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Review Articles



All or Nothing: Reading Franco Moretti Reading *A Review of Distant Reading and The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature by Franco Moretti*

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Abstract

Published in tandem in 2013, Franco Moretti's two most recent books continue his on-going project to develop radical new methods of literary history and to propose new formulations and frameworks for understanding the relationship between form and history and form and ideology. Bringing together the series of essays through which he developed his concept of distant reading, his collection of the same name argues for a 'falsifiable criticism' grounded in the data now available through digital technologies and for the concept of a 'world literature' that it is the task of comparatists to theorise. His book on the bourgeois – characterised by Moretti as a project of an entirely different nature – finds in the minutiae of language the construction of a bourgeois culture in which the figure of the bourgeois himself ultimately disappears. Contra Moretti, the review contends that these books are deeply interrelated and that the limits of Moretti's method are to be found specifically in the issues of scale raised by reading these two works in dialectical relationship to each other. In particular, while Moretti importantly forces us to confront in world literature what Fredric Jameson refers to as the 'scandal of multiplicity', his method is unable, in the end, to account for a reading of the world in literature in which both the empirical fact of a dead history and the allegorical possibility of another history already in the making can be found.

Keywords

literary history – form – ideology – Franco Moretti – utopia – allegory – critique

Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London: Verso, 2013

Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, London: Verso, 2013

In his essay, 'Utopia as Replication', Fredric Jameson puts forward what he himself terms a scandalous proposal: that Wal-Mart is 'the new institutional candidate for the function of Utopian allegory'.¹ Embodying a dialectical unity of opposites, Wal-Mart for Jameson functions not unlike monopoly capitalism for Lenin and its transformation of quantity into quality. Competition, Lenin explains, leads to monopoly, which in turn results in the very socialisation of production that sets the stage for the transition from capitalism to socialism. Significantly, this transformation occurs from *within* capitalism; size and monopoly create the conditions for a qualitatively new form of socialisation.² In Jameson's version of things, Wal-Mart, in its capacity to '[abolish] the market by means of the market itself', expresses the dynamic of capitalism today. As with monopoly, the point however is not to celebrate or castigate Wal-Mart but rather to show how that which currently carries a negative valence 'can also be imagined as positive in that immense changing of the valences which is the Utopian future'.³ In other words, the case of Wal-Mart, as well as Jameson's other, theoretical case-study, Paolo Virno's notion of the multitude, is meant to be a thought-experiment in which what he calls the 'scandal of multiplicity'⁴ becomes the occasion for clarifying the perverse and illuminating work of the dialectic and its relation to the Utopian 'method'.⁵

1 Jameson 2009, p. 420.

2 Lenin 1939, p. 25.

3 Jameson 2009, p. 423.

4 Jameson 2009, p. 428.

5 As Jameson writes, 'It is only in postmodernity and globalization, with the world population explosion, the desertion of the countryside and the growth of the mega-city, global warming and ecological catastrophe, the proliferation of urban guerrilla warfare, the financial collapse of the welfare state, the universal emergence of small-group politics of all kinds, that these phenomena have seemed to fold back into each other around the primary cause (if that is the right category to use) of the scandal of multiplicity and of what is generally referred to as overpopulation, or in other words, the definite appearance of the Other in multiple forms and as sheer quantity or number' (Jameson 2009, p. 428).

For our purposes, two aspects of Jameson's proposal are especially important: first is the fact that it is presented in the context of a distinction Jameson is making between representational Utopias and the Utopian impulse. Whereas representational Utopias, in one form or the other, always involve the representation of a Utopian space or totality, a realised Utopian plan of some sort, the Utopian impulse 'is not symbolic but allegorical', 'deals with fragments' rather than the totality, and therefore 'calls for a hermeneutic: for the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of Utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real; a theorization and interpretation of unconscious Utopian investments in realities large or small, which may in themselves be far from Utopian in their actuality'.⁶ In other words, the Utopian impulse can be found in the least likely of places: be it in blockbuster Hollywood movies such as *Jaws* or *The Godfather*, as Jameson argues in an early essay of his, 'Reification and Mass Utopia', or, here, in the possible transvaluation of size and scale, or sheer quantity, that Wal-Mart and overpopulation (in the case of Virno) prompt by way of allegory. This emphasis on allegory rather than actuality, I will suggest, not only constitutes a central aspect of Jameson's Marxian interpretative framework but also speaks to what is really at issue in current debates regarding the so-called death of theory and of hermeneutics, more specifically – namely, whether we read for what is visibly locatable *in the real* or for 'clues and traces *in the landscape of the real*'.

Second, Jameson also uses the analogy between Lenin's defence of monopoly and Wal-Mart to foreground the question of size and scale and, in particular, the difficulty we have in 'thinking quantity positively'.⁷ In other words, as Jameson speculates, it is 'apparently difficult for us to think of an impending future of size, quantity, overpopulation, and the like, except in dystopian terms'.⁸ Think of the 'return' to artisanal production, the 100-mile diet, co-ops and small farms, and the (over-)use of the language of 'community', all in the name of the local versus the global, the qualitative rather than the quantitative, the home-spun over the mass-produced – with the point being, as Jameson underscores, not to choose between one or the other, but rather to see how the difficulty of thinking big, in terms of size and scale, contributes to the 'obstacles facing Utopian thought in our own time'.⁹

What might it mean to think something analogous to scale at the literary level? This is the question, I think, that Franco Moretti's recent work most

6 Jameson 2009, p. 415.

7 Jameson 2009, p. 419.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

interestingly prompts us to consider. And the proposal I want to put forward here is that like Wal-Mart for Jameson, Moretti's work is the 'new institutional candidate for the function of Utopian allegory' within the field of literary and cultural criticism. In short, it is an attempt to think the 'scandal of multiplicity' that is world literature and literary history more generally. And the analogy can be extended: just as Wal-Mart forces us, in Jameson's reading, to forego an ethical or evaluative stance in favour of a dialectical one, Moretti's work, I want to suggest, should do the same. The idea, in other words, of choosing the local over the global or vice-versa, figured within Moretti's work as close versus distant reading, should be resisted. So too – as with Wal-Mart – the temptation to either celebrate or castigate Moretti's efforts to shake up the literary world as we know it should be resisted, despite or rather precisely because of the uncanny resemblances at times between them, especially when it comes to the fears Wal-Mart and distant reading raise. It is not too much of a stretch, for example, to detect in some of the most vehement responses to Moretti's new method of reading the fear of job loss and the sense that the humanities as we know them will be destroyed. Were distant reading to transform literary criticism in the same fashion that Wal-Mart has supplanted Main Street, many of us would be left out of work. In fact much of the professoriate already is; with the percentage of contingent faculty on the rise, and with the increasing dominance of a corporate culture within the university, academic workers and Wal-Mart associates have more and more in common. Again, however, the point will not be to moralise but rather to 'seize as an opportunity'¹⁰ this new mode of reading the system for its emergent possibilities.¹¹ Finally, like Jameson's analysis, mine is a thought-experiment insofar as it is an attempt to imagine a positive valence for a project about which I have reservations. For if Moretti's mode of reading big is not approached dialectically, and indeed if Moretti himself does not approach it dialectically, as I will argue he does not, it has the tendency to become akin to a one-sided celebration of Wal-Mart and as such incapable of *mediating* scale.¹² Just as we should not take Wal-Mart

10 Jameson 2009, p. 423.

11 Jameson explicitly distinguishes his approach from the 'crude but practical fashion' of Lenin's, clarifying that he will consider Wal-Mart 'not... as an institution from which (after the revolution) we can "lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus," but rather as what Raymond Williams called the emergent as opposed to the residual' (Jameson 2009, p. 423).

12 In a different context, Mark McGurl argues that 'commitment to one scale of analysis over another on the part of any given literary critic is usually intense enough that the question of scale *as such* never even arises' (McGurl 2009, p. 401). In his analysis of creative-writing programmes and postwar fiction, McGurl not only moves adeptly among a variety of

at face value, we should not take Moretti's method at face value – hence the necessity of reading scale not only dialectically, as a unity of opposites, but allegorically, as a figure for something utopian yet to come.

1 Thinking Big

Within the field of literary criticism, the contest over scale has largely taken place in debates about reading. In recent years multiple new forms of reading have been proposed, driven by a series of questions that defamiliarises the very act of reading, including not only how we read, but why and to what end. New approaches and new methods range from thing theory with its emphasis on reading objects rather than characters in texts, to surface-reading with its attentiveness to surfaces rather than depths, and the multifold field of the digital humanities and its turn, broadly, to quantitative rather than qualitative reading, data rather than texts. Moretti entered the fray in 2000 with the notion of 'distant reading'. Like his iconoclastic work more generally, distant reading was at once provocative and polarising – just the way Moretti likes it. Quoting Stendhal's Julian Sorel in *The Red and the Black*, he concludes his infamous essay, 'Conjectures on World Literature': "Don't delude yourself... for you, there is no middle road." The same is true for us.' A recurring refrain throughout his recent collection *Distant Reading* – the notion that there is no middle road – the Stendhal quote comes at the end of 'Conjectures on World Literature'; here the provocation is for those who study world literature to be 'a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures – especially the local literature. If comparative literature is not this, it's nothing. Nothing'.¹³ It appears again, at the end of 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature': 'Anarchy. Not diplomacy, not compromises, not winks at every powerful academic lobby, not taboos. Anarchy. Or as Arnold Schoenberg once wonderfully put it: the middle road is the only one that does not lead to Rome'.¹⁴

scales in order to highlight literary studies' 'elective affinity with perspectivism' (McGurl 2009, p. 400), but also foregrounds the question of scale. As he queries: 'We can close-read or contextualize at various geographical scales; we can consider one text or many; we can track cultural developments in a certain "historical moment" or across the centuries: given that the attention span of criticism is highly variable, what might a self-consciousness of the question of scale bring to our critical practice?' (McGurl 2009, p. 402).

13 Moretti 2013a, p. 62.

14 Moretti 2013a, p. 89.

Moretti's provocation rests on a simple premise: we already know how to read, now we need to learn how *not* to read. And what we know is *close reading*, which has left us essentially reading not even 1% of all the literature ever published. Not a very good statistic, when it comes then to making claims about the representative nature of the literature being read and the access it supposedly provides to the larger culture of which it is a part. To have any hope of getting to the remaining 99%, or what Margaret Cohen terms the 'great unread', something has to change – hence the move to distant reading, which relies on the gathering of data, in the form – as his 2005 collection announces – of maps, graphs and (evolutionary) trees. This data involves everything from mining nineteenth-century novels or Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' for the networks that exist between different characters within any given text, as in 'Network Theory, Plot Analysis', to counting the words in titles over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as in 'Style, Inc.', in order to understand the change from long descriptive titles to the short abstract or metaphorical 'title-as-ad' as a marketing tool.¹⁵ Hence, 'Style, Inc.' *Distant Reading* not only brings together the series of essays that has developed the concept of distant reading, from the early 'Modern European Literature: A Geographical Sketch'¹⁶ to 'Network Theory, Plot Analysis',¹⁷ but also provides an explicit developmental narrative in the prefaces to each essay that Moretti offers. These prefaces read like lab notes, mirroring the experimental approach to reading that is most succinctly captured in the name of Moretti's institute at Stanford, the Literary Lab, and best articulated in the open-endedness of the projects described, and in Moretti's willingness to discuss the successes and failures of this project to date. What emerges is a vision of criticism as incremental and exploratory rather than *sui generis* and complete. (Stanley Fish epitomises the latter vision when he asserts in one of a series of *New York Times* blog posts against the digital humanities, 'In a professional life now going into its 50th year I have been building arguments that are intended to be decisive, comprehensive, monumental, definitive, and most of all, mine').¹⁸ Key, then, to the method that will become distant reading – and that galls the likes of Fish, as well as others – is its changed relation to the very notion of critical authorship, which shifts from a singular to a collective enterprise: 'Fantastic opportunity, this

15 Moretti 2013a, pp. 203–4.

16 Originally published as Moretti 1994.

17 Originally published as Moretti 2011.

18 Fish 2012.

uncharted expanse of literature; with room for the most varied approaches, and for a truly *collective* effort, like literary history has never seen.¹⁹

With respect to world literature, in particular, distant reading necessitates a world-systems approach in which scholarly knowledge from around the globe would be collected and the accumulated data synthesised into a picture of a truly *world* literature. In this division of scholarly labour, analysis outweighs synthesis by far: Moretti references a phrase by Marc Bloch – ‘years of analysis for a day of synthesis’ – as well as the work of Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, the latter of which dramatises this new ratio: ‘The text which is Wallerstein’s, his “day of synthesis”, occupies one-third of a page, one-quarter, maybe half; the rest are quotations (1,400 in the first volume of *The Modern World-System*). Years of analysis; other people’s analysis, which Wallerstein’s page synthesizes into a system.’²⁰ Giddily, Moretti translates this social-scientific practice into literary terms: ‘[literary history] will become “second hand”: a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual reading*. Still ambitious, and actually even more so than before (world literature!); but the ambition is now directly proportional *to the distance from the text*: the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be.’²¹ Later in the book, in his preface to ‘Style, Inc.’, Moretti attaches the appeal of analysis to the ‘longue durée of [his] Marxist formation (the work of Della Volpe and Colletti), whose ferociously anti-dialectical stance urges [him] to devote all his energies to analysis, and none to synthesis.’ As he wryly adds, he also just happens to ‘like it’.²²

Modelling itself on Wallerstein *et al.*, distant reading inevitably falls prey to the same kinds of objections levied against world-systems theory: by focussing on the forest, one necessarily loses some of the trees. The late Giovanni Arrighi depicts this bind compellingly in an interview with David Harvey in which he discusses the process by which he came to write *The Long Twentieth Century* – an explanation that warrants some space given its applicability to the relationship of part to whole or concrete to abstract that defines Moretti’s reading of literature as a world-system. Arrighi explains that his ‘discovery of financialization as a recurrent pattern of historical capitalism’²³ upset his original plan to include a section on labour in *The Long Twentieth Century*. He notes that the original plan was not jettisoned, but simply not possible

19 Moretti 2013a, p. 89.

20 Moretti 2013a, p. 48.

21 Ibid.

22 Moretti 2013a, p. 180.

23 Arrighi 2009, p. 73.

within such an overarching *longue durée* stretching from the fourteenth century to the present. As he comments, ‘not only is there too much to cover, but there is also considerable variation over time and space in the relationship between capital and labour’.²⁴ In his reference to the ‘considerable variation over time and space’ in this relationship, Arrighi recognises the loss of labour as a potentially *constitutive* loss, insofar as labour constitutes an active rather than only a reserve army in relation to capital. For Arrighi, ‘the worker struggles of the 1960s and early 1970s, for example, were a major factor in the financialization of the late 1970s and 1980s, and the ways in which it evolved’.²⁵ In short, there is a dialectical relation between labour and capital that is not captured when the focus remains on finance capital – or, alternatively, labour – alone. Significantly, too, the loss of labour leads to a false picture of proletarianisation as a uniformly levelling process in which all workers become equally exploited. While capital is happy to proletarianise its workers in this manner, workers however ‘will mobilize whatever status difference they can identify or construct to win a privileged treatment from the capitalists’.²⁶

Moretti, too, gestures toward this trade-off between the macro and the micro: ‘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. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge; reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it’s precisely this “poverty” that makes it possible to handle them, and therefore to know. This is why less is actually more’.²⁷ But note the difference between his conclusions and Arrighi’s: whereas Arrighi recognises the loss of labour as consequential, for Moretti the loss concomitant with distant reading is, in the end, an unequivocal gain since, in this model of reading, knowledge itself comes at the expense of reality, of the infinitely rich, in the name of poor concepts and our ability to ‘handle them’. If nothing else, this is an odd set of equivalences to make in a project motivated by the idea of ‘falsifiable criticism’ – namely, the idea that criticism should hold itself to a ‘testable’ standard of proof, or, more simply, to being right.²⁸ In moments like this, the revelatory potential of distant reading

24 Arrighi 2009, p. 74.

25 Arrighi 2009, p. 75.

26 Arrighi 2009, p. 76.

27 Moretti 2013a, p. 49.

28 Moretti takes the freighted term ‘falsifiable’ from Karl Popper, a contentious figure within Western-Marxist circles. Popper and his followers debated with members of the Frankfurt School in what was referred to as the Positivism Dispute; and Moretti’s Italian compatriot,

as *critique* seems to recede precisely because distant reading simply is not supple enough to capture the complexities of scale where scale is felt and lived (i.e. not in poor concepts) – and most importantly mediated (in this example, in texts themselves). In other words, as a total effect, Moretti's almost evangelical advocacy of a social-scientific approach to literature risks losing the real trees at the expense of the evolutionary ones.

In response to a question from Roberto Schwarz (recounted in 'The End of the Beginning') as to whether his literary Darwinianism, while undoubtedly interesting, still constitutes a 'form of social critique', Moretti begins by briefly tracing his own intellectual development in the context of the 'crisis of Marxism' in Italy in the late 1970s and of Colletti's critique of dialectical-Marxist approaches to history specifically. Following Colletti's view that 'historical materialism' as practised was neither properly historical nor materialistic, Moretti narrates how he became increasingly occupied with 'the pursuit of a sound materialistic method, and of testable knowledge . . . until finally – slowly, imperceptibly – it ended up overshadowing the more substantive aspects of my historical work'.²⁹ So what is gained in Moretti's view? In exchange for substance, Moretti sees in his graphs, maps and trees the potential ground for a new form of critique. It is new for Moretti because his quantitative approach is profoundly estranging – both in terms of how we think about literary history, and, as we began, in terms of how we read. And it has the potential for critique because it is a ground-clearing exercise that 'leaves us free to advance new, irreverent hypotheses'.³⁰ But, significantly, it is also not a project about which

Colletti, drew on Popper's theory of falsification and the divide it establishes between Marxism and science to eventually disavow Marxism as a pseudo-science. Popper is thus important to the anti-Hegelian strand of Italian Marxism in the postwar period. Moretti's use of this term not only situates him within this particular variant of Marxism, but also, as with his mentors Della Volpe and Colletti, opens him up to the charge of positivism or empiricism. In this sense, Moretti's embrace of science can be seen as a repetition of sorts of the debates within Western Marxism regarding Hegelianism, the science of historical materialism, and the turn, in Italian Marxism specifically, away from dialectics and its attentiveness to matters of class consciousness and subjectivity. That said, Moretti's intellectual trajectory also differs in important ways from his Italian forebears, most significantly in terms of the openly dialectical nature of his early work, such as *Signs Taken for Wonders*, subtitled 'Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms', which includes a brilliant reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* entitled 'Dialectic of Fear'. As noted above, Moretti himself briefly narrates some of this history in the commentary to 'The End of the Beginning' in *Distant Reading*.

29 Moretti 2013a, p. 155.

30 Moretti 2013a, p. 158.

Moretti has any surety, since the only way to find out whether this potential can be realised as critique in the sense Schwarz means it is to 'return to the messy realities of social history'.³¹

Published at the same time as *Distant Reading*, *The Bourgeois* can be read as that return. In contrast to the essays on distant reading, which, as Moretti comments in a footnote in 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature', left no space for an analysis of the relationship between form and ideology (as opposed to form and literary history),³² *The Bourgeois* looks much more like the Moretti of old – of *Signs Taken for Wonders* (1983), *The Way of the World* (1987) and *Modern Epic* (1995) – in its attention to the figure of the bourgeois 'refracted through the prism of literature'.³³ In five chapters that ingeniously chart the disappearance of his main character, Moretti moves from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as exemplar of bourgeois literature, to nineteenth-century realism and the increasing absorption of bourgeois values into the very prose of literature, to the 'fog' of Victorianism and its disavowal of the precision developed by Defoe, and finally to the 'chronicle of bourgeois defeats'³⁴ in the semi-periphery – exemplified by Pérez Galdós's *Torquemada* (1889–96) – and the 'grey area' that is Ibsen, where the 'unresolved dissonance of bourgeois life'³⁵ is revealed. Organising these chapters is a series of keywords – 'use', 'efficiency', 'comfort', 'serious', 'influence', 'earnest', 'roba' (property, but also something more like 'life' as it functions in Giovanni Verga's *I Malavoglia* (1881)) – that, along with prose itself, comprise the 'style' of bourgeois culture and, as Moretti compellingly argues, the site where the bourgeois is to be found. Indeed, prose, style and use come together seamlessly in Defoe, whose major contribution to a bourgeois culture increasingly defined by instrumental reason is 'prose, as the style of the useful',³⁶ which then turns out to be, as well, the ultimate and 'only true hero' of *The Bourgeois*: 'Prose, as *the* bourgeois style, in the broadest sense; a way of *being* in the world, not just of representing it'.³⁷ As a result, Moretti attends throughout to the minutiae of language, which, as he wagers, 'captures the *slowness* of cultural history', the still 'incomplete project' of bourgeois culture.³⁸ In virtuoso readings, 'fillers' (descriptions rather than narrative proper) are

31 Ibid.

32 Moretti 2013b, p. 89.

33 Moretti 2013b, p. 4.

34 Moretti 2013b, p. 149.

35 Moretti 2013b, p. 178.

36 Moretti 2013b, p. 39.

37 Moretti 2013b, p. 181.

38 Moretti 2013b, p. 19.

shown not only to slow down the pace of novels literally but to subordinate the present to the past and hence figuratively retard alternative possibilities for some future historical change; strings of Victorian adjectives are parsed to reveal how evaluative judgements are made through them without seeming so, given the apparent neutrality of their attachments to the nouns they modify; single adjectives, later in the century, are seen to 'grate against the noun, like chalk on a chalkboard'³⁹ and thereby capture the ambiguities of bourgeois existence, as when Ibsen dramatises the possibility of lawful injustice or unfair legality, a kind of dissonance, Moretti argues, that the great Victorian realists such as George Eliot in *Middlemarch* cannot countenance; and Galdós's *Torquemada*, in a *tour de force* reading of style, is found to be 'hypnotized by *nominalizations*',⁴⁰ the grammatical embodiment of agentless prose beloved of lawyers and undergraduates alike. His vapidness, which Moretti links to Jameson's notion of the 'deterioration of protagonicity', buries 'the hegemonic ambitions of a whole class . . . in ridicule'.⁴¹

In its broad outline, then, *The Bourgeois* constructs a social history of bourgeois culture through or in literary prose, a story in which objectivity gradually eclipses subjectivity, a process that begins with the ever-resourceful Robinson Crusoe, who, like Hegel's 'prosaic mind', creates a world in which usefulness is all, everything a means to something else, world without end(s), amen, to echo Dickens. There is nothing particularly novel in identifying Crusoe thus (in the influential *Rise of the Novel* (1957), Ian Watt identifies Crusoe as *homo economicus*) but what is new, according to Moretti, is how we can now see instrumental reason 'as a *practice of language* – perfectly articulated, though completely unnoticed – well before it became a concept'.⁴² Likewise, in later chapters, Moretti's attentiveness to style unearths new signs of a homogenising world (Flaubert, he notes, sees France as a 'fully homogenized society' by the time of *Madame Bovary*),⁴³ from the use of free indirect discourse and its ability to propagate normative and 'normalising' judgements that seem to come from nowhere to the 'objective impersonality' Flaubert aspired toward, to the shift, more generally, from emotional evaluation to '*analytical presentation*'.⁴⁴ These seemingly neutral, invisible forms of bourgeois socialisation sap the possibility of subjective resistance of any sort – or of just plain subjectivity,

39 Moretti 2013b, p. 178.

40 Moretti 2013b, p. 163.

41 Moretti 2013b, p. 164.

42 Moretti 2013b, p. 39.

43 Moretti 2013b, p. 100.

44 Moretti 2013b, p. 91.

never mind a resistant form of it – and reveal the impotence of the literary itself, as it and the social become one, a collapse illustrated by Emma Bovary's mouthing of romance clichés, the equivalent of *idées reçues*. In one of his classic lines, Moretti comments that this is 'the nightmare of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*: no longer knowing how to distinguish a novel about stupidity from a stupid novel'.⁴⁵

In the end, along with his putative main character, the bourgeois, Moretti's main device, the use of keywords, also disappears. This is one sense of what he means when he refers to Ibsen's 'grey area', to the fact that Ibsen 'can look at bourgeois ambiguity without having to resolve it'.⁴⁶ The bourgeois values that previously were located in key terms such as 'use', or 'serious' or 'earnest' now pervade Ibsen's dramatic universe: 'But with the grey area, we have the thing, without the word'.⁴⁷ This is most like the world we currently live in, Moretti suggests. It not only describes how capital moves into new spaces, but also reflects how muddy the values of bourgeois life are; there is a lot of room between bad or immoral and illegal. Enron and the equivocal actions of Kenneth Lay are one name for this greyness;⁴⁸ 'Acquittal is acquittal', as Werle confirms in *The Wild Duck*, is another.⁴⁹ The choice is no longer one between good and bad bourgeois, rather there is a lack of alternatives altogether. Or at least until the late Ibsen. At that point, there is a twist in the story: 'prose as rational polemic' – Nora's speech, for example, at the end of *A Doll's House* – gives way to multiplying metaphors and the visionary entrepreneur (Solness as Hilda's 'master-builder' in Ibsen's 1892 play of that name) who rejects outright the language of prose, and takes on, instead, the 'poetry' of speculation, of looking into the future rather than being confirmed by the past. If the former describes the first bourgeois generation before industrialisation, the latter defines its 'ideal-type' after industrialisation. By taking us here, Ibsen becomes, for Moretti, the perfect epilogue to *The Bourgeois*: 'his plays are the great "settling of accounts" of the bourgeois century. . . . He is the only writer who looks the bourgeois in the face, and asks: So, finally what have you brought into the world?'⁵⁰ And the answer: 'This mad bifurcation between a much more rational and a much more *ir*-rational rule over society',⁵¹ which also, in the end,

45 Moretti 2013b, p. 100.

46 Moretti 2013b, p. 178.

47 Moretti 2013b, p. 172.

48 Ibid.

49 Moretti 2013b, p. 176.

50 Moretti 2013b, p. 170.

51 Moretti 2013b, p. 186.

signals the end of bourgeois realism. No match for the power and prowess of creative destruction, it is at once more indispensable and ultimately impotent 'in the face of capitalist megalomania'.⁵²

So, to borrow from Moretti, how to assess what he has brought into the world via the two types of criticism that characterise his two recent books: distant reading and...? Interestingly, it is hard to put a simple label on *The Bourgeois's* method. Marxist formalism perhaps? Or a formalism with (ultra-) close reading in contrast to Jonathan Arac's description of distant reading as 'a formalism without close reading'?⁵³ In *Distant Reading*, in his preface to 'The End of the Beginning', Moretti certainly sees these two books engaging altogether different methods or modes of thought and different objects of inquiry. Drawing on Marc Bloch's assertion in *The Historian's Craft* that 'tides are certainly connected to the phases of the moon, but in order to know it for sure one had first to independently determine the ones and the others', Moretti muses that the paired publication of *Distant Reading* and *The Bourgeois* 'makes me think that I like studying tides and moon independently of each other. Whether or not a synthesis will follow, remains to be seen'.⁵⁴ Likewise, in an assessment of the digital humanities specifically, he muses that there is at once too much data and too little ability (yet) to synthesise it without succumbing to the nondescript average or the boredom of the middle road: 'Too much polyphony, and too much monotony: it's the Scylla and Charybdis of digital humanities. The day we establish an intelligible relationship between these two, a new literary landscape will come into being'.⁵⁵ In both cases, bringing the large and the small, the concrete and the conceptual together involves some form of synthesis between two discrete realms or spaces, and two seemingly discrete methods.

Modes or approaches to reading in this account seem able to be utilised at will depending on the project or occasion. On the one hand, this is precisely what Moretti identifies as liberating or ground-clearing about distant reading: it offers a radically new way of reading, which clearly has been exhilarating for Moretti and, by extension, for many in the digital humanities who, as

52 Moretti 2013b, p. 187.

53 Arac 2002, p. 38. Moretti quotes Arac's description in his preface to 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature' favourably as a 'nice formulation' for capturing the kind of reading (of detective stories) he does in 'Slaughterhouse', which he doubts is 'still reading': 'I read "through" those stories looking for clues, and (almost) nothing else; it felt very different from the reading I used to know' (Moretti 2013a, p. 65).

54 Moretti 2013a, p. 138.

55 Moretti 2013a, p. 181.

the ‘*practising partner* of distant reading’,⁵⁶ have embraced in various ways the new possibilities – both prosaic and utopian – of digital technologies. In *The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0*, for example, digital humanities are characterised as ‘[having] a utopian core shaped by its genealogical descent from the counterculture-cyberculture of the ’60s and ’70s. This is why it affirms the open, the infinite, the expansive [and] the democratization of culture and scholarship’.⁵⁷ A bit more restrained in his assessment of digital humanities to date, Liu holds up Moretti as well as Pascale Casanova as models for the kind of scholars digital humanists should aspire to be: ‘While digital humanists have the practical tools and data, they will never be in the same league as Moretti, Casanova, and others unless they can move seamlessly between text analysis and cultural analysis’.⁵⁸ Much ink has been spilled over whether in fact Moretti escapes the confines of text analysis or the pull of empirical data in and for itself, a debate that Moretti finds to be the least interesting point of contention in the *furor* over distant reading. And I agree. So rather than dwell on whether distant reading is empiricist or not, it seems instructive instead to return to the related questions of scale and allegory with which we began, and, in particular, to think about them in the context of *The Bourgeois* rather than *Distant Reading*. Why? Because it is here that the problem of thinking about scale synthetically rather than as a unity of opposites becomes clear. *The Bourgeois*, I will argue, demonstrates that issues of scale cannot in the end be siloed in the way that Moretti envisions: we cannot sometimes read distantly, as others read closely, and then somehow bring the two together, to put it somewhat crudely. Scale as such is not additive, and modes of reading are not so easily taken on or off, as it were, as Moretti assumes.⁵⁹ Rather, to read scale we must read allegorically, for without allegory texts are reduced to meaning just what they say, to being read at face value, to recall our opening discussion. Data can *seem* stable in that way – it is ‘solid’, ‘impeccable’, clear (Moretti refers at one point to ‘the clarity of the empirical confirmation’)⁶⁰ – but texts are never stable in that way. And the effect of treating them like data is two-fold: 1. It drains the life out of texts; 2. It drains the life out of the *history* of texts – not only the literary

56 Liu 2012, p. 493.

57 *The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0*.

58 Liu 2012, p. 495.

59 Moretti acknowledges something similar about scale in his preface to ‘Planet Hollywood’, where he reflects on his writing of *Atlas of the European Novel* and notes that he ‘discovered the truth of Haldan’s famous dictum that “size is never just size”’ (Moretti 2013a, p. 91), but, as I will go on to show, this is not borne out in practice in *The Bourgeois*.

60 Moretti 2013a, p. 92.

history of which they are a part, but history itself. Ultimately, then, Moretti's historical materialism finds its 'proof' in the literary rather than the cultural or historical realm. In his emphasis on the literary in literary theory, the test of history (those 'messy realities of social history'), and, with it, a politics, in essence disappears; in Moretti's own words, 'methodology [replaces] critique'.⁶¹

2 Reading Scale

Like all of Moretti's work, *The Bourgeois* reveals him to be a master stylist. Whether in one-word sentences ('Absurd,','⁶² 'Fog.')⁶³ or concise formulations ('If capitalism cannot always be morally good, it must at least be always morally legible.')⁶⁴ his own style is fully part of the argument. In a recent review of *The Bourgeois*, Valerie Sanders, for example, describes his 'habit of halting over epigrammatic statements such as "Beyond the horizon", "Fortune, rationalized", "The style of the useful", "A life in the world" and even, sometimes, just one word: "Comfort"', and sees it as a 'pervasive feature of the book'.⁶⁵ For Sanders, these epigrammatic statements cause us to pause and 'absorb the resonance of particular words and phrases, rolling them around the tongue, as it were, to savour their full flavour.' For her they are as aesthetic as they are useful, at once '[taking] us forward incrementally through the argument'⁶⁶ and there to be savoured. But the most notable stylistic technique to my mind is the construction of declarative, defining sentences that, like Sanders's description,

61 Moretti 2013a, p. 155. Much in the way that Perry Anderson characterises the theory/practice split in Western Marxism, it is tempting to see this emphasis on method as dialectically related to the absence of a vibrant political 'practice' in our current conjuncture. Anderson refers to the 'obsessive methodologism' (Anderson 1976, p. 53) of Western Marxism, citing as exemplary books such as Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, Della Volpe's *Logic as a Positive Science*, Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, and Althusser's *Reading Capital*. In his Introduction to *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti states, 'In this book, clearly enough, the method is all.' (Moretti 1998, p. 5.) In a different vein, he admits that *The Bourgeois* is an 'exclusively historical study, with no true links to the present' (Moretti 2013b, p. 23) and hopes that, as his inscription to Perry Anderson and Paolo Flores d'Arcais is meant to convey, he will 'one day . . . learn from them to use the intelligence of the past for the critique of the present' (Moretti 2013b, p. 24).

62 Moretti 2013b, p. 115.

63 Moretti 2013b, p. 141.

64 Moretti 2013b, p. 178.

65 Sanders 2013.

66 Ibid.

make us pause – but in a weightier way than she suggests. Here are some examples: ‘Grey, not *bunt*, is the flag that flies over the bourgeois century.’;⁶⁷ ‘Serious, is the bourgeoisie on its way to being the ruling class.’;⁶⁸ ‘This self-inflicted blindness, is the foundation of Victorianism.’;⁶⁹ ‘But autonomy, was precisely what the Victorian manifesto was written against.’;⁷⁰ ‘His anti-Semitism, is the bourgeois turning against himself.’;⁷¹ ‘All they do, is a critique of bourgeois life; all they see, is bourgeois life.’⁷² In these constructions, definitions are literally definite; defined in so determinate a fashion that they are rendered virtually inert. They appear unchangeable because movement itself has been frozen in the comma that separates the first and the second part of each of these sentences. Above, the lack of suppleness in Moretti’s mobilisation of scale made it difficult to see just how we live in and negotiate multiple horizons simultaneously; here, at the level of the sentence, the existence of different levels or valuations – and the need therefore for some means of reading allegorically – is similarly hard to imagine. Contingency is erased; meaning is made concrete: ‘knowledge without freedom’, as Moretti names the useful knowledge that is the ‘battle-cry of Victorianism.’⁷³ What is portrayed is an orderly world; form and content are not so much dialectically related to one another as collapsed into each other, undifferentiated. To return to Liu’s language, the move from text analysis to cultural analysis is in effect *too* seamless. As a result, the readings here of the bourgeois and bourgeois culture are not quite as radically other from distant reading with its ‘units of analysis’ as they might initially appear, and, crucially, they share with distant reading an a- or anti-Utopian orientation, given the insistence on the given – whether in the locatable adjective, there for the counting, or in the sense, more generally, that the past is singular and matter-of-fact, locked as it is in static, ontological definitions, as if the keywords that Moretti identifies do not themselves contain a history of contradictory uses and potentialities *à la* Raymond Williams. One need think only of ‘influence’ and ‘earnest’ and the ways Oscar Wilde recodes and reinvests them with alternative – some might even say utopian – desires and meaning to wonder at how singularly they mean in Moretti’s account.

67 Moretti 2013b, p. 6.

68 Moretti 2013b, p. 74.

69 Moretti 2013b, p. 112.

70 Moretti 2013b, p. 140.

71 Moretti 2013b, p. 159.

72 Moretti 2013b, p. 179.

73 Moretti 2013b, p. 137.

Moretti addresses this issue obliquely in his opening discussion of Victorianism when he begins with *The Communist Manifesto* and its invocation of the revolutionary nature of the bourgeoisie, and asks what happens to that revolutionary stripping-away of the old within nineteenth-century Britain: 'It's the Victorian enigma: *contra* those paragraphs from the *Communist Manifesto*, the most industrialized, urbanized, "advanced" capitalism of the age *restores* "fervours" and "sentimentalism" instead of "sweeping them away".⁷⁴ In this way, Moretti accounts for the absence of the revolutionary or utopian within nineteenth-century British culture, but even here, in the context of the rousing *Manifesto* and its dialectical vision of what the bourgeoisie brings into being, he stresses only its realism, the fact that the bourgeoisie, by stripping away religious illusions, etc. 'is the first *realistic* class of human history'.⁷⁵

'Fog', the title for Moretti's chapter on Victorianism, stands in for the process in which the 'naked self-interest' brought to light by the bourgeoisie is veiled or disavowed rather than faced realistically by the Victorians. One example of this disavowal is the famous line from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, 'Nature, red in tooth and claw', whose Darwinian impact (*avant la lettre*) is attenuated, according to Moretti, by being buried in the middle of a four-stanza long aside, amidst a series of 'grammatical wonders'.⁷⁶ A form of veiling, it shares with Brontë, and later in the century, Conrad, a logic of disavowal in the face of unwanted knowledge.

74 Moretti 2013b, p. 108.

75 Moretti 2013b, p. 102. This view of the bourgeoisie reflects Moretti's reliance on Max Weber far more than Marx or Lukács throughout *The Bourgeois*, which may, in turn, contribute to his non- or anti-utopian vision of (literary) history more generally. Martin Jay, in *Marxism and Totality*, distinguishes Lukács from Weber (and Simmel) by his ability to 'move beyond [their] stoic pessimism by linking their intellectual dilemmas to the reified nature of bourgeois life, an explanation that grounded them historically' (Jay 1984, pp. 109–10). Interestingly, Moretti also invokes Weber in one of the final essays in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 'The Moment of Truth', as a figure from whom we still have much to learn regarding a realistic 'culture of the Left', which would neither recklessly embrace what he refers to as 'the moment of crisis' nor succumb to 'unending humiliations and compromises'. Moretti ends the essay by quoting the following lines from a speech of Weber's: 'What is deeply striking and moving... is the view of a *mature* man – it doesn't matter whether young or old in years – who, feeling truly and wholly his own responsibility for consequences, and acting according to the ethic of responsibility, still of a sudden does say: "I cannot do otherwise: I shall not retreat from here". Here is a truly human and moving behaviour, and such a situation must be possible at any moment for all of us who have not yet lost our inner life' (Moretti 1983, p. 261).

76 Moretti 2013b, p. 109.

But look at the poem as a whole, and matters start to get messier. In an earlier stanza of *In Memoriam* Nature is likened to a woman, which at the very least concerns how we understand Tennyson's attenuation of the Darwinian view of nature and its threat to Victorian stability. James Eli Adams, for example, suggests that although it comes as no surprise that Tennyson's attitude toward women – and hence toward Nature personified as woman – was conservative, the threat Nature/woman represents when seen in this light becomes far more destabilising than Moretti's reading allows. 'If one attends to the details of the personification, the beast of prey gives way to a more startling and more complex image. Nature is a woman red in tooth and claw – not a mere female animal (a lioness, say, could hardly cry out to the anxious poet with such articulate violence), but a woman in demonic form, a Fury'.⁷⁷ Consequently, 'as befits the poet's anxieties, "Nature" as he envisions her is more "unnatural" than any beast of prey – and she is so precisely by virtue of being female.' The very image of Maternal Nature that Darwin too wants to keep intact is unsettlingly undercut; the figure of the Fury, rather than indifferent, actively refuses her role as caregiver or nurturer: 'I care for nothing', she declares in section 56. With this renunciation, the line 'Behind the veil, behind the veil', which ends the section, does not so much repress the recognition of Nature's 'ravine', as amplify its social threat, by contravening Victorian gender relations, and specifically defying male desire. 'Where Nature figures simply as a beast of prey', Adams conjectures, 'the question would be pointless, since the term would conjure up mere instinctive ferocity. But woman red in tooth and claw startles the reader into pondering intentionality. What is "the secret meaning of her deeds"? Behind the veil, behind the veil: the poet's quest for solace is thwarted by that seductive yet disturbing emblem of feminine mystery'.⁷⁸

Now, my point in going into this much detail about Adams's analysis is by no means to 'prove' that we have to read Tennyson's view of Nature his way rather than Moretti's. Rather, it is to convey just how impossible – and I would add, undesirable even – it is to construct a 'falsifiable criticism' when it comes to interpreting the allegorical meaning of a text – or event or cultural or historical moment – in the world. It simply cannot be a matter of finding 'impeccable evidence'⁷⁹ – as Moretti describes fellow Stanford Literary Lab scholars Ryan Heuser and Long Le Khac's findings regarding the decline of 'moral evaluation' and its associated semantic fields via the rise in the use of a particular set of adjectives. Is Adams right about the power of woman red in tooth and claw,

77 Adams 1989, p. 15.

78 Adams 1989, p. 16.

79 Moretti 2013b, p. 128.

or is Moretti correctly reading how attenuated the power of Nature is in this same phrase? The notion that we could answer such a question as simply a yes or a no seems, in a word – and to borrow one of bourgeois culture's key terms – not very *useful*. Not only are these sorts of easy decisions the stock-in-trade of the contemporary neoliberal present, and of the neoliberal university, more specifically, which reduces more and more of our life-world to simplistic calculations of instrumental use – whether it is measuring the impact of research in dollars and cents or determining the learning-outcomes for students in any given course (and one wishes that Moretti would acknowledge how enmeshed in the instrumental, scientific language of the day the method and means of distant reading are) – but they require not so much a conceptual poverty (as a condition of thought) with respect to the 'infinitely rich' as a wilful blindness. If we think about scale only in terms of sheer size or immensity, we risk losing the texture of lived experience – or worse, instrumentalising it.⁸⁰ Once again, the example of Wal-Mart proves instructive here in its powerful dramatisation of what might be lost in a non-dialectical scalar reading – namely a lived reality of immense devastation that too easily can become abstract and forgotten in the clean logic of 'less is more'. This kind of abstract scientism – the idea that data or evidence could be 'impeccable' – is predicated on an acceptance of the historically given; such certitude forecloses the openness of the future and locks Moretti, ironically enough, into something of an iron system, the very criticism levied against the Hegelian dialectic.⁸¹

But also – and as with Wal-Mart – Moretti's provocation to think about reading in terms of sheer size and scale forces us to confront the 'scandal' of a world literature, which must invariably change the way we read. Were it not to do so would be equivalent to another form of wilful blindness. Once literature as a world system has become a knowable reality, there really is no turning back. This is one way, I think, of isolating what is wrong with current attempts to recuperate various forms of 'close' reading such as normative

80 Or, as Theodor Adorno, responding to the 'objective tendency' within the cultural criticism of his day, writes in the aphorism 'Baby with the Bathwater': 'To emphasize the material element over the spirit as a lie develops a dubious elective affinity with the very political economy one criticizes immanently, comparable to the complicity between the police and the underworld' (Adorno 2005, p. 44, translation modified).

81 In the context of a politics of labour, specifically, political action against capitalism will always include an extra-economic moment and the attempt to reduce Marxism to a science neglects what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge refer to as the 'political economy of living labour', or all those aspects of subjective labour that exceed economic determination. In this formulation, Negt and Kluge also underscore the fact that the economic sphere itself is hardly a pure sphere. See Negt and Kluge 2001.

New Formalism or surface-reading: in essence, they constitute forms of wilful blindness in their desire to preserve the localness of literature. In other words, *pace* Emily Apter, being *against* world literature is not a viable option; as with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's position on globalisation, the enemy is not the 'globalization of relationships as such . . . but a specific regime of global relations',⁸² designated in their analysis by the term Empire, or, in Jameson's and others' analyses, as late, finance, or global capitalism.⁸³ World literature! Its positive valence lies in the intimate connection 'between project and background',⁸⁴ as Moretti describes his work in 'Conjectures', and the relationship more generally between comparative literature and politics. What emerges from distant reading, then, is the potential for a reading of the world in literature in which both the empirical fact of a dead history and the allegorical possibility of another history already in the making can be found. After all, as Moretti demonstrates so effectively, prose, and reading more broadly, is a 'way of *being* in the world, not just of representing it'. In its current form, however, Moretti's model of literary theory ultimately 'eternalizes its present condition'⁸⁵ rather than thinking beyond it.⁸⁶ In this respect, I think it is fair to say, in response to Schwarz's question as to whether Moretti's method constitutes a form of social critique: 'not yet'.

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82 Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 46.

83 As Hardt and Negri elaborate on this point, the 'Leftist strategy of resistance to globalization and defense of locality is also damaging because in many cases what appear as local identities are not autonomous or self-determining but actually feed into and support the development of the capitalist imperial machine. The globalization or deterritorialization operated by the imperial machine is not in fact opposed to localization or reterritorialization, but rather sets in play mobile and modulating circuits of differentiation and identification. The strategy of local resistance misidentifies and thus masks the enemy' (Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 45–6).

84 Moretti 2013a, p. 119.

85 Adorno 1997, p. 120.

86 This description comes from the following quote: 'Philosophy which presents reality as such today only veils reality and eternalizes its present condition.'

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