theories and methodologies

Franco Moretti as Satirist

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MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH FRANCO MORETTI'S WORK WAS "CONJECTURES ON WORLD LITERATURE," FROM WHICH HIS BOOK *DISTANT READING* takes its title. The essay was first published in 2000 in the *New Left Review*, the original home of seven of the ten essays reprinted in *Distant Reading*. I happened across it in 2004 amid a fit of procrastination fueled by anxious uncertainty. I was unsure about how, or even whether, to revise a dissertation on popular novels in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany, many of which had been translated from the French. No one really knew much about them. They were miserably cataloged; generations of Prussian librarians had been ordered not to collect them—and to throw away any that had managed to take up shelf space in the first place. In 1795 the reactionary, antirepublican Johann Georg Heinzmann opined, "So lange die Welt stehet, sind keine Erscheinungen so merkwürdig gewesen als in Deutschland die Romanleserey und in Frankreich die Revolution" ("Since the beginning of time nothing was more noteworthy than the revolution in France and the reading of novels in Germany"; 139; my trans.). But an awful lot of these novels are now gone. Critics sometimes say they were read to shreds. And whereas Heinzmann—and generations of state and church censors before him—cared a great deal about the republican potential of German *Romanleserey* ("reading of novels"), I wasn't confident anyone did today.

Each of the essays in *Distant Reading* begins with a new preface sketching the occasion of its original composition. But in this brief review, I move us away from the scene of writing to foreground instead the scene of reading. For the import of *Distant Reading* might lie not chiefly in its call for distance but rather in its ability to prompt reading—and to get readers to consider what they want to pull near. And anyway, as Moretti says, while readers are "butchers" in the "Slaughterhouse of Literature," they, "not professors, make canons" (*Distant Reading*).[1]

His work, including many of the essays gathered in *Distant Reading*, has launched a thousand digital humanities sails. And although

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his influence on the field is important, it's not what is primarily important about this volume. Much commentary, often on point, has been written about his apparent readiness to abandon the aesthetic pleasures born of close reading to pursue a method that wants to find out what world literature might be.[2] And, ironically, Moretti's proposal to bring scientific methods to the study of literature coincides with historical and philosophical critiques of science that question the objectivity and distance to which the scientist lays claim.[3] But despite my interest in these critiques and their importance for my more recent work in environmental humanities, they are not what I want to talk about here either.

In taking aim at calcified pieties, the essays in *Distant Reading* abound in sly humor. And it is this satirical impulse, more than in the graphs, maps, or trees they sometimes aspire to produce, that gives them their power. At their best, and like satire generally, these essays prompt us to consider why we read and why reading literature matters. I draw again on personal example, but I'd wager it might be generalizable.

While I was beleaguered by self-doubt about my dissertation, "Conjectures" delivered the fortification I needed. It offers a modest proposal, its well-known "little pact with the devil." The pact is distant reading, and the essay is, first and foremost, a delicious satire. Moretti, a canny reader of Goethe, poses as a latter-day Faust, to send up the orthodoxy of close reading in the church of literature. Like Goethe's Faust, Moretti is done with critical pieties. He too lends Mephisto his ear. Faust says, "Grau, teurer Freund, is alle Theorie, / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum" ("Grey, dear friend, is all theory / And the golden tree of life is green"; *Faust. Eine Tragödie*, pt. 1, sc. 4, lines 2038–39; *Faust: A Tragedy*). He famously struggles when translating the Bible, rejecting "word" in "In the beginning was the word" and replacing it with "deed." And he leaves the Bible and his translation far behind, abandoning his study, on Easter no less, to set off into the world. In advocating distant reading, Moretti also sets off into the world and encourages us to follow. (No doubt he remembers that Faust will be saved at the end of part 2.)

"Conjectures" made me laugh with equal parts relief and spiteful glee. I was sick and tired of questions by what Germans call *Literaturpäpste* ("popes of literature"), critics who will have no truck with *Trivialliteratur* or the myriad other genres that might refuse to reveal fourfold truths in exegesis. Such critics have asked on several occasions of my work on "trivial" materials, "Lohnt es sich?" I usually took the question to mean, "How can you be so foolish as to waste your time on this trivial topic?"—although the literal and less hostile translation is, "Is it worthwhile?" And so I left my office and made a beeline for the library in search of more works by Moretti. Was he Faust, I wondered, or perhaps the more interesting Mephistopheles?

I snatched a copy of Moretti's *Signs Taken for Wonders* (1983), its various chapters translated from the Italian, and guzzled the introduction, "The Soul and the Harpy," while standing in the stacks and occasionally chuckling. Given my sense of trespass, my pleasure in "Soul" is perhaps understandable. For Moretti was someone who not only violated sacred space with impunity but also argued that the canon was a product of colonialist practices.

Drawing on the Annales school's critique of *histoire événementielle* ("evental history"), "Soul" argues that for most critics "normal literature" still "has no place in criticism" (15). Criticism remains focused on the big events; its failure to attend to the everyday has produced literary histories marked foremost by arrogant, colonialist superstition: "The result is that, at present, our knowledge of literary history closely resembles the maps of Africa of a century and a half ago: the coastal strips are familiar but an entire continent is unknown.

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Dazzled by the great estuaries of mythical rivers, when it comes to pinpointing the source we still trust too often to bizarre hypotheses or even to legends" (15). Such legends, I understood, included the certainty of critics who called trivial literature trivial or, conversely, who were certain about the greatness of the great. Popular forms, according to Moretti, merit attention in part for the ways that reading Bram Stoker, to use his example, could illuminate Charles Baudelaire; and the failure to understand Baudelaire as part of a larger ecology is to remain unable to account for innovation, change, and agency. It was not the case, Moretti reassured the younger me, that "mass literature" is "the undifferentiated and meaningless expanse most critics—still—say it is" (15). Blissful in their ignorance, such bedazzled critics might find themselves serving what the art critic Reger—in the novel *Alte Meister* (*Old Masters*), by the Austrian satirist Thomas Bernhard—calls "gefällige" ("pleasing"; 50; 40), or "simpering," Catholic state art, dreadfully provincial and bordering on imperial propaganda.[4] Moretti's aim was not simply to smash national European canons (or even to punch a Nazi, as Bernhard might have urged). As in the best *Bilderstürmer* ("iconoclasts"), Moretti wanted to violate canon law by expanding the concept of literature. By suggesting that enormous swaths of literary history beyond the coast were terra incognita, he invited us not only to explore but also to rethink everything we thought we knew.

In "Soul," he insisted that to reform literary history and the practice of criticism, we must slow down and attend to form. He makes this argument time and again in *Distant Reading*. In "Slaughterhouse," for example, first published in 2000, he says that "form is precisely *the repeatable element of literature*: what returns fundamentally unchanged over many cases and many years." Formalism, he continues, helps us "recognize . . . the *regularity*" of literature. In *Signs Taken for Wonders* and in much of his later writing, the novel is the form, perhaps *the* genre, whose systematic study might reveal the networks through which culture circulated before the advent of the film industry. In the preface in *Distant Reading* to "Planet Hollywood" (originally published in 2001), he renames the essay "a sort of 'Conjectures on World Film,' as it were, in which Hollywood replaced Paris as the center of the world." Only by also accounting for "normal" culture—genre fiction and films—could critics identify where, when, and how innovation has happened.

The critical challenge thus became developing algorithms that might reveal the importance of what Moretti, after Margaret Cohen, calls the "great unread": the ever-growing corpus of "normal literature" newly made machine-readable. Critics have pointed out that some of the fruits of this digital critical labor have thus far failed to realize the promise of Psalm 128.2: "happy shalt thou be" (*Bible*).[5] Perhaps such a failure is unsurprising given the devilish bargain at its origin. Yet the essays in *Distant Reading* have undeniably sharpened critical discussions of world literature. Its earliest essay, "Modern European Literature: A Geographical Sketch" (1994), written well before the "little pact" undertaken in "Conjectures," explores literature's complicity in colonial structures: "[A]t the very hour of its birth, Goethe's cultural dream immediately forces a question upon us. *Weltliteratur*: world literature, human literature? Or the literature of imperialism?" Variations on this question continue throughout the volume, most interestingly, in "History of the Novel, Theory of the Novel" (2008). There, he asks, "Why was there a European, but not a Chinese rise of the novel in the course of the eighteenth century?" The comparison provincializes the European novel: "'The novel has less need of . . . commentary than other genres,' writes [Ian] Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*, and for Europe he's right." But the novel is not—or at least was not—everywhere one and the

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same.[6] Drawing on Ming Dong Gu, Moretti notes that Chinese novels required commentary "because they were seen as—art. Since at least the *Jin Ping Mei*, around 1600, 'Chinese *xiaoshuo* went through an extended aesthetic turn.'" The comparison reveals that the novel qua novel was not inherently predisposed to spread, and it focuses our attention on how a particular variant then did so—how, in other words, "normal literature," became normal in an increasing number of places. Whether this insight has been won through distant reading remains another question.

The essays in *Distant Reading* pull up from the scene of the individual reader and the lines that reader scrutinizes. The distance is meant to provide an increasingly complete account of what the world of world literature might be. To see it means to see "the great unread." Borrowing extensively from the natural and social sciences, distant reading aims to generate an evidence-driven theory of literature commensurate with theories of other social systems, from biology to economics. Like Faust, Moretti leaves the solitude of the study for the traffic of the world. The satire provokes. But the devil is always in the details.

Remember all those novels Prussian librarians were forever getting rid of? What if, to return once more to Bernhard, what's left on our shelves might be "simpering" art, so eager to please the powerful? What if, by not recognizing the great gaps in our cultural memory, we are more like the teachers whom Reger so despises, "diese Lehrer im Staatsauftrag" ("these teachers employed by the state") who lead forced marches through the great works, who are forever "verleiden ihnen mit ihrer Stumpfsinnigkeit die Kunst" ("spoiling art for their students with their dullness"; *Alte Meister* 49; *Old Masters* 39). The archives of the great unread are partial at best.

But the evidence and the digital humanities' methods that make up distant reading are not what lend *Distant Reading* its vitality. The book is important because, like the best examples of digital or environmental humanities, it reminds us why literature and the larger humanities matter beyond the departmental curriculum and the demands of a dissertation, book, or promotion committee. It accomplishes this feat in no small part because Moretti is such a stylish writer, despite his claim that his English is not as supple as his Italian. His skills are most evident in "Conjectures," in the terrific passage that made me laugh out loud and then leave my office to find his other works. In following Faust, *Distant Reading* insists that literature is in and of the world, enmeshed in the fabric of our social text.

It is not their distant critical practice, finally, that makes these essays important. Rather, it is their power to pull us in with their style and frequent humor. They make us care about literature, including its past. They do so at a time when we might be especially worried about its future. And in their ability to get us to care, they also point to the possibility that a better future is ours to make in theory and in a range of scholarly practices.

Notes

1. "The Slaughterhouse of Literature" is the title of the third essay in *Distant Reading*.

2. I have written elsewhere about critiques of world literature, including those focusing on the version propounded by Moretti in "Conjectures," that fear its flattening of difference, especially its flattening of languages (Wiggin and MacLeod). Pizer also summarizes some of this debate and provides valuable bibliographic resources.

3. For two particularly well-known critiques of the objectivity of science, see Shapin; Latour.

4. Reger assesses: "All the paintings hanging on these walls are nothing but paintings by state artists. *Pleasing Catholic state art, nothing else*" (*Old Masters* 40).

5. In his review of *Distant Reading*, the *New Yorker* critic and archives editor Joshua Rothman notes that "Moretti has critics. They point out that, so far, the results of his investigations have been either wrong or underwhelming. (A typical Moretti finding is that, in

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eighteenth-century Britain, for instance, the titles of novels grew shorter as the market for novels grew larger—a fact that is 'interesting' only in quotes.)"

6. In "Evolution, World-Systems, *Weltliteratur*," an essay in *Distant Reading* originally published in 2005, Moretti lays out the problem: "the term 'world literature' has been around for almost two centuries, but we still do not know what literature is." World literature must be divided in two, he argues in characteristically crisp prose. "The 'first' *Weltliteratur* is a mosaic of separate, 'local' cultures." Despite their diversity, their organicity produces patterns best "explained by (some version of) evolution theory." The "first" epoch of world literature ends with "a decisive historical watershed": the creation of a single world system. Henceforth, literature cannot be understood through biology but through economics. No longer diverse, it "shows a growing, and at times stunning amount of sameness." No longer describable through evolution, "it is best explained by (some version of) world-systems analysis."

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