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The Gray Ordinariness of the Bourgeoisie

critics:
Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois. Between History and Literature*, London-New York 2013.

When we think of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, we have two pictures to consider – the furious activity of modern entrepreneurs using every possible means in order to multiply their property, but also the quiet life of the urban middle class, its many ethical rules, its ascetic lifestyle and moral strictness. These two images of capitalism have generally caused scholars trouble. For example, Max Weber, in the preliminary remarks that precede his famous study, had to enumerate in considerable detail the types representing the undesirable aspects of capitalism (pioneering, large-scale speculation, colonial, financial, and war-oriented[1]), in order to oppose to them his model of the rational and ethical spirit of capitalism. The heroic image of that adventurous capitalism was developed by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* "The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part… [it] has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations," in order to create a global system based on "naked self-interest."[2] In Marx's vision, the bourgeoisie not only creates new wealth and new divisions of old property, but also introduces new principles of recognition, replacing personal dignity with property status, professional ethos with remuneration, even suppressing family feelings and ties.

The panorama of continual changes and volatile revolutionizing of social relations that Marx lays out in the *Manifesto* represents only one side of the bourgeois coin, however. No less often do we see the other side: dominated not by revolution but by the stability of daily rituals, it seeks safe ways to invest family capital instead of finding new sources of income; instead of "naked self-interest," it displays various forms of communitarian ethics. We find a great many such images in nineteenth-century literature. Let us consider what might seem an unlikely example in this context, Zola's *Germinal*. Aside from the story of the miners and their strike, the novel presents the bourgeois Grégoire family, rentiers who have become rich through stocks in a mining company bought a hundred years earlier. The life of a successive generation of stockholders passes in quiet peace and harmony, based on trust in capital:

"[…] the Grégoires had maintained an obstinate faith in their mine. It would rise again: God Himself was not so solid. Then with his religious faith was mixed profound gratitude towards an investment which for a century had supported the family in doing nothing. It was like a divinity of their own, whom their egoism surrounded with a kind of worship, the benefactor of the hearth, lulling them in their great bed of idleness, fattening them at their gluttonous table. […] their desires were mingled in one idea of comfort; and they had thus lived for forty years, in affection and little mutual services. It was a well-regulated existence; the forty thousand francs

[1] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, New York, 2001, xxxiv.

[2] Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore in collaboration with Friedrich Engels, Chapter I. Marxists Internet Archive, last accessed January 19, 2016. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007.

were spent quietly […] Every unprofitable expense seemed foolish to them."[3]

This short fragment reveals many important elements of the image of the bourgeoisie proposed by Franco Moretti.[4] The world has become disenchanted, but in place of the Christian God there appeared a faith in the stability of capital, expected to bring the same dividends every year. This faith is no less metaphysical and no less sure than the vision of salvation in the beyond! But it allows one to live in peace, prosperity, and comfort – far away from both aristocratic luxury and the poverty of the proletarian masses. The foundation of this life is thrift, calculation, verifying that expenses are necessary and advantageous. The Grégoire family shows the state of a bourgeoisie who long ago abandoned the adventurous model of obtaining riches, who have withdrawn from risk in order to consume the goods obtained by their ancestors. Through these figures, Zola presents that not particularly attractive aspect of capitalism in which there is no place for great tales of the conquest of social position, and all that remains is concern for living quietly on seemingly clean financial assets. It is the moment when the storm of primitive accumulation has calmed, and in place of hope leading to risk-taking in order to obtain wealth, exertions to maintain one's obtained position dominate.

In his book *The Bourgeois. Between History and Literature*, Moretti chooses this second version of the bourgeoisie – though the book is synthetic in nature, the author does not employ the great narratives of the bourgeoisie, whether concerning the various forms of industrial, political, or technological revolution, but instead has chosen a specific micro-study of key concepts and prose styles in which ordinary bourgeois life was expressed. Scholars of modern literature have long noted the close relationship of the bourgeoisie to the novel, so that this theme may appear to have been exhausted already, but Moretti's book points toward a new way of thinking about realist literature, and about the bourgeoisie itself. According to the most famous formula, that of György Lukács, the novel is a bourgeois epic, whose form "is… an expression of… transcendental homelessness"[5] and in which both the heroic and the decadent phases of the transformation of the European bourgeoisie were recorded. Where the author of *Theory of the Novel* was too quick to see the heroic side of the great realist novels or the degeneration of naturalism, Moretti recognizes a changing but simultaneously quite uniform ideal type of the bourgeoisie.

The book's subtitle situates it between history and literature – Moretti is not writing an autonomous history of literature. Though his book often uses stylistic analyses, and he has used biological models of interpretation of the history of literary genres in other works,[6] in this book he does not treat literary history as a separate sphere entitled to its own laws. On the contrary, he seems to have dismissed the idea of the autonomy of literary texts in the history of concepts and in social history,[7] though there is no question of writing history based on literary texts either; instead, he is examining the relationship between literary forms and new social classes. Following the example set by Lukács, he treats literary forms as solutions to existential, social, and political conflicts – solutions that have remained, though the problems have long since passed away. This interpretative approach to various stylistic, conceptual, or plot strategies is supposed to enable us to hear an echo inside literary fossils of a past life, and voices of bygone conflicts and tensions.

Moretti decided to avoid studying the "spectrum of formal variations that had been historically available" in favor of examining only what outlasted the process of historical selection. The scholar's attention thus focuses on classics mainly of the nineteenth century, read not

[3] Emile Zola, *Germinal*, trans. Havelock Ellis, originally published by Everyman's Library, 1894. Online edition, last accessed January 19, 2016. http://www.eldritchpress.org/ez/g21.html.

[4] F. Moretti, *The Bourgeois. Between History and Literature*, London, New York 2013.

[5] G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. A. Bostock, Cambridge, MA 1974, 15.

[6] See F. Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London, New York 2013.

[7] On the relationship between the two, see Reinhart Koselleck's article "Historia pojęć a historia społeczna" (History of Concepts and Social History). R. Koselleck, *Semantyka historyczna* (Historical Semantics), trans. W. Kunicki, Poznań 2001, 130-154.

through the hermeneutic optics of unfolding the complicated meaning of masterpieces, but rather in search of fragments wherein essential styles, understood as the articulation of crucial concepts through new prose forms, reveal themselves. He gives significantly less weight to plot structures, proceeding from the thesis of the plot's decreasing importance in the modern novel, where it is displaced by descriptions of reality and the characters' internal worlds.

Moretti writes that the only protagonist of his book could be "laborious" prose, understood as an ideal type that is never fully realized in texts. He defines bourgeois prose in six steps. The first characteristic of such prose he names as the rhythm of continuation, duration – the examples he gives of this phenomenon are descriptions of the successive actions of Robinson Crusoe, oriented toward short-term goals. The accumulation of successive actions leads to the objectivization of work, perceived as activity taking place outside the subject. The second definition of prose refers to a passage by Lukács on the creative, productive nature of the spirit, which is no longer limited to the closed world of the Greeks, where each thing found its proper place and meaning, and the person's role consisted in knowledge of the forms of reality rather than their creation. Moretti traces the productivity of the spirit through the change in the status of things described, as they lose the status of signs, allegories referring to another meaning, and appear as "merely" material things – instead of signs of a deeper reality – they become objects that satisfy needs and desires, tools in individuals' struggle to adapt to their surroundings. Creativity or productivity leads to thinking of the work of art as work that can be executed with increasing skill, for example using a greater number of words to perfect description. Things presented with increasing precision nevertheless do not refer to a lost totality.[8] The opposite of productivity is revealed to be meaning, lost in the capitalist calculation – next to pride in technical accomplishments, there appears melancholy at the loss of meaning in the now-disenchanted world.

The third definition of prose, the reality principle, refers to the attempt to remove from literary presentation all elements of indistinction and imprecision. Like middle-class life, literature was to be ordered according to the principles of accounting and budgeting. The writer's subjectivity should be hidden in the background. The fourth definition of prose provides an intriguing coda to this principle: it relates to analyses of ostensibly indirect discourse. Unlike many previous scholars who have underscored the positive meaning of this form of narration, Moretti sees it primarily as a form of subordination to the social contract. Instead of characters speaking in their own discourse, here individual voices are joined together with what he calls the "bourgeois doxa," expressed even in the commonplace opinions of popular literature. The famous passage in *Madame Bovary* where Emma delights in possessing a lover is interpreted in this way.

Unlike such scholars as Hans Robert Jauss,[9] who find in Flaubert's trial for obscenity a confirmation of the innovative character of his narrative form, Moretti emphasizes that *Madame Bovary* rather introduces more elastic and effective forms of control, placing the signs of social order within the characters' consciousness. It is no longer the omniscient narrator who wields power here, but the bourgeois doxa, collective myths that define the acceptable ways of thinking. The fifth definition of prose is the "Victorian adjective," or miniature moral judgement. Moretti analyzes adjectives which are supposed to describe physical properties, but find applications in describing personalities or moral actions. Description moves into evaluation here; losing clarity and precision, it takes on greater moral meaning, intended to compensate for the world's disenchantment. The sixth and final definition of prose is fog, indistinction, into which bourgeois culture of the Victorian era enters, when it no longer wishes to see itself through naked self-interest, but instead chooses various forms of camouflage.

Thus successive definitions of prose are furnished by phases in the history of rationalization, the disenchantment of reality, its subsequent submission to new forms

[8] Here Moretti cites Hans Blumenberg and Lukács as philosophers who stress the modern loss of totality in favor of creating new forms of knowledge.

[9] See Hans Robert Jauss, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft*, Druckerei und Verlagsanstalt Konstanz Universitätsverlag, 1969, 39, 40, 68.

of control, and even the creation of new forms of meaning at the price of resignation from clarity and precision in favor of misty moral judgments. Transformations of the bourgeois mentality are reflected at the level of style by successive literary conventions – Moretti's stylistic analyses allow us to uncover the ideology at the lowest levels of the structure of literary works.

The second part of Moretti's stylistic proposal is based on the history of concepts and the selection of keywords. One of the models for this approach is found in Raymond Williams's books *Culture and Society* and *Keywords*, where Williams attempted to establish the meaning of a few crucial concepts of nineteenth century ideology. The second tradition that inspired it is the German *Begriffsgechichte* and its great lexicographical projects, such as the *Geschichtliche Grundbergriffe* (Basic Concepts of History) or *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Historical Dictionary of Philosophy) initiated by Joachim Ritter. The history of concepts emerges from studies in the history of philology, but, as Koselleck has shown, proceeds to go much further. Tracing the semantic changes in key concepts becomes the basis for studies in transformations of how we think about reality, as well as processes occurring in society, when new concepts, or their new meanings, articulate the existence of emerging social groups or processes.

The geneaology of the titular concept of the bourgeoisie itself demonstrates the slow process of change in definition, as it shifted from designating a city resident into a class description – a semantic process that took varied forms in different countries. Where the history of the concept of the bourgeoisie can be found in, for example, the works of Koselleck, mentioned above, or those of Jürgen Kocka, Moretti's original contribution is his formulation of seven basic terms to capture bourgeois existence. The author of *Bourgeois* does not start out from such great concepts as rationalism, liberalism, utilitarianism, freedom, or civil rights, which are easily linked with the middle class of the nineteenth century. More than writing a history of (great) ideas, he is interested in looking into the everyday life of the bourgeoisie, above all as it is presented in the novel. What, then, are the keywords to describe the bourgeoisie? Here they are: *useful, efficiency, comfort, serious, influence, earnest,* and *roba*. The last word is taken from Giovanni Verga's novel *Mastro-Don Gesualdo*, and describes a specific relationship with property, wherein it is not given merely the status of goods or effects, but ties the owned space or thing much more closely to the person who owns it. The other six terms come from English, French and German novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

What is the image of the world contained in these words? It must certainly be a reality that has submitted to a pragmatic view that values what is useful and efficient. It is also a reality of taking everyday tasks seriously, and concern for comfort and prosperity, for the stability of one's immediate existence. It is also an awareness of belonging to society, under the influence of other individuals, as well as the need to propagate one's own vision of the world among other classes – Moretti does a brilliant analysis, for example, using the example of Elisabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South*, of how the bourgeoisie's hegemony was created by placing factory owners in the role of patriarchal guardians vis-a-vis their workers. In place of class conflict, the constant threat of strikes, and the revolt of the exploited proletariat, the idea of social harmony appeared, wherein workers would find their industrialists to be solicitous protectors. One of Moretti's most interesting analyses deals with descriptions in realist prose – which usually slow down the progress of narrative catalysts (as Roland Barthes called them) or act as "fillers" (using Moretti's term). Their contents give the bourgeois ideology its fullest expression, as they present the "prose of human life"[10]: the individual's limited place in modern society, where there is no longer any chance for heroic autonomy.

Moretti begins his study by citing various theories of capitalism and the bourgeoisie. For a long time these two entities appeared in the scholarship to be indivisible, with capitalist economics and bourgeois anthropology as two sides of the same coin. In recent years, however, many theoretical works have passed over the bourgeoisie in silence, depriving the history of capitalism

[10]See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, Vol. 1, Berlin 1842, 307, 325.

of its protagonist. The bourgeoisie was always a group with permeable boundaries and weak internal cohesion: most attempts to define it either tried to make it hold too many people, or limited themselves to the narrow bourgeois elite. It is easiest to define it in terms of the double contrast with the aristocracy defined by legal privileges and the proletariat defined by its obligation to work as hired labor. Though the bourgeoisie includes both the economic bourgeoisie and the educated bourgeoisie, though it must retain ambivalence between desire and asceticism – in addition to maintaining such dialectical tensions, Moretti discerns what jointly defines the whole group, its keywords which express themselves in diverse forms of prose. Moretti bases his image of the bourgeoisie mainly on English, French, and German novels, but devotes the fourth chapter to the metamorphoses of the bourgeoisie in semi-peripheral countries, including Italy, Russia, and Poland. In a short analysis of Bolesław Prus's *The Doll*, he pronounces Wokulski to be (possibly) "the most complete bourgeois figure of nineteenth-century fiction,"[11] because of his combination of learning, finances, and politics with love. Rather than guaranteeing success, however, that combination leads to abandonment by businessmen of the semi-peripheral country.

The vision of the bourgeoisie that emerges from Moretti's book presents a distinct alternative to the scholarship on the nineteenth century that grew from the works of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault. There is no place here for either arcades packed with goods or institutions micromanaging modern society. Moretti does not spin a great tale about the adventures and achievements of the bourgeoisie. Instead of the many transformations of the nineteenth-century world, a vision arises of grave stability and slow evolution; instead of growing conflicts – a time of compromise. By means of this change in perspective, Moretti opens up bourgeois ordinariness, usually hidden by the narratives of great events in political history, but also barely recognizable in studies of repressed elements in Victorian culture. The ordinariness that defines many of our contemporary daydreams about serene abundance in a crystal palace.

[11] F. Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, 156-160.

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Abstract:
The article offers a discussion of Franco Moretti's book *The Bourgeois. Between History and Literature*. Moretti constructs an image of the bourgeoisie based on studies in the domain of prose stylistics of the novel and the history of concepts. By adapting these methods, he manages to steer clear of ideological images of the bourgeoisie as the revolutionary class of the liberal era, and concentrate on ordinary middle class life.

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