

Literary Studies Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

An Interview with Jonathan Culler

Jonathan Culler stands today as one of the most influential scholars of literature – and historian scholars of literary theory. The following interview provides only the snapshot of Culler’s significant presence and influence through his decades of scholarship and teaching in university classrooms. As we follow his path from Harvard (B.A. 1966) to Oxford (Rhodes Scholar and M.Phil 1968) through to his dissertation work at Oxford (D.Phil. 1972), followed by his directorship of modern languages at Cambridge (1969-1974) to his life-time career at Cornell (since 1977), Culler has singularly dedicated his career to formally exploring the theoretical frameworks that might best open literature to how we as readers explore and create meaning in its apprehension. As such, we see Culler’s scholarly journey zigzag in and through insights from philosophy (Phenomenology, for instance), linguistics, anthropology, and semiotics (Structuralism, for instance).

Culler’s early scholarly maneuvers happened with the publication of *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* in 1975 followed by his extremely influential article “Beyond Interpretation: The Prospects of Contemporary Criticism” (1976). In a move to complicate and even push away from a tradition of fetishizing the reading of literature (New Criticism) or its interpretation as perceptual and experiential (Phenomenology), Culler began to articulate a more capacious approach: one that at once sought to enrich understanding of how underlying structures produced meaning all while being aware of the activity of interpretation itself. That is, Culler here and in his other books is less interested in following a school of thought or theoretical movement, but rather in constantly exploring how we might construct intelligible frameworks for understanding how we as readers handle gaps between meaning and experience that we constantly come across in literature. In this way, as we move from one to another of Culler’s books such as *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1982), *Barthes* (1983), his coedited *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena* (2003), and *The Literary in Theory* (2007), we see the deep impulse to sidestep oppositional thinking and shun any leanings toward a unified theory or approach to the study of literature. To wit, to read Culler’s scholarly corpus is to read the journey of an intellect that seeks not to produce the way of interpreting literature (Structuralism, Deconstruction, New Historicism, Cultural Studies, say), but to consider theory and interpretation as one of many ways in which we can and do derive a pleasure in our

meaningful encounters with literature. In this sense, Culler's career is also that of a historian who seeks to trace the ebbs and flows of literary theory, all while keeping the joys and wonders of the literary encounter front and center. In his scholarly tracing, Culler seeks the path of clarity and transparency in ideas and in writing; he's allergic to obscurantism and unintelligible writing. In many ways, *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) is the culmination of all this. His beautifully composed exploration of the poetry of Sappho and Horace through Goethe, Lorca, Williams, and Ashbery sharply focuses our attention on how each poet creates poems (their interior workings) that transcend linear historical development and containment.

Winner of many prestigious awards and fellowships, including the Guggenheim Fellowship, as well as inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, Jonathan Culler is Class of 1916 Professor of English and Comparative Literature in the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell and has served as Secretary of the American Council of Learned Societies and as Chair of the New York Council for the Humanities.

Aldama: You were born in Cleveland and grew up in New Haven, then attended Harvard for your B.A. and went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar for your Ph.D. Is there more to this story?

Culler: During the war, my mother was living with my grandmother in Cleveland. But I grew up in New Haven because my father was a professor at Yale. He didn't get tenure at Yale, so we moved to University of Illinois where he published a book that caught the eye of the President of Yale who hired him back with tenure. For me, attending Harvard and Oxford was a way to get away from home. I spent 11 years in England altogether. I was there for three years at Oxford, and then got a job in Cambridge for five, and then came back to Oxford for three, another three. And it was during the time at Oxford that I came to Yale as a visiting professor for a term. At that point, I received an offer from Cornell and another from Irvine; but then – 1976 – Irvine was really just getting started. I came to Cornell in 1977 and have been there 40 years.

Aldama: Your first book published was on Flaubert...

Culler: This was happenstance. I was teaching at Cambridge when I met an editor at a cocktail party who asked if I'd like to write a book on some particular author. I was teaching Flaubert, so offered this as a possibility. Soon after, I signed a contract. Having a contract for a book when you're young can be very useful. It set a deadline that I had to have it finished by. I wrote it quickly with a certain enthusiasm and elan as a young Turk going to set everybody right about Flaubert. I wouldn't necessarily say I like it best of all my books, but I'm certainly very fond of it. It has a boldness others lack.

Then I went back and revised the dissertation, which was published as *Structuralist Poetics*. My dissertation director was Stephen Ullmann, who wrote books

on style and French prose or style and the French novel. He wanted me to put in references to how other non-structuralists treated this or that issue. So, the revision was basically taking all that out and making it just about structuralism.

Aldama: You've written several made-to-order books, including on literary theory and Roland Barthes. Was this liberating for you as a scholar?

Culler: Yes, writing for a deadline, with a purpose and audience in mind is definitely liberating. This type of made-to-order writing of books would be useful for young scholars today. I think it would be very enabling for them: instead of sweating over their dissertation and hoping that somebody will publish it, not knowing when to stop revising, etc. What if departments hired young scholars with the idea that they would write a specific book to be delivered on such and such a date and with a particular audience in mind? That would be very liberating.

Aldama: What literary theorists might you single out as admiring? Was there a group that you found a particular affinity with?

Culler: I had immense admiration for Barbara Johnson and her mastery of the short essay form, plunging into the middle of a poem without having to explain why it was important contextually. She would take a line from a poem or whatever and begin to analyze with absolute confidence. The results are really remarkable.

There wasn't a group per se that I found a particular affinity with. Remember, I was in England when I wrote what would become *Structuralist Poetics*. At the time, there weren't other scholars working on structuralism. At Oxford I knew more about this structuralism than my supervisor and other scholars. This gave me a certain confidence to write things that I wouldn't have felt had I gone to graduate school at Yale, where there were people sitting at the feet of de Man and who always felt intimidated by his enigmatic knowledge.

Aldama: You are well-known for teaching literary theory courses at Cornell, Jonathan. This seems to continue today. In 2017, you taught a graduate seminar on one of the high priests of critical theory: Jacques Derrida.

Culler: A group of graduate students persuaded me to teach this course. I wouldn't have offered to do this, partly because I haven't been trying to keep up with all the translations of all the seminars and other publications about Derrida. (I had intended to teach a graduate seminar on Baudelaire and Hopkins). The seminar ended up being rather large: 30 students. I brought in scholars to guest lecture and participate in the seminar. This proved especially useful as I'm not enough of a philosopher to talk with authority about Derrida in relationship to Husserl, Heidegger, and Kant, for instance.

For a long time, I taught every year a course titled "Literature and Theory." It was a joint undergraduate-graduate course on Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan.

It comprised lectures by me and discussion sections run by graduate students. And, I've team-taught with Cathy Caruth the course, "Literary Theory on the Edge." While I don't teach the big theory courses anymore, other of my colleagues do. I think it's good to have a course that's offered regularly that has a reputation that undergraduates will think everybody ought to take this at some point.

Aldama: Literary theory has been an important part of your teaching and your scholarship. However, you've always brought a level-headed approach to its use.

Culler: Yes, both *Structuralist Poetics* and *On Deconstruction* sought to present and explain this material to Anglophone audiences. That does not preclude evaluation, of course, but the goal was to analyze these movements or modes of discourse and identify what seemed more important and potentially productive for literary studies. When I published *On Deconstruction* in 1982, I said right upfront that for deconstructive criticism we have to look to scholars other than Derrida; when Derrida writes about literary texts, he's counter-signing; he's making use of them in various ways, but he's not undertaking analyses to show how they undermine the philosophical oppositions on which they rely or on which they assert. That's something he does when he's dealing with Plato or Rousseau, for instance. I was interested in the mechanisms of a deconstructive reading rather than actually carrying out a deconstructive reading.

Aldama: Is there a school of critical thought that you gravitate toward more in your scholarship?

Culler: I've always been more interested in trying to figure out how literature *functions* – and less interested in discovering new interpretations. In this sense, I've always been inclined toward developing a poetics rather than a hermeneutics. I'm really a structuralist at heart.

Aldama: Where might New Historicism fit into your evolution as a scholar?

Culler: Back in the day, I spent a lot of time attempting to do historicist work on Baudelaire, reading texts on prostitution and all the sort of topics with which he was engaged. But these notes remain in folders. I don't have the Stephen Greenblatt magic, where he can go into a library and somehow a historical text will come to him that will illuminate the literary work and vice versa.

Uncovering histories of reception is more central to my work than trying to reinsert literary works into historical context. In my retirement, I'd like to return to the project on Baudelaire, especially looking at how his work was received.

I find that attending to a work's reception alerts you to different frameworks, different possibilities for thinking about the literature in question. It opens the possibility of formally exploring what your predecessors have said

about the work, and then allows you to announce what you think about it. In this way, it's not only a theoretical approach, it's a strategy of writing.

Aldama: Your scholarship has always been less a critical theory for critical theory's sake, and more a model for how we might come to understand the co-creative (author, text, reader) process when reading literature.

Culler: That may be true, though I have always insisted that the purpose of literary theory is not to generate new readings; it is a subject in its own right. But in *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), I treated poems as objects that exist to be interpreted. I then saw my task as explaining how you get from this poem to the kinds of interpretations that critics produce when they write about the poems. I attended to the conventions that enable critics to make the moves that enable them to get from poem to interpretation. Scholars have tended to treat poetry as something that exists in order to give rise to interpretations, and I do this in *Structuralist Poetics*. In the more recent *The Theory of the Lyric* (2015), I consider interpreting to not be the end-all and be-all of poetry's existence and adopt quite a different approach.

It is interesting that we have defenses of literature but that nobody ever bothers to write defenses of songs. You know, people enjoy songs of all sorts, and don't feel that song has to be defended as something worthy of our attention. We just attend to them; we learn songs; we sing them, we enjoy them, etc. This seems to me significant. Why has literature become something that needs to be defended when singing does not?

Aldama: Literary theory has been shaped by a history by impulses known as New Criticism, Structuralism, Poststructuralism, New Historicism, Cultural Studies. What do you see happening in today's scholarship?

Culler: Well, in the age of Trump, literary studies seems necessarily to take on a political angle. Of course, it is partly that so many things we thought taken for granted have now been attacked that the range of topics that seem political has expanded. I am interested in the revival of narratology, including Unnatural Narratology – the work of Project Narrative scholars like you and your colleagues at Ohio State seems potentially productive. So, too, does what you and your colleagues have called “storytelling science”; the idea of understanding how stories are built in order to reverse engineer then tinker with stories to make them fresh and new. In general, systematic study of narrative is useful.

It used to be that criticism also served as evaluation: critics evaluated the success or failure of works they were studying. This dimension has dropped out of academic literary studies – we tend to choose only works that we think are very successful – except insofar as scholars evaluate works of the past for their complicity with various social problems and issues. We aren't generally evaluating them for their success or failure in performing literary operations. But I think it would be more valuable – and narrative studies could help here –

if students were to become engaged in understanding how narratives work or don't work, so they can argue why they work or don't work.

Aldama: Jonathan, since taking your professorship position at Cornell in 1977 to today you've seen so much change in how we theorize *and* teach literature. You've been a significant part of this change. Can you speak a little to how literary theory and literary studies might be relevant to students today?

Culler: There certainly was a time in the humanities when teaching critical theory was attractive to students. Students still get excited when I teach Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, for instance. Introducing students to critical theory as a new way to read literature and the world has worked very well. But teaching critical theory does not necessarily get students excited about literature. Nowadays, I am afraid I really don't have a good sense what actually works to get young students excited about the study of literature. I teach a large undergraduate course called "Major Poets," which works quite well, but the students who enroll are generally already fond of poetry. I think that what attracts them is that the course description specifies that one of the assumptions of the course is that there are other things to do with poems besides interpret them. Just as you can become a connoisseur of popular music without spending time attempting to determine what songs mean, so you can appreciate poetry without focusing on interpretation.

Aldama: In your work and as you've mentioned earlier in our conversation, when it comes to the study of literature you are more interested in formulating theories of reading than in identifying different interpretations. What is the difference between theory and interpretation?

Culler: I wouldn't say that my goal is formulating theories of reading, but I am not much interested in interpretation these days – especially interpretation as an academic exercise, as carried out in student papers or in publications. When I write about literature, I do, obviously, engage in some interpretation, but the goal is not to produce new, superior accounts of the meaning of a work. I am interested in the range of literary possibilities and how a work exploits some of them – in short, poetics.

Now the difference between hermeneutics and poetics is often blurred in practice, but in principle they move in opposite directions: given a text, hermeneutics wants to know what this text means; poetics, on the other hand, asks how it is that a text can have the meanings it does for its readers. It thus starts from meanings and works back towards features of the text.

Aldama: Looking back over your career, how might you characterize your sense of the concept of literary universals?

Culler: "Literary universal" is not a concept I have ever used. I confess I know nothing about non-Western literatures and think it would be arrogant to posit

universals on the basis of my limited knowledge. But I assume that the impulse to construct narratives, both to make sense of experience and to entertain, is pretty universal, and that most cultures have practices that exploit possibilities of play with the intricacies of language in rhythmic fashion. It is possible that cognitive science will come up with descriptions of structuring practices that can be deemed universal and are particularly relevant to literature, but I suspect that whatever Western science comes up with –whether cognitive science or poetics – will be a set of terms or categories that can be *applied* to the practices of diverse cultures more than features that can be directly observed in them. That is the way that theories of literature work generally, but to insist that they are universal seems overweening.

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