The Tropes of Theory

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Literary theories maintain a rather ambiguous relationship to literature, meandering between participation and alienation. On the one hand, they attempt to assume a neutral, abstract meta-position, for which the dogma of disinterestedness has been decisive since Kant. It presupposes an analytical aloofness to the object of reading, freeing itself from the entanglements of an involved reading and placing the text as an object of knowledge at safe distance. This holds true even where theoretical approaches claim particular proximity to the poetic text (as, for example, in strategies of close reading) or where they take into account the impact of affects as an essential element of both writing and reading literature (as, for instance, in empathy aesthetics [Einfühlungsästhetik]).

On the other hand, literature and literary theory are so intimately entwined that they can hardly be neatly separated. This close bond is not only exploited by hybrid genres such as autotheory or autosociobiography, which have turned literature into a field of artistic research and theory formation. An even larger aspect of this connection is the irreducible literariness of theory itself. We witness this poeticity of theoretical thought on several levels, be it the narrativization of theory, the long tradition of embedding theoretical treatises situationally, for instance, in the form of travel essays, or the extent to which theories operate with tropes and figures.

This literariness of the theory does not only concern the overtly metaphorical (and therefore sometimes castigated as 'crypto-jargon') vocabulary of poststructuralism. It extends to all theoretical reasoning, even in its sincerest attempts at avoiding any figurativity or the semantic shifts of rhetorical alieniloquium in order to meet scientific standards of precision and analytical rigor. One thinks, for instance, of keywords such as "unraveling" ("Verfransung") in the descriptive and analytical theoretical language of Critical Theory, of the "circulation of social energy" in New Historicism, or the ambiguous notion of "evolution" in Formalism. Furthermore, as Blumenberg has shown in his "theory of non-logicity", basic concepts of literary theory such as 'reading' and 'readability' are fraught with an intellectual history that goes back to antiquity as pre-conceptual instruments of cognition in the natural and technical sciences.

The workshop builds on the groundwork of this metaphorological history of science but focuses on the field of conceptualization in literary theory since theoretical metaphors in literary theory remain a largely unexplored area to this day. Crucial questions in this regard are: Which tropes does literary scholarship employ to develop its theoretical language? What functions do different figures of speech assume as theoretical figures of thought? What kind of knowledge on poetics do they confer? How do the demands of objectivity and evidence in theory collide or, possibly, collaborate with the confusing imagery of figurative speech? Does

a heightened awareness of tropical language in literary theory reshape our understanding of the difference between theoretical (as purportedly non-figurative) and poetic (as figurative) texts?