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An Experimental History of Literature?

critics:
Franco Moretti *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, Translated by Tomasz Bilczewski and Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik, Krakow 2016.

Graphs, maps, and trees: these three discrete yet interrelated figures are proposed for a history of literature by Franco Moretti, world-renowned comparativist and literary scholar, in the book he published in 2005. It was only last year, however, that the book made its way into the hands of Polish readers in the form of a new translation by Tomasz Bilczewski and Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik. The book is innovative in that it vehemently calls for the integration of a new feature into the scope of literary history. As a kind of academic manifesto, it poses new questions articulately and directs its readers toward new ways of thinking and pursuing research, with a great potential for provoking controversy.

Graphs, maps, trees… these features populate the book with which Moretti officially breaks into the arena of Polish culture and science. This book is the fifth in a series of seven of Moretti's monographs. It is situated somewhere past the halfway mark, as it were, of the Italian scholar's body of work. Yet this publication stands out as the very foundation of the hermeneutic method that Moretti, as a scholar rooted in Marxist critique and working in the English (and German) department(s) at Stanford University in California, has diligently developed over years of work. Through a materialistically conceived history of a literature (in particular of the novel) and by attempting to comparatively grasp in one stroke a whole plurality of languages and cultures, Moretti's preoccupations compelled him to develop the method he calls "distant reading" – a method explicitly intended to push back against the practice of close reading developed on American soil and turn instead to quantitative methods for literary studies, supported by empirical research.

Moretti's book, freshly translated into Polish, grew out of a several year-long project that, through energized attempts and extrapolations, ultimately became *Graphs, maps, and trees…* The book draws from the hermeneutic methods of three distinct academic disciplines – in this order, sociology (and statistics), geography (in particular, geometry) and biology. The Italian-

born scholar attempts to usher these methodologies into the world of literary studies.

In the book's first section on graphs, Moretti adopts tools from the sociology of literature (in particular, statistics) to visually represent a model of the external parameters governing the popularity trajectories of various literary genres (the rise, duration and fall of their popularity) by applying quantitative methods. At first, the scholar focuses on representing trends associated with English-language literature from as early as the seventeenth century and as late as the nineteenth. He ultimately broadens the scope of his research to literary processes rooted in scattered moments in time and corners of the globe (France and Italy, India, Spain, Nigeria, Denmark, Japan) that are nonetheless subject to the same parameters. By this, I refer to the staggered and multifaceted development of the novel as well as the cyclical nature of emerging transformations that, when "read from a distance", reveal the evolution of literature to be paradoxical trajectory that betrays a tendency to maintain continuity within change. Taking examples from English-language prose, Moretti shows how individual subgenres emerge from the depths of history, flourish for an average of twenty-five to thirty years, and then vanish once more into obscurity. Moretti claims that a similarly cyclical dynamic in the history of English literature – although this cycle's intervals are shorter – shapes the alternation between women and men's domination of the publishing market. Moretti rationalises these revealed contingencies somewhat vaguely and cursorily, referencing biological and generational categories and pointing to the "naturalness" of the successive regime changes. These shifts allegedly responded to changes in the political sensibilities of various generations, and gave rise to a need for new and better forms of artistic expression as a tool for describing reality. It is worth noting that one of the foundational theses supporting Moretti's remarks is the Marxian-minded conviction that a form of literary art is always clasped in direct relationship with the ideological and political fabric of society that encompasses it.

This belief also surfaces in the book's second section, which is devoted to maps. Moretti describes the transformations unfolding in a specific genre – village stories. Works discussed include Mary Mitford's *Our Village,* John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* and Bertold Auerbach's *Schwarzwälder Dorfgeschichten*. Moretti lays out the eponymous maps to support his sketch of the parameters governing the world of the rural idyll, and to trace their transformations. Moretti treats the creation of maps as the preparation of a text for further analysis. This consists of reducing the text to specific categories, then abstracting the text and rendering it as a new artifact that amounts to something "more than the sum of [its] parts: [it] will possess 'emerging' qualities, which were not visible at the lower level".[1] In this sense, Moretti, as he himself admits, draws more from geometry than from geography. After all, he is interested in the spatial relations between the objects of his research rather than the representation of space. On this premise, he manages to reveal the cyclical trajectory of the rise of the idyll, within which the village becomes, in a way, the center of the universe. By identifying this feature in all the worlds he analyses, he unveils the dynamic of their transformations: the decentralization and disintegration under the pressure of the intrusive "outside", which entailed progressive industrialisation and the diversion of societal interests towards the cities.

The book's third part uses trees. In form and content, they reference the diagrams introduced by Charles Darwin to represent evolutionary shifts, using characteristic graphics describing morphological changes. In this section, Moretti draws from the premises of nineteenth-century theories of evolution in order to grasp the parameters

[1] Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History,* New York 2005, p. 53.

governing laws of differentiation, selection and the exchange of (literary) genres. Referencing the principles of natural selection as they are culturally understood, based on mutation and adaptation to a (cultural) environment, the scholar attempts to execute his studies on a microscopic scale. Operating on the level of select characteristic features believed to be essential for a given literary genre (the cultural equivalent of the "gene", appearing in the figure of literary "phenotypes"), he attempts to reconstruct a series of divergences to which a given genre is subject, thereby *de facto* generating a hypothesis on the relationship between characteristic features and the environment that together determine the "survival" and success of the (literary) genre. In this section, Moretti focuses on the detective novel. Citing an example from the famous Sherlock Holmes series penned by Arthur Conan Doyle, alongside other detective novels of the period, he attempts to reconstruct the series of innovations (concerning the presence and role of the trace in the novel's structure), that determined the success of the analysed example. Moving backwards (from the branches to the trunk), the analysis takes on the form of the titular tree that successively branches out according to staggered moments of differentiation: dichotomized, inter-genre differences that together produce an image of a given genre's "evolutionary process".

The scholar's methodological vision is bold and incisive. As an aside, we might add that this is not only a theoretical vision, but one verified through practice in his work with students at the Stanford Literary Lab that he founded.[2] In a short and condensed form (excluding the introduction and afterword, the book fills about a hundred pages) *Graphs, Maps, Trees…* resembles a kind of academic manifesto. The American scholar is forthright about his position and the objectives that motivate him:

> […] within that old territory, [literature – B.S.] a new object of study: instead of concrete, individual works, a trio of artificial constructs – graphs, maps, and trees – in which the reality of the text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction. 'Distant reading', I have once called this type of appraoch; where distance is however not an obstacle, but *a specific form of knowledge:* fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models.[3]

Moretti's own notion of "distant reading" runs distinctly counter to the method of "close reading" proposed by deconstructivism. Taking, on the one hand, Russian Formalism and structuralism as its foundation, while referencing cultural tools on the other, the scholar attempts to develop a new model of research that is intended to be – markedly – expansive rather than alternative. "A more rational history of literature. That is the idea", comments Moretti further on in the book. The scholar presents this whole undertaking with a certain dose of nonchalance, as if his argument were petty, light and obvious. Yet in truth, it is quite the opposite.

We might interpret Moretti's rather serious vision for literary studies as a reaction to the current status of literary studies. Although Moretti never states this outright, it is not hard to come away with the impression that he perceives contemporary literary history as hardly rational, mired in scattered readings of individual texts, too incidental and detailed, never seeing the forest for the trees – losing a sense of the whole, which is to say, the whole literature of a given period and the entirety of historical processes grasped along a long timeline. Contemporary literary history, Moretti might argue, disintegrates into deconstructive "close (and treacherous) readings" of canonical works, while a whole host of books waits on the wings to be read. To notice these ignored books, it is not only necessary to

[2] All work developed at the Literary Lab is published in the form of so-called *pamphlets* on its official website: https://litlab.stanford.edu [26 June 2017].

[3] F. Moretti, p. 1.

tear one's eyes away from individual texts, but in fact to bolster one's reading with tools that allow one to transgress the borders of individual, human sight. In this sense, Moretti tries to undermine the contemporary tendencies prevalent in literary studies that are still current in Poland. At the very least they appear in Ryszard Nycz's significantly titled text *Cultural Nature, Weak Professionalism. Some Remarks on the Object of Literary Knowledge and the Status of the Discourse of Literary Studies (Kulturowa natura, słaby profesjonalizm. Kilka uwag o przedmiocie poznania literackiego i statusie dyskursu literaturoznawczego tekście),* published as the introduction to the volume *A Cultural Theory of Literature* (*Kulturowa teoria literatury)*.[4] Generally speaking, although he remains interested in culturally oriented research, Moretti seems to withhold his opinion on weak professionalism and the current status of the discourse of literary studies. Although his observations lack a vengeful tone – and in fact are expressed in a light and welcoming attitude – he does propose a return (or perhaps the recreation from scratch) of a "hard methodology", and by implication, a "hard object" of study. It is rather telling that Moretti opens his book by citing from Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* as a kind of allegation: the quote offers the image of a man seeking the golden center between literature and truth. Stating the issue thus, and in light of his remarks further into the book, we can ascribe to Moretti the stance of the scholar whose seeks to establish truth for the subject of literature. This idea seems as intriguing as it does grueling and ultimately problematic.

Moretti's methodological proposal poses a question that was last asked with similar emphasis over a century ago by Wilhelm Dilthey: the question of the very nature of the object of literary studies; of the method best suited for this research; and speculation (from the point of view of our knowledge today on academic discourse[5]) on the relationship that emerges between method, discourse and the object of knowledge they produce.

In attempting to confront this impasse, he discerns in the literary reflections of his time, Moretti reaches back towards a time before Dilthey's distinction between the natural and human sciences. On a certain level, he interrogates this division and redirects literary history towards scientific method. Referencing statistics, geometry and biology – an approach that Moretti believed would provide the opportunity to break free from hermeneutic individualism and perspectivism towards the scholar's accumulation of raw data, preparing – under ideal conditions – an objective and broad sample of material for analysis and interpretation. In Moretti's opinion, the great benefit of this new method would be the expansion of perspective on the one hand, and on the other, the very capacity to reference that external, empirical element that might usher in the unexpected, inconceivable, and that which surpasses subjective projections – the *demonstrandum* that demands explanation and appears to confront reality itself:

> And problems without a solution are exactly what we need in a field like ours, where we are used to asking only those questions for which we already have an answer.[6]

This would be that elusive "hard object" that might bring us into contact with reality. By that measure, this is something that would authenticate and validate the findings of literary research. This would offer the remedy sought after by so many scholars who feel frustrated and lost about

[4] See. R. Nycz, *Kulturowa natura, słaby profesjonalizm. Kilka uwag o przedmiocie poznania literackiego i statusie dyskursu literaturoznawczego* [in:] *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne problemy i pojęcia.* ed. M.P. Markowski, R. Nycz, Universitas, Kraków 2012.

[5] See also: M. Foucault, *The Order of Discourse.* Inaugural lecture at College de France, December 2 1970. trans. I. McLeod [in:] *Untying the Text: a Poststructuralist Reader*. ed. R. Young, Routledge, Boston, 1981.

[6] F. Moretti, p. 26

the contemporary condition of literary studies – a literary studies that is "suspended in the void", as it were, incapable of unambiguous resolutions or generalizations, ready to stand by mutually exclusive claims, inconclusive, and whose social legitimacy lurks beneath a question mark. The methods proposed by Moretti provide (with one exception I will go into later) a certain purity of vision. The countless operationalisations, reductions and abstractions that underlie "distant reading" yield transparent and evocative forms and models that reveal at one glance "how things really are" in text and in literature. On this basis, we can formulate hypotheses and interpretations that illuminate the actual, objective state of things.

Moretti's vision might well come across as both inspiring and fortifying. It can shame and challenge one to make an effort. This vision is inspiring in so far as it opens up new perspectives for literary studies, and promotes a vision of scholarship that gives us the means to falsify claims. It is therefore located within the order not of interpretation, but of truth. It is shaming in that it reveals the insufficiencies that have plagued literary scholarship to this day (Moretti emphasises that traditional scholarship has in fact limited its focus to approximately 1% of canonical texts and authors, referring to the remaining 99% of all published books only sporadically or not at all, allowing them to instead fade into obscurity). His vision galvanises us to master these new skills and forms of knowledge that enable us to study literature in the spirit of empirical research.

There are undoubtedly disciplines within literary studies that might successfully apply (or already apply) the premises of research from the social sciences, if not from the hard sciences. Yet it is a suspicion all too humanist in nature that might object to scientific certainty with the following doubt: can literary studies in fact allow itself to be reduced to the form that Moretti proposes? One of the main features defining literature as the object of literary studies is that very resistance to reductive thinking, peeking towards "something greater" that might have no place in other social discourses. Of course, literary studies should not be conflated with literature. Even so, I believe it should be possible to tether it close to literature. I find that the great value of literary studies emerges precisely in those moments when the discipline surpasses its own borders, loses the conceptual and methodological "ground beneath its feet" and allows itself to draw its borders from scratch. The special value of literary studies – so distinct from other discourses – might lie in its (self-)critical potential and its capacity to relentlessly question its own methods and earlier parameters. In other words, its ability to remain in constant motion.

It seems that the method Moretti proposes is not in a position to offer such things. Despite the fact that he devotes much of his book to the cyclicality of the processes governing literature (the cyclical trajectories and exchanges of literary genres, the ratios of writing by women and men on the publishing market, the worlds represented in village stories, the cyclical appearance and disappearance of literary forms in dispersed parts of the world), he himself structures his narrative in the spirit of progress. The subsequent sections of the book maintain the literary convention of an investigation, using a form of suspense that recalls the adventure or detective novel (the book, by the way, reads beautifully for this very reason). Moretti guides his reader (rarely detouring her into the backroads) along the path towards a shared resolution of the stated problem, along the way offering the thrill of emotion that accompanies the discovery of the concrete truth of the surrounding world.[7] The "distant reading" mod-

[7] It is worth adding that in spite of his references to scientific method, Moretti does not offer any final conclusions: what is "real" in his book is simply its collection of graphs, maps and trees. Their explications, however, are rather informal and superficial. His explanatory hypotheses are intriguing, but are created ad hoc, as it were. For the most part, they are not ultimately problematised or resolved.

el proposed by Moretti operates on the axis of hypotheses and their falsifications. This can be easily spun into a statistical fiction which, paradoxically, significantly complicates applying this critical gesture to its own categories.

Speaking somewhat metaphorically, statistics – and here I am referring specifically to the book's first section on graphs – do not make it possible to transform the reader/scholar. Statistics might make it possible to redefine terms, but I fear that this does not amount to the same thing, due to the absence of the actual experience of reading. It is worth noting that the very idea of "distant reading" (in theory, for Moretti as a scholar is impressively erudite, seeing all sides of the picture and having much reading under his belt) has little to do with the act of reading as it is traditionally understood. There is no encounter with the book: instead, there is the encounter of the text (understood as a sum of words) with numbers, models, and methods. If reading takes place at all here, it is chiefly in order to create categories and operationalisations that might enable us to delegate further reading to the statistics program. On this basis, it becomes possible to generate graphs and continue the act of reading on a more abstract level. How are these two modes of reading different? They differ in how they place emphasis and allot time to the texts read. "Distant reading" devotes the most time to mapping out the research material and to creating categories and methods for grasping its "essences" (in this approach, citing this concept is not entirely unjustified), while significantly less time is left for interpreting and discussing findings. This is the precise inverse of the classical reading mode, according to which the process of reading and of interpretation run parallel to one another.

The statistical method in fact operates according to three parameters: quantity, intensity, and relation. It allows one to observe deviations from the norm, to falsify claims, and to compare values. It does not, however, allow one to yield much more in interpretation beyond the inferences projected along the way, for it does not provide the freedom described by Nietzsche and many others, of the thinking subject linked to the object of his knowledge: it merely relocates the two. In the case of Moretti's method, the subjective burden of interpretation is displaced to a decidedly less dramatic place than it has within traditional literary studies, and a more convoluted way of categorizing and activating its data.

> The concept of genre is a crucial one for Moretti's book. Although literary genres form the very basis of his observations, their definition remains clearly outlined. It is only in the third section on trees that Moretti makes the following observation:

> Take the concept of genre: usually, literary criticism approaches it in terms of what Ernst Mayr calls 'typological thinking': we choose a 'representative individual', and through it define the genre as a whole […] 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.[8]

The dynamic notion of genre introduced in the section on trees, operating according to the criteria of characteristics and considering definitive shifts in time is a definite gain and interesting proposal, that Moretti manages to develop through his references to the methodologies of Charles Darwin. It is difficult, however, to suppress the impression that the critique of the genre articulated in this citation also refers to the book's first section on trees. It is clear that in using statistical methods, Moretti was not able to rely on the developmental, dynamic definition of the genre grasped in the third section. As Moretti himself has written – "whereas graphs abolish all qualitative difference among their data, trees try to *articulate* that

[8] F. Moretti, p. 76.

difference".[9] The question thus arises: how does Moretti define genres in the first section and build their taxonomy in such a way as to retain his findings in the form of graphs? Literary works rarely identify their own genres, and when they do, it is not necessarily a judgment in which we can blindly trust. Genre categories tend to emerge *ex post facto,* and while they can be said to be an indispensable element of literary production, they are not literature's object, but rather the object of the knowledge of literary history. It is precisely here that the question of operationalisation arises. By this I refer to the question of how and by which criteria we define data in such a way that we can use it as the foundation for a statistical program and its results, and render them as visualisations in the form of graphs. Moretti's own lack of an unambiguous position on this issue, along with the extensive bibliography that follows the book's first section ("Note on the Taxonomy of Forms") seem to suggest that the scholar classifies individual genres according to the formal and chronological definitions proposed by the authors of the articles and books he uses as his sources. To some extent, this is a relatable choice – the great volume of material that Moretti chose to include in his research demands the support of an expert's guidelines, but at the same time, they significantly impact the results. This state of affairs thus begs the question: is the regularity of the results produced by the research at Stanford truly the consistency demonstrated by literary texts? Is it not the derivative of a consistency and monolithic quality constructed on the very premises that the scholar critiques in the excerpt quoted above, invoking Mayr? And if so, then can we actually claim that we know anything more of that 99% of unread books? Or do we only continue – though this time, we cover our tracks – the extrapolation of our knowledge of canonical works taken as prototypes for defining genres, thus creating the very basis for the operationalisations and models proposed by Moretti?

[9] Ibid, p. 77

Of course, my remarks might be unfounded, and it might well turn out that Moretti, as a seasoned scholar, has exhaustively thought through this issue of the fortuitous operationalisation that allows him to evade a simple repetition of categories developed by other scholars,[10] although he has given us no grounds on which to confirm this. By referencing statistical methods, he has neglected the elementary premises of hermeneutic process. When reading Moretti's book – or specifically, its first section– we never learn how many or what kind of books were used for analysis, or how their data was harvested to form the basis for defining categories, and by which criteria these categories persist, and finally, what method was used for conducting research and with what level of significance this research proceeded. The reader is deprived of all this information, and as a result, from the point of view of the empirical sciences, Moretti's references, his work, as it appears in the book, resembles popular science – impossible to verify and reconstruct. Of course, this cognitive form is relatable, to an extent. Moretti's book stands at the very fore of this kind of research, and for this reason, in order to garner interest and to make his work approachable, he must have had to simplify it a great deal. Moretti himself seems to describe the results included in the book as a mere springboard towards true further research. This does not change the fact that between his strong claims and his actual actions, a wide margin appears.

The marriage to scientism that Moretti boldly proposes seems intriguing for yet another reason. Through his appeal to science, Moretti confidently offers a remedy to one of the most critical infirmities plaguing literary studies:

[10] This is an exceptionally difficult statement. Firstly, because an adequate genre classification of books that one has never read seems to be particularly strenuous, but secondly, because the very phenomenon of the literary genre – as Moretti himself as shown – has multiple meanings and is internally heterogeneous and always changing – and as such, it is difficult to submit this concept to a classification system that might satisfy the requirements of its disjointedness and competency.

> […] the study of national bibliographies made me realize what a minimal fraction of the literary field we all work on: a canon of two hundred novels, for instance, sounds very large for nineteenth-century Britain (and *is* much larger than the current one), but is still less than one per cent of the novels that were actually published: twenty thousand, thirty, more, no one really knows – and close reading won't help here, a novel a day every day of the year would take a century or so … And it's not even a matter of time, but of method: a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it *isn't* a sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole […].[11]

Moretti invokes the demon of the whole, on the one hand, in order to use him as a threat, and on the other, to promise to grasp him under his thumb. This argument might wield a certain influence, for it simultaneously invokes the anxiety and desire experienced by all literary historians. While the phantasm of the whole has remained dormant for some time thanks to deconstructivism that preferred in its place the poetic fragment or the text not yet fully grasped.[12] By citing the empirical sciences, he invokes the spirit of that exiled ideal – comprehensive, full reading – although he brings it to a new level. He proposes a paradoxical formula: the total reading of all existing works, made possible by the fact that, at the end of the day, not one of these works is actually read. This proposition offers the chance to realize the fantasy of comprehensive reading, while offering freedom from that ravenous, haunting ideal. For it promises total certainty. How many literary historians struggle everyday with a constant feeling that they have not yet read enough, a discomfort spawned by literature not yet mastered. In this case, the idea of the whole coincides with identification as an expert, and bores its way out from within. If we define the expert of nineteenth-century literary history as the person who "knows everything on this subject", we also imply that this person has "read everything on this subject", and here we run into our pain point. While this state of things seems to have always existed, in so far as the expert was not defined by the number of texts, but by their accessibility – today, in the age of the internet and of omnipresent information, the awareness of this problem has become particularly rankling. As a remedy, we attempt – just as Moretti proposes – to delegate this work to programs and machines, tools that make it possible to step beyond the limitations of the human condition and to lean out towards the idyll of the whole. Since the use of supercomputers offers the promise of grasping the whole cosmic universe in one glance, why should it not grasp the whole universe of reading? This, however, leads to our next paradox, one tightly bound to the previous one: in order to clear the scholar's conscience, we delegate reading to machines that free us from the obligation of reading. As a result, in lieu of reading more, we read less and less.

Yet the elementary question remains: does "distant reading" in fact offer a comprehensive gaze? And the question immediately follows: what would actually constitute this comprehensive gaze? Scanning all literary texts on earth? Then what do we do with all the unpublished texts, hidden away in the drawers of writers waiting for better times? Or those texts lacking dates or titles, will these also be "read" or will they be discarded as an unclassified "miscellaneous"? Finally, how do we define literature and what texts does it include? Without doubt, literature does not only consist of literary texts, but of their social functions, their reception history and criticism, their popularity in the canon and their evaluation. These parameters turn out to

[11] F. Moretti, p. 3-4.

[12] Pierre Bayard's book (despite its ironic, quipping tone) *How to Talk About Books You've Never Read,* speaks to the very contemporary nature of this problem. The book responds to this state of affairs and becomes a *de facto* guidebook, counseling its reader on how to manage the frustration (and shame) brought on by this unconditional ideal of the whole.

be blurred and difficult to grasp. And even if we managed to grasp them, would this "whole" really be so reliable? By what criteria can we sort these wholes in order to make use of them? Do we not simply convert the flood of letters into a vertiginous data dump?

The idea of a literary system, referencing Even-Zohara's notion of literary polysystems, has, according to Moretti, is more ideal and aspirational than actually attainable. The widening of perspective and attempt at "distant reading" – studying the contingencies that arise out of literature and literary texts is surely a wise idea worthy of our attention. Applying statistical methods to expand the scope and increase the probability of certain basic judgments about literature seems to be of great value. The true benefits of this notion, however, will be clear only when we take into account an awareness of our own cognitive and human limitations, associated directly with the limitations and insufficiencies of the methods we use. Empirical methods are also tethered to these limitations, and in this way, they too have no right to lay claim to a comprehensive gaze. I would therefore suggest that when Moretti speaks of comprehensive understanding, he is not referring to totalizing explanations that the method he promotes does not, in the end, facilitate. He is referring, rather, to the ability to grasp phenomena from many perspectives, understood in their broadest possible complexity.

This is when Moretti's remarks become the most intriguing. Leaving open the question of the Stanford scholar's methodological basis, we open up a space in which we can treat the sciences cited in his book as the source of discourses that the literary discourse uses in his work. In this sense, the discourses of the natural and mathematical sciences provide us with a whole host of metaphors, as well as new ways to think about, conceptualise, and represent data that might inspire the literary scholar. This would be a paradoxical intervention on the "hardening" of the humanities, to draw out instead the consequences of academic languages submergence in discourse (and the resultant *de facto* surpassing of Dilthey's binary sketched above). This seems to be precisely what Moretti is doing. With his tone of nonchalance, along with a bit of boldness, he strives not so much for the premises and methods of the natural sciences, as for their special manners of speech and tools for describing and representing phenomena and – most importantly– visualizing them. In this sense, Moretti's book resembles a kind of thought experiment. At times – I must confess – a successful one. There remains no doubt that referencing statistics and biological morphology's methods of depiction has provided a catalyst for conceiving anew some literary phenomena, from fresh perspectives that lead to new and compelling conclusions. Although many of Moretti's premises and concepts lack a firm foundation (such as we might expect of strict scientific methods), it nonetheless seems that they are most of all intended to inspire thought and foster creativity, to pose new questions and develop new concepts. Referencing the image of morphological trees, and to a certain extent graphs and charts as well, leads to the integration and functionalization of a great wealth of genre distinctions. By this measure, it provokes us to recognize the homogeneity of the concepts available to literary studies, both from a synchronic perspective (as we cover so many different literary genres by speaking of "novels" and "poetry"), and diachronic perspective (specifically in reference to the awareness of genres' internal variations and transformations throughout time; the interrelations between genres – their moments of convergence and divergence. Transplanting evolutionary theory into the territory of the humanities does not seem entirely possible – as Alberto Piazza remarks in the afterword to Moretti's book – but the idea in and of itself, and moreover, the attempt to apply it in life, seems somewhat cra-

zy, but certainly intriguing and inspiring. It leads to an expansion into new questions and new approaches, enabling retrospective research of the latent "purposes" of genre transformations. It allows us to reach direct conclusions, as it were, about the cultural "environment", in which certain literary genres flourished. It thus offers a new narrative and new set of visual forms for the phenomena associated with literary history.

Moretti's appeal to objectivism and to a sense of rationality remains an unrealized postulate, which seems to be to the book's benefit. I believe this is because the discourse on literature suffers from an excess of rationalism and scientific ambitions, rather than their lack. It is also because Moretti's postulate opens up the discursive and visual potential of the natural sciences. Borrowing from this aspect of the hard sciences helps us reach more creative and refreshing insights for literary history. However much a method influences its object, so do experimental methods of research allow us to distill new and unexplored vistas.

The main benefit of Moretti's book is its capacity to embolden and inspire literary scholars. The book demonstrates how much we still have to accomplish in the field of literary history, encourages us to seek out new methods, and by this measure, inspires us to renew the very discipline. What's more, the book invites its readers into a laboratory of literary history – during individual research as well as meetings with students. Moretti shows us that not only can literature itself be experimental, but it can invite us to experiment ourselves: the expansion and cultivation of the methodological and cognitive joy of the procedure. Within the humanities, the ambitions of Moretti's method must be taken with a drop of irony as one of many possible discourses on literature. This should not, however, drive one to frustration or grief – to the contrary, it should be accepted as an incentive to explore and plunder the possibilities yielded in the encounter between (academic) culture and literature; the search for a way to creatively apply the premises and tools of other disciplines to our discussion of literature. How "scientific" this is can be measured not so much by objective, external criteria, as by the level of engagement, creativity, ingenuity and thought-provoking academic rigor, as well as the readiness to share one's ideas with others. One cannot deny these aspects of Moretti and his book.

When we speak of the translators' work, however, their task was not easy. Moretti's language oscillates between the gentleness and simplicity of spontaneous speech, on the one hand, and abstraction and specialized jargon, on the other. The scholar's tone betrays a palpable distance towards his owns statements, a tendency to joke and to construct long, complex statements resembling casual speech, in which the subsequent motifs are tied fluidly together. On this point the translators have acquitted themselves rather well. In Polish, Moretti's style becomes more verbose, its statements becoming more formal and precise. It seems that the translators came to an agreement that Polish scholarly discourse is not yet ready for this idiosyncratic marriage of casual, colloquial speech with the academic treatise. As a result, Moretti seems somewhat restrained in Polish, although he still reads as a scholar with a specific, idiosyncratic diction. A certain challenge in translating *Graphs, Maps, Trees…* is also posed by the matter of translating specialist terms (not only from the hard sciences, but from the humanities, as well), that Moretti uses amply in his writing. I am referring, for example, to the genre distinctions of English literature. Figure 9, representing British genres of the novel between 1740 and 1900, makes a strong impression. The translators decided to translate the genre distinctions introduced by Moretti (keeping their original names in parentheses), thus building a rather handy dictionary of English literary genres of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that must have required

enormous effort, thought, and searching. It is not just any task of translation that is so bound to the work of localization and the translation of nuanced citations from world literature that the author often tacks onto the graphs, maps and trees of the book's title.

Aside from the countless stylistic trappings that turn clear sentences from the original into ones that, in translation, demand thorough reflection, the translation does not provoke any real reservations. I am unsettled, however, by the fact that the translators seem to have fallen into a trap to which they should have been sensitive, considering their work in translation studies. In the second section of *Graphs, Maps, Trees…*, where we read about the transformations of the British village, as described in John Galt's *Annals of the Parish,* we find the Polish-language text to feature such fragments as:

> Nowa rzeczywistość przestrzenna wbiła się mocno jak klin pomiędzy Dom a Świat, podporządkowując zarówno jeden jak i drugi element narodowemu rynkowi, w którego obrębie średni dystans pokonuje co tydzień, jeśli nie codziennie, za sprawą regularnych nowinek – książek, gazet, kwestii politycznych, a wszystko to w liczbie mnogiej – zjawiska te będą się mnożyć przez całe przemysłowe XIX stulecie. Z dawnej epoki cudów przeżyły tylko żółwie.[13]

In English, the excerpt reads:

> Between Home and the World, a new spatial reality has wedged itself, subordinating them both: the national market, whose intermediate distance is traversed every week, if not day, by those *regular novelties* - books, newspapers , politics: all plurals - which will keep multiplying throughout the industrial nineteenth century. From the Age of Wonders only a turtle survives. [14]

[13] F. Moretti, *Wykresy, mapy, drzewa. Abstrakcyjne modele na potrzeby historii literatury* przeł. T, Bilczewski i A. Kowalcze-Pawlik, WUJ, Kraków p. 59.

[14] F. Moretti, p. 49.

The translators handle many obstacles lurking within the text with grace, demonstrating their translators' toolkit. Naturally, problems do arise when, in translation, it is not clear that the new "spatial reality" that wedges itself between home and the world, subordinating both, is in fact the national market, as the original text clearly expresses. The "regular novelties" are not "phenomena" (*zjawiska*), but in fact, specific products, media and mediations that become widespread in the nineteenth century and wipe out everything but… turtles, of course? The presence of this slow, digressive animal provides a rather surprising coda to the subsection V in the section on maps, which addresses the end of the rural era and the dawn of industrialism. The motif of the tortoise appears two more times in the book: once within the text, and once within the description for Figure 20. I cannot say this with total confidence, but my guess is that the translators fell prey in this case to that same error that Stanisław Barańczak describes in *A Small but Maximalist Translation Manifesto (Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny manifest translatologiczny…):*

> In one excerpt of the seventeenth-century poet Richard Crashaw, he [Jerzy Sito – B.S.] mistakenly understood the English word "turtle" according to its basic contemporary sense of a "turtle" ("*żółwia*"), which gave him a springboard to paint the picture of a pair of lovers intwined together "like sweet little turtles wound into a ball" – a picture that moreover seems improbable to common sense speculations on the forms of intimacy technically available to that carpaced reptile of the Chelonia genus: this might well be a testament to the bravura of Crashaw's baroque imagination, if not for the fact that in the seventeenth century, the word turtle indicated the all-too-conventional "turtle dove".[15]

[15] S. Barańczak, *Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny manifest translatologiczny albo: Tłumaczenie się z tego, że tłumaczy się wiersze również w celu wytłumaczenia innym tłumaczom, iż dla większości tłumaczeń wierszy nie ma wytłumaczenia,* "Teksty drugie" 1990, issue 3, p. 46.

The turtle dove as a basic method for transferring information across long distances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seems a more compatible fit for Moretti's paragraph than a turtle. I offer this information mostly as a curiosity (albeit a meaningful one) rather than an accusation. Although Moretti's book is quite short, it references books and circumstances of distant epochs and places in an offhand but often cryptic manner. It is difficult, in these circumstances, to expect absolute knowledge on the part of the translator of all linguistic nuances and contexts associated with the original text. If we expect anything at all in such straits, it is that Tomasz Bilczewski, one of Poland's foremost translation theorists and comparativists, might recognize the fragment cited from Barańczak. This seems rather clear. And if he is in fact familiar with this text, then we can assume that this turtle that closes the paragraph should evoke some puzzlement or wonder in the translators, which ought to bring to mind the very problem Barańczak describes. If things proceeded otherwise, this might mean that the turtle did not catch the translators' attention in any special way and failed to prompt further discussion. This, in fact, is a problematic symptom, for it might hint towards a certain mechanical quality (perhaps done too fast?) of the work, that dulled their sensitivities, and a waning of the translators' interest. This impression is confirmed elsewhere in the text whenever Moretti's statements lose their signature, casual panache and in Polish, read as sanitised and obedient to academic discourse. Perhaps Moretti's dictions in the original and in translation could be approximated more boldly if the translators did not only understand what Moretti was trying to say on the level of semantics (in spite of Moretti's deceivingly simple agenda – or perhaps precisely because of it – this was an extraordinarily difficult task that the translators survive quite in tact), but attempted to grasp – even intuitively – the senses that emerge on the level of the pragmatics of expression, which for this author, seem particularly significant and quintessential …

This book, brought to Polish readers in 2016 by Bilczewski and Kowalcze-Pawlik within a series by the publishing house Hermenia, is an important and fascinating publication. It offers a clear proposition for how we might think about literature, and fantastically fills in a gap in Polish literary discourse. With *Graphs, Maps, Trees,* the translators, on Moretti's behalf, renew the question of our picture of literary status and its current status (the question of its object and method), begging us to once more think through its premises and submit them to critique. In the end, Moretti's proposal is also an invitation to experiment with literature, and with the study of literature: to air out the cupboards of literary historians and step beyond them into a laboratory pulsing with life and creativity.

KEYWORDS

literary studies

GRAPH

interdisciplinarity

Abstract:
This critical essay is devoted to Franco Moratti's book Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History, whose Polish translation came out in 2016. Its critical focus rests mainly on the first figure of the triad proposed in the title, and assesses the Stanford comparativist's strategy for carrying over methodologies from the empirical sciences to the study of literature. The essay's commentary provides an opportunity to interrogate contemporary links between the humanities and the hard sciences. These reflections ultimately prompt us to question this division and, following in Moretti's footsteps, help us unearth new approaches to literary studies that take their cue from the discursive practices of the hard sciences. This essay does not take as its point of reference the experimental approach that Moretti proposes, but instead an approach of creative experimentation - provoking an attitude of openness and the impulse to cultivate new, counter-intuitive methods for revisiting classical philological concepts.

statistics

MAP

tree

Note on the Author:
Borys Szumański (1990) is a doctoral student at the Department of Polish Philology and Classics at UAM. He is currently writing his doctoral thesis, titled "Translation Discourse in the Light of Psychoanalytic Theory". His main interests include the theory of translation, representation, and psychoanalysis. He has studied the work of Edward Stachura and Rafał Wojaczek and postwar Polish prose. He occasionally works on language theory and the poetics of songs.