theories and methodologies

Theology Still?

MATTHEW WICKMAN

"I HOPE MY ATTITUDE WILL NOT BE REGARDED AS IRREVERENT," MAURIZIO ASCARI DECLARES BEFORE LAUNCHING INTO A CRITIQUE OF Franco Moretti's critical methods (3). By contrast, I undertake no critique of Moretti's methods, but my attitude toward his work is at least somewhat irreverent, if also appreciative. I titled an early draft of this essay "Distant Reading and the New Poetics of Enchantment; or, Toward a Literary History That Is Spiritual but Not Religious." This title was self-consciously outrageous, since there is little that is overtly enchanted, let alone spiritual, about Moretti's criticism. Indeed, one of the recurring rhetorical fillips in his book *Distant Reading* involves the disparagement of close reading as a kind of theology: "At bottom," close reading is "a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously—whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them. Distant reading: where distance . . . *is a condition of knowledge*" (48; see also 33, 67, 89, and 113). By invoking enchantment and spirituality to describe his work, then, I was looking to underscore, a little cheekily, how rigorous engagement with his "pact with the devil" reveals similar features to those Moretti partly discredits—namely, credulity, "superstition" (Johnson 84), and "mystery" (Goodwin xiii). In essence, my aim was to employ close reading—of distant reading—as a kind of return, if not revenge, of the repressed.

I decided against that approach, in part because I agree with Moretti that the dialectic between close and distant reading has been overplayed. "I have asked for it," he admits, "so I won't complain, but it's not very interesting" (137). I still find *Distant Reading* most provocative when read against as well as with his intentions.[1] And yet the labels I initially intended to use, like enchantment, did not seem quite right, for the irony clinging to them in that context would have recapitulated his contempt for "theology." And *theology* as Moretti invokes it neatly fits his volume, a collection of previously published essays whose organizing conceit is careful rereading. The volume also

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brilliantly captures the zeitgeist: it's a meditation on what literary history is, as well as why and how it is meaningful. *Distant reading*: the very name suggests a divine perch.

If we read *Distant Reading* as a kind of theology—or, more simply, if we read *Distant Reading* at all—what do we stand to gain? Consider that while Moretti is commonly lauded for his "brio" and "verve," such personal (and, in my view, deserved) accolades may distract us from *Distant Reading* as an impersonal index of promises and anxieties associated with literary history and thus the spirit of the discipline's age (McCann 108; Trumpener 170). To be sure, distant reading carries with it an evocatively utopian past, shades of the old Marxian dream that (finally) understanding history is tantamount to changing it. But it also delineates new interpretive horizons through evolutionary and world-systems theories and, of course, digital technologies employed at a grand scale. Moretti thus seeks perspicuous distance from enlightened history and deep time, the diastole and systole of temporality today. And while his various theories and techniques strike me as judicious and often ingenious, the collective energies of *Distant Reading* seem almost Dionysian, an ecstasy of aggression against staid interpretive habits and the disciplinary status quo. In short, Moretti breaks things. But he also names them or at least points to them. And it is three such things I wish to highlight here. None pertains exclusively to literary history, but each potentially converts it into an instrument for wider-ranging investigations.

Ontology: The Being of Literary History

Whereas distant reading's assault on close reading raises a habitual hue and cry, a criticism of a different stripe reduces distant reading to a species of leaden data analysis lightened only by Moretti's virtuosity (Davidson 88). I generally find claims like these a little shortsighted, although the corresponding disdain Moretti has for traditional critical practices invites such reactions. His attention is elsewhere, as he forcefully argues that distant reading enables us to take stock of units much larger and smaller than 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 plane that lies beyond them: below or above; the device," like the clue, in his memorable analysis of detective fiction, "or the genre" (*Distant Reading* 77). And yet, Ascari argues, because genres are made of texts, they are "volatile, fluid," "self-conflicting," and porous (9). How, for example, is one supposed to input into a data set of genres a novel like Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering*, which is a composite of genres—historical, gothic, and epistolary? Or take titles, another device Moretti engages with great creativity. While he derives a relation between title length and the reading market (*Distant Reading* 182–90), Katie Trumpener shows that a comparison of the British and German book trades reveals how "the contents of titles, despite the appearance of similitude, might mean something subtly different in adjacent parts of Europe," thus undermining the broadly comparative aspirations of distant reading (167).

It may or may not be true that distant reading cannot address ambiguities of this type; such contentions do not entirely hold water with discerning distant readers like James F. English and Ted Underwood (285–88). Still, in prosecuting their case, distant reading's critics light implicitly on a salient point. Frances Ferguson obliquely gestures toward it when she observes that the problem with trying to capture literary history "is not that literary categories and classifications" like genres or titles "become impossible to apply but that they are as easily changed as applied" (661). That is, the categories we use to divide texts (let alone periods) collapse; we have a difficult time knowing just what we

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are looking at when we engage these rubrics. Texts are not just one thing; hence, neither are their elements and conglomerates, their devices and genres. What we glean from distant reading, therefore, is less the truth of literary history than its caricature, something felt more than known: call it literary-historical "post-truth," or alternative facts about the long nineteenth century.

And why? Because, according to its critics, as insightful as distant reading may be about literary *history*, it achieves that insight partly by overlooking *literary* history. It thus essentially lays the groundwork for a reenactment of Heidegger's ontological project: "This question" of literary being "has today been forgotten. . . . So if it is said that" literature "is the most universal concept" to literary scholars (21), "this cannot mean that it is the one which is clearest or that it needs no further discussion. It is rather the darkest of all" (23). Indeed, Moretti wanders into an ontological conundrum. By counting texts, and thus by converting literature into data strings of ones and zeroes, distant reading accentuates Alain Badiou's observation that "[w]e live in the era of number's despotism" (1). Statistics, markets, trade figures, polling data—all dominated by numbers—become the measure of modern life. And yet, he argues, "we don't know what a number is, so we don't know what we are" (3). He is not playing coy: numbers are the elements of diverse systems—whole, real, irrational, and so on—with different implications for how we imagine the objects they enumerate. Until we define what texts *are*, then, what sense is there in counting them? This is essentially Ferguson's question.

Moretti's rejoinder is effectively that we do not know what literature is because we do not know what its history is. Literature derives its being from "[f]orm as a struggle," a complex of competing forces and mediums through which texts negotiate their norms and shifts of style and genre (*Distant Reading* 134). Hence, distant reading may not stumble into ontological conundrums as much as find its motivation from them. But its manner of interrogation is novel, pun intended. And this brings us to our next category.

Phenomenology: The Appearance of Literary History

The puzzle distant reading exposes—how can we know the history of literary forms if we don't really know what those forms are?—may explain Moretti's fascination with visualization. After all, to see is, seemingly, to bypass existential enigmas through the assurance of immediacy: we may not know exactly what literary history is, but it's *right there*. Experience supplements understanding.

Moretti embraces this process of phenomenological enhancement, making it part of the drama and methodology of distant reading. He began employing evolutionary trees, he says, "merely as a sort of shorthand visualization, but after a while" he "realized that it was more than that: it functioned like a cognitive metaphor," making him "quite literally *see* literary history in a new way" (76). The "metaphor," the vehicle, implicitly became the tenor, which in turn drove historical inquiry. Referring to his penchant for diagrams in *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*, he explains in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* that if he keeps "making diagrams . . . it is because" for him "*geometry 'signifies' more than geography*. . . . [F]or a geometrical pattern is too orderly a shape to be the product of chance. It is a sign that something is at work here—that something has *made* the pattern the way it is" (56).

This appeal to geometry is historically canny, because geometry has long mediated the relation between ontology, number (or data), and experience. Elsewhere, I engage in an extended analysis of this phenomenon (122–26, 130–33), elaborating on a historical parallel between the undulating graphs in Moretti's practice of distant reading and the aesthetics of the picturesque. Uvedale Price,

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an important late-eighteenth-century critic of the picturesque, situated its aesthetics "between beauty and sublimity" (82), which is to say, between agreeable (i.e., regular and "complete") forms and distended (i.e., misshapen and "obscur[e]") ones (Burke 93, 54). Reflecting on the status of landscapes and gardens, he remarks, "Formerly, every thing was in squares and parallelograms; now every thing is in segments of circles, and ellipses. . . . [A]venues, vistas, and strait ridings through woods, are exchanged, for clumps, belts, and circular roads and plantations of every kind" (247). In other words, the picturesque gave expression to a more complicated geometry in which changes in shape accompanied new complexities of proportion. This geometry is what I take to be relevant to distant reading, for these new, intricate patterns reflected new perplexities in mathematical thought. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers of mathematics had avoided the riddle of irrational numbers—figures irreducible to whole numbers or simple fractions—by appealing to proportions. For example, isosceles triangles with two sides each measuring one will have a hypotenuse equaling the square root of two, a number that is neither whole nor fractional. And this was important because ancient metaphysics had held that objects found their measure in whole numbers: to exist was to be *one* thing or else a countable assembly or fractional mass of one. So when Price appealed to the shift from regular shapes like "squares and parallelograms" to irregular forms like "segments" and "clumps," he was effectively articulating an aesthetics that gave expression to irrational—mysterious and previously unimaginable—states of existence. (Formal mathematical solutions to irrational numbers would emerge in the nineteenth century.)

Distant reading rejuvenates that history, that beguiling strangeness of shape, for the twenty-first century. In *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, Moretti writes retrospectively (hence, in a kind of prolepsis of *Distant Reading*) about discovering the odd fact "that absolutely *all* Italian box office hits of the sample decade [1986–95] were comedies; why that was so, however, was completely unclear. I felt I had to say something, so I presented an 'explanation'" in the essay "Planet Hollywood," "but it was silly of me" to do so, "because the most interesting aspect of those data was that I *had found a problem for which I had absolutely no solution*." And this is why distant reading is especially important, he concludes, because "problems without a solution are exactly what we need in a field like ours, where we are used to asking only those questions for which we already have an answer" (26). Hence, while he wades into ontological morasses, the historical DNA of distant reading shows it lending form to those imponderables. Inexorable mystery represents the impetus as much as the obstacle of distant reading, which invites us to experience what we do not (yet?) know. And this is probably all for the better, for the appeal *of seeing* rather than *reading* literary history exists, really, only if we cannot make sense of it otherwise. Happily, distant reading's shapes inspire Moretti to extraordinary insights regarding genre, markets, world literature, the state of criticism—indeed, the discipline. But the implications of those insights can seem foreboding.

Crisis: The End of Literary History?

Distant reading represents a force of disruptive innovation, accentuated symbolically as much as substantively by the replacement of close (human) readers by distant (computerized) ones. Moretti heightens this unsettling impression by playing up a rhetoric of crisis. Relative to his field of comparative literature, for example, he invokes an image less of general decline than of betrayed origins, for Goethe's dream regarding the discipline, *Weltliteratur* ("world literature"), was far more ambitious: "let me put it very simply: comparative literature has not lived

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up to these beginnings. It's been a much more modest intellectual enterprise." And if we are to be more expansively minded in our pursuit of history—if we are to recapture not just the shape but also the vision of history by realizing its dream for itself—we have to break our disciplinary habits: "world literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different" (*Distant Reading* 45, 46). We need to upset conventional reading practices and "go against the grain of national historiography," breaking the mores of traditional literary fields (53). Times like ours demand "clear, hard facts" (64), "what Jonathan Arac described . . . as a 'formalism without close reading'" (65), a "larger literary history" that requires "other skills: sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, concordances, incipits—and perhaps also . . . 'trees'" (67). What we do not need, in other words, are interpretive tours de force of the typical (close reading) variety, especially of the usual, canonical standbys. In short, we do not need literary studies, not as it is conventionally practiced. Shutter all departments!

Of course, if *Distant Reading* channels a general consensus that the humanities are in crisis, what that crisis is still seems debatable. One public raconteur of the sad tale of decline, David Brooks, who has told this story on several occasions in *The New York Times*, opened a 2013 op-ed by citing these figures: "A half-century ago, 14 percent of college degrees were awarded to people who majored in the humanities. Today, only 7 percent of graduates in the country are humanities majors." That said, the *narrative* of decline is more hotly disputed than the numbers.[2] Brooks contends that "many humanists have lost faith in their own enterprise," whereas Geoffrey Galt Harpham, taking a different view, remarks that the humanities may not be *in* crisis as much as they *cause* and *publicize* it. The humanities encourage a type of reflection that results in "a loss of self" and a "confusion of intellect and imagination," such that "the humanities represent by their very nature a crisis" in university cultures that privilege the supposedly durable knowledge of the sciences (39). His insight perceives crisis in the humanities, then, less as a problem to be solved than as a way of doing business. Crisis is often a language of novelty in the humanities, a way of announcing (sometimes melodramatically) that scholars have not yet paid attention to this or that subject and that the disclosures of this or that book or article should forever change history.

Moretti is an eloquent orator of crisis: he makes space for distant reading by raising alarms about the state of comparative literature and of reading. And he's right that distant reading has opened new terrain for literary study: "A lot of good work has been done on the relation between meaning and meaning," the standard interpretive gesture (154), "far too little on meanings and forces. . . . [W]here the real challenge lies, and the hope for genuine breakthroughs, is in the realm of causality and large-scale explanations" (*Distant Reading* 154–55). Of course, the implication that other forms of literary study are somehow impaired or on the verge of extinction need not follow. And yet such implications seem organic in an environment of perpetual crisis, which is the air we humanists breathe, whether we like it or not. And even if we think he is right that distant reading represents one answer to pervasive crisis—one way of formulating new answers to old questions and of initiating conversations across new disciplines—that does not mean we do not remain dedicated close readers: this cluster of essays in *PMLA*, closely reading *Distant Reading*, is evidence of that. And what, in Moretti's terms, does that mean?

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We (moderns or literary historians) may (think we) know that history is an agglom-

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eration of details, minutiae, data. Yet we still seem to read only a small portion of it. This narrow focus is partly a result of sheer volume, an onslaught of texts and trends whose mass and momentum overwhelm anxieties of influence, to say nothing of the traditions and individual talents on which such anxieties are predicated.[3] But it is also a function of the ritualistic nature of reading and of the meanings, prospective as much as retrospective, we derive from it: reading helps us organize the unfamiliar and therefore assists us in knowing how to judge and act. *Distant Reading* is thus an especially compelling book, for while it is mostly a compilation of Moretti's greatest hits, it also identifies, whether self-consciously or symptomatically, some of academia's arch concerns regarding the near- and long-term future: seismic shifts across fields and disciplines, moral and political imperatives to recover the breadth of history, and epistemic and economic impacts of big data, to name three. And so, wanting to gain a purchase on these modern forces—wanting to get a better perspective on them, wanting to *see* them—we create a forum like this one, and we read *Distant Reading* (almost) religiously. We engage in what Moretti calls a "theological" exercise, which shows we don't entirely believe what he writes. Or what we read.

But does even he believe it? And is it right here to speak of belief in the first place when, as he says, we should be looking for "clear, hard facts"? What he desires is something beyond belief, beyond the reach of mere interpretation. I am struck here by the similarity between his account, above, of the spellbinding effect of encountering a problem for which he had no solution—and of finding, in that crucible of sublime incapacity, a critical raison d'être—and Talal Asad's description of religious compulsion: "it is possible for someone to encounter something unpredictably that transforms her, to be gripped through her senses by a force . . . *without having to interpret anything*" (51). To see, and to see so clearly, so vividly—to be in the presence of history so vibrantly—that it seems almost immediate, unimpugnable, *there*: this is the experience Moretti essentially professes and proselytizes.[4] Distant reading may demystify history, but in his conception its practice almost becomes a form of mysticism.

When I initially conceived of this essay in terms of enchantment and spirituality, it was with this quality of intense experience, this timbre of numinous criticism in mind. Ironically, Moretti may be one of our great religious writers. And, contrary to expectation, perhaps most important, Moretti's, I do not mean this comment disparagingly. Being, appearance, and crisis are worthy subjects for any theology, even one directed toward something as terrestrial as literary history. Moretti is right to invoke such language for a project so grand and potentially transformative. Would that more of us were so bold, so willing to hazard something other than the criticism of "vigilance, detachment, and wariness," the suspicious hermeneutic of mere "crrritique" (Felski 2, 120).

Notes

1. *Distant Reading* does not encompass all of distant reading. But the two are often interchangeable in my discussion because of Moretti's efforts to theorize the practice. Hence, there is a little slippage between the book's title and the common noun.

2. "There's only one problem with those insistent accounts of the decline of the humanities in undergraduate education," Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth remark. "[T]hey are wrong. Factually, stubbornly determinedly wrong. . . . There is no 'steady downward spiral'" in the number of humanities majors. "It is more like the sales of Beatles records—huge in the 1960s, then dropping off sharply in the 1970s" (2). No news since then, not really. Or so it seemed until a second drop-off after 2008.

3. For a recent intervention into Harold Bloom's famous argument about the anxiety of influence, see Garber.

4. On this "nonhermeneutic" notion of presence, see Gumbrecht 1–20.

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