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von Joachim Harst, Christian Moser und Linda Simonis

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Joachim Harst, Christian Moser, Linda Simonis

## Languages of Theory

### Introduction

In recent years, the interest in theory which has once been a moving force of academic research in the field of literary studies appears to have decreased. The status of theory, its relevance and appropriateness for the understanding of literature have been put into doubt. Faced with this observation, some critics have even suggested that we have now entered into a new era of research which can retrospectively be identified as the era “after theory”.<sup>1</sup> Against the background of such pronouncements and to a certain extent in opposition to them, the investigations proposed here wish to uphold the idea of the utility and indeed the need for theoretical approaches to literature. To appreciate the status of theory and its possible contribution to a deepened understanding of literature, it is useful not to focus exclusively on the distinction or supposed divide between literature and theory. Instead, so our suggestion, we should pay attention to what links and unites them. This common ground or common denominator of literature and theory, we would like to argue, consists in the dimension of language. Furnishing, so to speak, the intellectual material from which both domains of articulation are formed, language constitutes at once the key element of literature and a principal concern of theory.

In foregrounding this idea of a linguistic engagement common to both literature and theory we also wish to counter the assumption of what has frequently been supposed to be an opposition between the interests of philology and those of theory: The philological study of texts and their linguistic and stylistic properties on the one hand and the issues of theory on the other hand have often been regarded as distinct and separate concerns, sometimes even as standing in conflict with each other. At a closer look, however, it becomes clear that the simple opposition of philological and theoretical aims does not hold. In recent times numerous comparative and other literary studies have successfully combined philological and theoretical approaches and thereby given proof of their compatibility and possible fruitful reconciliation.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from bridging a supposed or alleged gap between philology and theory, the approach to theory proposed here also has the advantage that it is able to uncover a potential for theory enclosed in language itself. We might here, for instance, evoke the tradition of rhetoric which, over a long period reaching from antiquity to early modern times, served as the prevailing approach to text and

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1 See for instance Terry Eagleton. *After Theory*. New York: Basic books, 2003.

2 Cf. for example Frank Lestringant. *Jean de Léry ou l'invention du sauvage*. Paris: Garnier, 2016, or Robert Darnton. *L’Affaire des Quatorze. Poésie, police et réseaux de communication à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: Gallimard, 2014.

discourse.<sup>3</sup> By drawing its tools and modes of analysis from the study of language, it offered both a theoretical approach to literary and cultural discourse and a practical model, an instruction of how to put these insights effectively to use. More recently, this conceptual knowledge enfolded in language has been rediscovered by speech act theory<sup>4</sup> as well as by the tradition of conceptual history ('Begriffsgeschichte')<sup>5</sup> which have both – each in its own way – endeavoured to bring to the fore the conceptual force inherent in certain elements of the linguistic materials themselves.

These observations also illustrate that cultural studies, contrary to a widespread, but misleading view, are not to be understood as an alternative or substitute of theoretical aspirations. Rather, cultural approaches and perspectives offer themselves as a (necessary) complement and companion piece to theory and should ideally go together with and underpin conceptual and theoretical inquiries. To pursue cultural studies and theoretical investigations as complementary enterprises indeed promises to be beneficial to both sides: While the first provide an indispensable means to contextualize theoretical observations, to place them in their respective historical and cultural frameworks, the latter allow us to understand the relevant notions underlying cultural issues and phenomena and to grasp their conceptual and epistemic significance.

Building on the insights developed above, the investigations joined in this volume aim to explore the 'languages of theory' and to work towards a more comprehensive understanding of how theory relates to language. How do theoretical approaches acquire or generate the conceptual and linguistic tools at work in their analyses? In how far do they elaborate their own languages and styles of inquiry? And in what ways do they reflect on language and on the terminology underlying their approaches?

In the light of these questions, it becomes clear that the interrelation between the concern with the manifold languages and idioms of literary texts and the engagements of theory reaches even further than has been indicated above. Linguistic and philological matters, we can provisionally conclude, are not just a supplement or addition to theory. Far from being external to theoretical reflection, philological and linguistic analysis can serve as a constitutive element and driving power of the making of theory. It is not least by a close attention and refined sensitivity to language that theoretical approaches gain their capacity of drawing distinctions and thereby succeed in elaborating a fine-grained and conceptually rigorous framework of analysis.

In order to further explain and illustrate our guiding idea that theoretical ventures are often inspired by linguistic and philological inquiries, we can draw on a

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3 Cf. Brian Vickers. *In Defence of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. See also Quentin Skinner. *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 19-110.

4 Cf. John Searle. *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

5 Cf. Ernst Müller/Falko Schmieder. *Begriffsgeschichte und historische Semantik. Ein kritisches Kompendium*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016.



variety of recent contributions to literary and cultural theory. Michel Foucault, for example, in his later lectures held at the Collège de France<sup>6</sup>, takes great interest in the origins and historical developments of certain ancient Greek terms such as *alētheia* and *parrēsia* which are gradually developed and exposed as key notions of what turns out to be a new way of accounting for the subject's engagement with truth and its relation to power. In a similar vein, Giorgio Agamben, drawing on the seminal works of Émile Benveniste<sup>7</sup> and Georges Dumézil<sup>8</sup>, systematically resorts to etymological reflections and to comparative analyses of the history of words in the Indo-European language family in order to deploy the meanings and functions of certain core concepts, as for example the term *sacer* which means both 'holy' as well as 'banned' or 'cursed.'<sup>9</sup> As a further example of the linguistic or philological interest of theory we could point out Bruno Latour's recurrent preoccupations with rhetoric and the rhetorical tradition, e.g. when he takes up and problematizes the old distinction between truth as a conviction created by language and truth as evidence established by demonstration.<sup>10</sup> Rhetoric, Latour argues, is not only a fundamental device of the arts and humanities, it is also secretly at work in the scientific pursuit of empirical knowledge. As a further candidate for the linguistic/philological commitment of theory we can evoke the work of Jacques Derrida, in particular his concern with language in its written form as *graphé* or *scripture* as opposed to its vocal form as speech.<sup>11</sup>

The above examples, although far from presenting an exhaustive or representative list, may help to convey a first impression of the ways linguistic issues enter into the production and shaping of theory.

The present volume collects the papers presented in the context of the panel *Languages of Theory* at the conference of the *International Association of Comparative Literature* (ICLA) at Vienna in July 2016. As stated above, our aim is to examine the philological or linguistic preoccupations of current approaches in literary and cultural theory, to look into the (pre-)history of theory's engagement with linguistic concerns and to unfold its conceptual and semantic implications. Taking our cue from the title of the ICLA conference, *The Many*

6 Cf. Michel Foucault. *Le courage de la vérité*. Cours au Collège de France. 1984. Édition établie par Frédéric Gros. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2009, pp.9-18. See also Foucault. *Du gouvernement des vivants*. Cours au Collège de France. 1978-1979. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2012, pp. 8-9.

7 Cf. Émile Benveniste. *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*. 2 vols. Paris: Minuit, 1969.

8 Cf. Georges Dumézil. *Les dieux souverains des Indo-Européens*. Troisième édition revue et corrigée. Paris: Gallimard, 1986.

9 Cf. Giorgio Agamben. *Homo sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Torino: Einaudi, 2005.

10 Cf. Bruno Latour. *L'art et la parole*. Workshop at the Centre Pompidou, Paris 2010. [https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/ressource.action?param.id=FR\\_R-7227a-79c7f1758e3f0b57252a164da1&param.idSource=FR\\_E-78e1c4693a8f4b9d4fd2b0b7c14187c](https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/ressource.action?param.id=FR_R-7227a-79c7f1758e3f0b57252a164da1&param.idSource=FR_E-78e1c4693a8f4b9d4fd2b0b7c14187c) (visited 20.9.2017).

11 Cf. Jacques Derrida. *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit, 1967, pp. 52-54.

*Languages of Comparative Literature*, we have found it to be a rewarding task to raise the issue of the “languages of theory” and to promote its further exploration and analysis. It is our contention that theoretical approaches and reflections do not only rightfully hold their place in comparative literature studies but that it is also worthwhile to interrogate their conceptual genealogies and terminological choices, their styles of thought and argument as well as their various linguistic engagements.

The articles united in this volume have taken up this challenge and attempt to elucidate the intricate relationship of language and theory in exemplary case studies. In our selection of proposals, we have taken care to cover a certain variety of theoretical approaches prominent in current debates.