theories and methodologies

Franco Moretti: A Response

FRANCO MORETTI

FIRST OF ALL, THANKS TO WAI CHEE DIMOCK, THE EDITOR OF *PMLA*, AND TO ALL CONTRIBUTORS FOR HAVING PUT THIS FEATURE TOGETHER.

Devoting time and energy to someone else's work is a very generous thing to do, and I'm grateful to all of you for your attention. Really.

Since Dimock made clear from the start that the discussion would be "on *Distant Reading* the book," I will not address Johanna Drucker's and Catherine Nicholson's essays, which, though very interesting, concern methodological and historical issues rather than the book itself. Otherwise, my reply will proceed as follows: a prologue on my relationship to distance; some retrospective thoughts on *Distant Reading*; a few responses on "facts," interpretations, "reading," and "readers"; some reflections on modeling; and a conclusion on what Lisa Marie Rhody calls the "dehumanizing" nature of "scientific discourse."

Distance. When I go to the movies by myself, I sit far from the screen; possibly, in the very last row of the theater. The same with lectures; if good manners allow it, I choose the end of the hall. I like it better there, which may have something to do with the "humor" so generously mentioned by Bethany Wiggin (though perhaps not with the "Dionisian" traits evoked by Matthew Wickman). And it's not just a matter of "liking" it better—it's that I *understand* better if I am far away. In discussing the different ways we can look at paintings, Northrop Frye observed that, if being close to the canvas allows us to see brushstrokes and similar details, "the further back we go, the more conscious we are of the organizing design of a picture." Design is not more important than brushstrokes; it's just a different object of study. When you arrive in a new town, writes Goethe in his *Italian Journey*, you should first of all climb to the top of the bell tower, to get a sense of the city as a whole. Someone else could have said: go straight to the cathedral, and see what's inside. They are both good ideas; it all depends on what you are interested in. I'm more interested in design and layout than brushstrokes and cathedrals. Whence *Distant Reading*.

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The first essay collected in the book precedes by several years any quantitative work on my part; the same for "Conjectures on World Literature"; only the third piece, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," includes work on a (medium-size) series. The initial impulse behind *Distant Reading* had thus little to do with empirical data: it arose from my fascination with (nonliterary) conceptual models—evolutionary theory, and the Braudel-Wallerstein view of world history—and with their explanatory potential for literary study. As the years went by, however, two simultaneous transformations occurred: the empirical and quantitative aspect of my work increased—while the drive toward theoretical explanations became weaker. We are so used to thinking of explanations and data as the two sides of the same coin that the idea they could be inversely proportional may sound absurd. But when I look at my work, I know that it's true (and, to be frank, I think it's true of digital humanities as a whole). Great intellectual energy goes into the collection, cleaning, sorting, initial analysis, and visualization of the data; a lot less, in establishing a relationship with clearly stated and interesting theories. Time after time, I have felt myself (and others?) slip into microexplanations; ad hoc, often improvised reactions to the pressure of this or that finding, which I couldn't connect with any broader horizon. Knowledge seemed to shrink into half knowledge; a false modesty, bordering on intellectual hide-and-seek; or the coarse anti-intellectualism exemplified by *Wired*'s proclamation that "correlation is enough" and that "the scientific method" is "obsolete" (Anderson). Fact is, big data has produced a decline in theoretical curiosity, which, in its turn, has made our results often mediocre. "More" data is not the solution here; we have enough data already. Only a resolute return to theory may change the way we work.

Andrew Goldstone and I disagree often; usually, with great mutual enjoyment. Here, among other things, he criticizes my idea of visualizations as "objects" of computational criticism, and my speaking of (a certain type of) findings as "facts." Magically, while he was writing his observations, I was myself writing on "objects" and "facts" (and interpretations) for a Stanford Literary Lab pamphlet that will appear more or less simultaneously with this issue of *PMLA*. So, I'll just refer the reader to the forthcoming "Patterns and Interpretation" for my position on this matter, and turn instead to Alison Booth's more specific critique of my interpretation of the fifth volume of Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village*. I suspect (as, probably, does Booth) that few people have read the five volumes of *Our Village*, and fewer still may care about our disagreement. But, for what it's worth: her interpretation foregrounds biography, mine social history, and to some extent they complement each other. I still prefer my view of the matter, because it accounts for the "armed peasantry" (60) evoked by Mitford in the very first pages of her book, and makes sense of the claustrophobia of the volume as a whole (the very opposite of Booth's "pony chaise"). But who knows? The happy few who know what we are talking about will decide for themselves.

Reading. Goldstone describes very well the changes in the practice of "reading" outlined in my book, but is still convinced—as are many others—that when I analyze, say, the titles of novels, my "'formal analysis' entails, in its rhetoric and logic, what is usually called close reading." Of course, it all depends on what we mean by "close reading"; on this, Nancy Armstrong and Warren Montag's essay is particularly rich. The question, here, seems to be this: should every careful study of words and sentences be considered a version of close reading? Personally, I don't see why. Linguists engage in that kind of study at least as carefully as we do, and have never bothered with the formula. Or take Goldstone's example: when I wrote about *The Unfashionable Wife*, I could have moved from the title to the

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text—or (as I did) from the title to other titles. Title-to-text would have brought a detailed analysis of a single work, moving from the title to, say, the style of the opening paragraph, the description of the main character, the recurrent metaphors, and so on; title-to-titles led instead to the "grammar" of two distinct series, involving the role played by adjectives, proper names, abstractions, and so on. Attention to linguistic detail is common to both choices; all the rest is different. Does it make sense to use the same label for both? Why not close reading for one, and quantitative formalism (or something like that) for the other?

From reading, to readers. For Goldstone, I am not interested in actual—real, living—readers, who are replaced in my argument by a "universalized reader, one who could be more easily identified with the expert critic." He is wrong about the expert critic (a figure that hardly plays a role in my work), but completely right in my disregard for actual readers: I have always thought that the decisive force in literary systems is not concrete human beings, but abstract institutions: generic and stylistic conventions or—in the economic sphere—markets, publishers, libraries, and so on. Let me be clear: both readers and institutions matter; it's just that the latter matter more, and explain more. Besides, Goldstone and I disagree even on the way one should think about readers: he inclines toward their explicit declarations, as in Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*; I, toward the implicit function texts or genres assign them. The deeper issue, here, seems to be the role of consciousness in literary life (and in social life more broadly): if human beings are aware of how they read and act, then their self-explanations should be taken seriously; if, on the other hand, conscious motives are ex post constructions, then analysis can disregard them as mere rationalizations. I am definitely of the latter opinion, which seems to me to have been strongly corroborated by the human and social sciences. But I am grateful to Goldstone for having restored the question to our attention. And I look forward to the next disagreement.

Modeling raises a different set of issues. "What [Moretti] has done is produce a statistical *description* of his corpus," writes Richard Jean So. "[W]hat he has not done is produce a statistical *model* of this corpus." Completely true. And Andrew Piper, for his part, presents an interesting "model of a model," as it were, detailing the various steps that lead to its realization. One of the lab's current studies is addressing a very similar issue—mostly thanks to Mark Algee-Hewitt, Zephyr Frank, and Ryan Heuser—taking the idea perhaps even further than Piper and So envisage: that is to say, in the direction of *simulations of literary structures*. Should our attempt—and that of So's and Long Le-Khac's and Piper's and others'—be successful, the relationship between theory and history will be placed on an entirely different plane: models will provide a landscape of theoretical possibilities far exceeding what has been actualized in the course of time, and history would thus cease to be the "obvious" starting point for literary study. What that may concretely mean for our work is—to me, at least—not clear. That we are all moving, in various ways, in a similar direction, is certainly inspiring.

I end with Rhody's contribution. For her, my networks are "failures" (why?), and speech acts are "a narrow definition of relationship" (in drama, where everything is a speech act?); I also believe in the "omniscience" of data (what?), and have all sorts of strategies to "silence," or even "beguile and silence," my "academic rivals"; finally, the act of "extracting 'representative' features" from a text is linked to Saartjie Baartman's fate, as a cautionary tale for the "literary critic engaged in distant reading"—that is, me. Being compared to people who forced a woman to go on display in freak shows, then dissected her body in search of the missing link between animals and humans is a first, even for *Distant Reading*, and I could have a great time countering such an

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argument. Instead, I'll just say that "silencing" others has never been part of my work, first, because I like disagreement (though not insults), and, second, and more important, because I continuously *use* other people's work to construct my own. *Distant Reading* "breaks things," writes Wickman; maybe, but only in order to *build* other things. This, much more than any "destructive element," has been my driving intellectual passion, especially in the book under discussion; if anything, I have often wondered at my innate reluctance toward destruction per se, and worried about the underlying conservatism that the instinctive respect for "what is" tends to entail. But this, clearly, is a very different story.

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