

GRAPHS, MAPS, TREES

Abstract Models for Literary History—3

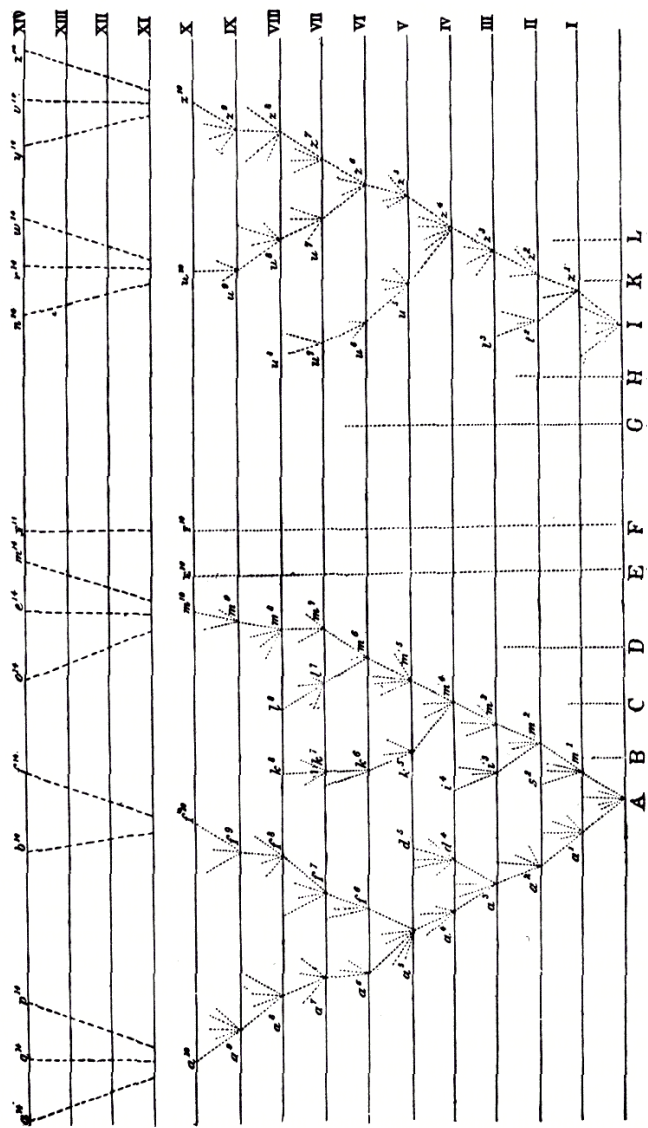
TREES; EVOLUTIONARY THEORY. They come last, in this series of essays, but were really the beginning, as my Marxist formation, influenced by DellaVolpe and his school, entailed a great respect (in principle, at least) for the methods of the natural sciences.¹ So, at some point I began to study evolutionary theory, and eventually realized that it opened a unique perspective on that key issue of literary study which is the interplay between history and form. Theories of form are usually blind to history, and historical work blind to form; but in evolution, morphology and history are really the two sides of the same coin. Or perhaps, one should say, they are the two dimensions of the same tree.

I

Figure 1 (overleaf) reproduces the only tree—‘an odd looking affair, but indispensable’, as Darwin writes to his publisher in the spring of 1859²—in *The Origin of Species*; it appears in the fourth chapter, ‘Natural selection’ (which in later editions becomes ‘Natural selection; or, the survival of the fittest’), in the section on ‘Divergence of character’. But when the image is first introduced, Darwin does not call it a ‘tree’:³

Now let us see how this principle of great benefit being derived from divergence of character, combined with the principles of natural selection and of extinction, will tend to act. The accompanying diagram will aid us in understanding this rather perplexing subject . . .⁴

FIGURE I: Divergence of character



Let A be a common, widely-diffused, and varying species, belonging to a genus large in its own country. The little fan of diverging dotted lines of unequal lengths proceeding from A may represent its varying offspring . . . Only those variations which are in some way profitable will be preserved or naturally selected. And here the importance of the principle of benefit being derived from divergence of character comes in; for this will generally lead to the most different or divergent variations (represented by the outer dotted lines) being preserved and accumulated by natural selection.

Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*

A diagram. After the diachronic diagrams of the first article, and the spatial ones of the second, trees are a way of constructing *morphological* diagrams, with form and history as the two variables of the analysis: the vertical axis of figure 1 charting the regular passage of time (every interval, writes Darwin, ‘one thousand generations’), and the horizontal axis following the formal diversification (‘the little fans of diverging dotted lines’) that would eventually lead to ‘well-marked varieties’, or to entirely new species.

The horizontal axis follows formal diversification . . . But Darwin’s words are stronger: he speaks of ‘this rather perplexing subject’—elsewhere, ‘perplexing & unintelligible’⁵—whereby forms don’t just ‘change’, but change by always *diverging* from each other (remember, we are in the section on ‘Divergence of Character’).⁶ Whether as a result of historical

¹ The first two essays in this series, on ‘Graphs’ and ‘Maps’, appeared respectively in *NLR* 24, November–December 2003 and *NLR* 26, March–April 2004.

² ‘It is an odd looking affair, but is *indispensable*’, continues the letter to John Murray of May 31, 1859, ‘to show the nature of the very complex affinities of past & present animals’. Frederick Burkhardt and Sydney Smith, eds, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, vol. VII (1858–59), Cambridge 1991, p. 300.

³ The word ‘tree’ appears only at the end of the chapter, and surrounded by signs of hesitation, possibly because of the religious echoes associated with the Tree of Life: ‘The affinities of all the beings of the same class have *sometimes* been represented by a great tree. I *believe* this simile *largely* speaks the truth’: Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 1859; facsimile of the first edition, Cambridge, MA 2001, p. 129 (italics mine).

⁴ Darwin, *Origin*, p. 116.

⁵ ‘You will find Ch. IV perplexing & unintelligible’, he writes to Lyell on September 2, 1859, ‘without the aid of enclosed queer Diagram, of which I send old & useless proof’: Burkhardt and Smith, eds, *Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, p. 329.

⁶ ‘The intent of Darwin’s famous diagram has almost always been misunderstood’, writes Stephen Jay Gould: ‘Darwin did not draw this unique diagram simply to illustrate the generality of evolutionary branching, but primarily to explicate the principle of divergence. Darwin’s solution . . . holds that natural selection will generally favor the most extreme, the most different, the most divergent forms in a spectrum of variation emanating from any common parental stock. . . . Note how only two species of the original array (A–I) ultimately leave descendants—the left extreme A and the near right extreme I. Note how each diversifying species first generates an upward fan of variants about its modal form, and how only the peripheral populations of the fan survive to diversify further. Note that the total morphospace (horizontal axis) expands by divergence, although only two of the original species leave descendants.’ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, Cambridge, MA 2002, pp. 228–9, 235–6.

accidents, then, or under the action of a specific ‘principle’,⁷ the reality of divergence pervades the history of life, defining its morphospace—its space-of-forms: an important concept, in the pages that follow—as an intrinsically expanding one.

From a single common origin, to an immense variety of solutions: it is this incessant growing-apart of life forms that the branches of a morphological tree capture with such intuitive force. ‘A tree can be viewed as a *simplified description of a matrix of distances*’, write Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi and Piazza in the methodological prelude to their *History and Geography of Human Genes*; and figure 2, with its mirror-like alignment of genetic groups and linguistic families drifting away from each other (in a ‘correspondence [that] is remarkably high but not perfect’, as they note with aristocratic aplomb),⁸ makes clear what they mean: a tree is a way of sketching *how far* a certain language has moved from another one, or from their common point of origin.

And if language evolves by diverging, why not literature too?

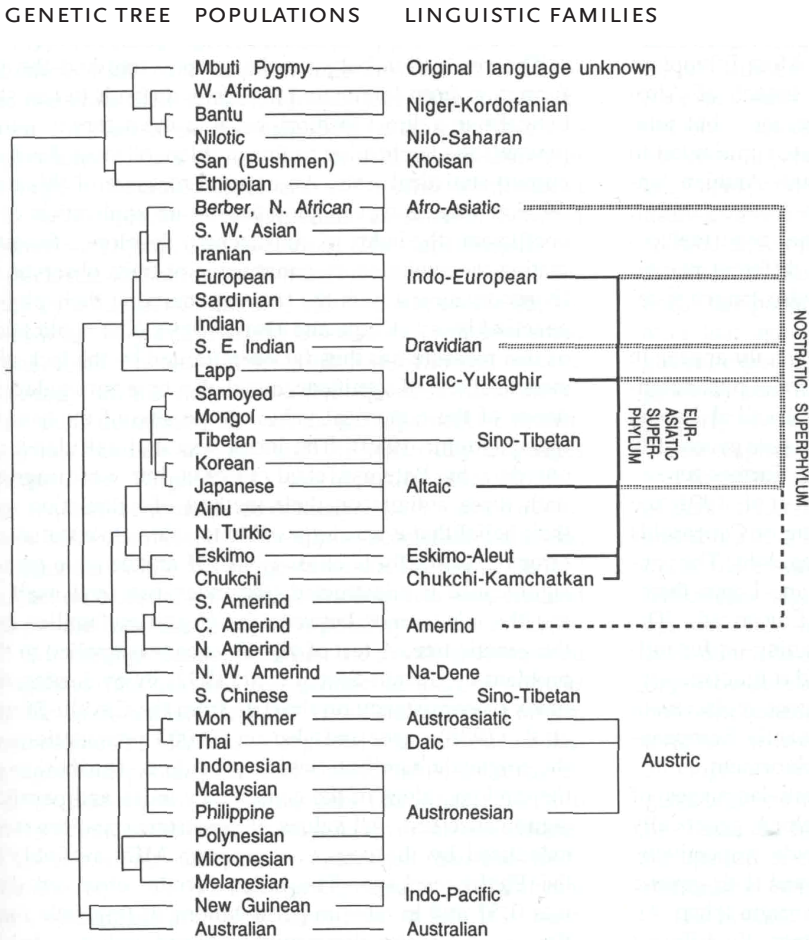
II

For Darwin, ‘divergence of character’ interacts throughout history with ‘natural selection and extinction’: as variations grow apart from each other, selection intervenes, allowing only a few to survive. In a seminar of a few years ago, I addressed the analogous problem of literary survival, using as a test case the early stages of British detective fiction. We chose clues as the trait whose transformations were likely to be most revealing for the history of the genre, and proceeded to chart the relationships

⁷ ‘One might say . . . that ‘divergence of character’ requires no separate principle beyond adaptation, natural selection, and historical contingency . . . Climates alter; topography changes; populations become isolated, and some, adapting to modified environments, form new species. What more do we need? . . . But Darwin grew dissatisfied with a theory that featured a general principle to explain adaptation, but then relied upon historical accidents of changing environments to resolve diversity. He decided that a fully adequate theory of evolution required an equally strong principle of diversity, one that acted intrinsically and predictably’: Gould, *Structure*, p. 226.

⁸ Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza, Paolo Menozzi and Alberto Piazza, *The History and Geography of Human Genes*, Princeton 1994, pp. 38, 99 (italics mine).

FIGURE 2: *Linguistic trees*



Why is there a close similarity between linguistic and genetic trees? . . . The correlation is certainly not due to the effect of genes on languages; if anything, it is likely that there is a reverse influence, in that linguistic barriers may strengthen the genetic isolation between groups speaking different languages . . . The explanation of the parallelism between genetic and linguistic trees is to be sought in the common effect of . . . events determining the separation of two groups. After fission and migration of one or both moieties to a different area, they are partially or completely isolated from each other. Reciprocal isolation causes both genetic and linguistic differentiation.

L. Luca Cavalli-Sforza, Paolo Menozzi and Alberto Piazza, *The History and Geography of Human Genes*

Fig 2.6.2 The genetic tree comparing linguistic families and superfamilies published in Cavalli-Sforza et al. (1988). Populations pooled on the basis of linguistic classifications belong to the following groups: Bantu, Niger-Kordofanian family; Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan family; Southeast Indian, Dravidian family; Samoyeds, Uralic family from Russia; North Turkic, branch of Altaic family; Northwest Amerind, Na-Dene family. The genetic tree was constructed by average linkage analysis of Nei's genetic distances and is the same as that of figure 2.3.2A.

between Conan Doyle and some of his contemporaries as a series of branchings, which added up to the (modest) tree of figure 3.⁹

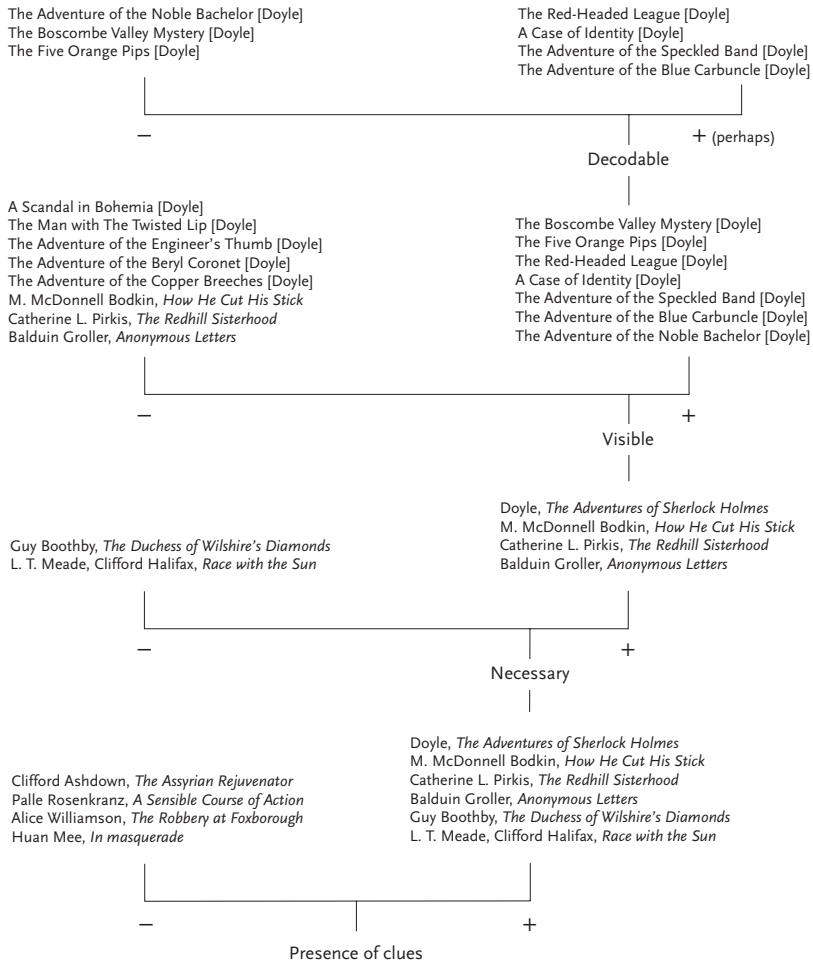
Here, from the very first branching at the bottom of the tree (whether clues were present or not) two things were immediately clear: the ‘formal’ fact that several of Doyle’s rivals (those on the left) did not use clues—and the ‘historical’ fact that they were all forgotten. It is a good illustration of what the literary market is like: ruthless competition—hinging on form. 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). This pressure of cultural selection probably explains the second branching of the tree, where clues *are* present, but serve no real function: as in ‘Race with the Sun’, for instance, where a clue reveals to the hero that the drug is in the third cup of coffee, and then, when he is offered the third cup, he actually *drinks it*. Which is indeed ‘perplexing & unintelligible’, and the only possible explanation is that these writers realized that clues were popular, and tried to smuggle them into their stories—but hadn’t really understood *how* clues worked, and so didn’t use them very well.

Third branching: clues are present, they have a function, but are not visible: the detective mentions them in his final explanation, but we have never ‘seen’ them in the course of the story. Here we lose the last of Doyle’s rivals (which is exactly what we had expected), but we also lose half of the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which we hadn’t expected at all; and the next branching—clues must be not just visible, but decodable by the reader: soon to become a key ‘technical law’ of the genre—is even more surprising, since decodable clues appear, even being generous, in only four of the twelve *Adventures*, and being strict, in none of them.

Why this last-minute stumble on Doyle’s part? I try to explain it in ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature’, and will not repeat the argument here. But I will mention an objection raised in the course of the seminar to the logic behind figure 3. This tree, said one of the participants, assumes that morphology is the key factor of literary history: that Doyle owes his phenomenal success to his greater skill in the handling of clues; to his being the only one who made it to the top of the tree, as it were. But why should form be the decisive reason for survival? Why not social privilege

⁹ I am here summarizing and updating the results of a larger study: see ‘The Slaughterhouse of Literature’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, March 2000.

FIGURE 3: Presence of clues and the genesis of detective fiction



From the standpoint of technique, the devices employed by Conan Doyle in his stories are simpler than the devices we find in other English mystery novels. On the other hand, they show greater concentration . . . The most important clues take the form of secondary facts, which are presented in such a way that the reader does not notice them . . . they are intentionally placed in the oblique form of a subordinate clause . . . on which the storyteller does not dwell.

Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*

instead—the fact that Doyle was writing for a well-established magazine, and his rivals were not?

Plausible. So I went to the library, where I discovered that, in the course of the 1890s, over one hundred detective stories by twenty-five different authors had been published in the *Strand Magazine* alongside Sherlock Holmes. Since so many writers had access to the same venue as Doyle, the ‘social privilege’ objection lost its force; but, more importantly, the study of those hundred-odd stories—while confirming the uniqueness of Doyle’s technical feat—also added two entirely new branches to the initial tree of detective fiction (figure 4). The more one looked in the archive, in other words, the more complex became the genre’s morphospace. The ‘family of narrative forms’ evoked in the first of these articles was beginning to take shape.

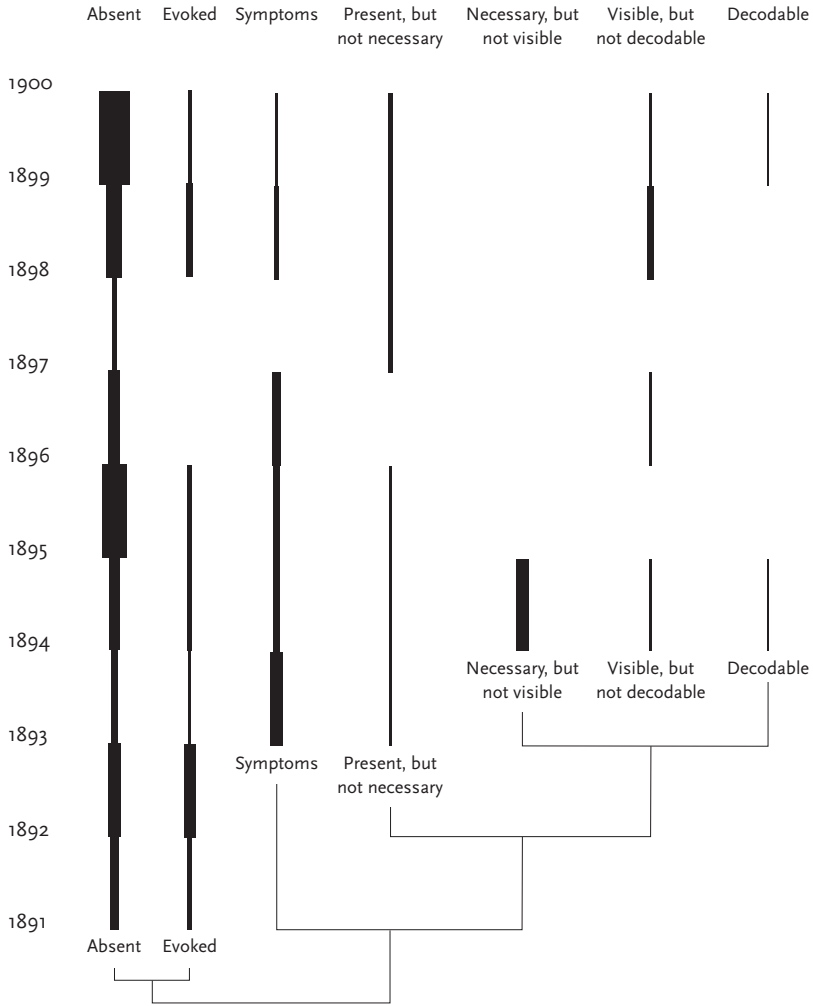
III

Is divergence a factor, in literary history? These first findings suggest a cautious Yes. But what is it, that generates this morphological drifting-away? Texts? I doubt it. Texts are distributed on the branches of the tree, yes, but the ‘nodes’ of the branching process are not defined by texts here, but by clues (their absence, presence, visibility etc): by something that is much *smaller* than any individual text—a sentence, a metaphor (‘It was the band! The speckled band!’), at times (‘I could only catch some allusion to a rat’) not even a full word. And on the other hand, this system of differences at the microscopic level adds up to something that is much *larger* than any individual text, and which in our case is of course the genre—or the tree—of detective fiction.

The very small, and the very large; these are the forces that shape literary history. Devices and genres; not texts. Texts are certainly the *real objects* of literature (in the *Strand Magazine* you don’t find ‘clues’ or ‘detective fiction’, you find *Sherlock Holmes*, or *Hilda Wade*, or *The Adventures of a Man of Science*); but they are not the right *objects of knowledge* for literary history. Take the concept of genre: usually, literary criticism approaches it in terms of what Ernst Mayr calls ‘typological thinking’:¹⁰ we choose a

¹⁰ See Ernst Mayr, *Populations, Species and Evolution*, Cambridge, MA 1970; *Evolution and the Diversity of Life*, Cambridge, MA 1976; and *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology*, Cambridge, MA 1988.

FIGURE 4: *Presence of clues and the genesis of detective fiction*



In this diagram, where the thickness of the line indicates the number of stories published during each year, the two new branches are the second and third from the left. The former includes those stories in which clues are not present, but are verbally evoked, or perhaps invoked by the characters ('If only we had a clue!'; 'Did you find any clues?'), in what is probably another awkward attempt to smuggle them into a text that does not really need them. In the third branch from the left, clues are present, but always in the form of medical symptoms, as if in an homage to the old art of medical semiotics—which had of course been Doyle's model from the very start: Holmes is modelled on Edinburgh's Dr Bell, has always a doctor at his side, studies his clients as if they were patients, etc.

'representative individual', and through it define the genre as a whole. *Sherlock Holmes*, say, and detective fiction; *Wilhelm Meister*, and the *Bildungsroman*; you analyse Goethe's novel, and it counts as an analysis of the entire genre, because for typological thinking there is really no gap between the real object and the object of knowledge. But once a genre is visualized *as a tree*, the continuity between the two inevitably disappears: the genre becomes an abstract 'diversity spectrum' (Mayr again), whose internal multiplicity no individual text will ever be able to represent. And so, even 'A Scandal in Bohemia' becomes just one leaf among many: delightful, of course—but no longer entitled to stand for the genre as a whole.

A diversity spectrum. Quite wide, in figures 3 and 4, because when a new genre first arises, and no 'central' convention has yet crystallized, its space-of-forms is usually open to the most varied experiments. And then, there is the pressure of the market. The twenty-five authors of the *Strand Magazine* are all competing for the same, limited market niche, and their meanderings through morphospace have probably a lot to do with a keen desire to outdo each other once and for all: when mystery writers come up with an 'aeronaut' who kills a hiker with the anchor of his balloon, or a somnambulist painter who draws the face of the man he has murdered, or a chair that catapults its occupants into a neighboring park, they are clearly looking for the Great Idea that will seal their success. And yet, just as clearly, aeronauts and catapults are totally *random* attempts at innovation, in the sense in which evolutionary theory uses the term: they show no foreknowledge—no idea, really—of what may be good for literary survival. In making writers branch out in every direction, then, the market also pushes them into all sorts of crazy blind alleys; and divergence becomes indeed, as Darwin had seen, inseparable from extinction.

There are many ways of being alive, writes Richard Dawkins, but many more ways of being dead—and figures 3 and 4, with all those texts that were so quickly forgotten, bear out his point: literary pathology, one may almost call it. But instead of reiterating the verdict of the market, abandoning extinct literature to the oblivion decreed by its initial readers, these trees take the lost 99 per cent of the archive and reintegrate it into the fabric of literary history, allowing us to finally 'see' it. It is the same project of the first article in this series, 'Graphs', from a different angle: whereas graphs abolish all qualitative difference among their data, trees try to *articulate* that difference. In the graph of British novels between

1710 and 1850, for instance (figure 2 of 'Graphs'), *Pride and Prejudice* and *The life of Pill Garlick; rather a whimsical sort of fellow*, appear as exactly alike: two dots in the 1813 column, impossible to tell apart. But figures 3 and 4 aim precisely at *distinguishing* 'The Red-Headed League' from 'The Assyrian Rejuvenator' and 'How He Cut His Stick', thus establishing an intelligible relationship between canonical and non-canonical branches.

IV

Trees; or, divergence in literary history. But this view of culture usually encounters a very explicit objection. 'Among the many differences in deep principle between natural evolution and cultural change', writes Stephen Jay Gould, their 'topology'—that is to say, the abstract overall shape of natural and cultural history—is easily the most significant:

Darwinian evolution at the species level and above is a story of continuous and irreversible proliferation . . . a process of constant separation and distinction. Cultural change, on the other hand, receives a powerful boost from amalgamation and anastomosis of different traditions. A clever traveller may take one look at a foreign wheel, import the invention back home, and change his local culture fundamentally and forever.¹¹

The traveller and his wheel are not a great example (they are a case of simple diffusion, not of amalgamation), but the general point is clear, and is frequently made by historians of technology. George Basalla:

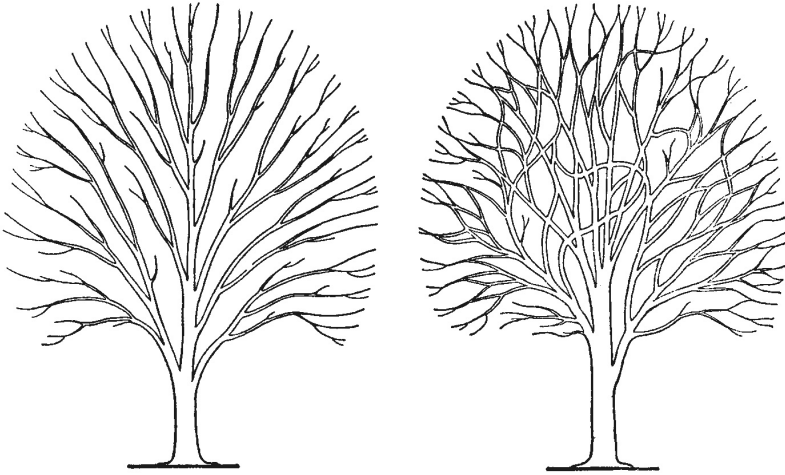
Different biological species usually do not interbreed, and on the rare occasions when they do their offspring are infertile. Artifactual types, on the other hand, are routinely combined to produce new and fruitful entities . . . The internal combustion engine branch was joined with that of the bicycle and horse-drawn carriage to create the automobile branch, which in turn merged with the dray wagon to produce the motor truck.¹²

Artifactual species combined in new and fruitful entities: in support of his thesis, Basalla reproduces Alfred Kroeber's ingenious 'tree of culture' (figure 5, overleaf), whose Alice-in-Wonderland quality makes the reality of convergence unforgettably clear. As it should be, because convergence is indeed a major factor of cultural evolution. But is it *the only one*?

¹¹ Stephen Jay Gould, *Full House. The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*, New York 1996, pp. 220–1

¹² George Basalla, *The Evolution of Technology*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 137–8.

FIGURE 5: *Tree of Culture*



THE TREE OF LIFE AND THE TREE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF
GOOD AND EVIL—THAT IS, OF HUMAN CULTURE

The course of organic evolution can be portrayed properly as a tree of life, as Darwin has called it, with trunk, limbs, branches, and twigs. The course of development of human culture in history cannot be so described, even metaphorically. There is a constant branching-out, but the branches also grow together again, wholly or partially, all the time. Culture diverges, but it syncretizes and anastomoses too. Life really does nothing but diverge: its occasional convergences are superficial resemblances, not a joining or a reabsorption. A branch on the tree of life may approach another branch; it will not normally coalesce with it. The tree of culture, on the contrary, is a ramification of such coalescences, assimilations, or acculturations. This schematic diagram visualizes this contrast.

Alfred Kroeber, *Anthropology*

'*Culture diverges*, but it syncretizes and anastomoses too', runs Kroeber's comment to the tree of culture; and Basalla: 'the oldest surviving made things . . . stand at the beginning of the *interconnected, branching*, continuous series of artifacts shaped by deliberate human effort'. *Interconnected and branching*; *syncretism and divergence*: rather than irreconcilable 'differences in deep principle' between convergence and divergence, passages like these (which could be easily multiplied) suggest a sort of

division of labour between them; or perhaps, better, a cycle to which they both contribute in turn. Convergence, I mean, only arises *on the basis of previous divergence*, and the power of its results tends in fact to be directly proportional to the distance between the original branches (bicycles, and internal combustion engines). Conversely, a successful convergence usually produces *a powerful new burst of divergence*: like the ‘new evolutionary series [which] began almost immediately after Whitney’s [cotton gin] was put to work’, and which quickly became, concludes Basalla, ‘the point of origin for an entirely new set of artifacts’.¹³

Divergence prepares the ground for convergence, which unleashes further divergence: this seems to be the typical pattern.¹⁴ Moreover, the force of the two mechanisms varies widely from field to field, ranging from the pole of technology, where convergence is particularly strong, to the opposite extreme of language, where divergence—remember the ‘matrix of distances’ of figure 2—is clearly the dominant factor; while the specific position of literature—this technology-of-language—within the whole spectrum remains to be determined.¹⁵ And don’t be misled by the ‘topological’ technicalities of all this: the real content of the controversy, not technical at all, is our very idea of culture. Because if the basic mechanism of change is that of divergence, then cultural history is bound to be random, full of false starts, and profoundly path-dependent: a direction, once taken, can seldom be reversed, and culture hardens into a true ‘second nature’—hardly a benign metaphor. If, on the other hand, the basic mechanism is that of convergence, change will be frequent, fast, deliberate, reversible: culture becomes more plastic, more *human*, if you

¹³ Basalla, *The Evolution of Technology*, pp. 30, 34.

¹⁴ It is easy (in theory, at least) to apply this cyclical matrix to the history of genres: convergence among separate lineages would be decisive in the production of new genres; then, once a genre’s form stabilizes, ‘interbreeding’ would stop, and divergence would become the dominant force.

¹⁵ In Thomas Pavel’s recent *La Pensée du Roman*, Paris 2003, which is the most ambitious theory of the novel since the masterpieces of the inter-war years, divergence is the fundamental force during the first seventeen centuries of the novel’s existence, and convergence in the last three (these are my extrapolations, not Pavel’s). The interpretation of these results is however far from obvious. Should one insist on the striking quantitative supremacy of divergence even in the notoriously ‘syncretic’ genre of the novel? Or should one focus on the (apparent) historical trend, viewing divergence as a ‘primitive’ morphological principle, and convergence as a more ‘mature’ one? And are Balzac, say, or Joyce, only instances of convergence (pp. 245, 373)—or are they also the initiators of strikingly new formal branches? All questions for another occasion.

wish. But as human history is so seldom human, this is perhaps not the strongest of arguments.

V

One last tree: this time, not the ‘many more ways of being dead’ of Conan Doyle’s rivals, but the still numerous ‘ways of being alive’ discovered between 1800 and 2000 by that great narrative device known as ‘free indirect style’. The technique was first noticed in an article on French grammar published in 1887 in the *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, which described it, in passing, as ‘a peculiar mix of indirect and direct discourse, which draws the verbal tenses and pronouns from the former, and the tone and the order of the sentence from the latter’.¹⁶ *Mansfield Park*:

It was the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety. Nobody was in their right place, nothing was done as it ought to be. She could not respect her parents, as she had hoped.¹⁷

Nobody was *in their right place*, nothing was done *as it ought to be*: the tone is clearly Fanny’s, and expresses her profound emotional frustration at her parents’ house. Nobody *was* in their right place . . . *She could* not respect *her* parents: the (past) verbal tenses and (third person) pronouns evoke for their part the typical distance of narrative discourse. Emotions, plus distance: it is truly an odd *Mischung*, free indirect style, but its composite nature was precisely what made it ‘click’ with that other strange compromise formation which is the process of modern socialization: by leaving the individual voice a certain amount of freedom, while permeating it with the impersonal stance of the narrator, free indirect style enacted that *véritable transposition de l’objectif dans le subjectif*¹⁸ which is indeed the substance of the socialization process. And the result was the genesis of an unprecedented ‘third’ voice, intermediate and almost neutral in tone between character and narrator: the composed, slightly abstract voice of the *well-socialized individual*, of which Austen’s heroines—these

¹⁶ A. Tobler, ‘Vermischte Beiträge zur französischen Grammatik’, *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 1887, p. 437.

¹⁷ *Mansfield Park*, ch. 39.

¹⁸ Charles Bally, ‘Le style indirecte libre en français moderne’, *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift*, 1912, second part, p. 603.

young women who speak of themselves *in the third person*, as if from the outside—are such stunning examples.¹⁹

Placed as it is halfway between social *doxa* and the individual voice, free indirect style is a good indicator of their changing balance of forces, of which the tree in figure 6 (overleaf) offers a schematic visualization. And as can be seen, not much happens as long as free indirect style remains confined to western Europe; at most, we have the gradual, entropic drift from ‘reflective’ to ‘non-reflective’ consciousness:²⁰ that is to say, from sharp punctual utterances like those in *Mansfield Park*, to Flaubert’s and Zola’s all-encompassing moods, where the character’s inner space is unknowingly colonized by the commonplaces of public opinion. But just as the individual mind seems about to be submerged by ideology, a geographical shift to the east reverses the trend, associating free indirect style with conflict rather than with consensus. Raskolnikov’s inner speech, writes Bakhtin

is filled with other people’s words that he has recently heard or read [and is] constructed like a succession of living and impassioned replies to all those words . . . He does not think about phenomena, he speaks with them . . . he addresses himself (often in the second person singular, as if to another person), he tries to persuade himself, he taunts, exposes, ridicules himself²¹

A language filled with ‘other people’s words’, just like Emma Bovary’s: but where those words, instead of being passively echoed, arouse ‘living and impassioned replies’. Here are Raskolnikov’s reactions to the news of his sister’s impending (and loveless) marriage:

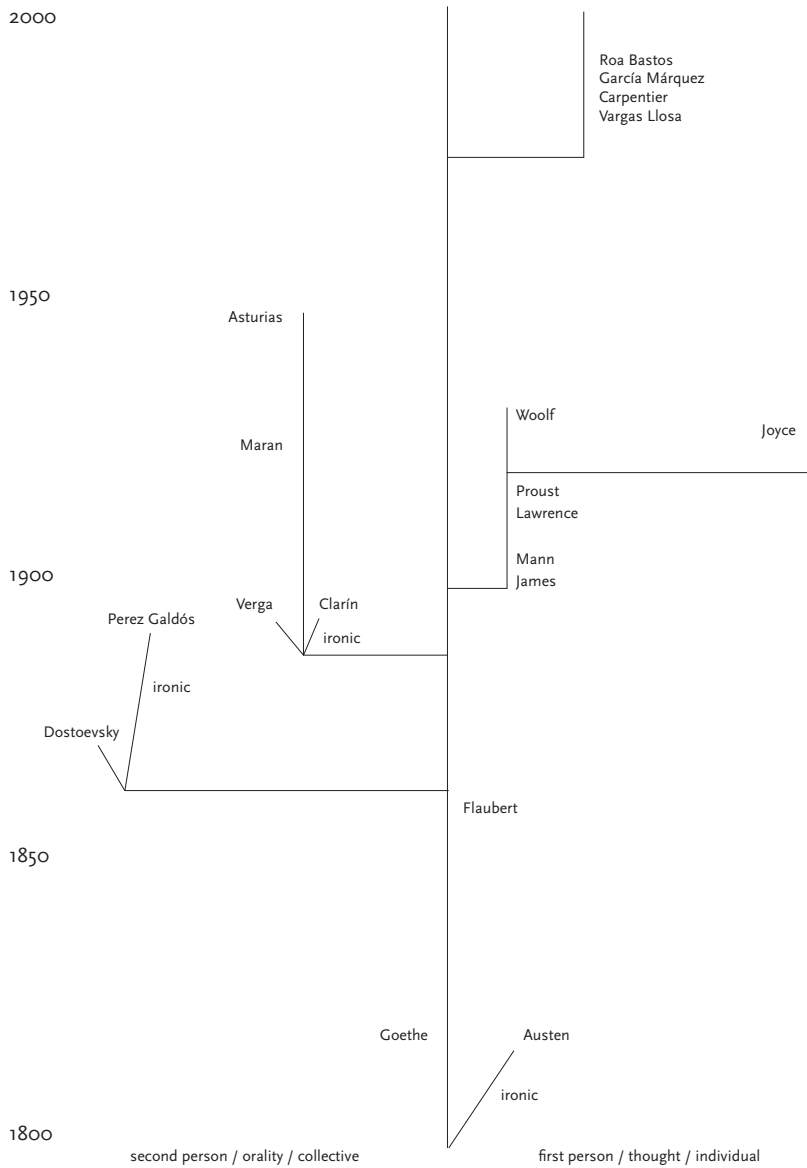
‘Won’t take place? And what are you going to do to stop it? Forbid it? By what right? What can you promise them instead, in order to possess such a right?’

¹⁹ I have analyzed in detail the connexion between free indirect style and socialization in ‘Il secolo serio’, *Il romanzo*, vol. 1, Torino 2001 (forthcoming, Princeton 2005). Needless to say, I do not claim that free indirect style is *only* used to represent the process of socialization (which would be absurd), but rather that between the two existed—especially early on—a profound elective affinity.

²⁰ For these terms, see Ann Banfield’s classic study of free indirect style, *Unspeakable Sentences*, Boston 1982.

²¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 1929–63, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 237–8. The dialogic reinterpretation of free indirect style sketched by Bakhtin is extensively developed in Volosinov’s chapters on ‘quasi-direct discourse’ in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* [1929], Cambridge, MA 1993, pp. 125–59; see also Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics*, Palo Alto, CA 1990, esp. pp. 343–4.

FIGURE 6: *Free indirect style in modern narrative, 1800–2000*



This figure reflects work in progress, and is therefore quite tentative, especially in the case of non-European literatures, and of the diachronic span of the various branches.

To devote your whole life, your whole future to them, *when you finish your course and get a job?* We've heard that one before, that's just maybe—what about *now?* I mean, you've got to do something right now, do you realize that?' . . . It was a long time since [these questions] had begun to lacerate his heart, and it was positively an age since his present sense of anguish and depression had come into being . . . It was clear that now was not the time to feel miserable, to suffer passively with the thought that the questions were not capable of resolution; no, instead he must do something, and at once, as quickly as possible. Whatever happened, he must take some action, or else . . .²²

Great page. But can we really speak of free indirect style for those sentences in 'the second person singular, as if to another person' that open the passage, and that are so crucial for Bakhtin's argument (and for his entire theory of the novel)? No, not quite: the second person (especially if in quotes) indicates the *direct* discourse of an open-ended discussion, rather than (as in the second half of the passage) the *narrative* report of thoughts and emotions. Why this double register, then, why this shift in the representation of Raskolnikov's inner debate? Probably, what happened was something like this: entrusted by Dostoevsky with a dialogic task so unlike its usual one, the free indirect style of *Crime and Punishment* became more intense and dramatic ('he must take some action, or else') than ever before, 'stretching' as far as it possibly could; but in the end, the open-endedness of dialogism was incompatible with the narrative register of free indirect style, and so—in a little morphological 'catastrophe'—the latter's key traits were all rearranged according to a different logic. A border had been crossed, and free indirect style had 'mutated' into something else.

VI

Bakhtin's conceptual vocabulary, with its emphasis on the oral threads within novelistic prose, is a good prologue to the next branching of the tree, which occurs around 1880, at the height of the naturalist movement. Here, the fault line—which is, again, geographic and morphological at once—runs between different forms of symbolic hegemony in *fin-de-siècle* Europe: in the West, the silent, interiorized *doxa* of large nation-states, arising almost impersonally from newspapers, books, and

²² *Crime and Punishment*, ch. 4.

an anonymous public opinion; in the South, the noisy, *multi*-personal ‘chorus’ (Leo Spitzer) of the small village of *I Malavoglia*, or the sharp whispers of the provincial confessionals of *La Regenta*; later, the *longue durée* of collective oral myths in *Batouala* or *Men of Maize*.²³ Here, free indirect style embodies a form of social cohesion which—in its reliance on explicit, *spoken* utterances, rather than ‘non-reflective’ absorption—is more quarrelsome and intrusive than in western Europe, but also much more unstable: the spokesmen for the social (villagers, confessor, chief) must be always *physically there*, ready to reiterate over and over again the dominant values, or else things fall apart. As indeed they do, in all of these novels.

So far, we have followed free indirect style as it explored the ‘objective’ pole of its tonal scale: the ‘truths’ of the neo-classical narrator and the *doxa* of public opinion; the force (in Dostoevsky) of abstract theories and ideas, and the myths of traditional societies. Around 1900, however, a different group of writers begins to experiment at the opposite end of the spectrum, that of the irreducibly singular. First comes a cluster of upper-class stylizations (James, Mann, Proust, Woolf . . .), where the deviation from social norms is often so slight that it may not even form a separate branch; then, more decisively, Joyce’s generation moves well beyond ‘non-reflective consciousness’, into the pre-, or un-conscious layers of psychic life. And at this point, a second stylistic ‘catastrophe’ occurs: just as, in *Crime and Punishment*, the third person of narrative discourse was taking turns with the second person of dialogue, in *Ulysses* it is constantly sliding into the *first* person of the stream of consciousness—with all the galaxy of idiosyncratic associations that this

²³ Two examples. ‘Nowadays mischief-makers got up to all kinds of tricks; and at Trezza you saw faces which had never been seen there before, on the cliffs, people claiming to be going fishing, and they even stole the sheets put out to dry, if there happened to be any. Poor Nunziata had had a new sheet stolen that way. Poor girl! Imagine robbing her, a girl who had worked her fingers to the bone to provide bread for all those little brothers her father had left on her hands when he had upped and gone to seek his fortune in Alexandria of Egypt.’ Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia*, ch. 2.

‘He’s a good old man, the sun, and so equitable! He shines for all living people, from the greatest to the most humble. He knows neither rich nor poor, neither black nor white. Whatever may be their colour, whatever may be their fortune, all men are his sons. He loves them all equally; favours their plantations; dispels, to please them, the cold and sullen fog; reabsorbs the rain; and drives out the shadow. Ah! The shadow. Unpityingly, relentlessly, the sun pursues it wherever it may be. He hates nothing else.’ René Maran, *Batouala*, ch. 8.

technique entails.²⁴ And through the prism of this small grammatical shift, one can again glimpse a branching process of a higher order, where psychological realism ‘speciates’ into modernist epics, just as, earlier, it had metamorphosed into dialogic novels.

In the final branching of the tree—Latin American ‘dictator novels’—the fluctuation between third and first person is still there, but its direction has been reversed: in place of a third person narrative modulating into a first person monologue, we see the dictator’s attempt to objectify his private (and pathological) self into the monumental poses of a public persona. ‘My dynasty begins and ends in me, in I-HE,’ writes Augusto Roa Bastos in *I the Supreme*; and towards the end of the book:

HE, erect, with his usual brio, the sovereign power of his first day. One hand behind him, the other tucked in the lapel of his frock coat . . . I is HE, definitively, I-HE-SUPREME. Immemorial. Imperishable.²⁵

In Roa Bastos’ novel, as in Carpentier’s *Reasons of State* and García Márquez’s *General in his Labyrinth*—the other two dictator novels of 1974, a year after the *putsch* against Allende in Chile—the ‘I’ of *El Supremo* still largely overshadows his ‘HE’, thus confining free indirect style to quite a limited role. But with Mario Vargas Llosa the technique moves into the foreground, and realizes its full political potential: by presenting the mind of the dictator ‘unmediated by any judging point of view’—to repeat Ann Banfield’s limpid definition of free indirect style²⁶—Vargas Llosa endows the putrid substratum of political terror with an unforgettably sinister matter-of-factness:

Had the United States had a more sincere friend than him, in the past thirty-one years? What government had given them greater support in the UN? Which was the first to declare war on Germany and Japan? Who gave the biggest bribes to representatives, senators, governors, mayors, lawyers and reporters in the United States? His reward: economic sanctions by the oas to make that nigger Rómulo Betancourt happy, to keep sucking at the tit of the Venezuelan oil. If Johnny Abbes had handled things better and the bomb had blown off the head of that faggot Rómulo, there wouldn’t be any

²⁴ ‘He looked down at the boots he had blacked and polished. She had outlived him. Lost her husband. More dead for her than for me. One must outlive the other. Wise men say. There are more women than men in the world. Condole with her. Your terrible loss. I hope you’ll soon follow him. For hindu widows only. She would marry another. Him? No. Yet who knows after.’ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ch. 6.

²⁵ Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, Normal, IL 2000, pp. 123, 419.

²⁶ Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*, Boston 1982, p. 97.

sanctions and the asshole gringos wouldn't be handing him bullshit about sovereignty, democracy, and human rights.²⁷

VII

From the abode of noise and impropriety, where nobody was in their right place, to the asshole gringos handing him bullshit about sovereignty, democracy, and human rights. This is what comparative literature could be, if it took itself seriously as *world literature*, on the one hand, and as *comparative morphology*, on the other. Take a form, follow it from space to space, and study the reasons for its transformations: the 'opportunistic, hence unpredictable' reasons of evolution, in Ernst Mayr's words.²⁸ And of course the multiplicity of spaces is the great challenge, and the curse, almost, of comparative literature: but it is also its peculiar strength, because it is only in such a wide, non-homogeneous geography that some fundamental principles of cultural history become manifest. As, here, the dependence of morphological novelty on spatial discontinuity: 'allopatric speciation', to quote Ernst Mayr one more time: a new species (or at any rate a new formal arrangement), arising when a population migrates into a new homeland, and must quickly change in order to survive. Just like free indirect style when it moves into Petersburg, Aci Trezza, Dublin, Ciudad Trujillo . . .

Spatial discontinuity boosting morphological divergence. It's a situation that reminds me of Gide's reflections on the form of the novel at the time he was writing *The Counterfeiters*: granted that the novel is a slice of life, he muses, why should we always slice 'in the direction of length', emphasizing the passage of time? why not slice *in the direction of width*, and of the multiplicity of simultaneous events? Length, plus width: this is how a tree signifies. And you look at figure 6, or at the others before it, and cannot help but wonder: which is the most significant axis, here—the vertical, or the horizontal? diachronic succession, or synchronic drifting apart? This perceptual uncertainty between history and form—this impossibility, in fact, of really 'seeing' them both at once—is the result of a new conception of literary history, in which literature moves forwards *and sideways* at once; often, more sideways than forwards. Like Shklovsky's great metaphor for art, the knight's move at chess.

²⁷ Vargas Llosa, *The Feast of the Goat*, ch. 2.

²⁸ Mayr, *Toward a new Philosophy of Biology*, p. 458.

VIII

Three articles; three models; three snapshots of the literary field: first the system as a whole, then the middle ground of chronotopes and genres, and now the micro-level of stylistic devices. But despite the difference of scale, some constants remain. First, a total indifference to the philosophizing that goes by the name of ‘Theory’ in literature departments. It is precisely *in the name of theoretical knowledge* that ‘Theory’ should be forgotten, and replaced with the extraordinary array of conceptual constructions—theories, plural, and with a lower case ‘t’—developed by the natural and by the social sciences. ‘Theories are nets’, wrote Novalis, ‘and only he who casts will catch’. Theories are nets, and we should learn to evaluate them for the empirical data they allow us to process and understand: for how they *concretely change the way we work*, rather than as ends in themselves. Theories are nets; and there are so many interesting creatures that await to be caught, if only we try.

Finally, the approaches I have discussed (and others that could have been added) also share a clear preference *for explanation over interpretation*. They don’t offer a new reading of *Waverley*, *Black Forest Village Stories*, or *I Malavoglia*, but aim to understand the larger structures within which these have a meaning in the first place: the temporal cycles which determine the coming and going of genres, or the circular patterns typical of old village culture, or the stylistic branches that delimit the social function of free indirect style. Were I to name a common denominator for all these attempts, I would probably choose: *a materialist conception of form*. An echo of the Marxist problematic of the 1960s and 70s? Yes and no. Yes, because the great idea of that critical season—form as the most profoundly social aspect of literature: *form as force*, as I put it in the close to my previous article—remains for me as valid as ever. And no, because I no longer believe that a single explanatory framework may account for the many levels of literary production and their multiple links with the larger social system: whence the conceptual eclecticism of these articles, and the tentative nature of many of the examples. Much remains to be done, of course, on the compatibility of the various models, and the explanatory hierarchy to be established among them. But right now, opening new conceptual possibilities seemed more important than justifying them in every detail.