



The Distant Future? Reading Franco Moretti

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Abstract

Franco Moretti's suggestion that we swap close for distant reading has shaken up the academy. Yet while so many critics know Moretti's name, it can be difficult to pin down exactly what he's saying. Without any single magnum opus to his name, Moretti's points are instead scattered across a score of articles and a handful of short books. This article attempts to join the insights of books like *Atlas of the European Novel* and *Graphs, Maps, Trees* to those of articles like 'Conjectures on World Literature' and 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature,' in hopes of providing a fuller picture of exactly what kind of reading (and what kinds of distance) are implied by distant reading.

Franco Moretti is arguably the most controversial figure working in English and Comparative Literature today. To his supporters, he has come to tower over the field, a man more 'mythopoeic figure' than literature professor, as Elif Batuman puts it. His work has 'all the irresistible magnetism of the diabolical,' she says; he 'generates around himself a dense network of folklore and apocrypha.' Other critics have loudly objected to just such mythologizing. Moretti is 'not really so unusual or isolated as he might appear,' in Timothy Burke's opinion; distant reading 'isn't really as new as it would have us believe,' in William Deresiewicz's terms.

Moretti courts just such controversy. His 'agenda,' as Jonathan Arac says, is 'deliberately scandalous.' This is a man whose own jacket copy (for *Graphs, Maps*) twice calls his work 'heretical.' Throughout his work, he returns again and again to a cycle of early claim and later recantation. 'I felt I had to say something, so I presented an 'explanation' ... but it was silly of me, because ... *I had absolutely no solution*' he says in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (26). 'OK, I confess, in order to test the conjecture I actually did read some of these 'first novels' in the end,' he says in 'Conjectures' (61n.19).

Even his sentence structure can seem intentionally rebellious. Moretti regularly breaks conventional rules of grammar and syntax in his prose. He relies instead on what Christopher Prendergast has called the 'Moretti house style' (42), beginning sentences with 'and' or 'but' and summarizing arguments with a brief sentence fragment at the start of a paragraph. He relies heavily on colons, semicolons and m-dashes to connect one thought to another and he rarely gets through a page of prose without italicizing anything. These tiny, inconsequential infractions cumulatively paint him as a (grammatical) outsider, deliberately flouting the scholastic 'rules' of academic prose. He can write conventionally when he chooses to ('The End of the Beginning' is a good example), but he rarely makes this choice.

Moretti's willingness to transgress only to then reveal his transgression, or his reliance on colloquial, non-standard prose, can seem like mere elements of his outsider image. Yet in both cases, what looks like rebellious posturing is working much harder for his method than it may first appear. The claims he will go on to recant describe early conclusions, later

discarded or early hypotheses, later tested. They illustrate provisionality – the distance that distant reading imposes between data and explanation, distance that close reading would compress into ‘interpretation.’ By imposing this pattern of revision on Moretti’s work, his recanted claims emphasize that conclusions are only ever temporary. As Richard Maxwell says, ‘The point about’ Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel* is ‘not that it gets everything right but that it opens up a fascinating territory for discussion’ (699).

The ‘Moretti house style’ reinforces this same provisionality. As Prendergast has noted, Moretti’s syntactic elision, the ‘sentence that is not a sentence,’ often ‘travels up from sentence to argument’ (42), producing the ‘big blanks’ that Moretti refers to in ‘Planet Hollywood’ (PH 90). Prendergast criticizes the coherence of Moretti’s arguments in light of these blanks, but the empty spaces do more than beg the question. They mark the difference between notes toward a theory and the theory itself. Gaps become stopgaps, in other words, leading to a common Moretti formulation: ‘Big blanks. Since, however, some interesting patterns emerge, I am writing these pages anyway. Take them for what they are: initial hypotheses that should be tested against a larger, more precise set of data’ (PH 90). Thus, the ellipses and semicolons that people Moretti’s pages not only flout the academic rules, they also teach his readers that none of his statements are ever final.

Similarly, Moretti’s disregard for complete sentences and conventional transitions propels the reader more quickly through the text. His writings are quite short, with few words to the printed page in the recent Verso editions, large numbers of visual aids and a line break between body text and footnote that can run quite high on the page, such as the page in ‘Conjectures’ that boasts five lines of body text perched above forty-one lines of notes (63). The look of the page and the grammar of the text disincite the reader from lingering over any element of Moretti’s text. The speed of reading thus stands in here for the distance of distant reading. Instead of ‘fewer elements’ the reader gets less time, but both aim to produce ‘a sharper sense of ... overall interconnection’ at the expense of slow/close reading (GMT 1).

What can look like mere ‘outsider’ posturing thus functions instead as a point of entry into distant reading. And a point of entry can be a good thing, for while Moretti attempts to ‘put it very simply,’ as he says twice on the first page of ‘Conjectures’ (54), his trademark style can also obscure the connective tissue of his arguments. There is no weighty Moretti masterpiece, no *Mimesis* or *Theory of Prose*. He prefers the stance of editor or contributor and so his recent work has come as essays and short books, the links between which can be unclear. What follows is an attempt to fill in some of these gaps, to give some sense of the shape Moretti’s work has taken in the last ten years or so, the direction in which it may be moving, and some of the major criticism it has received. Behind this paper stands a strong conviction that his ideas are worth the attention.

Data

The ‘trouble with close reading,’ Moretti argues, ‘is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon...[Y]ou invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter...At bottom, it’s a theological exercise’ (CWL 57). It’s the wrong method for large literatures, in other words; intensive rather than extensive, close reading makes it equally impossible for comparatists to account for the world literature that is now ‘unmistakably a planetary system’ and for Victorianists to address the ‘thirty thousand nineteenth-century British novels out there, forty, fifty, sixty thousand – no one really knows, no one has read them, no one ever will’ (CWL 54, 55).

Close reading also presents other problems in addition to its sheer incommensurability to the archive. Even if we were able to read all the novels published in Victorian Britain, the kind of knowledge implied by close reading still makes no sense within a 'larger literary history,' as Moretti says. 'Knowing two hundred novels is already difficult. *Twenty thousand?* How can we do it, what does 'knowledge' mean in this new scenario?' (SL 208). The problem with a 'close' epistemology is its investment in the individual, a commitment that Moretti calls irrational (GMT 4).

The privileged single case enshrined in close reading is best seen in how close reading thinks about genre. Close reading works through typological thinking, he says; usually, 'we choose a 'representative individual,' and through it define the genre as a whole.' Analysis of the representative then '... counts as an analysis of the entire genre, because for typological thinking there is no gap between the real object and the object of knowledge' (GMT 76). Once a representative has been chosen, a close reading of any other text can only produce its difference from that representative, invoking Jauss' horizon of expectations negatively, 'when a text transcends a given horizon' (GMT 21), but giving us no way to know the horizon itself. This typology of genre is only one example of the exaggerated emphasis close reading places on the individual case, but it is a problem endemic to the method, irrespective of the size of the archive.

The solution Moretti offers to the quagmire of 'close' is its 'distant' opposite. Comparatists need to 'return to that old ambition of *Weltliteratur*,' he says, and even specialists in national literatures ought to more accurately represent the fields they claim expertise in. The way to do this is not simply to read more, because 'a novel a day would take a century or so,' at least for Victorian Britain (GMT 4). The project would be impossible, and therefore '[w]orld literature cannot be literature, bigger,' he says. '...It has to be different. The *categories* have to be different...[W]orld literature is not an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method' (CWL 55).

The new critical method that Moretti introduces is distant reading, a two-part process best understood through the 'slogan' Moretti borrows from Marc Bloch: 'years of analysis for a day of synthesis' (CWL 56–7). The technique begins with the 'years of analysis,' the acquisition of data that can be measured and compared. Distant reading, he says, 'allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems' (CWL 57). This 'focus on units' works through 'a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction:' 'you *reduce* the text to a few elements, and *abstract* them from the narrative flow' (CWL 57, GMT 1, 53). After 'you define a unit of analysis,' you can 'follow its metamorphoses in a variety of environments – until, ideally, *all* of literary history becomes a long chain of related experiments' (CWL 61–2).

Moretti's various 'experiments' with distant reading offer a wide range of possibilities for how a device or genre can be abstracted from a text or context (SL 212). In the 'trees' section of *Graphs, Maps* and in 'Slaughterhouse,' for example, he isolates clues from detective fiction. In the 'maps' section of *Graphs, Maps* and in the first two chapters of *Atlas*, he isolates the setting of village tales and of different events ('beginnings,' 'daydreams') in various novels. In the Manhattan-area video stores of 'Markets of the Mind' and the British and French circulating libraries of *Atlas*, he isolates the genres available for rent.

The units that Moretti chooses to abstract and then analyze can seem puzzling. The shift 'up' or 'down' from the literary text as the unit of analysis, 'up' to genre or 'down' to device, destabilizes the definition of the unit. The definition of a literary object is fairly sharp, as far as definitions go. Bracketing a few notable exceptions and some broader questions of editions and paratexts, we all more or less agree on what 'is' *Paradise Lost* or *New Grub Street*, 'Theme for English B' or 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.' Are we equally

sure what defines a clue, a comedy or free indirect discourse? In a recent *Valve* post Moretti himself cautions against 'naïve ... passion for fuzzy or crude units of content' that some distant approaches to literature can engender (VAL ii). In his objections to typological thinking, Moretti suggests that precise definitions of genre matter less than our own ad hoc sense of what a genre is, but what about genres and devices for which we have no intuition? Do we have a gut feeling for 'formal compromise' (CWL 61) as a unit of analysis? Any three points make a plane; Moretti runs the risk of identifying genres and devices whose totality is as artificial as that of the individual texts he is trying to displace.

In the preceding examples, Moretti himself accumulates the majority of the data and much of it comes from within individual texts. There is a second way to acquire the data necessary for distant reading, however. Bloch's 'years of analysis' immediately becomes 'other people's analysis' in Moretti's elaboration; data can be 'abstracted' from other scholars' research as well (CWL 57). 'I decided to rely entirely on other people's work,' he says in the graphs section of *Graphs, Maps* (GMT 18). For the first half of that section, Moretti borrows results from 15 other scholars; for the section's second half, he borrows from over a 100 studies.

There is a loose relation between these two means of data acquisition and the distinction Moretti makes in *Atlas* between fictional and historical spaces (ATL 3). All of the 'units' he 'abstracts' from his colleagues' work provide historical data, while most of his own isolations of device or genre come from either a single text (setting in *Our Mutual Friend* [ATL 115–34]) or from a series of related texts (the presence or absence of language in action films [MM 112–3, PH 94]). This relation is more pragmatic than proscriptive, however; Moretti can borrow historical data because that information is there to be borrowed. Libraries maintain national bibliographies, *Variety* lists successful American films, and scholars periodize genres, but there are very few quantitative data sets available that abstract units from a narrative and measure the results. In the ideal academy, however, as Moretti described it to the *New York Times* ("My little dream," he added wistfully, "is of a literary class that would look more like a lab than a Platonic academy"), the brunt of literary scholarship would be the accumulation of more and more of these data sets. A new set of skills would take over from 'the very close reading of very few texts: sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, concordances, incipits' (SL 208–9). The key feature of all this data is its portability. '[Q]uantitative work is truly *cooperation*,' he says, 'not only in the pragmatic sense that it takes forever to gather the data, but because such data are ideally independent from any individual researcher, and can thus be shared by others, and combined in more than one way' (GMT 5).

Cooperation not only produces a larger body of data with which to work; it also sets the tone for distant reading, because it encourages conversation among scholars. This dialogical model of scholarship has become more and more the template for Moretti's career. The major essays and, increasingly, the books of his last ten years of work take the form of a series of exchanges and collaborations. 'Conjectures,' for example, first appeared in *The New Left Review*. It was followed there by at least four essays written criticizing Moretti's claims and goals, after which Moretti published 'More Conjectures' as a response to his critics. More recently, *Graphs, Maps* first appeared as a series of three essays in *NLR*, after which it was published in book form with an afterward by Alberto Piazza, a geneticist. *NLR* also published Christopher Prendergast's lengthy critique of the book, and then Moretti's 'The End of the Beginning: A reply to Christopher Prendergast.' *The Valve*, the blog run by the ALSC, also ran a 'book event' dedicated to *Graphs, Maps*, with 22 posts from scholars in the field, including three 'Moretti Responds.'

The closest Moretti has come to his own magnum opus is in fact a massive collaborative effort, the recent *The Novel*. The two-volume English edition of (compared to five volumes in the original Italian) boasts roughly 100 contributors, from 18 countries. Contributors also come not only from national and comparative literature departments but also from departments of social anthropology, sociology, architecture, art history, computer games research, international studies, visual studies, cultural studies and psychoanalysis. There's genius here, but it's the genius not of an individual author but of the field of critics, a field that here is emphatically broad. *The Novel* thus provides an extreme example of the collaborative logic that has long governed Moretti's thinking.

A number of critics have questioned what kind of cooperation is possible in Moretti's version of literary scholarship, even as they might also welcome his intention. 'What is rare and wonderful in this ambition for the literary humanities is its capacity to foster ... a real sharing in which one colleague's work actually means something to other colleagues,' Jonathan Arac says, and yet Arac worries about 'a covert imperialism' in Moretti's project (44). Moretti's tacit reliance on English in his 'monolingual master scheme' restricts the top of the critical pyramid to Anglophones, Arac says, reproducing the same cultural hierarchy Moretti is trying to describe (44). Gayatri Spivak voices similar concerns. 'The market [of the new 'world literature'] is international. Students in Taiwan or Nigeria will learn about the literatures of the world through English translations organized by the United States,' she says (xii). Thus Moretti's project 'is nationalism, U.S. nationalism masquerading as globalism' (108).

Privileged English establishes one hierarchy; the possible feudalism of Moretti's Centre for the Study of the Novel at Stanford presents another, which Arac describes as the difference between the 'readers' and the 'global synthesizer, who becomes the *maestro di colour che sanno* ('master of those who know')' (45). 'I end by asking,' he says, 'what does it mean that those who know are not their own masters?' (45). Spivak poses the same question, but in her formulation 'those who know' are not American graduate students but peripheral scholars. 'As he admits,' Moretti's world literature 'depends on the close reading practiced by national literary scholars on the periphery. Should our only ambition be to create authoritative totalizing patterns depending on untested statements by small groups of people treated as native informants?' (107–8).

Moretti's response to both problems has been to minimize them. 'Sure, global English may end up impoverishing our thinking,' he says in a footnote, '...but for now, the rapid wide public exchanges it makes possible far exceed its potential dangers' (MCN 76n.8). 'As for my having at my disposal 'the human-graduate-student-equivalent of a commodity-cluster supercomputer,' he says in a 'coda,' '...that's unlikely. As for grad students doing the primary work on which I later build castles in the air, this has happened a few times – but MUCH more often in the opposite direction, with me gathering the primary data, and placing them at the disposal of students or readers' (VAL iii).

Moretti's versions of cooperation are routinely criticized, but nothing draws more fire than his stance on reading. Moretti is an 'absurdity,' Harold Bloom told *The New York Times*. 'I am interested in reading,' he said with an audible shudder. 'That's all I'm interested in.' Bloom's is the 'inevitable objection,' as John Holbro terms it: 'to suggest that literary studies take the quantitative turn is preposterous, Gradgrindian positivism. I'm sure Moretti gets this a lot.' More searchingly, Spivak suggests that Moretti's rejection of reading is a utopian attempt at 'controlling undecidability,' by assuming that humanism can be made to be a subject (108). 'The real problem,' she adds, 'is the claim to scopic vision' (108). William Deresiewicz voices a similar humanist claim. 'The truths that the reading of fiction brings us are not factual and specific but general and philosophical –

what earlier ages called wisdom,' he writes in his review of *The Novel*. '...Quantitative analysis reduces wisdom to information.'

Yet Moretti argues that if 'the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases where one can justifiably say, less is more,' because 'between the pleasure and the knowledge of literature [or at least a large part of knowledge] there is no continuity. Knowing is not reading' (CWL 57, VAL i, Moretti's brackets). We have to lose reading to gain knowing, in other words. Losing reading, we gain time, answering the major problem posed by the archive's size. A text reduced and abstracted takes much less time for critic to work with when quick mapping of the beginnings and endings of Jane Austen novels replace the lengthy reading of those, or when counting successful Hollywood movies replaces watching all of those films (ATL 12–8, PH 90). Distant readings can thus recoup 'the lost 99 per cent of the archive' (GMT 77). More importantly, however, the abstraction of a few elements in a text provides a new way to know literature, a new epistemology appropriate to enormous numbers of texts. The new epistemology replaces the knowledge of a text with the knowledge of systems. When we give up reading, Moretti says, we gain 'theoretical knowledge' of 'the system in its entirety' (CWL 57). Distance is '*a specific forms of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection' (GMT 1). Genre in this model becomes an 'an abstract diversity spectrum ..., whose internal multiplicity no individual text will ever be able to represent,' rather than a 'representative individual' – a system, not a typology (GMT 76). Systems like these are what Moretti says knowledge means in the 'new scenario' of a canon of thousands rather than scores (SL 208).

Making Meaning and Deforming Meaning

In order to see these systems, however, it is not enough to gather the quantitative data. The data must also be interpreted; the 'years of analysis' must give way to the 'day of synthesis.' The research provides '*data*, not interpretation,' Moretti says. '... Quantitative data can tell us when Britain produced one new novel per month, or week, or day, or hour for that matter, but where the significant turning points lie along the continuum – and why – is something that must be decided on a different basis' (GMT 9). Moretti's example suggests that the interpretation of the data is just as important as the data itself, because it is what Jenny Davidson calls 'Moretti's own personal insightfulness' that draws conclusions from the data he assembles. His interpretations of data in *Graphs, Maps* argue for 'where the significant turning points lie' on the rise-of-the-novel charts, theorize a cyclical pattern of genre, and relate the disintegrating circles of village tales to the rise of national centralization. Interpretations like these are what make the book interesting, what separate successful distant reading from the 'mindlessly headlong factual accretions – graphs, maps, and trees of no conceivable interest to anyone' that John Holbro imagines '[t]oo many Morettis will call forth' from the MLA.

While Moretti's own work shows interpretation to be as important to distant reading as the accumulation of data is, however, interpretation is curiously elided in his descriptions of distant reading as a method. He heavily emphasizes the occasions on which he has been unable to come up with an explanation that fits his data. When there are explanations, they are described as vague ('*faute de mieux*, some kind of generational mechanism seems the best way to account for the regularity of the novelistic cycle ... Clearly, we must do better [GMT 22]), as the work of other scholars ('Jameson's 'law' had passed the test' [CWL 60]), or as the product of sheer luck (GMT 26, 53). All these ways of minimizing interpretation make it seem easy, natural – an inevitable result of the

accumulated data, which 'will be *more than the sum of their parts*: they will possess 'emerging' qualities, which were not visible at the lower level.' (GMT 53).

'Visible' here is more than a metaphor: Moretti also makes analysis seem transparent because he conflates the interpretation of data with the representation of data. How information gets displayed is crucial to most of Moretti's recent work. Graphs, maps, and trees, both in the eponymous book and in 'Planet Hollywood,' 'Slaughterhouse,' and the literary geography of *Atlas*, are all visual devices. Moretti calls them 'abstract models' for distant reading, but they do more than simply abstract; they change the way units are seen. According to Moretti, once the scholar hits on the right way to display the data, in his account, the meaning of the information is suddenly made clear. 'Everybody, from the first readers onward, had noticed the country walks of *Our Village*; but no one had ever reflected on the circular pattern they projected on the English countryside, because no one – in the absence of a map of the book – had ever managed to actually *see it*' (GMT 53). Yet this version of events minimizes the difference between seeing a circle and explaining that circle, as Moretti does, as the effect of a strong village life not yet fragmented by national centralization. How the data get interpreted is replaced by how the data are seen, which minimizes the explanatory work involved in distant reading.

Moretti emphasizes the transparency of analysis in the face of good data because he wants to extricate literary studies from interpretation, narrowly construed as the reading of an individual text to discover what that text 'means,' in favour of explanation, in which the scholar no longer makes meaning out of text, but rather looks at the data and explains how the information came to be what it is. In some of Moretti's formulations of the conflict between explanation and interpretation, he appears to say that both methods can peacefully coexist. '[F]or me, abstraction is not an end in itself,' he claims in the introduction to *Graphs, Maps*, 'but a way to widen the domain of the literary historian, and enrich its internal problematic' (GMT 2). His most sympathetic critics have followed this weaker claim. 'Moretti's work only becomes a 'problem' for literary studies when it claims that its method ought to replace the ones currently in use. So far as I know it does not,' Eric Hayot says; as Timothy Burke puts it, 'There is no requirement to purchase the entire methodological inventory he makes available, or to throw overboard close reading.'

In more recent restatements of this problem, however, Moretti takes the more radical stance that the distant turn he advocates entails the rejection of interpretation. Between interpretation and explanation 'I see an antithesis,' he says. 'not just difference, but an either/or choice' (VAL ii). The antithesis of interpretation and explanation, he says, is the inevitable result of their different treatment of causality. In an interpretive solution, both problem and solution, text and critic, offer types of meaning. Interpretation, in other words, links meaning to meaning without ever broaching the question of causation. In an explanatory solution, on the other hand, the separation between data and the interpretation of that data creates a 'total *heterogeneity of problem and solution*' (GMT 24). The problem is always quantitative; whether it be the slope of the line, the dots on the map, or the branches in the tree; but the explanation of that problem comes from another realm of knowledge. The external aspect of explanation, which interpretation lacks, is what explains the data, what causes the data to be what they are. The graph itself can never answer the graph.

What can answer the graph is form. Only the 'general structures' of morphology, 'those larger patterns that are their [the individual texts'] necessary preconditions,' can explain data in Moretti's distant readings, can achieve the 'day of synthesis' from the 'years of analysis,' (GMT 91). '[T]o make sense of quantitative data, I had to abandon the quantitative universe, and turn to morphology: evoke form, in order to explain the

figures' (GMT 24). This turn to form is common in Moretti's work ('the conjunction of formalism and literary history has been a constant [perhaps *the* constant] of my work,' he says in a footnote [SL 227n.22]), and genre is by far his most frequent unit of analysis. Two of his early books outline the development of genres in fiction – *The Way of the World* and *bildungsroman*, *Modern Epic* and modern epic – while at least one critic, Matt Greenfield, puts *Graphs, Maps* itself into the 'familiar' genre of genre theory.

Common to all this work with genre are Moretti's readings of genre as the trace of power. In the great majority of Moretti's distant readings, form is specifically materialist: form as ideology, or as the abstract or diagram of force (SL 227n.22, GMT 64, 92). Literary form is the product of, and thus the illustration of, 'society, rhetoric, and their interaction,' he says in *Atlas*, adding in *Graphs, Maps* that form is 'the most profoundly social aspect of literature' and in 'Conjectures' that '[f]orms are the abstract of social relationships: so, formal analysis is in its own modest way an analysis of power' (GMT 92, ATL 5, CWL 66). Meaning is thus only half the story here; the '[f]orces that (de-)form meanings' are the other half (EB 82). Where interpretation links the text's meaning to the critic's meaning, a materialist explanation turns to form to link the data's meaning to social, economical and political forces, and while we already have enough interpretations that tie one meaning to another, we have 'far too little, on meanings and forces' (EB 83).

This Marxist commitment to form as force has long informed Moretti's work. Many of the short essays he has published in *NLR*, for example, locate a formal feature of contemporary American culture and explain that feature as the product of market forces. In 'MoMA 2000: The Capitulation' he claims that the 'figurative revival' of postmodernity – the return of plot, melody and theme to art after modernism – is actually the restoration of the market, 'the market that had somehow been eluded in the Modernist years' (102). He sees 'New York Times' Obituaries' as orderly stories of institutions and inventions with a 'truly Victorian faith in progress,' in which human lives only matter for the 'things' they contribute to human evolution, and any larger sense of injustice in the economic system has been completely erased (105). In 'Planet Hollywood,' worldwide distribution of Hollywood films illustrates the global hegemony of American culture.

The description of form as the abstract of power relations exemplified in these four essays tends to take one of two forms. Broadly speaking, in Moretti's work genres proliferate or they suffocate. The suffocation of form often works in tandem with economic poverty. In 'Markets,' for example, it is the poor areas whose video stores lack genres. There's a similar pattern at work among the small markets he looks at in *Atlas* – the regional circulating libraries that stock many fewer volumes than their London counterparts. A small market 'is not the scaled-down replica of a large one, with everything present in the same (reduced) proportions: it's a different system, where proportions are altered' (MM 114). Thus, small libraries have not just fewer books but fewer genres. There's a certain degree of internal logic to this correlation. 'That the market of an urban ghetto may offer few choices, makes bitter sense: it's in line with the general pattern of social injustice,' Moretti says (MM 114).

He finds the same generic poverty at the opposite end of the economic spectrum of capital, however. Blockbuster, the 'good example of the globalization of culture' that Moretti offers, has the 'same overpowering number of 'New Releases'; [and the] same bombardment of action films [as the poor market]; relatively few genres; and very few foreign films' (MM 114). Similarly, the various rises of the novel that he charts in *Atlas*, in 'Conjectures,' and in *Graphs, Maps* sometimes represent the hegemony of national cultural production – British and French novels conquering foreign markets – and sometimes the hegemony of form itself, as the novel comes to stand in for all

other genres, to conquer genre itself to some degree. In Moretti's account cultural hegemony, which we associate with economic wealth, spells cultural poverty just as much as economic poverty does.

Moretti's models also describe the eruption of forms, and he's offered a number of explanations for this over the years. Sometimes, it's simply the most privileged markets that boast the greatest number of genres, the most 'distinct perspective[s] over reality' (MA 113). There's also his thesis, first sketched out in the final section of *Atlas* and later elaborated in 'Conjectures' that a literary world-system works through the autonomous development of genre at a literary centre (like the novel in Britain and France) and the subsequent dissemination of that new form to the periphery. When the foreign form arrives, it collides with 'local materials,' a collision that is often unstable but occasionally highly fruitful, producing new advances in the form (CWL 58). Forms are not autonomous developments but erupt instead as the product of unequal distribution of cultural capital in the literary world.

Depoliticized Form

In light of this long interest in force acting on form, it is surprising that Moretti seems recently to have turned away from form as force and toward form explained only as form. In sections of *Graphs, Maps* the explanations that Moretti offers for some of the data he has collected invoke not political or economic explanations but explanations that are purely internal to the formal structure of the literary object. In the most tantalizing example, Moretti suggests in *Graphs, Maps* that genres appear and disappear in generational clusters of 25–30 years. The impact of politics on genre produces exceptions to this rule, like the short life spans of Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novels, not the rule itself. Instead the rule seems to operate independently of external forces. Moretti hypothesizes some relationship between genre and generation, but his explanation ends there. The gender of authorship, whether most authors are male or female and cultural convergence and divergence also appear to work from a similar oscillation, both equally inexplicable by a local political explanation (GMT 26–9, 80–1). '[I]t's fascinating to see how researchers are convinced that they are all describing something unique,' Moretti says, '... whereas in all likelihood they are all observing the same comet that keeps crossing and recrossing the sky: the same *literary cycle*' (GMT 27).

Moretti still describes these cycles as an illustration of force, a 'conflict that remains constant throughout the period,' but it's increasingly unclear what weight historical forces can have if their results cannot change (GMT 27). In *Graphs, Maps* Moretti recounts the criticism that geographers levelled at *Atlas*: 'This, however, is not really geography ... but rather *geometry*; ...not really maps, but diagrams...[F]or geography, locations as such *are* significant; geography is not just extension ..., but 'intension' too' (GMT 54–5). Just as Moretti makes diagrams rather than maps, history in his cyclic genres has lost its 'intension'; what 'analysis of power' is possible of a history that has become simply 'temporal extension?' Yet 'in the total absence of contrary evidence, why on earth should I drop a perfectly plausible explanation?' Moretti has asked recently. 'Because it sounds politically wrong?' (EB 76).

Unexpectedly, the same constellation of social history and evolutionary theory that underpins Moretti's original conception of form as force also supports his recent turn to the purely formal. Moretti often invokes *Annales* historians to explain his own desire to chart aggregate behaviour, especially Fernand Braudel. 'I consider it [serial history] an excellent model *for the study of literature itself*,' he says in *Atlas*. 'Specifically, I have in mind two great achievements of the *Annales* school: the dramatic enlargement of the 'historian's

domain,' first of all, towards what is everyday, un-monumental, or even invisible ... And then, the related discovery of how *slowly* this territory changes: the discovery of 'histoire immobile,' as Braudel has polemically called it' (ATL 150). Social historians' emphasis on 'the large mass of facts' offers an alternative to literary historians' 'rare and curious works,' the unique literary objects that Moretti repudiates (GMT 3).

Social history teaches Moretti to see the conflict shaping literary form. '[T]he nature of the questions changes,' he says: 'Events don't interest Lucien Febvre for what in them is unique,' writes Pomian, but 'as units in a series, which reveal ... a conflict that remains constant throughout the period' (GMT 27). At the same time, however, the slow change of the everyday that Moretti also inherits from Braudel informs his more purely formal conclusions. Moretti often quotes Braudel's well-known tripartition of time into the short time of event and individual, the *longue durée* 'to be measured in centuries,' and, in between, a middle level of cycles within the historical flow (GMT 13–4, SL 224). Again, Moretti intends his study of literary cycles to illustrate economic, social, and political forces at work on the literary. As he moves from explaining any one iteration of the cycles to explaining the cycles themselves, however – the movement from the cycle to the principle underlying the cycle, we might say – he shifts implicitly from the middle level of Braudel's divided time into its slowest level, the *longue durée*, a level that lies beyond (or, better, below) the political forces to which Moretti is so attentive.

The agents of change in Braudel's *longue durée* are in some sense no longer historical but rather environmental; climate and geography produce historical formations. Here, *Annales* history overlaps with evolutionary theory. Moretti attributes his growing interest in the possible confluence of science and literature, however, to his 'Marxist formation, which ... entailed ... a great respect for the scientific spirit' (GMT 2). Evolutionary theory thus becomes another way to understand form as force, he adds at the very end of *Graphs, Maps*, an 'echo of the Marxist problematic of the 1960s and 70s' (GMT 92). Often Moretti's use of evolution unfurls along these very lines. His version of the selection pressures that operate in 'literary evolution,' for example, almost always entail either market forces or the symbolic capital of the metropole. What he calls 'literary survival' then depends on the formal change that arises to meet these pressures (GMT 72). 'The twenty-five authors of the *Strand Magazine* are all competing for the same, limited market niche, and their meanderings through morphospace have probably a lot to do with a keen desire to outdo each other's inventions' (GMT 77). His characterization of traits emergent at various levels of literary organization also derives from evolutionary theory, which posits that evolution acts at all levels of biological organization, from the gene all the way up to the kinship network and possibly even the species. In Moretti's analogy, market pressure can select for clues, say, at the level of the device, or for courtship novels, at the level of genre. Evolutionary theory thus offers Moretti the means to articulate some of the ways at which force is at work on form.

Evolutionary theory also problematizes this connection, however, but it does so in the opposite way that Braudel's cycles do. Where cycles shift causality from historical actors onto large-scale patterns, evolution emphasizes the large role that chance plays in formal change. Evolution is 'opportunistic, hence unpredictable,' in Ernst Mayr's phrase, and thus may not reliably reveal reasons for its literary analogue, reasons that can be explained as the result of local forces (GMT 90). Once randomness or pattern enter the equation, in other words, evolution and quantitative history may begin to disregard force and explain form as purely formal. Again, Moretti's tentative steps toward depoliticized distant readings do not lose their authority on this account, but this slight shift toward the purely formal ought to provoke some reassessment of his premises.

Many of Moretti's critics object to his use of both social history and evolutionary theory as theoretical models for literary study, and most of their criticism can be grouped under Christopher Prendergast's heading 'the perils of analogy' (59). Literary history is fundamentally unlike these other disciplines, they argue. A literary history of the 'large mass of facts' isn't literary history, Spivak says; it's an encyclopedia (107). Culture and nature have 'utterly different temporalities,' Prendergast says. 'Biological time is a *longue durée* of a sort that not even Braudelians dream of. Cultural time is far speedier' (57). Moretti's use of new models, and particularly of models drawn from the sciences, has also drawn a different sort of critique, however. Prendergast also suggests that Moretti's use of evolution actually produces a social Darwinism that retroactively rewards the winners of literary history, a 'way of thinking about human history' that a 'whole tradition of 'Marxist formation' has urged us to abjure' (62). In a very recent article in *NLR*, Moretti recounts a similar question posed by Roberto Schwarz. '[W]as this kind of literary history still trying to be (also) a form of social critique – or had it entirely abandoned that project?' Schwarz asked (EB 84). 'Methodology had replaced critique,' Moretti continues. 'And Schwarz's words came as a sudden jolt: have I lost my way?' (EB 84). The abstract models he has produced 'signa[l] a clear break with the literary tradition,' objects of inquiry that 'no longer 'speak' to the historian' (EB 85–6). '[T]he epistemological alterity thus instituted between subject and object contains the seed and the potential for critique,' he concludes, '... but it remains to be seen whether this is the type of critique that Schwarz had in mind' (EB 86). What I have been calling the discrepancy between form as force and the purely formal in Moretti's recent work is one element of this recent self-questioning.

'Why is Moretti's work controversial?' Eric Hayot asks, and there is no doubt that it continues to be so. Recent reviews of Moretti's new two-volume critical anthology, *The Novel*, are as polemical as any Moretti has yet received, and show no sign of resolving themselves into consensus. For Hayot, this is a sign of critical desperation. Moretti's work 'comes at a moment when the last major wave of new ideas seems to have foundered. Many people seem to want a new Theory to replace the exhausted old Theory,' he says. He may be right; perhaps many of the critics who respond to Moretti do so because they are looking for the Next Big Thing. It seems, however, that the major thrust of Moretti's work points elsewhere. If he is serious about communication among scholars, then the rabid debates his work has produced have already achieved their own ends. Literary scholars do more than just argue with one another, however. While the fractious disagreement surrounding his work and the emphasis that his work itself puts on conversation suggests that people will keep talking about Moretti, the portability of his methods is not yet clear. It remains to be seen if his controversial models will have any impact on how other scholars practice, and what that effect might look like for literary critics and historians who lack novel 'labs,' tenure or Moretti's particular brilliance.

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