

Franco MORETTI. *Falso movimento. La svolta quantitativa nello studio della letteratura*, [“False movement. The quantitative turn in literary studies”], Ebook ed., nottetempo, 2022, ISBN 978-88-7452-952-0.

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Had one followed the development of Anglo-American literary studies over the last couple of decades, they might have justifiably anticipated a different reception for Franco Moretti’s 2022 *Falso movimento. La svolta quantitativa nello studio della letteratura* [“False movement. The quantitative turn in literary studies”]. One of the most prominent (and controversial) figures of the field returning to previous work with such acquiescence was to be a significant editorial event, surely, despite the volume being published in Italian. More than a year later, however, Moretti’s latest monograph is yet to be translated in English, even though the German version has already been released (*Falsche Bewegung. Die Digitale Wende in Den Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Konstanz University Press, 2022). The belatedness of the translation is worth mentioning insofar as several of its reasons can be inferred from the volume itself. In Moretti’s characteristically agile and non-assuming writing, *Falso movimento* reads as “un bilancio del cammino percorso” [“a report on the path travelled so far”] – an account of what distant reading came to be, in view of what its most vocal proponent had hoped it would become. Its tone is decidedly circumspect, if not entirely dismayed; in the author’s words, however, “[n]on si tratta di avere nostalgia, e men che meno di recriminare. Si tratta di capire” [“It’s not about being nostalgic, and even less about incriminating anyone. It’s about understanding.”].

The volume comprises two theoretical chapters (the opening and the closing one), which frame three distinct case studies (or, rather, thematically specific analyses), approaching historical anomaly, cultural morphology, and the protocols of data visualization, respectively. It opens with “La strada per Roma. Ermeneutica e quantificazione” [“The way to Rome. Hermeneutics and quantification”], a broad

theoretical section in which Moretti attempts to trace the relationship between the hermeneutic and the quantitative, establishing a polarizing stance, which traverses the entirety of the volume:

Che rapporto c'è, tra le categorie della quantificazione e quelle dell'ermeneutica? Lo stesso: le prime esaminano le frequenze e le medie della letteratura; le seconde, i suoi aspetti normativi. Normativi, nel senso che aveva in mente Panofsky quando definì l'arte 'uno scontro realizzante e oggettivante, mirante a risultati definitivi, di una forza plasmante e di un materiale che va plasmato'." [What is the relationship between the categories of quantification and those of hermeneutics? The same: the first examine the frequencies and the averages of literature; the latter, its normative aspects. Normative, in the sense Panofsky had in mind when defining art as 'a realizing and objectifying confrontation, aiming at definitive results, between a shaping force and a material to be shaped'"]. (Moretti, "La strada per Roma")

That hermeneutics and quantitative analysis fail to properly overlap within critical labor is one of Moretti's main grievances, robustly informed by how inherently incompatible he perceives them to be. While interpretation undoes the work of form (in Panofsky's sense), reestablishing the connection between work and world by reluctantly unearthing how the first transforms the latter, the quantitative approach is ill-equipped for this (comparatively) minute task. Albeit singularly able to process and showcase the logic of ample series of seemingly unrelated elements, the disciplinary employment of quantitative analysis has regrettably forgone a rigorous reevaluation of its operative categories. Thus, what Moretti most blatantly grieves is the concept of form or, rather, its lack of conceptual revisions in the wake of the quantitative turn:

Ora, "forma" non è un concetto tra i tanti: è ciò che caratterizza la sfera estetica in quanto lavoro, produzione, intervento sulla realtà. Si perde la forma, si perde la dimensione sociale della letteratura, e la si riduce a uno scialbo riflesso. Il che è appunto quel che è successo con l'avvento di tecniche come il text mining, il topic modeling, la content analysis, la sentiment analysis e via dicendo: tutti strumenti di lavoro che, invece di sfidare le categorie formali, le hanno semplicemente dimenticate. E le forme, si sono dimenticate di noi. ["Now, 'form' is not a concept among others: it is that which characterises the aesthetic sphere as work, production, intervention upon reality. The form is lost, the social dimension of literature is lost, and it is reduced to a dim reflection.

Which is exactly what happened with the advent of techniques such as text mining, topic modelling, content analysis, sentiment analysis and so on: all work tools which, instead of challenging formal categories, have simply forgotten about them. And the forms, they have forgotten about us.”] (“Prefazione”)

The canons engendered by the interpretative tradition invariably center the text, a banal premise of the hermeneutical process which is entirely elided when moving into the territory of quantitative analysis. There, the individual text becomes a mere “puntino” [“small dot”] in a vast landscape of texts that *type thinking* of the interpretative manner cannot (and is not ever interested to approach. It is the mutual exclusivity of hermeneutical and data-driven approaches that resides at the core of Moretti’s discontent and self-denounced nostalgia:

Avrei dovuto saperlo. [...] Sono impulsi antitetici. Dioniso, Apollo. Si pensi a come lavorano sulla forma. L’interpretazione si muove tra la forma e il mondo, andando in cerca del significato storico delle opere; la quantificazione si muove tra forma e forma, tentando di tracciare le coordinate di un futuro atlante della letteratura. [...] Grandi passioni, entrambe. Ma troppo esclusive per lavorare assieme. Possono senz’altro – lo ripeto – lavorare l’una accanto all’altra, offrendosi a vicenda dei nuovi oggetti di lavoro, o innescando delle nuove domande. Ma non possono davvero collaborare. Notte e giorno: questo comincia, quella svanisce. Non smetteranno mai di inseguirsi, e non saranno mai una cosa sola. [“I should have known. [...] They are antithetical impulses. Dionysus. Apollo. Think about how they work with form. Interpretation moves between form and the world, looking to find the historical significance of the works; quantification moves between form and form, attempting to trace the coordinates of a future atlas of literature. [...] Grand passions, both. But too exclusive to work together. Certainly, they can work alongside each other, offering each other new objects of work, or triggering new questions. But they cannot truly work together. Night and day: when one begins, the other vanishes. They will never cease chasing each other, and they will never be one.”] (“La strada per Roma”)

Building on this incessant epistemological tension, the following chapter, “Eccezioni, norme, casi limite, Carlo Ginzburg” [“Exceptions, norms, extreme cases, Carlo Ginzburg”], brings in the reputed Italian historian as Moretti’s central interlocutor, since few approaches to cultural history are more significantly opposed to his than

Ginzburg's "passione per l'anomalia" ["passion for anomaly"]. His 1976 *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* is a testament to this belief that "un caso limite" ["an extreme case"] can prove representative for the historical context the limits of which it showcases; his example is the 16th-century Italian heretic Menocchio, whose life is metaphorically read as a telling anomaly, a sort of cultural fissure in the hegemonic historical narrative. What Moretti argues is that, less than an extreme case of an otherwise intelligible historical norm, Menocchio's biography represents an anomaly in the strictest sense of the term, an example so extraneous to the acknowledged historical logic that it challenges it, showcasing its shortcomings. Admitting the necessity of anomaly to the process of knowledge production, Moretti laments the inherent impossibility of conceiving historical anomaly from within quantitative cultural analysis. Thus arises a form of epistemological dissonance which is productive only insofar as it is acknowledged:

"Oggi giorno, abbiamo un'infinità di lavori che combinano metodologie e campi di indagine diversi; da quell'azzardata stranezza che era, l'interdisciplinarietà è divenuta ormai il mantra dei burocrati della cultura. È dunque tempo di cambiare rotta. Capire perché certi metodi restino caparbiamente irriducibili gli uni agli altri ci dirà molto più di mille conciliazioni forzate." ["Nowadays, we have an infinity of types of labour that combine diverse methodologies and research fields; from the daring peculiarity that it was, interdisciplinarity has become the mantra of cultural bureaucrats. Understanding why certain methods remain stubbornly irreducible to one another will tell us much more than a thousand forced conciliations will."] ("Eccezioni")

"Simulazioni, forme, storia" ["Simulations, forms, history"], the following chapter, further illustrates this irreducible tension by looking into Moretti's experiments with constructing dramatic networks for some of European literature's most canonical plays – Aeschylus' *The Persians*, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, Sophocles' *Oedipus King*. What is attempted here is not the exhaustive (and functional) reconstruction of the dramatic texts as networks, in the reductive sense one might anticipate when envisioning such a project ("La distanza tra concetto e realtà – la distanza variabile tra concetto singolo e realtà plurali – è inevitabile; non bisogna cercare di abolirla, ma di liberarne il potenziale esplicativo. ["The distance between

concept and reality – the variable distance between singular concept and plural reality – is inevitable; there is no need to try and abolish it, but rather to free its explanatory potential.”]). Rather, the emphasis is placed on what the model manages to misrepresent or altogether fails to formalise. Albeit starting from such operative premises, the project proves faulty in its aspiration to morphologically depict the history of the dramatic text, much like Darwin does when illustrating natural selection in *On the Origin of Species*. Epistemologically neutral as it might seem, such an aim inherently implies the pre-eminence of morphology over history, of form over reality: “aveva completamente subordinato la storia alla morfologia. [...] L’immaginazione morfologica era tutto; la realtà storica, nulla” [“it had completely subordinated history to morphology. [...] The morphological imagination was everything; the historical reality was nothing.”] (“Simulazioni”).

The potentially problematic relationship between morphology and the socio-historical reality it attempts to formally represent is further described in the third chapter, “Vedere e non vedere. Sulla visualizzazione dei dati nelle discipline umanistiche” [“Seeing and not seeing. On the visualization of data in the humanities”]. Co-authored with Oleg Sobchuk, this section targets a component of critical practice that digital humanities are heavily (and singularly, among the humanities) reliant on – data visualization. Much like the previous chapters, it is rooted in deep scepticism, aiming to showcase how unreliable the usage of figures might turn out to be in historical analysis. To unite morphology, which is primarily concerned with taxonomy and correlation, and history, which is explicitly dependent on narrative continuity, once again implies an epistemological tension that is yet unresolved, as the authors exemplify within several recent digital humanities papers. They reach a biting conclusion:

La “forma” della storia pone degli interrogativi che vanno al di là delle spiegazioni di questo o quel risultato: degli interrogativi teorici. “Ancor più degli strumenti di laboratorio”, scrisse Thomas Kuhn più di mezzo secolo fa, “le teorie sono gli attrezzi essenziali del mestiere di scienziato”; se solo gli avessimo dato retta! Anche se, per fortuna, le forme più volgari di anti-intellettualismo – i proclami della rivista Wired: “la correlazione basta e avanza”; “il metodo scientifico è obsoleto” – sono ormai scomparse, con l’avvento dei dati quantitativi le spiegazioni “forti” si sono fatte sempre più rare, sopraffatte da un’ondata di dilazioni, false modestie, ragionamenti ad hoc, e via

svicolando. Abituati come siamo a vedere i dati empirici e le spiegazioni teoriche come le due facce della stessa medaglia, la cosa può sembrare assurda. Purtroppo, è la realtà delle digital humanities. [The ‘form’ of history poses questions that go beyond the explanations of this or that result: theoretical questions. ‘Even more than laboratory instruments’, wrote Thomas Kuhn more than half a century ago, ‘theories are the essential tools of the scientist’s trade’]; if only we had listened to him! Even though, fortunately, the more vulgar forms of anti-intellectualism– the proclamations of Wired magazine: ‘correlation is more than enough’; ‘the scientific method is obsolete’ – have now disappeared, with the advent of quantitative data the “strong” explanations have become rarer, overwhelmed by a wave of delays, false modesty, ad hoc reasoning, and so on. Accustomed as we are to see empirical data and theoretical explanations as the two faces of the same coin, this may seem absurd. Unfortunately, it is the reality of digital humanities.”] (“Vedere”)

The title of the final chapter swiftly sums it up: “Il quantitative come promessa e come problema” [“The quantitative as promise and as problem”]; the section expands upon an idea that had been blatantly stated in the introduction: “Da ipotesi che era, lo studio quantitativo della letteratura era divenuto realtà. Ma i modelli astratti erano scomparsi, e la storia della letteratura non era cambiata granché. [“From the hypothesis that it was, the quantitative study of literature became reality. But the abstract models had vanished, and the history of literature hasn’t changed all that much.”] (Prefazione). The very conclusion of the volume registers this disenchantment with what was once expected to be a disciplinary revolution of incomparable consequence; in part, this failure is attributed to a general reluctance to significantly engage “la grande cultura estetica e scientifica del Novecento” [“the great aesthetic and scientific culture of the twentieth century”] (“Il quantitative”), and the turn towards the far narrower perimeter of recent American critique. In his characteristically stern style, Moretti does, however, provide a broader diagnostic:

Forse, è che eravamo tutti completamente impreparati all’avvento delle nuove tecnologie di ricerca. Impreparati nel profondo, non perché non ne sapevamo di statistica. La statistica si studia e si impara; il difficile è esser capaci di quella immaginazione scientifica che conferisce alle scienze naturali la loro straordinaria audacia intellettuale. Le avessimo noi, delle teorie così belle... Le avremo, un giorno? [“Perhaps, it is that we

were all completely unprepared for the advent of new research technologies. Profoundly unprepared, not because we were not aware of statistics. Statistics can be studied and learned; the difficult part is being capable of that scientific imagination which offers the natural sciences their extraordinary intellectual audacity. If only we had such beautiful theories... Will we have them, one day?"] (“Il quantitative”)

It is rather difficult, in the wake of such a conclusion, to argue that Moretti’s volume does not indulge in nostalgia; I would argue that it does. Not only does it read as nostalgic towards a project which it judges as incompletely (and sometimes wrongly) implemented, but also towards the explanatory totality of hard sciences, which seems to remain Moretti’s most resilient and quixotic aspiration. It is against this quixotism, I would argue, that the “false movement” can be so starkly registered. As the preface anticipates, explaining the title’s reference to Wim Wenders’ 1975 *Falsche Bewegung*:

Non c’è dubbio, un movimento c’è stato: da un capo all’altro della Germania, addirittura. Ma è vero anche l’aggettivo, e la dissonanza che esso comporta. Nelle parole di Wilhelm, su cui il film finisce: ‘Avevo l’impressione di aver mancato qualcosa, e di continuare a mancare qualcosa, a ogni nuovo movimento’. [“There is no doubt, a movement did happen: from one side of Germany to the other, no less. But the adjective is also true, through the dissonance it implies. In Wilhelm’s words, with which the film ends: ‘I had the impression that I’d missed something, and that I continued to miss something, with each new movement’”.] (Prefazione)