“Performance Anxieties, or Hitting on Theory”

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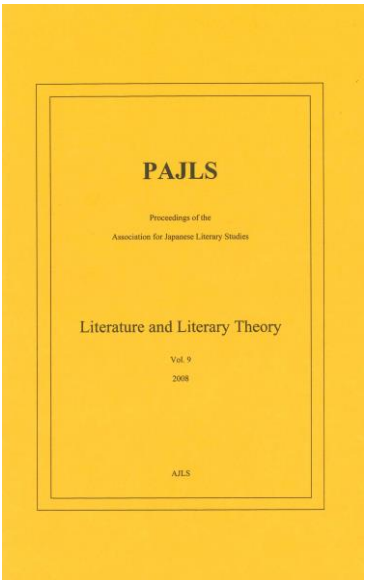

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Performance Anxieties, or Hitting on Theory

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The debate over whether there is an appropriate place for "theory" in the humanities that roiled the academy some thirty years ago has been settled for the most part. Whatever research methodologies, disciplinary assumptions, or modes of reading the word may refer to in its specific iterations, there can be little doubt that "theory" is now firmly entrenched in academic jargon. Although the particular uses of theory certainly vary widely among individual academics and programs (and here I include resistance to theory as itself a theoretical stance), the term has acquired a general institutional force as a broad, if somewhat vaguely defined standard for publication, pedagogy, curricular development, and, most important, promotion. Precisely because theory is now so central in the institutional configurations of the humanities—it is part of the scholarly atmosphere, if you will—it is more important than ever that we discuss the ramifications of its position; for even the most basic question of what we mean when we talk about theory provides an opportunity to reflect upon a range of issues—best practices in teaching, the moral and political significance of research, the place of the study of Japanese literary cultures in the American academy. Moreover, a consideration of how theory is understood and practiced allows us to consider fundamental concerns about the status of knowledge in the humanities.

These issues are taken up in Jonathan Culler's recent work, *The Literary in Theory*, where the current status of theory proves to be a surprising source of anxiety; surprising because Culler's own intellectual and institutional status is grounded on his explication and application of the uses of theory over many years. It seems odd that at this stage in his career Culler should feel so strongly compelled to defend the position of theory, especially since he offers a lucid, if somewhat fluid definition of it as a discourse, or set of discourses, that are "analytical, speculative, reflexive, interdisciplinary, and a counter to commonsense views."[1] This definition may be contestable, but it is not so controversial as to be out of the mainstream (in fact, I would argue that it *is* the mainstream understanding of the term). Culler, however, goes on to assert that theory is manifestly *not* a theory of literature, and notes that this situation has led to the complaint that theory takes students away from literature and literary values. His book, he tells us, is an attempt to counter that complaint by showing that the apparent eclipse of the literary by theory is an illusion.

Whatever the merits or flaws of Culler's general conception of theory, for the purpose of this paper I want to focus on the striking way in which he frames his defense of it. He rejects the complaint that theory takes us away from literature, but he also concedes the following point: "It is true, however, that work on language, desire, power, the body, and so on has led to a neglect of theoretical issues that are particular to literature and the system of the literary."[2] Culler even confesses his own contributions to this neglect, citing an article, "Literary Theory," he wrote for a 1992 MLA publication (*Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*). Looking back on that essay, he beats himself up: "Busy talking about race and gender, identity and agency, distracted by the notoriety of Knapp and Michaels's now largely forgotten

[1] Jonathan Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 4.
[2] Culler, *The Literary in Theory*, 5.

antitheory theory, *I inadvertently forgot the theory of literature*."[3] He then turns in dismay to look at today's graduate students—those poor benighted souls—and finds that they have little acquaintance with basic narratology. They know Foucault, but not Barthes or Genette much less Wayne Booth. Culler's project then, is not just to point out the literary in theory, but also to rectify what he concedes as the recent phenomenon of the eclipse of literature in theory. This concession threatens to render his whole defense incoherent.

Apart from his strained *mea culpa*, the most striking aspect of Culler's argument is the implication that there may be a fundamental divide between literature and theory, or, more precisely, between literary theory and theory as the term is more generally understood and applied in the humanities—that is, as modes of reading that emerge from a wide range of disciplinary discourses, many of which do not originate in literary studies. Although he goes to great lengths to dispel that implication, Culler's project suggests that he takes it to be a serious problem. But is his concern about a disjuncture between theory and literary theory justified?

Literary studies is strained sometimes by *apparently* competing regimes of knowledge: one arising out of the contact with or experience of local or particular objects of study (in this case, the literary cultures that we designate Japanese), the other produced by broadly applicable modes of reading (what we call theory). The perception of such competing regimes mirrors the perceived divide between knowledge produced by the sciences, the supposed domain of rational, universal theory, and that produced by the humanities, the domain of the local and intuitive. I am in no way suggesting that these regimes of knowledge are irreconcilable—indeed, I believe that the notion of a split between particular and universal ways of knowing is in part an illusion created by the style of argumentation Culler has adapted. However, I would suggest that, even though theory may bring disciplinary rigor to an object of study, the sense that there is a need to calibrate, or harmonize, divergent discourses exposes how unsettled and indeterminate the production of knowledge can be. The appeal to theory does not justify the study of Japanese literature as a particular historical or aesthetic phenomenon so much as justify a way of thinking about the world that gives us an excuse to find a place for Japanese literary studies in our institutions. Reading Japanese literature through a theoretical framework then becomes an exercise in self-reflection, exposing our own cultural assumptions and making us mindful of the need to harmonize competing discourses.

For his part, Culler tries to reconcile what he sees as the divide that has opened up between theory and literary theory by calling for "a more robust poetics" that would allow us to "explore how the conventions or formal conditions of literary works, rather than their themes, make possible certain kinds of critical engagements with institutions of power."[4] This call for a reconciliation of theory and literary theory is based on the assumption, as I indicated above, that there is a real difference between regimes of knowledge; and although I wonder if this sense of difference is not an illusion created by the style of argumentation, the use of a "robust" study of poetics can act as a way to ground theoretical approaches in particular historical and linguistic contexts.

Accordingly, I want to play off of Culler's argument by inverting his formulation of *the literary in theory* and instead exploring a few instances of *the theoretical in literature*. That is, I

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[3] Culler, *The Literary in Theory*, 5. Italics mine. The awkwardness of this phrasing suggests something of the contrived nature of Culler's defense. Culler makes a great fuss over the work of Knapp and Michaels, which, for a theory that is now "largely forgotten," plays an undeservedly large role as whipping boy in Culler's analysis.

[4] Culler, *The Literary in Theory*, 11.

want to consider how poetics may constitute a mode of reading that, like other forms of theory, engages with its own positionality, its situatedness, and the constructedness of its own schemes.[5] Due to constraints of time and space, I cannot examine any of these examples presented below in depth.[6] However, the passages I have selected are all well known, and so I will present brief catalogues of some of the rhetorical elements identified within the narrative itself as crucial in the formation of poetics as a mode of writing and as a theoretical mode of reading.

My first examples are taken from *Genji monogatari*: specifically, the "E-awase" (Picture Contest) chapter, which chronicles a reading competition, and the "Hotaru" (Fireflies) chapter, which presents a discourse, or discussion, of fictional *monogatari*. In the first instance, the competition takes place in two venues. The first is an informal contest that provides detailed argumentation, and the second is a formal, imperial contest in which the reasons for specific critical judgments are not spelled out. A number of theoretical claims arise during the course of the disputation.

1. Because the characters involved in the contests are looking at picture scrolls and reading them as literary texts, there is an underlying assumption of the unity of narrative media. This unity does not represent a convergence of media, in the sense in which Henry Jenkins uses the term, since narratives told through pictures and words are not treated at the Heian court as divergent to begin with. There is a clear understanding that the physical materiality of a narrative is itself a contextualizing element that matters to the way we read. Thus, a merit or flaw in the literary work depicted in a picture scroll automatically becomes a flaw or merit in the picture.

2. There is a strong notion of canon among the participants, but one that may be contested for political reasons. The canon of aesthetic tastes, the source for the contestants' "spin" on narratives is an instrument for achieving and justifying political power.

3. A sophisticated understanding of genre augments a historical awareness of a canonical tradition. This is not simply an understanding of differences among genres, but a more fluid understanding (like the understanding of the unity of media) in which different genres such as history and fiction may bleed into one another. This notion of genre requires propriety of discourse, in which modes of reading must match modes of writing (that is, prose criticism for prose, poetic criticism for poetry).

4. There is a powerful awareness of narrative as a means for defining or imagining a sense of community (in Benedict Anderson's sense of the term). At the climactic moment of the imperial contest the picture scroll offered by the Genji faction, which Genji painted during his life in exile at Suma, creates a powerful and tearful reaction among all those in attendance.

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[5] Culler, *The Literary in Theory*, 41. I am borrowing Culler's phrasing and vocabulary here.

[6] I have discussed the examples from *Genji monogatari* and *Kōshoku ichidai onna* that follow in more detail in Dennis Washburn, *The Dilemma of the Modern in Japanese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 21-36 and 53-75.

> They looked upon the pictures and felt, even more than at the time of his exile, how sad and painful it had all been. The appearance of the world in those days, and the thoughts they had kept in their hearts at the time, came back to them as if they had just occurred. In drawing the scenery of that place, its strange bays and strands, Genji had kept nothing from view. Here and there *kana* were mixed in with the cursive characters. It was not a conventional, formal diary, and the manner in which the moving poetry had been incorporated into the work was breathtaking. Everyone was captivated by it. Points of interest and beauty found separately here and there in the other pictures were all contained together in this one scroll. Its beauty was deeply felt. Everything gave way before it and the Left was victorious.[7]

5. The affective realism of Genji's art gives his work an unparalleled poignancy that provides the grounds for a sense of shared identity or community. However, even though the artistic language of the scroll purportedly achieves an almost perfect correspondence with reality, that correspondence lies beyond any author's descriptive ability, including that of Murasaki Shikibu. The indirect presentation of this aesthetic ideal through the picture scroll, which the author need not reproduce, but simply refer to, represents an example of how an imagined work of art and the critical discourse of its reception achieves a harmony that arrests the process of change and the force of karmic bonds in order to represent for political purposes an ephemeral present as an absolute, timeless value.

Many of the theoretical claims that emerged from the picture contest are later supplemented by the discussions of fictional *monogatari* in the "Hotaru" chapter that take place first between Genji and Tamakazura, and subsequently between Genji and Murasaki. These discussions, however, extend the earlier arguments about narrative by making several additional claims.

1. Tamakazura is troubled by her guardian's (Genji's) sexual advances, and she tries to find a way out of her dilemma by reading as many stories as she can in the hopes of finding a character who has confronted, and resolved, a similarly awkward situation. When Genji sees her reading these works of fiction, he makes a strong claim against reading fiction since it is a system of deception that is corrupting; that is, he makes a claim for a mode of reading that justifies censorship on moral grounds.

2. When Tamakazura counters that Genji understands the moral dangers of fiction because he is more practiced at deception than anyone she knows, he shifts his argument to make two very different theoretical claims about narrative: that it supplements history by providing details and atmosphere, so that fiction is never actually just fiction; and that fiction is the best way to get at certain kinds of

[7] Murasaki Shikibu, *Genji monogatari*, edited by Yamagishi Tokuhei, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 15 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1970), 184-85.

ethical and spiritual truth, in the manner of exempla or *hōben*. In the exigencies of the moment Genji literally hits on a theory at the same time that he hits on Tamakazura.

3. Once these claims have been made, and Tamakazura has rebuffed him again, Genji reverts back to a more standard view of narrative that promotes an instrumental, political need for suppressing the subversive, seductive power of fiction. He lectures Murasaki on just this point in order to make sure his daughter, a future empress, will not be exposed to the improper influences of fictional narrative.

My second example is taken from passages found in two consecutive chapters in Saikaku's *Kōshoku ichidai onna*. In "Shorei onna yūhitsu" (Etiquette: a female writing instructor), the woman, who is the narrator of her own story, sets up shop as a writing teacher and vows to give up her lustful ways. When a young man asks her to write love letters for him to help him win the heart of another woman, she goes off on a digression about the power of the written word.

> There is no more expedient means to reveal your true feelings than a letter. Even to distant provinces and villages you can relate your thoughts with a brush. No matter how well-written a letter it may be, when there are many falsehoods contained therein the letter will of its own accord cease to be of interest and will be discarded with no regrets. A letter that shows traces of sincerity will naturally strike a chord in the heart of the reader, so that he will feel that he has definitely met the person who wrote it.[8]

At first glance this seems like a simple, even naïve defense of realism, or verisimilitude, but this view of epistolary writing is quickly undercut by the woman, who, in a parody of the discourse on *monogatari* in *Genji monogatari*, begins to desire the young man and wants to make him her lover. Her letters are a form of seduction that may be discarded when the moment is right. She urges him to give up the cold-hearted woman he is pursuing, pointing out that his writing is of little use.[9] The young man finally agrees to be her lover, but he sets out some rather harsh conditions in the form of a different kind of narrative, a pre-affair contract. The woman is put off by his legalistic demands and gains revenge by forcing him to have sex with her constantly, gradually destroying his health and social position—so much for the power of words. Even though the acts of writing and reading bring the two lovers together, the essential fictionality of all writing is exposed by the overriding reality of passion. Once the narrative pretense that passion is the universal condition of human experience is re-established, the sexual joke of the insatiable woman, which is of course a male fantasy, can be retold in a new fashion.

This parody continues into the next chapter, "Chōnin koshimoto" (A townsman's handmaid), where the subject becomes *haikai* poetry. The woman witnesses the funeral procession of a shopkeeper whose wife is renowned for her beauty. This leads to a discussion of whether or not having a beautiful wife is good thing, and the narrator cites the go-between Gion

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[8] Ihara Saikaku, *Kōshoku ichidai onna*, in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, vol. 47 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1961), 368.

[9] Saikaku, *Kōshoku ichidai onna*, 369.

Jinta, who says that "While a wife is something you have to look at your whole life, a woman who is too beautiful is not good."[10] The narrator generally concurs.

> In my own experience it is the same with beautiful women and beautiful scenery; if you look at them all the time you soon grow tired of them. One year I went to Matsushima, and since it was my first time I was enthralled with the place. I thought, "If only I could show this to a singer or a poet!" Yet after gazing out on the view from morning to night the myriad islands began to reek of the seashore, the waves at the beach of Sue no Matsuyama roared in my ears. The cherry blossoms at Shiogama scattered without my viewing them; I overslept and missed the dawn over the snows of Mount Kinka; and I did not give a second thought to the moon over Oshima. Instead I gathered black and white pebbles at an inlet and was soon lost in a game of *mutsumusashi* with some children.[11]

The sights of Matsushima are indeed beautiful until the narrator comes to understand that their physical reality undermines the poetic ideals to which she alludes. The sights become conventional and of no interest to one who is an embodiment of the ephemeral and up-to-date. The parody points up not just the ultimate impotence of literary conventions, their inability to arouse the narrator, but it also exposes the limitations of all literary expression, reinforcing the woman's earlier claims that literature is as much a poetics of reading as of writing. These claims may be summarized as follows.

> 1. Taken together, these passages show a sophisticated understanding of both genre and of the ability of canonical discourses to shape modes of reading.
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> 2. Verisimilitude, the lynchpin of formal realism, seems to be an overriding value, though its claims to objectivity and universality are quickly undercut. The situatedness of realism is undressed and exposed.
>
> 3. The passages indicate that a parodic understanding of the discourse of class is embedded in literary practice: the townsman is "unlettered" compared to the woman, who has had a classical, aristocratic training in literature; and the conventional, commercial expectations created by poetic expressions of epiphanic encounters with famous places put the emerging townsman culture into touch with Japanese cultural history (thanks to artists such as Bashō who, in his adopted guise as a poet-priest, commercialized the spirituality of the literary tradition).
>
> 4. The passages present a mode of reading that is subversive in that it undercuts the claims of all texts to being true to reality. The jokes about the anxiety of literature's ability to perform harmonize the narrator's poetics of reading with the narrative mode of Saikaku's work as a whole. There is a clear recognition of the constructed nature of text and of values, and a concomitant awareness of the disjuncture between words and the realities they signify.

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[10] Saikaku, *Kōshoku ichidai onna*, 374.
[11] Saikaku, *Kōshoku ichidai onna*, 375.

My final example is provided by Enchi Fumiko's novel, *Onna men*. An important section of the novel is a critical essay, "An Account of the Shrine in the Fields," written long before the events in the novel take place by the main character, Toganō Mieko. The reader is a man, Ibuki Tsuneo, a professor of Japanese literature (and thus someone who is susceptible to the seduction of theory) who happens to be having an affair with Mieko's widowed daughter-in-law, Yasuko. The essay presents a striking re-interpretation of the character of the Rokujō lady from *Genji monogatari* that offers a defense of her possession and killing of Genji's wife, Aoi, and her later possession and weakening of his idealized love, Murasaki. The essay ends with the following observations.

> The following poem and its preface are from the collected poetry of Murasaki Shikibu. . . . "On seeing a painting wherein the vengeful ghost of the first wife, having seized the second, is exorcised by prayers."
>
> Suffering from the rancor of the dead,
> Or might it be the demon in one's own heart?
>
> Murasaki Shikibu's modernism is evident here in the skeptical view she takes of the medium's powers, even though exorcism was in her day an established practice, and in her perception that what is taken for seizure by a malign spirit might in fact be the workings of the victim's own conscience. One cannot help wondering why she chose to write so vividly in her novel about a phenomenon in which she herself seemed to have little faith. In doing so, however, she was able to combine women's extreme ego suppression and ancient female shamanism, showing both in opposition to men.[12]

This re-interpretation makes a number of bold moves in connection with modes of reading and with harmonizing theory with poetics (in Culler's sense of the "system of the literary").

> 1. Mieko imposes an anthropological reading on *Genji* that explains the phenomenon of female spirit possession in terms of both a rational psychology and Levi-Strauss's (later Geertz's) notion of "deep play."
>
> 2. Building on both anthropological and psychological discourses, she imposes a feminist reading on the poem that has echoes of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.
>
> 3. The essay exposes writing itself as a patriarchal discipline that controls women by identifying them as archetypal figures and by viewing the effort to take up the pen as a "sin" inherent to the nature of women.
>
> 4. The essay operates as both a critique of female archetypes and an ironic exposure of how this gothic novel, *Masks*, perpetuates such archetypes in the service of plot.

[12] For purposes of citation here I have relied on the translation by Juliet Winters Carpenter. Enchi Fumiko, *Masks* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 56-57.

My point in setting out these catalogues of instances of the theoretical in literature is not that Murasaki, Saikaku, or Enchi somehow anticipate contemporary discourses on reading, that they have somehow beat us to the punch. If that were all that these catalogues suggest, then they may be viewed as simply an act of self-reflection, an imposition of contemporary discourses onto older, seemingly familiar literary elements that has no analytical force. I contend, however that they do much more than that. These examples of the theoretical in literature suggest how critical modes of reading make us conscious and reflective of the process of theory itself.[13] The rhetorical function of theory is crucial to understanding not just the poetics *in*, but the poetics *of* the three works I have cited. This in no way implies a simplistic correspondence of ideas between the author and the characters. Presentations of the act of reading in all of the examples above have a clear narrative function as a performance of literary competence and values that openly exposes the ways in which narratives strive to control our readings of them. They also point to the performance of theory as a form of seduction—Genji seducing the court or trying to seduce Tamakazura, Saikaku's woman seducing her readers, Mieko seducing Ibuki into her plot. These are sophisticated instances of theory used to analyze discursive practices in a manner that reveals the positionality and the constructed nature of the narrative contexts in which they appear. As such, these examples encourage us to practice at least some degree of humility when making any claims for literary theory. They compel a reconsideration of our own contemporary notions by showing that theory itself is a performance—a contest, a lesson in writing, an academic article—that seeks not just to discipline and create knowledge, but to seduce, undress and control.

[13] In this regard I found one of the reactions to my presentation of this essay at the conference telling. Despite the fact that two of the examples I give come from "classical" literature, I was labeled a "modernist" (!?) who was evidently poaching on the territory of my fellow panelists, all scholars of "premodern" literature. While I strongly dispute the implication that I am poaching, as my essay hopefully has made clear, the underlying concern of this particular reaction is a valid one. We cannot escape the limitations imposed by our contemporary notions of reading (of theory), and so we must always take into account the specific historical, political, social and material contexts of the production of a literary work. A study of the theoretical in literature is one way (though not the only way) of harmonizing our position as readers/theorists with the position of the text.