennett addresses with such rigidity (dare I say monolithic brutality?) in *Outside Literature* (1990). The issue collapses as Culler finds his own neither/ nor solution: 'sometimes the object has features that make it literary but sometimes it is the literary context that makes us treat it as literature' (p 27).

<sup>3</sup> The philosophical astuteness on display here is largely a product of Culler's use of the ideas of two key contemporary philosophers. At a number of points Culler makes clear his indebtedness to the feminist philosopher Juliet Butler, and Anthony Appiah, the philosopher of language.

inclination towards sociological and semiotic perspectives. Culler raises the issue (and it is also clearly a concern) that if this intrinsic skill of close reading, the practice that really defines the study of Literature as something distinctive, is lost or excluded, then the discipline will become little more than a branch of sociology.

Thus whereas Culler has clearly sacrificed any kind of breadth, the same cannot, surprisingly, be said for depth as he presents a cohesive, convincing, a thoroughly level-headed narrative of such a wide and constantly burgeoning field as it pursues its major focus, what he characterises as being 'the major shifts in interpretation brought about by shifts in theoretical discourses'.

True to his concern with literary theory as 'a force in institutions' rather than 'a disembodied set of ideas' (p. 123) Culler has structured his text around the key questions and areas of debate within literary theory, producing a volume that does not attempt to present any kind of survey of modern or contemporary literary theories, though it does include a useful appendix of theoretical schools and movements. Culler shows that theory is a term that not only has a history and a politics, but is something ingrained. For Culler theory (all theory, not just literary theory) involves a process of challenge, debate and revision, it is a process that is never complete, and which should never take itself for granted<sup>4</sup>:

Theory then offers not a set of solutions but the prospect of further thought. It calls for commitment to the work of reading, of challenging presuppositions, of questioning the assumptions on which you proceed (p. 122)

Yet, if for Culler it is quite clear that the tried and trusted old assumptions no longer hold, that nothing can be taken for granted and that everything has to be argued for, I also sense to some degree, an inclination to treat the new orthodoxies in the same way. Readers may be surprised at my arriving at this conclusion since Culler would seem to take so much of the new orthodoxies on board. However, he never gives us the impression of feeling constrained to mouth the usual post-Saussurean platitudes. The case of how he uses Saussure is indicative: Saussure is presented as the 'place' where people approaching theory for the first time need to re-orientate themselves, and yet having made this fairly predictable (if not unavoidable) first move, he starts to make all kinds of innovative and imaginative applications and extensions of the very arguments and material that seemed so staid and unexciting in that dull classic *Structuralist Poetics* (if anyone still uses this text to teach structuralist theory I would be most surprised!) (1975). That Culler's status as one of *the* gurus of Structuralist Theory remains undiminished is evidenced by the fact that Culler wrote the

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<sup>4</sup> Here Culler has much in common with Terry Eagleton.

introduction to the section in Rivkin and Ryan devoted to Structuralism ('Structuralism and Linguistics'), the only other 'guest' to provide an introduction to a particular section being Louis Montrose (for the section devoted to historicist modes of interpretation).

Consequently, what we have here is a text in which Culler's skill as a taxonomist underpins his philosophical acumen and imaginative insight as he mixes standard 'new' positions and very innovative applications and extensions of this thinking. Particularly impressive is his use of the concept of performative language something that is also explored with exciting results by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (1995), to produce what is in effect, something of a redefinition of Literature—a redefinition that asserts the value and significance of this artistic/communicative form. He asserts that, as performative, Literature 'takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world' (p. 98). In the chapter on performative language, the significance of which I have already attested to, his theory of poetical 'extravagance' is a gem, and his exploration of the theoretical *aporia* between poem as verbal structure and poem as event is most stimulating for any reader interested in poetry as both form and phenomenon.

This would come as something of a surprise to the reader after the much more predictable tack of the first few pages where Culler assumes what may not seem to be but are in fact by now very conventional stances—as when in the first chapter 'What is Theory' he presents a very potted history of representation in Western Philosophy from the obligatory 'already-deconstructed by Derrida' post-structuralist perspective. This is of course the starting point that we would expect a deconstructive elucidator to take. As is the case with philosophical issues, the implications from an in-house dispute about the old Platonic distinction between appearance and reality can have enormous implications from practices in the conceptual frameworks of other disciplines. One small step for Derrida, this metaphysical exercise in deconstructing Rousseau's notion of writing as 'supplement' one giant leap for literary-lecturer kind. Derrida makes a very early entry into the text (first mentioned on p. 2 and then dealt with more substantively on p. 5), and Foucault enters on p. 9 (re his analysis of the relationship between power and sexuality, and the extreme denaturalisation of the idea of the sexual). Culler makes the case for the striking difference between them, the one concentrating on texts, as theorist of the literary in theory, the other concentrating on social practices and formations as the revealer of the power strategies of discourse.

As he runs through the possible (and limited) definitions of the term 'Literature'—from the Russian Formalist/Prague Structuralist notion of 'Literature as the "foregrounding" of language', through to 'Literature as Fiction', as 'aesthetic object' and as 'intertextual/self-reflexive construct', the strengths and limits of these perspectives are demonstrated in shedding light on the idea of the literary. No quick

and final answers are provided: the Formalist and Structuralist positions whose positions on the issue of the distinctiveness and difference of Literature as a category could not be further apart are explored, but are rejected in favour of a perspective that addresses the issue of readers, social/ institutional conventions and of the way Literature (or what sets out to be received as Literature) is received and the uses to which it is put. Here another hard-line absolutism is neatly avoided—that of Tony Bennett's rigid contextualism (which we can paraphrase as 'the meaning of a literary text = the use/ uses to which it is put'). The clear inference to be drawn is that no perspective is ever complete—that all we can hope for is an interesting and stimulating partiality that will always lead elsewhere. For Culler the incompleteness of theory is not only the reason for its pervasiveness, but is its entire *raison d'être*. It is also the reason why theory and Literature can have a harmonious marriage—because they are both so 'free'. The incompleteness of theory suits what he sees as Literature's 'Entropic', 'resistant' and 'paradoxical' qualities (see p. 41). Paradox (not in the limited sense of the term that is cursed by its association with American New Criticism) proves in Culler's adept hands to be a way of cutting through some of the thornier conundrums in literary theory—his convincing, rather 'lateral' analysis of literary universals being a prime example.

Following the chapters in which he analyses the relationship between Literature and cultural studies, Culler moves on to deal with issues of language, meaning and interpretation. After this we have the two chapters dealing with genre, both of which assert the primacy of literary modes or devices in all discursive practices, including the decidedly non-literary (metaphor being the focus of the first of these two chapters, and narrative the second). This is the most conveniently overlooked of all the major claims made by post-structuralist theory: Derrida's big point about the pervasiveness of the metaphorical and rhetorical strategies of writing in all textual/ discursive practices (formalising much of what Nietzsche had presented with characteristic energy in his aphoristic critiques of the rationalist style and content of philosophy). The logical conclusion here is one that seems to inform Culler's book at a fundamental level: Literature is not peripheral, its strategies are inescapable, ingrained in the very nature of language.

Culler's deep identification with this line of thought gives the book a nice self-reflexive quality: having made an important contribution to the field of literary theory in the ways that I have suggested, and all within less than 150 pages, the book would as a narrative achievement, seem to embody its own observations regarding the ubiquitousness and significance of narrative strategies.

In the closing chapters Culler covers the familiar Althusserian/ Lacanian/ Foucauldian ground of subjectivity and identity. Whilst the chapter dealing with the latter (entitled 'Identity, Identification and the Subject') is nothing like as pivotal to Culler's book as the equivalent chapters in Bennett and Royle's are to their

construction of the central issues of the field, Culler moves in a similar direction towards the notion that psychological identification/ projection is the key not only to understanding the process whereby texts are read and textual meanings produced, but also provides an important perspective on the moral debates that surround Literature, primarily in relation to the concern with the way in which it affects its readers (a concern that goes right back to Plato's Republic). However 'balanced' an account he wishes to present, Culler subscribes to the view that rather than being a conservative or reactionary force or institution, Literature is something whose natural tendencies are towards challenging, provoking and subverting the established and accepted—and as such is more likely to align itself with liberal and radical forms of thinking. After his discussion of the diametrically opposed positions on the politics of Literature on their merits we are left feeling that it is right to be more inclined towards seeing literary texts as sites of resistance rather than forces for compliance, that because of the presence of the potentially subversive extensions and applications of the text's tendency to constitute an expression of the uncanny/ indefinable/ excessive/ undecidable, the default position should be one in which we expect and look for qualities that confound, if not actively resist, the stereotypical values and perceptions of the social and political elite, even if this elite should control the means of literary production.

On the negative side, Culler's book does not situate itself adequately enough in relation to the issues that surround Literature and its theory, not so much in relation to each other (he is, as I hope to have suggested, very good on this score) but in relation to the wider socio-cultural world, particularly a world that is developing in particular economic and cultural directions that are associated with the terms 'postmodern' and 'late-capitalist'. Here a contrast with the Rivkin and Ryan anthology to which I have previously referred, is both useful and salutary. Whereas Rivkin and Ryan's attempt to be as inclusive as possible, and to focus on the question of the interface/ dialogue/ dialectic between theory and socio-cultural reality, Culler's view of literary theory does seem removed from the practicalities of life and politics, for all its commendable openness, and despite its commitment to post-Saussurean problematisations of notions of finality and completeness. The inclusiveness that Rivkin and Ryan have made every effort to achieve gives the reader a strong sense of, and with this an appreciation of, the postmodern social context that theory cannot help addressing and is inevitably a part of<sup>5</sup>. In the light of this shortcoming, it is a

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<sup>5</sup> Of particular importance here is the debate over the continued significance of theory in a postmodern world where everything is changing with ever increasing rapidity (and thus there is no time to step back and pause to make critical judgements and assessments) and where with the total saturation of the social environment by the image, particularly the electronic image, the whole Western notion of a distinction

pity that Culler did not at least give a nod towards the dissident figures in literary studies who challenge the contribution that theory has made to what they themselves characterise as our postmodern/ late-capitalist socio-cultural malaise. My intuition is that there is much common ground between these critiques and the thinking that informs Culler's 'packaging' of the field. Perhaps the reason for this silence is Culler's optimism, grounded in an implicit faith that his own openness and generosity towards Literature is shared by academic colleagues working in the same field (some of whom I fear would like nothing better than to see Literature deconstructed out of existence, no longer a recalcitrant and reactionary obstacle to the logic of utopian solutions). Culler's readers should at least have been left with an inkling that the situation in literary theory and in the literary academic world is not always as rosy as his book suggests. Not all literary theorists and critics approach their subject with such openness and generosity.

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between appearance and reality, between the copy and the original begins to founder. Baudrillard and the theorists most influenced by his thinking such as Hebdige and Jameson have focussed upon the implications of this development for our rapidly disappearing theory-confident modernist/industrial world.

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