Distant Reading. Franco Moretti.

Since he coined the term in 2000, Franco Moretti's notion of 'distant reading' has become very popular. It is no wonder that, looking for a title for a collection of essays, Moretti or his publisher chose that appealing, programmatic and polemical term. *Distant Reading* brings together ten essays, published between 1994 and 2011, and shows both continuities and developments in Moretti's thought.

One prominent example of development is in the meaning of the term 'distant reading' itself. In its original formulation, in the essay 'Conjectures on World Literature,' the term had nothing to do with the digital analysis of literature that we associate it with today, and not even with the visualizations and mappings of e.g. *Graphs, Maps and Trees* (2005). No, 'distant reading' originally referred to the study of world literature while relying on studies done by other researchers. The size and linguistic diversity of the world's literatures make this inevitable: '(…) literary history (…) will become 'second hand': a patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*. Still ambitious (…) but the ambition is now directly proportional *to the distance from the text* (…)'. (48)

As an example, Moretti discusses the reception of the English and French form of the novel in non-European literatures. In most cultures, the first novels are visibly the results of a problematic compromise between western form and local subject. For Moretti, this is an exercise of power. The foreign form (the novel) is 'dictated by an outside power', 'powerful literatures making life hard for the others' (58). And again: 'Forms are the abstracts of social relationships: so, formal analysis is in its own modest way an analysis of power' (59). The thought that literary exchange might involve something like appropriation, where a peripheral language area plays an active role in adopting certain core forms, arouses nothing but contempt: 'Are these concepts—or daydreams?' (117).

Comments such as these show Moretti's Marxist background. Moretti has also been profoundly influenced by the theory of evolution. 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature' applies the evolutionary perspective to the development of literary genres. Like nature, literature is a slaughterhouse. Why is it then that some books survive? Moretti's thesis is that based on formal aspects readers like certain works, and by sharing their preferences with other readers they decide about the survival of these forms (69-70). His example is the detective story, where Conan Doyle discovered the clue as an essential structuring element. Moretti draws a tree structure in which each branching adds an essential requirement: there must be a clue, and it must be necessary, visible, and decodable. He then places stories by Doyle and his contemporaries on their branches in the tree (73), which he interprets as a biological family tree:

> (…) what 'raises' this tree, this branching pattern of literary history? Texts? Not really: (…) the branches (…) are generated by *clues*—by their absence, presence, necessity, visibility, etc. (…) a unit much *smaller* than the text. Conversely, the branches are also part of something much *larger* than any text, which is the *genre* (…). Devices and genres: two *formal* units. (…) Not texts. Texts are real objects—but not objects *of knowledge*. If we want to explain the laws of literary history, we must move to a formal plain that lies beyond them (…). (76-77)

This is a strong (and welcome) statement in defiance of the almost universal consensus that the humanities are about the individual and unique. Laws explain regularly occurring features, not individuals. The emphasis on regularities and laws is a constant in these essays. Unfortunately, Moretti's laws are not always convincing. In detective fiction, for instance, the 'wrong' branches do not become extinct (81), and this is a recurrent weakness in the book: the tendency to generalize from a single and not always very credible example. In the case of detective fiction, maybe the analogy between the biological family tree and the tree that is supposed to represent the genesis of the detective story is just a superficial resemblance. The branches in the tree of the detective story are not species that evolve into descendant species. This tree is just a decision tree that classifies stories based on theoretical criteria; there is nothing in reality that corresponds to its branches. In a later essay, Moretti admits that on second thought much of the discussion about trees should be seen as a methodological proposal rather than as fully fleshed out empirical result.

Another insightful essay is 'Evolution, World-Systems, *Weltliteratur*'. It discusses the importance of evolution and Wallerstein's world-systems theory for literary history. One of the attractive aspects of Moretti's work is that he tackles the really large questions. In this essay, evolution explains literary variation, while world-systems theory explains literary diffusion and uniformity. Until about the eighteenth century, divergence dominates; thereafter, because of the rise of capitalism, diffusion becomes the dominant tendency.

In his introduction to this piece, Moretti explains why evolution and world-systems theory are so interesting for him: 'they were both uncompromisingly materialistic; both historical; both supported by plenty of empirical evidence ... What more could one ask for?' (121). The natural sciences provide a good model for literary history: 'the opposition between laws and individuals, explanation and interpretation, random and intentional, distant and close, and so on, in all these cases I am squarely on the side of the natural sciences' (122). (Biology's only shortcoming is that it has no notion of class struggle).

In the years after this essay, Moretti's theoretical interests moved into the background to make room for more quantitative work. The essay 'Style, Inc.: Reflections on 7000 Titles' is a good example. It investigates trends in British novel titles in the period 1740-1850. 'In a few years, we will have a digital archive with the full texts (…); but for now, titles are still the best way to go beyond the 1 per cent of novels that make up the canon (…)' (181).

And why are titles of interest? 'Half sign, half ad, the title is where the novel as language meets the novel as commodity' (181). The major trend in the corpus of titles is that they were getting shorter. Moretti offers an economic explanation: to stand out among the increasing number of novels, books needed eye-catching, memorable titles. The piece is full of interesting observations supported by numbers. The many titles that consist of just the first name of a female protagonist suggest a marriage plot. In titles that name a single abstract concept until 1800 the vices dominate (*Disobedience*, *Retribution*), while after 1800 moral principles prevail (*Moderation*, *Integrity*). Moretti: '(…) that moral precept fabricated for practical utility is really the dawn of Victorianism' (201).

About this article, Moretti writes:

This is a quantitative study: but its units are linguistic and rhetorical. And the reason is simple: for me, formal analysis is the great accomplishment of literary study, and is therefore also what any new approach—quantitative, digital, evolutionary, whatever—must prove

itself against: prove that it can do formal analysis, better than we already do. Or at least: equally well, in a different key. Otherwise, what is the point? (204)

This quotation offers a good example of Moretti's writing style. Note the explicitly personal, the implication that he is stating the obvious, the casual 'whatever', and the sentence fragments suggestive of speech.

The last article, 'Network Theory, Plot Analysis', uses network diagrams to investigate literary works. The diagrams, for example of *Hamlet*, show characters and their connections, and reveal clusterings of characters that otherwise would have remained invisible: 'Here, nothing ever disappears. (…) The past becomes past, yes, but it never disappears from our perception of the plot' (215). The diagrams and their manipulations ('experiments') require interpretation, but Moretti is always good at finding meaning. The network diagrams for chapters of Dickens novels show simple symmetric figures. Moretti: 'it indicates that, below the surface of social interactions, there is always a melodramatic substratum of love or hatred ready to erupt' (233). Now, that may be a brilliant insight in Dickens (or human nature), but it's certainly not suggested by the diagrams. Moretti describes the essay as 'a brief happiness, before the stern adulthood of statistics' (215). Quite possibly, however, stern statistics would leave little room for flashes of intuitive insight.

So the final verdict on this collection must be mixed. Moretti's essays are inspiring in their emphasis on a scientific approach to literary history, their interest in large questions, the focus on non-canonical literature, the methodological innovation, their rejection of the subjective, and his willingness to reconsider earlier views. This is without doubt a rich book. However, the book also disappoints, because of its many apodictic but unsubstantiated pronouncements. Still, Moretti's ideas have deeply influenced many literary historians and practitioners of the digital humanities. The pieces collected here provide a good picture of his thinking and if for that reason alone are well worth reading.

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