

# The Dangers of Distant Reading: Reassessing Moretti's Approach to Literary Genres

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Ours is the global age. Ours is the digital age. From our present observatory, we are all aware of that. Ours is an increasingly smaller world in which the amount of information we face is growing bigger and bigger. And in our attempts to find our way through this maze of words and images we face ever new challenges.

Theorists of literature and culture have responded to these sweeping changes by evolving new approaches to their fields of study. In 2000 the comparatist Franco Moretti (2000a, 57–58) published his seminal “Conjectures on World Literature,” in which he advocated a strategy of distant reading:

Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something.

Moretti applies distant reading to the diachronic study of both world literature and literary genres, two fields he insightfully regards as connected. In his brave attempt to achieve a clearer understanding of literature as a system,<sup>1</sup> Moretti is ready to do away with “*direct textual reading*,” which he associates with a restricted literary canon, since the finite time each human being has at his or her disposal does not allow a single interpreter to go beyond a limited number of texts (57).

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1. Moretti's view of world literature—with its emphasis on the relation between core, semi-periphery, and periphery—rests on the works of the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, notably on his seminal *The Modern World-System*, vol. 1 (1974), and of Fredric Jameson. For a critical discussion of this world-system model as applied to literature, see Beecroft 2008.

The problem Moretti addresses here is highly relevant to the contemporary view of literature, for the centrality of national canons has been recently challenged in various ways. On the one hand, the increasingly transnational production and circulation of literature has fostered a wealth of studies on world/global/planetary literature, migrant writers, translation, transmediality, and even self-translation, making the concept of a national canon look outdated both ideologically and pragmatically in relation to the global nature of the contemporary market. On the other, the canon has been undermined by the importance popular literature and culture have acquired, also thanks to the postmodernist erosion of the barriers between “high and low,” the development of cultural studies, and the advent of new media. Briefly, Moretti’s atextual, systemic approach can be regarded as a daring attempt to come to terms with the swiftly changing nature of literary phenomena.

Predictably, Moretti’s choice to do away with texts in order to focus his inquiry on other components of the literary system provoked a heated debate, which also thrived on the pages of the *New Left Review* (Arac 2002; Kristal 2002; Moretti 2003b; Orsini 2002; Prendergast 2001). The postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously addressed this issue both in *Death of a Discipline* (2003) and in “World Systems and the Creole” (2006), an essay she published in response to Wai Chee Dimock. Other scholars have taken part in this exchange, but my article does not aim to question Moretti’s strategy of distant reading in relation to the concept of world literature, although I regard this as a passionate subject. Neither am I trying to deny the relevance of quantitative research—a method that Moretti adopted in his *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (1998) and whose potential he is still exploring, as shown by the activity of the Stanford Literary Lab, which he founded together with Matthew Jockers in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

Moretti’s research in the field of digital humanities is a welcome addition to other forms of literary inquiry. What worries me is Moretti’s tendency to regard distant reading as objective, within the framework of a purportedly scientific approach to the humanities,<sup>3</sup> which might be more aptly described as pseudo-

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2. The website of the laboratory includes both a description of its various teamwork projects and a series of individual and collective publications (Stanford Literary Lab 2010–). See Allison et al. 2011; Finn 2011; Heuser and Le-Khac 2012; Moretti 2011.

3. As Kathryn Schulz (2011) has recently remarked while discussing Moretti’s stance: “The counterpoint to theology is science, and reading Moretti, it’s impossible not to notice him jockeying for scientific status. He appears now as literature’s Linnaeus (taxonomizing a vast new trove of data), now as Vesalius (exposing its essential skeleton), now as Galileo (revealing and reordering the universe of books), now as Darwin (seeking ‘a law of literary evolution’).”

scientific. As we have seen, Moretti's (2000a, 57) distant reading is meant to overcome close reading, a practice that he describes as a "theological exercise," therefore as a relic of a former age. Following his enthusiasm, we may come to regard distant reading as a liberation from the constraints of a time in which interpretation came to coincide with revelation and meaning was associated with the univocal nature of authorial intention rather than with the multiple encounters between a text and its readers, but does distant reading really provide a liberating and democratic approach to literature?<sup>4</sup> My contention is that far from opening new perspectives, distant reading may actually blunt our critical faculties, inviting us to inadvertently adopt biased views of literature under the mask of objectivity.

The central part of my essay is aimed at revealing precisely the pseudoscientific nature of distant reading as applied to the analysis of literary genres. Before proceeding to an inevitably close reading of Moretti's theories, let me add that Moretti has proved capable of opening new avenues to literary inquiry, and we should be grateful to him for this inventiveness. I only wish to call attention to the dangers an uncritical application of scientific metaphors to literature may produce. I hope my attitude will not be regarded as irreverent.

### **Abstract Models for Literary History**

In "Conjectures on World Literature" Moretti (2000a, 66) discusses what he regards as "two basic cognitive metaphors: the tree and the wave." Moretti associates the phylogenetic tree with Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory, with the discipline of philology, and more generally with the progress from unity to diversity, while he associates the wave with historical linguistics and with the wiping out of diversity. In Moretti's eyes the interaction of these contradictory models explains cultural history.

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4. Of course my qualms about distant reading do not imply a rejection of quantitative research at large. Presenting a quantitative history of Australian literature, Katherine Bode declares to aim precisely for a more "extensive" and "democratic" historiography," and she coherently explains that in her eyes "constructions of value are too determining of literary history." To contrast this canonical bias, her book "considers how the history of the Australian novel changes when forms not traditionally valued by literary critics are incorporated." She also clarifies that her "empirical approach" is informed by cultural materialism with a "focus on the contexts of production and consumption." As Bode (2012, 1–3) remarks, it is "at the boundaries of literary and book history" that quantitative methods are thriving. The book includes a conclusion on the future of digital humanities in which the author writes, "Instead of simply embracing (or rejecting) data-based approaches, a critical attitude toward such methods is necessary" (169–70).

These and other “cognitive metaphors” are at the core of the three essays Moretti published in the *New Left Review* in 2003 and 2004 under the common heading “Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History.” One of the issues Moretti raises in these articles—which were reprinted in volume form in 2005—is the evolution of literary genres, notably of detective fiction. What I am arguing is that although Moretti draws his models from scientific disciplines (graphs from quantitative history, maps from geography, and trees from evolutionary theory), he actually uses them to support theories that lack proper verification.<sup>5</sup>

This theoretical fault line partly originates from Moretti’s choice to start from abstract models, the validity of which he subsequently tries to prove, rather than evolving theoretical models from the field of inquiry of popular literature itself. Of course it is difficult to define where the germ of a theory lies. Theories are rooted in the observation of phenomena, but they involve an element of intuition—we could say of abduction, since scientists and critics are like detectives who visit a crime scene: they proceed from scattered clues and infer things that can be proved only after further research. Moreover, once theories have been formulated in their embryonal form, they keep changing according to the results further observations provide. This is a “dirty,” “messy” process rather than a linear one.

The danger of bending reality to theory is always present in research. When scientists and scholars let the results of their research be unduly influenced by their expectations, a confirmation bias is produced.<sup>6</sup> Excluding those cases in which this happens intentionally, we are left with the very real danger every researcher faces of shaping the results of an experiment or a critical inquiry due to the unconscious influence of one’s own beliefs and desires.

Good researchers should do their best to keep their frame of mind flexible. They should stand at the same time inside and outside themselves, using their mental resources and yet recognizing them as “relative” or “situated.” These are the tools you have ready at hand, but you should always strive to prevent them from entirely shaping your view of the world. You should keep your curiosity alive, aiming—with a mixture of humility and daring—to see what lies beyond

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5. Moretti’s evolutionary approach to literature has been recently studied by Kenta Tsuda (2011) within the wider framework of social and cultural evolutionism, a theoretical tendency that embraces not only comparative literature but also the study of belief systems, economics, and society. This purported “revolution” in the study of cultures and societies—pivoting on the idea of selection—has been discredited by Tsuda, who regards it as resting on fallacious premises.

6. For a definition of *confirmation bias*, see Carroll 2003, 81.

your ability to recognize and conceptualize things. In this respect researchers resemble tightrope walkers. You have to keep your balance in the face of the absolute unknown that surrounds you, but you must also avoid the risk of believing that the world is reduced to the thin line on which you are walking.

### **Graphs and Genres**

Let us now approach Moretti's first essay. Here Moretti invites critics to cross the borders of what we call the literary canon and deal with the much wider phenomenon of popular literature. Focusing on nineteenth-century Britain, Moretti argues that the canon includes something in the order of two hundred novels out of the twenty to thirty thousand that were actually printed. According to Moretti (2003a, 68), the choice to investigate this huge amount of material involves a shift from the strategy of close reading to a "quantitative approach to literature."

Moretti's visual rendering of this quantitative approach translates into graphs describing phenomena such as the rise of the novel and the life cycle of genres. The critic starts from the premise that "quantitative research provides a type of data which is ideally independent of interpretations" (72). Yet collecting cultural data actually involves an element of interpretation, as Moretti himself half recognizes when he adds, "Since we are all eager to find what we are looking for, using the evidence gathered by other scholars, with completely different research programs, is always a good corrective to one's desires" (80). Moretti chooses to rely on other people who have previously defined genres as if this were a guarantee of objectivity, but such a critical attitude simply amounts to a shifting of responsibility.

What this decision implies is the choice not to question the assumptions on which the traditional view of genres such as detective fiction rests. Instead of opening new avenues to critical thinking, Moretti's choice to ground his inquiry on "over a hundred studies of British genres between 1740 and 1900" actually prevents him from going beyond the premises the community of scholars already shares (80). Moretti's quantitative approach—which purportedly takes into account the whole literary field rather than the restricted enclave of the canon—entails the refusal to look at this varied landscape with one's own eyes.

### Evolutionary Trees and the Literary Market

The consequences of this stance are apparent in Moretti's third essay, where he applies the paradigm of natural selection to literature. One of the case studies he tackles to sound the hypothesis that the literary market is characterized by a "ruthless competition—hinging on form" (2004b, 48)—is the early development of detective fiction, notably the stories that appeared in *Strand Magazine*. Moretti puts his view of literary selection in a nutshell when he claims, "Readers discover that they like a certain device, and if a story doesn't seem to include it, they simply don't read it (and the story becomes extinct)" (48).

The critic regards clues as the single formal device on which the evolution of detective fiction pivoted, and after analyzing his corpus of *Strand* stories, he traces the following spectrum of formal choices:

- 1) clues are present but serve no real function;
- 2) clues are present, they have a function, but they are not visible;
- 3) clues are visible and decodable by the reader.

According to Moretti, the first choice leads to the dead branch of the detection tree, the second proves that the road to hell may be paved with good intentions, while the third is the key to literary survival. Yet Moretti acknowledges that no more than four of the twelve *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* stories include decodable clues. Instead of realizing that this in itself calls his theory into question, Moretti wonders, "Why this last-minute stumble on Doyle's part?" (48). Moretti leaves this question unanswered, claiming that he addressed it in "The Slaughterhouse of Literature" (2000b), which he mentions as the source of his evolutionary view of detective fiction.<sup>7</sup> Here Moretti explains Doyle's relative indifference to decodable clues as follows: "Conan Doyle stumbled upon clues while he was working at something completely different, which was the myth of Sherlock Holmes. Think of the opening scenes of the *Adventures*, when Holmes 'reads' a whole life from the signs on the body of his client: this is what Conan Doyle wants from clues: a support for Holmes's omniscience. They are

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7. In this text Moretti not only contrasts Doyle with his rivals but also lists his critical references, which include the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky, the sociologist Siegfried Kracauer, the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, the literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov, the semiotician Umberto Eco, and the historian Carlo Ginzburg. As we can see, Moretti subscribes to the traditional view of detective fiction. See Moretti 2000b. The critic had already dealt with Doyle's saga in "Clues," a chapter in *Signs Taken for Wonders* (1983), and had edited two collections of detective stories in the 1970s (Moretti 1978a, 1978b).

a function of Holmes, an attribute, like coke and the violin" (215). The idea that Doyle—consciously or unconsciously, as Moretti seems to imply—abstained from providing readers with meaningful clues because they would have created “a potential parity between him and the reader,” while he was aiming at climactic revelations, is easy to share (216). From the perspective of authorial intention we may safely infer from the stories that Doyle’s main interest was not an interactive use of clues. That is all.

Moretti, however, considers this as a stumble—an evaluative comment that implies the shift from the production to the reception of the Holmes saga, for Moretti sees clues precisely as the winning trait in the struggle for survival. This brings to light the underlying premises of Moretti’s critical attitude, since the paucity of decodable clues in the Holmes saga goes against the principle of fair play, which was considered as imperative by golden age writers and critics. When Moretti describes the use of decodable clues as “soon to be the First Commandment of detective fiction” (214), he is referring to S. S. Van Dine’s ([1928] 1946, 189) celebrated “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories,” the first of which reads: “The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described.” The same principle recurs in Ronald A. Knox’s ([1929] 1946) “A Detective Story Decalogue” and in “The Detection Club Oath” ([1928?] 1946), which was written about the same time.

Moretti’s view of detective fiction uncritically rests on the normative and restrictive attitude that golden age theorists advertised as objective, adopting a self-validating positivistic stance. Van Dine and Knox, however, like Richard Austin Freeman, Dorothy Sayers, and others, were first and foremost creative writers whose theoretical and historical constructs reflect their own practice as authors of clue puzzles. The rules to which they subscribed are no longer regarded as timelessly valid but rather as culturally situated, for in the course of the twentieth century, detective fiction deeply changed in terms of both creative writing and theoretical/historical constructs. A descriptive and comprehensive approach is now uppermost thanks to critics such as Julian Symons (1972), Stephen Knight (1980, 2004), Martin Priestman (1998), and Martin Kayman (1992), who discarded the traditional notion of detective fiction to use the umbrella term *crime fiction*. Detective fiction is now regarded as a subgenre of crime fiction, like sensation fiction or the police procedural, and has been reassessed within a much wider network of literary works.

Briefly, approaching Doyle's use of clues through the eyes of golden-age theorists may help us understand his reception in the interwar period but does not explain either his previous fortune or the current revival of interest in this figure. The immediate success of Holmes's adventures was not due solely to clues but to a variety of factors. Suffice it to think of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" to realize how important the gothic element was in the Holmes canon. Elements such as exoticism and the imperial adventure are no less important, as is shown by *The Sign of Four* and "The Speckled Band." Yet to explain Doyle's success and his competitors' failure, Moretti does not take into account the Holmes saga as a whole but focuses on a single aspect of it, first formulating the hypothesis that its fortune rested on that only and then wondering why a close study of the texts fails to validate this hypothesis.

This is when the confirmation bias occurs. The gap between theory and observation is not bridged. Theory cannot be readjusted, since it stands on assumptions that the theoretician regards as objective and is therefore either unwilling or conceptually unable to question. The danger that is inherent in the presumed objectivity of distant reading becomes apparent.

Moretti's overconfident interpretative stance has been deconstructed by Elif Batuman (2005), who invites us to take into consideration the possibility that the undecodable character of clues in the Holmes stories is not an accidental mistake but a calculated feature: "Conan Doyle was writing during the conquest of England by industry and rationalism; perhaps his readers wanted stories about the kinds of magic that are possible within the constraints of science." Batuman uses the hypothesis that Doyle voluntarily abstained from using decodable clues—thus creating an aura of magic around his hero—as a means to undermine Moretti's Darwinian paradigm: "Can Darwin's law of 'random divergence' be applied to literature—given that books, unlike animals, result from 'intelligent design'?"

While Batuman is more interested in Moretti's fallacious use of Darwinian theories, what I wish to stress is that the critic's pseudoscientific method rests in fact on cultural premises that he uncritically accepts as objective. Moretti seems oblivious to the issue that genres are critical and theoretical constructs, which simply do not exist in the minds of readers as clearly defined entities. The "hundred studies of British genres" that Moretti (2003a, 80) claims to have used do not provide him with an objective foundation but are situated in time. They are representations rather than descriptions and bear the traces of the cultural climate in which they flourished.

### Genres and Complexity

Already in 1929 Régis Messac opened his seminal *Le "detective novel" et l'influence de la pensée scientifique* with a reflection on the fuzziness of genres and of the labels we use to define them. In Messac's eyes (1929, 5) these terms "have a nuance of individual meaning for each individual who pronounces them" (my translation). Messac resolutely went in for complexity, analyzing the connection between current critical terms, such as *mystery story*, *detective story*, *sensation story*, and *crime story*, claiming that "in practice, there can be all possible transitions between crime story and detective story" (9; my translation).

After these refreshing reflections, let us go back to Moretti. Having concluded that divergence of forms is a major factor in literary history—a statement that confirms his "evolutionary" hypothesis, pivoting on the writers' efforts to survive in the literary market—the critic argues that "the forces that shape literary history" are "devices and genres; not texts" (Moretti 2004b, 50). This emphasis on the creative tension between micro and macro elements enables the critic to bypass the text as a literary entity and to attack what he calls "typological thinking," that is, the idea that a genre is defined by a single "representative individual," a perfect specimen, whereas a genre should actually be regarded as a "diversity spectrum" (52). As we have seen, however, Messac was already fully aware of this, and the same view of genre as a complex system—a field of forces—has been subscribed to also by Alastair Fowler (1982, 149–69), who famously advocates a polygenetic view of genre formation, rejecting the traditional monogenetic account, which tended to identify the origin of a genre with the creation of a model text.

We should not bypass texts, because genres are made of texts, and that is why they are such a volatile, fluid—even self-conflicting—entity. As Fowler (1982, 23) claims in his seminal *Kinds of Literature*: "Every literary work changes the genres it relates to. . . . However a work relates to existing genres—by conformity, variation, innovation, or antagonism—it will tend, if it becomes known, to bring about new states of these genres." Dimock (2006, 86) puts this dynamic into a nutshell when she defines genre as "a self-obsolete system."

Genres not only change all the time but also have "no clear dividing boundaries," and "membership of one by no means rules out membership of others" (Fowler 1982, 37). A literary work can be related to different genres at the same time. With his characteristically deconstructive attitude, Jacques Derrida (1980, 65) rendered the idea that genres are not mutually exclusive in "The Law of

Genre,” where one reads, “I submit for your consideration the following hypothesis: a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text: there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging.” The identity of a genre is fluid, in both diachronic and synchronic terms, since it results from a complex set of negotiations involving authors, readers, and critics. Each individual has a different view of a particular genre, and yet a generic core—an aggregate of characteristics that readers share—can always be identified, otherwise genres would not be such an important element of literary communication. Genres, however, cannot be defined as objective entities but rather as fluctuating, incessantly shifting collective projections.

We must understand and accept that when we discuss genres we are in the realm of complexity, as Derrida acknowledged in the above-mentioned passage. To render the concept of genre, we might possibly resort to the image of a field of energy. A genre is a halo that we can all perceive but that no one can grasp in its entirety, since this ghostlike entity reveals itself in a different way to each member of the community. With our mental energies, we all contribute to giving life to this impalpable substance, we all participate in it, but no one can appraise it in its entirety, as it is. Our perspective is inevitably partial. Yet this does not prevent us from studying genre or from sharing our experience of it. We need theoretical and critical tools to analyze this aspect of the human experience, but we should never let our conceptual construction make us oblivious to the fact that texts are the only material entity we are dealing with, and that is where a theory of genre should start.

### **Moretti versus Prendergast**

In 2005 the *New Left Review* published Christopher Prendergast’s response to Moretti. While Moretti traces a causal link between Doyle’s use of clues and his success in the literary market, Prendergast (2005, 51) reminds his readers that Doyle’s fortune may well have rested on “quite different factors (for example a fascination with the figure of Sherlock Holmes, the gentleman from Baker Street).” What Moretti’s train of thought does not render is indeed the complex responses of readers, who are not necessarily gulping down detective stories to quench their thirst for a single device, such as interactive clues, but may be also

interested in other aspects of that narrative recipe, including characters, ambience, and the way an author makes sense of the world.

In his reply to Prendergast, Moretti (2006, 72) denies this possibility and claims to have focused on clues “because all theories of detective fiction place clues at the very centre of the genre’s structure, thus singling them out as its crucial morphological variable.” Moretti’s evolutionary analysis of detective fiction is based on an obsolete concept of this genre. By regarding genres as “problem-solving devices, which address a contradiction of their environment, offering an imaginary resolution by means of their formal organization” (73), the critic seems unable to consider detective fiction other than as an effort to address the epistemological condition of uncertainty that engendered the hyperrational, mastermind detective.

His attitude is oblivious to other factors that actually influenced the early development and reception of this genre, such as the relationship between crime, detection, justice, religion, divine Providence, punishment in the afterlife, the existence of ghosts, and so forth. Yet if we do not take these factors into account, we can hardly understand the transition from a Christian to a positivist view of crime and detection:

sin—investigation driven by divine Providence—punishment in afterlife  
 crime—investigation driven by forensic science—mundane punishment

This transition was far from over at the fin de siècle, as is proved by the supernatural paradigm that underlies *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) (Ascari 2007, 55–65). The Victorian age was marked not only by positivism but also by a strong interest in the supernatural, which was often investigated with pseudoscientific means (Ascari 2007, 66–90; Bown et al. 2004; Grimes 2011; Smadjic 2010). Doyle himself became a Spiritualist and notoriously came to advocate the existence of fairies. Moreover, at the turn of the century many writers and readers were intrigued by the investigation—either by scientific or pseudoscientific means—of uncanny mysteries, whose nature might turn out to be either natural or supernatural. These ambivalences are at the core of a syncretic subgenre of detective stories, pivoting on the esoteric knowledge of the so-called detectives of the occult, who face both common criminals and discarnate entities (Crofton 2012; Parlati 2011). Unsurprisingly, this subgenre was exorcised by golden-age theorists, as shown by Van Dine’s ([1928] 1946, 190–91) rules:

8. The problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods for learning the truth as slate-writing, ouija-boards, mind-reading, spiritualistic séances, crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo. A reader has a chance when matching his wits with a rationalistic detective, but if he must compete with the world of spirits and go chasing about the fourth dimension of metaphysics, he is defeated *ab initio*. . . .

14. The method of murder, and the means of detecting it, must be rational and scientific. That is to say, pseudoscience and purely imaginative and speculative devices are not to be tolerated in the *roman policier*.

Golden age theorists deliberately severed the genre from its pseudoscientific and supernatural components to emphasize its highly rational nature and mark the triumph of the “fair play” principle, but we should not retrospectively apply this attitude to the late Victorian period. The coordinates of reception constantly shift. Reading Holmes is quite a different experience in the 1890s, in the 1920s, or in the 2000s. Due to our ever-changing cultural background, we actually see different things. While at the beginning of the twentieth century emotions were banished from the territory of detective fiction in an effort to ennoble the genre as an intellectual pastime akin to chess and crossword puzzles, detaching it from its disreputable nineteenth-century relatives, we now live in the age of the thriller. Emotions are back, and with vengeance.

Moretti’s (2006, 74) inability or unwillingness to go beyond the golden age view of the detective canon is proved by the fact that he refuses to take into consideration Prendergast’s hypothesis that the appealing figure of Holmes may have contributed to the success of the saga:

Since Prendergast does not explain why a gentleman (which Holmes, incidentally, is not) would be so fascinating in a mystery story—whereas we *do* know what makes clues valuable in that type of narrative—I see no reason to abandon a solid hypothesis for one that, right now, is a mere possibility. And then, unlike gentlemen, clues are a *formal* trait of detective fiction and since form is the repeatable element of literature, they are more likely to play a role in the replication and long-term survival of a literary genre.

This passage is puzzling. What does Moretti mean by form? Why does he seem to regard it as the only element that defines a genre? Is not murder or crime “repeatable” like clues? Do themes concern only thematic criticism, or do they interact with genres?

### **Is It Clues or Charisma? Or Both?**

The personality of Holmes is itself “repeatable,” as is proved by the huge amount of Holmes stories written after the death of Doyle, from Nicholas Meyer’s *The*

*Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1974) to Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (1978), Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution* (2004), and Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary* (2005), not to mention the huge output of fan fiction pivoting on Doyle's detective. Moreover, in recent decades Holmes has been at the core of fortunate film and TV adaptations. Suffice it to think of Guy Ritchie's much discussed *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), the appeal of which relies on action rather than clues. But then we should not forget that the title Doyle chose for his first collection of Holmes stories is *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and that the word *adventure* recurs in most of the following Holmes stories. Holmes is not simply an armchair detective but also a master of disguise, and he does not eschew either action or danger.

Another notable recent adaptation is Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss's widely praised BBC *Sherlock*, which has already gone through two series (2010–12), and a third has been announced. The pleasure viewers derive from this contemporary update is due to the creators' ability to reinvent Holmes's adventures against the backdrop of our age—in terms of technological development, urban environment, human interaction—also enabling those who are in the know to relish the witty intertextual connection with the original. As Bran Nicol (2013, 125) claims, the series avoids an overtly reverential approach to Doyle, reverting to the source of the original's appeal—"the brilliance of 'the Holmes method,' the relationship between Holmes and Watson, and, most of all, the peculiarities of Holmes's personality." This list goes well beyond the interactive use of clues.

Moretti is oblivious to the importance of the investigating agent as a persona who is endowed with a charisma that translates into formulaic attributes. Holmes is not simply an icon of positivism, as a superficial sociological reading of the character may induce us to believe. Holmes's violin connects him with fin de siècle aestheticism. His addiction to drugs betrays his "excessive" status and his kinship with Edgar Allan Poe's late romantic investigator Auguste Dupin, a gothic creature of the night. Holmes's relation with his negative double, Moriarty, is too specular not to become ambivalent. Of course Holmes as a character is also defined by his relation with Watson and by the details of their quarters in Baker Street, which has characteristically been "turned" into a museum, proving that fiction can acquire the status of a pseudofact. As Knox (1955, viii) perceptively wrote,

When you take to writing detective stories, the measure of your success depends on the amount of personality you can build up round your favourite detective.

Why this should be so, is not immediately obvious; it might have been supposed that this kind of fiction had a merely mathematical appeal. But, whether because Sherlock Holmes has set the standard for all time, or because the public does not like to see plots unraveled by a mere thinking-machine, it is personality that counts.

These words become even more meaningful if we take time to ponder that Knox is one of the apologists of the clue-puzzle form, as discussed above. Knox's testimony is actually confirmed by G. K. Chesterton (1953, 168), who wrote a famous essay on Sherlock Holmes in which he claimed, "Mr. Conan Doyle's hero is probably the only literary creation since the creations of Dickens which has really passed into the life and language of the people, and become a being like John Bull or Father Christmas." Chesterton did not confine himself to stressing Holmes's clue-solving ability but discussed the many ingredients that concurred to the lasting fortune of his adventures.

Having acknowledged the role "personality" played in the success of the Holmes saga, we should remember that the formation of the Holmes myth involved a variety of cultural transactions and products, ranging from the pictures that accompanied Doyle's stories to literary parodies<sup>8</sup> and adaptations both for the theater and for the cinema.<sup>9</sup> Some of the features we associate with the Sherlock Holmes icon are not rooted in the texts themselves but result from this complex set of cultural exchanges. We owe Holmes's deerstalker hat to Sidney Paget's illustrations, since Doyle's stories had previously offered only generic descriptions of Holmes's headgear, such as "his ear-flapped travelling cap" in "The Adventure of the Silver Blaze" (1892). Another illustrator who strongly contributed to the early characterization of Holmes is the American Frederic Door Steele. Steele's portrait of Holmes was in turn influenced by the American actor William Gillette, whose play *Sherlock Holmes*—first staged in Buffalo in October 1899—debuted in London in September 1901 (Zecher 2011).

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8. See Robert Barr, "The Adventures of Sherlaw Kombs" (1892); J. M. Barrie, "The Adventure of the Two Collaborators" and "The Late Sherlock Holmes" (1893); Bret Harte, "The Stolen Cigar Case" (1899).

9. See Charles Brookfield, *Under the Clock* (1893); John Webb, *Sherlock Holmes* (1894); William Gillette, *Sherlock Holmes: A Drama in Four Acts* (1899). For a list of Sherlock Holmes silent films—the earliest of which is Arthur Marvin's *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* (1903)—see Davies 1968.

### Embracing Complexity

As these reflections prove, I am arguing in favor of a theoretical approach that is based on the observation of literary phenomena and that takes into account their wider cultural dimension. In my opinion, we cannot understand literary genres without studying both the context of production and that of reception of texts.

Although—to avoid a shortsighted approach to literary history—Moretti has laudably extended his analysis to the varied territory of popular literature, he has ultimately failed to develop appropriate analytic tools. The idea that a single “device”—clues—may be identified as the factor that ensured the immediate success and the subsequent survival of late nineteenth-century detective stories is outdated. Only four of the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* stories present visible clues simply because this was not the defining feature of the Holmes formula. Moretti has accepted as objective a view of detective fiction that crystallized in the first half of the twentieth century as the result of precise cultural conditions and that has since then been increasingly called into question by specialists.

All literary genres change unceasingly. Although this amounts to a truism, it is important to underline it, since criticism—perhaps inevitably—evolves at a slower pace than the objects it studies. In recent years the term *detective fiction* has been increasingly supplanted by *crime fiction* in the critical debate in the attempt to cover not only an expanding galaxy of literary subgenres, including police procedurals, neo-noirs, antidetective fiction, true crime, psycho-thrillers, eco-thrillers, techno-thrillers, literary thrillers, conspiracy thrillers, and many others, but also a wider cultural sphere, embracing films, TV series, and even computer games.

Let me state another truism. The past is incessantly rewritten in function of the present. History is enlisted—consciously or not—to support present identity. The approach historians of crime fiction currently take to the development of the genre deeply differs from that of their early twentieth-century forerunners. Instead of identifying Poe as a founding father and his “tales of ratiocination” as the full-blown model of the genre, they let themselves be led by their curiosity to investigate those border territories in which crime fiction hybridized with other literary genres (including the ghost story), they study the adaptation of nineteenth-century texts as well as the multifaceted exchanges between the verbal and the visual that accompanied the process of illustration.

Of course I am aware of the fact that the late twentieth-century shift from

a textual to a cultural view of literary genres is linked not only to the progressive exhaustion of the innovative power of structuralism (and post-structuralism) but also to the impact of digital technology on literary studies. Thanks to digital devices, today we have easy access to visual information and multimedia contents—from book illustrations to photographs, films, and TV programs. This both enables us and prompts us to offer a more complex account of the evolution of literary genres within a cultural perspective, studying also the transmigration of stories from one medium to the other.

Moretti's quantitative approach to literature is also a child of the computer age. Far from questioning the usefulness and potential of digital humanities, I wish to underline the necessity of a combined approach. Studying literary phenomena under the aegis of a neo-positivist objectivity easily leads to hubris. If today we wish to devise a more fitting approach to the history of literature, our priority must be that of problematizing phenomena rather than simplifying them. Adopting new abstract models that rest on old cultural prejudices is not the best way to come to grips with complexity. We should rather evolve new theories from a direct confrontation with texts and other cultural artifacts, for popular literature deserves the same amount of critical attention that was previously devoted only to the canon.

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