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Review of Franco Moretti's Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History

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Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History.
By Franco Moretti. London: Verso, 2005. 119 pp.

When a major literary critic announces a project to reconceptualize literary history, it is an event. When that critic provides the tools for such a project, it deserves a careful look. In a well-known essay published in 2000, Franco Moretti called for a new approach to literary history that would capture the vast wealth and variety of world literature by means of "distant reading."[1] Making extensive use of secondary sources to obtain data, distant reading requires a deliberate reduction and abstraction of the text. With distance, Moretti argues, one can take in the whole of world literature precisely because one does not become bogged down in the details of reading. A literary history based on this approach would involve new constructs, which are presented in *Graphs, Maps, Trees.*

Moretti insists that the distance he championed earlier is "*a specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models" (1). Invoking the scientific spirit ("in principle, if not always in practice") of his Marxist training, he notes that these models come from other disciplines: "graphs from quantitative history, maps from geography, and trees from evolutionary theory" (1–2). Moretti does not use these figures metaphorically, either: the book contains thirty-three black-and-white graphs, maps, and trees. By applying "scientific" models, Moretti hopes to expand the domain of literary history. A substantial afterword by a biologist, Alberto Piazza, opens a dialogue between science and literature.

In his chapter on graphs Moretti observes just how thin a slice of the literary field is treated in traditional literary studies: a canon of two hundred nineteenth-century British novels would be much larger than the one typically studied, but it is "still less than one percent of the novels that were actually published: twenty thousand, thirty, more, no one really knows" (4).[2] It is far too many texts for anyone to read carefully, but a quantitative method, using graphs, allows one to grasp the system as a whole. Moretti uses data collected from a number of scholars to trace the rise (and fall and rise again) of the novel in various countries. Britain and Japan, for example, had novel "explosions" in the eighteenth century (i.e., from five to forty-five new novels per year, on average), Italy and Spain in the nineteenth century, and Nigeria in the mid-twentieth. Of course, this knowledge does not tell us anything about the contents of these books; Moretti does no reading of actual texts.

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[1] Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, no. 1 (2000): 54–66.

[2] Moretti deals with this issue in "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *MLQ* 61 (2000): 207–27.

He is interested in structures rather than details, and he sets about enumerating, listing, and categorizing. He identifies no fewer than forty-four genres among the British novels published between 1740 and 1900, graphing when each rises, flourishes, and declines. This technique raises some interesting questions, but it is more often bewildering. The conclusions seem at best merely plausible, at worst trivial. For instance, while it is reasonable to suggest that the political novel evanesces shortly after the political issues it deals with recede (e.g., anti-Jacobin novels are not relevant by the 1820s), the life span and definition of certain genres is debatable (did the "spy" novel really disappear around 1800?).

The chapter on maps allows for some textual analysis, inasmuch as narrative elements may be extracted from a given text and placed on a map, but it does not approach the level of close reading.[3] "What do literary maps do?" Moretti asks. To begin with, they "prepare a text for analysis. You choose a unit—walks, lawsuits, luxury goods, whatever—find its occurrences, place them in space . . . or in other words: you *reduce* the text to a few elements, and *abstract* them from the narrative flow, and construct a new, *artificial* object," like a map (53; ellipses and italics in original). Moretti "maps" the interrelated tales in Mary Mitford's *Our Village* (as well as other British and German village stories), in which the various tales form a kind of solar system, a circular diagram based on distance to and from a central point, the village. By mapping later editions and other tales, Moretti reveals a disintegration of the "natural" village chronotope. As prosy strolls in the countryside give way to travels on the iron rails of modernity, the circular geography of the village story yields to the linear geography of urbanization and the modernizing processes of industrialization and national centralization. By "rearrang[ing] the [narrative's] components in a non-trivial way," Moretti's maps "may bring hidden patterns to the surface" (54). Thus they disclose potential readings of the text and the literary history of which it is a part. But here again, the text itself is not read, or at least not interpreted; the elements are simply extracted from the text and repositioned in a diagram.

The graphs and the maps have charted a changing literary field, the former as a system of genres and the latter as a literary geography of a particular type of space (or chronotope). Both show *that* the field changes, but not *why*. Trees provide a format for tracing the "evolution" of literary forms as texts branch off and become either dead ends for literary history or the representatives of a new genre or subgenre. The fittest survive, where fitness implies adaptation to the narrative form of a discernible genre. Moretti, referring to his method as comparative morphology, views it as the appropriate approach for the study of world literature: “Take a form, follow it from space to space, and study the reasons for its transformations” (90). The trait studied is both smaller than the text (e.g., the use of clues in detective tales) and larger (inasmuch as the trait transcends various texts to typify a genre). The tree, displaying divergence of literary forms in literary history, can be used to help answer some of the questions posed in the chapter on graphs. For example, a particular genre “dies off” when it lacks a necessary trait. As in biological evolution, it is not always clear in advance what will survive (e.g., Arthur Conan Doyle’s rivals certainly would have liked to produce works sharing the Sherlock Holmes tales’ popularity and canonicity). The tree, then, helps explain something that the graph cannot: “Whereas graphs abolish all qualitative difference among their data [i.e., *Pride and Prejudice* appears at the same dot next to 1813 as all the other novels published that year], trees try to *articulate* that difference” (77) by distinguishing which characteristic leads a text to “survival,” continued readership or canonicity.

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[3] Moretti has long been interested in literary geography; see, e.g., *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998).

Each of these models deals with a different section of the literary field, but the movement of *Graphs, Maps, Trees* is from the broad to the microscopic. That is, graphs diagram “the system of novelistic genres as a whole,” whereas maps diagram the life span of “a specific chronotope” and trees the “micro-level of stylistic mutations” (91). Thus each model has its own field and function, but Moretti notes that they have something important in common: “They share a clear preference for explanation over interpretation,” specifically “the explanation of general structures over the interpretation of individual texts” (91). Moretti’s point is not to perform new readings of the texts he discusses; rather, he uses his abstract models to define the “patterns that are their necessary preconditions” (91).

This is my primary objection to the project of *Graphs, Maps, Trees.* By relying heavily on secondary resources, objective bibliographic data, and cursory readings to extract the relevant “trait,” the literary historian will overlook, or deliberately elide, the particulars that make the study of literature critical. The practice leads to, and even encourages, generalizations that critics would normally eschew. It may be interesting to argue, for example, that “nautical novels disappear in the mid-nineteenth century because the industrial novel now occupies its former morpho-space,” but this is not a conclusion based on facts easily agreed on by all, and it certainly says nothing about *Moby-Dick.*[4]

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[4] To his discussion of graphs Moretti appends “A Note on the Taxonomy of the Forms” (31–33), in which he lists his sources for establishing his forty-four novelistic genres and the life span of each. The note highlights the general problem of defining genres themselves, not to mention the problem of overlapping genres in a single work. After all, what kind of novel is *Moby-Dick*? A nautical tale? A romance? Acknowledging the limitations of traditional genres, Moretti has previously called it a “modern epic” (see *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* [London: Verso, 1996]).

Indeed, few texts not written for a static market niche confine themselves to clearly demarcated generic parameters. (Harper and Brothers advertised Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as a nonfiction work of travel, but because we read the text rather than take the author's or publisher's word for it, we know that it belongs to some other genre.) This objection is not merely critical but also pedagogical and political. The skills associated with critical reading must be encouraged in literary study and in the culture at large. In an era of globalization, where an "economic and cultural leveling process," as Erich Auerbach once called it, is eroding particularity and specificity to an even greater degree than formerly imagined, the political implications of a project of "distant reading" are troubling.[5] The example of Auerbach alone shows that one can address the massive field of *Weltliteratur* without abandoning textual analysis.

Graphs, Maps, Trees is a fascinating book and will certainly spark new debates in and beyond the literary disciplines. Moretti emphasizes that the use of these models is intended to change the way that we do literary history; it will open the literary field up to new forms of analysis, allowing critics to ask new and better questions. This is a grand ambition, and this slender volume has the feel of an introduction. Moretti acknowledges that his results are tentative: "Much remains to be done, of course, on the compatibility of the various models, and the explanatory hierarchy to be established among them. But right now, opening new conceptual possibilities seemed more important than justifying them in every detail" (92). Fair enough. I look forward to seeing how future research will supply those details, and I am excited about the prospects of a new literary history. But in this age of waning literacy and devaluation of the literary in our economic world system, I am wary of a literary critic who calls for an end to reading.

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[5] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 552. In a response to Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature," Jonathan Arac objects that distant reading would practically establish English as the common currency of global literary study, reinforcing a linguistic imperialism with respect to already marginal languages and literatures ("Anglo-Globalism?" *New Left Review*, no. 16 [2002]: 35–45).