A Distant Episteme. New Conditions of Knowledge in Franco Moretti's *Distant Reading* (2013)

di Alberto Comparini

Franco Moretti's *Distant Reading* (2013) is a complex book, one that deals with literary, historical, sociological, and theoretical issues from multiple perspectives, not all of which are related to the much-discussed discipline of the 'digital humanities'. While is true that the book leans in this direction, nonetheless «evolution, geography, and formalism»[1] are the *morphological traits* that Moretti focuses on and explores in this collection of ten essays. I don't use the verb 'explore' by chance. *Distant Reading* is a book *in fieri*, for which research is subject to falsification; not just because of the scientific root of each work, but also as a way to overcome dialectical materialism. As Moretti writes, «[l]earning to study *the past as past*, then, and *the present as present*: such is the intellectual challenge posed by *Weltliteratur* in the twenty-first century»[2]. This is one of the many goals of *Distant Reading*: to open up new paths in order to «break with the literary tradition as we know it»[3] and to establish new models which may help us to better *read* the rise of the novel. In this sense, his debt to Marxism is clear – something Moretti does not deny, reminding us many times of his Marxist education as a literary scholar – since, already in its primordial constitution, Marxism was linked to and rooted in social science. In order to create a new vision of literary studies, Moretti acknowledges the limits of dialectical materialism and, indeed, moves beyond it – philosophically speaking – toward a new interpretation of reality. *Distant Read-*

ing is located, Moretti writes, «where distance […] *is a condition of knowledge.*» The definition he offers of his method is worth quoting at length:

> It allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, «Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. 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[4].

This definition appears only at page 49, in a chapter titled *Conjectures on World Literature*, which elicited «heated» and «violent» reactions from the start, and still does[5]. Graphs, maps, and networks find their own *form* and position even later in the book, namely in the last two chapters, *Style, Inc.: Reflections on 7,000 Titles (British Novels, 1740-1850)* and *Network Theory, Plot Analysis*. Among other things, Moretti's book shows how morphological analysis can become a part of a «distant reading» of 19th century British novel titles, or how new literary devices, such as «clues», can be understood as branches of a tree-shaped genre of «detective stories.» In the first case, Moretti develops

new ideas and interpretations of the changes in average title length between the 18th and the 19th century, by looking at the growth of the market and of readership. In the second case, Moretti shows how clues pass from being merely *part* of the story to being *the* devices through which Arthur Conan Doyle, most notably, was able to stand out within detective fiction. As Moretti puts it,

> [d]evices and genres: two formal *units*. A very small formal unit and a very large one: these are the forces behind this figure – and behind literary history. Not texts. Texts are real objects – but not objects *of knowledge*. If we want to explain the laws of history, we must move to a formal plan that lies beyond them: below or above; the device, or the genre[6].

Furthermore, if we follow Moretti's claim about fidelity to his methodology, even geography occupies an important place within the project of *Distant Reading*. Here, too, we quote Moretti at length:

> The European space is not a landscape, not a backdrop of history, but a *component* of it; always important, often decisive, it suggests that literary forms change 'in' time, no doubt, but not really 'because' of time. […] Just think again of baroque tragedy; is its formal variety the result of passing time – of history? Little or nothing […]. A form needs time in order to reproduce itself; but in order to arise it is space that it needs most. Space, spaces, plural, of neighboring, rival cultures; where the exploration of formal possibilities may be allowed, and in fact encouraged as a sort of patriotic duty. Once more: the space of a divided Europe[7].

However, all these issues – morphological, historical, geographical – are addressed by way of distant reading, which finds its critical approach in quantitative analysis. How can we study English or French novels of the 19th century, when each year there were hundreds if not thousands of new works printed? Close reading is based on a predetermined canon according to power relations (both political and economic), whereas distant reading, allows us to study and understand certain moments in the history of literature through a comparative view of time and space alike, through geographic models and morphological, quantitative and computational techniques. As Moretti

points out, the problem is not literature itself, but *how* we study it. Surely, certain sentences might have provoked perplexity in Moretti's readers (sentences like «[u]npleasant but true, imperialism plays for modernism the same role played by the French Revolution for the realist novel; it poses the basic problem – how can such heterogeneous and growing wealth be perceived? How can it be mastered? – addressed by *collage*, intertextuality, or the stream of consciousness. Without imperialism, in other words, we would have no modernism»)[8]. Yet, as was already the case with *La letteratura vista da lontano* (2005), it is the epistemological drift of our perspective on literature that has created a confused, not to say negative, reading of Moretti's new enterprise in literary studies *mare magnum*, as the chapter *The End of the Beginning* – a reply to Christopher Prendergast's essay *Evolution and Literary History. A Response to Franco Moretti*[9] – clearly shows. It is a delicate topic, which, as always, risks taking extreme positions. In a short review, *What Is Distant Reading?*, published in the «Sunday Book Review» of the *New York Times* on June 24, 2011, Kathryn Schulz writes that «[t]o understand literature, Moretti argues, we must stop reading books»[10]. Similar claims can be found in *Reading Graphs, Maps, Trees. Responses to Franco Moretti* (2011), in any research group or department that sees digital humanities as a threat to close reading, or even in digital humanities discussion. According to Shawna Ross, «[w]hile the creation of (and access to) complete literary archives and data sets will certainly meet with obstacles, *Distant Reading* conjures a very different specter: overestimating the power of data and in doing so losing the texture and feel of the objects we study»[11]. «Quantitative formalism» has lead Moretti to «read 'through' [detective] stories looking for clues, and (almost) nothing else; it felt very different from the reading I used to know»[12]. Again, we are in front of a different *vision* of reading, not a rejection of reading altogether. Although it appears to be devalued by quantitative principles in the graphs of *La letteratura vista da lontano* (2005) and *Distant Reading* (2013), or in the maps of the *Atlante del romanzo europeo* (1997), actual texts remain, at any case, the cornerstone, if not the *Ur*-cornerstone of any study of the digital humanities. So, what does *reading* mean, then? This is the question Moretti is constantly asking us between the lines of his 'digital humanities' books. As with any critical approach, the

problem resides partly in how we *use* the tool we have in order to understand literary texts and literary history, and partly in the tools themselves. This is true for the model of the human sciences: are digital humanities so different from philology in terms of scientific approach? Not at all. Whether or not we 'like' them, they both share a scientific method that digital humanities scholars and philologists both apply to their own discipline; furthermore, as with any other method, they are inevitably (or at least tend to be) exercises in teleology. Rather than attacking the method itself, in order to evaluate the quality of digital humanities research (and, in this case, Moretti's book), we should take into account something that often does not garner much attention in digital humanities discussions: the role of the 'data reader'. A good example is the aforementioned study of 7,000 titles of British novels from 1740 to 1850. Referring to the works of Claude Duchet, Moretti considers titles as a «coded message – in market situation»[13]. By way of graphs, Moretti shows the major metamorphoses of 18th- and 19th-century titles: «in the space of two generations, they become much, much shorter»[14]. By considering culture as an ecosystem, through social mutations – the growth of novel readership and the number of novels published yearly – and market laws alike, Moretti argues that long titles disappeared «because between the size of the market, and the length of titles, a strong negative correlation emerged: as the one expanded, the other contracted.» As he goes on to say, «Nothing much had changed, in the length of titles, for a century and a half, as long as the production of novels had remained stable around five or ten per year; then, as soon as publishing took off in earnest, titles immediately shrank […]. By 1790, their 'quantitative' transformation was virtually complete»[15]. It is the «*force of the market*» that set new 'literary' rules. As Moretti writes, «[t]his of course doesn't mean that all titles gave the same answer to the pressure of the market; but it does mean that they all had to face the same question: how could one shorten a message – without losing information? There was a lot of information in summaries: what happened to it? Was it – gone? Reformulated? Replaced by something else?»[16]. Scientists write mathematical programs and therefore they 'produce' at some level of the program their own biased position. «Excluding those cases in which this happens intentionally, we are left with the very real danger every researcher faces of

shaping the results of an experiment or a critical inquiry due to the unconscious influence of one's own beliefs and desires,» one critic writes[17]. In a similar way, Moretti also produces his own codes and parameters for his research. In both cases (if the codes are right, that is), regardless of whether we are studying the frequency of electrons in a particle beam or the change in title length in 18th- and 19th-century British novels, we will have to face the collector's *interpretation* of the data. Moretti gave us an empirical world to study, one borne of the homology between the world-economic and world-literary systems: is the title change due *only* to the laws of the market or are there other reasons behind this formal and historical development? The data itself is silent; it merely registers and reports what the coordinate of 'title length' and 'time' is. Therefore, the potential of distant reading lies in the role of the reader *after* reading. «Studying titles is a small step»[18], Moretti writes, towards a more complete knowledge of literature, one which takes into account what Margaret Cohen has called the «great unread»[19]. The study of data in Moretti's work would be unintelligible without a deep understanding of Darwin's theory of evolution and its subsequent developments, as well as Wallerstein's world system, on the one hand, and the European Atlas (a synecdoche of the European literary tradition), on the other. In this sense, distance does not at all erase the function of interpretation: a chart or a graph may show the key to understanding the rise of the novel, but without the correct interpretation of the reader, they would remain hidden, or, even worse, misread. Despite its aggressive tone, Prendergast's inquiry as to the Marxist dimension of Moretti's interpretation of the world is scientifically plausible. As Prendergast writes, «Literary markets are of course facts on the ground, at least the ground of modernity broadly conceived, and Moretti has done more than most in his recent research to analyze their workings. The trouble, however, lies elsewhere. Philosophers of the market like to think of it as a cognate of Nature. I cannot recall a single 'Marxist' who does so. The equation of market and nature under the aegis of evolutionary biology is exactly the move of social Darwinism. Clearly, there is a politics in this. It is a version of victors' history»[20]. This is a critique of Moretti's close reading of his own distant reading, that is to say, of the interpretation of the data collected. As it should be, the quantitative process is not taken into account; what

matters is *how* we read data. The results cannot speak on their own: their voice is a signifier devoid of signification. It is the scholar who must visualize them in order to create conditions for interpretation. *Distant Reading* opens up a new hermeneutic space. In the last chapter, Moretti states clearly that he is working on a network theory and that what appears in the book is the «beginning of an answer, and the beginning of the beginning is network theory»[21]. As a synthesis of the dialectic between disciplines, *la letteratura vista da lontano* stands out as a unilateral method to understand both literature and its history. When Gérard Genette published his studies on paratext in the 1980s, his interpretation seemed to be the only answer to the issues related to the book itself as object. Today, *Palimpsestes* (1982) and *Seuils* (1987) are considered fundamental tools to explain the complexity of literature itself. When distant reading acknowledges its role as a means and not as an end, it will be fully understood and eventually judged as being as important as any other discipline.

Notes

[1] F. Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London, Verso 2013, p. 2.

[2] Ibid., p. 135.

[3] *Ibid*., p. 158.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 49.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 44.

[6] *Ibid*., p. 77.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 13.

[8] *Ibid*., p. 40.

[9] C. Prendergast, *Evolution and Literary History. A Response to Franco Moretti*, in «New Left Review», 34/4 (July-August 2005), pp. 40-62.

[10] K. Schulz, *What is Distant Reading?*, in «New York Time», 24 June 2011, p. 34 (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/books/review/the-mechanic-muse-what-is-distant-reading.html).

[11] S. Ross, *In Praise of Overstating the Case. A review of Franco Moretti, «Distant Reading» (London: Verso, 2013)*, in «Digital Humanities Quarterly», 8,1, 2014 (http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/8/1/000171/000171.html#gailey-jewell2012).

[12] F. Moretti, *Distant Reading*, cit., p. 65.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 181.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 182.

[15] *Ibid*., p. 188.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 192.

[17] M. Ascari, *The Dangers of Distant Reading. Reassessing Moretti's Approach to Literary Genres*, in «Genre», 47/1, Winter 2014, pp. 1-19, p. 4.

[18] F. Moretti, *Distant Reading*, cit., p. 210.

[19] M. Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 1999, p. 23.

[20] C. Prendergast, *Evolution and Literary History*, cit., p. 61.

[21] F. Moretti, *Distant Reading*, cit., p. 212.