



---

Planetary Literary History: The Place of the Text

Author(s): Frances Ferguson

Source: *New Literary History*, Summer, 2008, Vol. 39, No. 3, Literary History in the Global Age (Summer, 2008), pp. 657-684

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20533107>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *New Literary History*

# Planetary Literary History: The Place of the Text

Frances Ferguson

**F**RANCO MORETTI HAS RECENTLY DRAMATIZED the difficult relation between literary history and reading at the present moment, in the process renewing all of our justified anxieties about exactly what we can say about “literature.” Although Goethe called for the advent of “the age of world literature” in 1827 and Marx and Engels saw a world literature arising “from the many national and local literatures” in 1848, an ever-growing awareness of planetary interconnections in political, economic, and ethical life has lent urgency to the project of thinking in terms of a planetary system of literature.<sup>1</sup> To register the enormity of this task for the readers who would be its foot soldiers, Moretti observes, “we are talking of hundreds of languages and literatures here. Reading ‘more’ seems hardly to be the solution. Especially because we’ve just started rediscovering what Margaret Cohen calls the ‘great unread.’”<sup>2</sup> So much to read, so little time. Moretti thus holds out before us a project whose immensity impresses us with the comparative triviality of our own individual efforts. A task that might be characterized as Herculean and sublime, genuinely planetary literary history would disrupt the understanding of reading-as-self-cultivation or reading-as-the-mastery-of-national-literatures (packaged in the relatively manageable form of canons). It would look completely unlike the noble calling that Matthew Arnold took reading to be when he urged readers to judge so intensely and repeatedly that they might overcome their chauvinisms and parochialisms, might advance a justification of a national literary academy on the model of the French Academy.

For Moretti, even a lifetime of reading cannot come to terms with a project of such scale. The very perception of planetary literature as a whole that dwarfs individual capacities marks it as sublime and suggests the next stage in his argument—the shift into another mode. Moretti describes what would be a “subreption” in Kant’s terms—a consciousness of our own capacity to think such overwhelming of our individual empirical capacities. In Moretti’s terms, however, this shift from unmanageable and intolerable overabundance to a new and manageable phase occurs less as an account of consciousness than as a methodological response—an

opening on social scientific method and its ways of assembling a heuristically unified field from which comparative values can be deduced.

In the discussion that follows, I first try to identify aspects of the tension between writing literary history and reading individual texts as that tension has perennially emerged. Moreover, because I see the writing of literary history and the reading of individual texts as projects that strain against one another—and that have done so at least since the expansion of literary critical and historical discourse in the eighteenth century—I second Moretti's view that close reading does not forward the aims of literary history. I then turn to the claims that Pascale Casanova and Moretti make for the usefulness of sociological formalism in developing an account of literature in a planetary system, and endorse their sense of its importance in capturing something broader even than circulation figures or reception history—namely, social regard for literature, on the one hand, and the unevenness of its distribution, on the other. Finally, rather than just endorsing Casanova's repudiation of an atomizing process of reading individual texts and Moretti's suggestion that we look to units larger than the text (such as genres) and smaller than the text (such as free indirect style), I consider how distant knowledges—properly linked with sociological awareness rather than with the intense direct engagement with a text represented by close reading—might contribute to our understanding of texts considered as units in themselves.

\* \* \*

It is perhaps ironic that, in the wake of what was sometimes called the "linguistic turn" in literary studies, and one that we might have thought that we were done with, language would have recently emerged as a crucially complex problem for the writing of literature, literary criticism, and literary history. We know that literature is a selection of language, so we've always recognized that language, as they say, "had to be taken into account." But our descriptions of how such consideration of the role of language might work have radically changed in recent years. In this discussion, I will examine the challenges that various literary historians have identified for themselves, and us, as they try to address what now appears to be a wildly intractable problem posed by language—its multiformity.

The first version of linguistic multiformity that presents itself simply involves recognizing the diversity of languages—not just English but also Urdu, not just English and French but also Mandarin, not just English and French and German but also Yiddish and Welsh. Thinking of literature as a global phenomenon makes us conscious in the first place of

the insufficiency of any individuals as individuals to comprehend all the languages of the world. Yet the second model of linguistic multiformity presents problems that seem at least as formidable—the intralinguistic. It's this latter multiformity that occupied Ezra Pound when he was locating the brilliance of Henry James's writing—and that led him to praise James for "the great labour, this labour of translation, of making America intelligible, of making it possible for individuals to meet across national borders."<sup>3</sup> Pound's observation here is rather more serious than an observation that the British say "on the cards" when the Americans say "in the cards," or that they mean different things when they utter words like "chips" and "biscuits." Instead, he was pointing to James's achievement in having captured the particular patterns of speech and thought that would give a sense of what it was like to have and listen to one's New England grandmother. And it's this latter multiformity that was at stake in the efforts of various eighteenth-century writers to identify the particular strengths and beauties that came to be seen as inherent in their native tongue—and that called for their literatures to be different in crucial respects from literatures written in other languages and other dialects of dominant languages.<sup>4</sup>

In the first case, that of the interlinguistic, we have the problem of translation and the questions about comparisons that have always dogged comparative literature as a field—even when it took its portfolio principally to include writing in English, French, and German. In the second, that of the intralinguistic, it may appear that we are encountering extreme localism and provincialism (the sound of a particular person's, and family member's, voice, habits of pronunciation—all that makes them be and appear as someone "from here"). This second seems totally removed from the worldliness of world literature and world literary history.

When an earlier generation of scholars wrote literary history as comparatists, they once discussed literary periods and the movement of concepts and genres—the intensification of an interest in what Theodore Kaczynski and others have called "wild nature" in the romantic period, the ballad revival in Germany and England.<sup>5</sup> The famous interchange between René Wellek and A. O. Lovejoy over how best to conduct literary history for the romantic period involved a dispute over how much territory the concepts should cover—whether one could speak of a romantic period or whether the period rubric was mainly important as a starting point for further discriminations. Wellek thought that one could abstract an identity for the period that represented an overarching and informing collection of concepts (in much the way that Vladimir Propp thought that one could speak of the tale even though his ideal model never corresponded to any actual individual tale).<sup>6</sup>

The debate between Wellek and Lovejoy over the primacy of types or more finely specified instances—abstractions that can adequately embrace individual examples or examples that require their own proper names—exemplifies a time-honored philosophical debate between representational or formal idealism and nominalism. But recent accounts of literature and the literary historian's dilemma go rather farther. They are perhaps best captured by a problem that Bertrand Russell laid out in his essay "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description."<sup>7</sup> There Russell illustrates knowledge by acquaintance with one's ability to speak of the hardness, brownness, and so forth of a table that one experiences. As soon as one gets to the question of naming the table as table, however, Russell speaks of that as a matter of knowledge by description, thus insisting on a gap between the things of our experience and the names by which they are called. As an account of knowledge, Russell's discussion stresses how quickly our knowledge by acquaintance ends and how soon we are reliant on other people's reports. It's this aspect of Russell's work that, as Ann Banfield has pointed out,<sup>8</sup> exercises a significant influence on Foucault's *Les Mots et Les Choses* (*The Order of Things*) and *L'archéologie du savoir* (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*) and that I believe underwrites much of Deleuze's interest in Lewis Carroll's jokey scholasticism in *La logique du sens* (*The Logic of Sense*). Whether or not one could easily produce the lines of transmission that would enable us to identify Russell's influence as Russell's, this position—call it Russell's—is obviously allied with a deep suspicion of the notion that linguistic reference is easily achieved and sustained. In the grip of such a notion, Foucault can analyze the taxonomic aspirations of the Enlightenment to both penetrating and hilarious effect and Paul de Man can, in his essay "Excuses" on Rousseau's *Confessions*, take the direct testimony of that notoriously participatory witness Rousseau, follow the utterance of the name "Marion" along three different explanatory tracks, and show them all to be inadequate to bridge the gap between the "noise" of the utterance and the explanation.<sup>9</sup> (No wonder that Russell thought that names could only be made to stick by the act of pointing and that he reserved an important place for the pronouns associated with ostension.)

The claim that issues from Russell's position is that we may well be led from an early age to point at a picture in a child's book and to say "apple" but that we might also think that "apple" is the name of redness or a certain shape. (It is from situations like this that debates over how many words the Eskimos have for "snow" arise.) Russell doesn't push the matter in the direction of skepticism and, instead, comments on the significance of our ability to learn by description. But the importance of his view is that it subsumes Wellek's and Lovejoy's alike in suggesting the difficulty of correlating description and acquaintance. The two posi-

tions, rather, look as though they required one another. Each is a way of depicting the experience of readerly perception; they merely refer those perceptions to relatively larger or smaller units without solving the question of the relationship between the experience of and the naming of an object.

For literary history, then, the sort of analysis that I'm attributing to Russell, Foucault, and Deleuze represents a major challenge because it throws into question formal representationalism and nominalism alike. For the problem is not that literary categories and classifications become impossible to apply but that they are as easily changed as applied. The claims that have been made by literary historians on the basis of their acquaintance with literature look as though they have seriously over-extended themselves. For acquaintance has come to look like a very modest if important thing indeed—more like the blackness of the ink on the page than like ideas about nature, recognizable spirits of an age, or demonstrable literary techniques like alliteration or personification.<sup>10</sup> The implication of Russell's—and Foucault's and Deleuze's—accounts is that even names involve multiple possibilities of classification (sometimes the apple as an individual fruit, sometimes as a red thing, sometimes as a fruit tree).

Literary history can therefore—indeed, must therefore—continually operate in the mode of revision precisely because it has a hard time keeping its columns straight. Even formal categories like that of genre are important less for corralling particular examples than for providing an opening for the uncovering of another generic classification. Given the difficulties of moving from sensory experience to descriptions of the object that provoke it, we can begin to grasp the peculiar nature of literary history as we have known it—literary history, that is, as the testimony from experience. For literary history has been largely founded on a claim about the importance of acquaintance, in which we take historians to be functioning primarily as readers and offering up descriptions of their own perceptual objects. And it is worth stressing how far that insistence upon acquaintance has made literary history look like a relatively temporary business indeed—one that would hold only as long as a reader of a particular account in the literary history had not checked that description against her own readings of the texts in question.

It may not be a fact about literary objects that they demand to be seen “anew” by each individual reader, but it is certainly a fact about our habitual ways of treating literary objects that we don't take anyone else's word for it when she pronounces a poem “great” or “haunting” or “melancholy.” Niklas Luhmann has good reason to maintain that we accept—and repeat—news reports without feeling the need to confirm them directly for ourselves. With literature, however, such personal re-

action is crucial. We think that reading what we treat as the actual text occupies a central role—that the reports we read about literary texts should be proved on our pulses and that our aim in talking about literary texts is not to convey other people's reactions but to test them (as we don't feel obliged to do with news stories or gossip, for which most of us are simple transmission vehicles).

This emphasis on direct acquaintance with the actual text is related to the view of aesthetic experience generally that Kant lays out in the third *Critique* when he offers a description of aesthetic experience that has had such strong prescriptive force that it has frequently seemed like a way of testing for the aesthetic—namely, that the apprehension of a particular aesthetic object should precede, or overcome, a determination of what it is. (A quilt may be a domestic linen, used for cover and warmth, but a Rauschenberg quilt, hung on the vertical, is not governed by such determinations.) Moreover, the desire to avoid describing aesthetic experience and criticism as simply the recognition of a resemblance to a previously known category has strongly colored a literary criticism and literary history that were eager to show that they were not simply accepting a particular poem as if it were merely another entry in a series or collection. Thus, a critic like Samuel Johnson labors strenuously to defend criticism against the charge that its judgments are predetermined when he hacks away at the privilege that may have accrued to a poem like *Lycidas* simply because it was the handiwork of someone whose name had become a brand by the time that Johnson was writing his *Lives of the Poets*. Literary history, in his influential example, involves creating a thick enough description of the circumstances of birth, education, and life situation to make individual literary productions look as though they are obliged to answer to a writer's life and times; and it earns its sense of force by continually dramatizing its skepticism about the tendency toward generalization that its own movements create. Thus, Milton is a great poet, but *Lycidas* is not a great poem; *Paradise Lost* is a great poem, but the allegory of Sin and Death and the depictions of the angels as alternately embodied and disembodied are serious mistakes. The notion that literary history necessarily involves a reference to critical reading continually destabilizes any appeal to reliable sources of value. Even the work of well-credentialed authors must be evaluated in itself, and we are encouraged to notice not just Homeric authorship but also to register the caution that even Homer nods. The insistence on critical reading and aesthetic judgment sets a limit to generalizations, or makes them proceed haltingly.

Close reading and aesthetic judgment have, that is, perennially threatened literary- historical claims by continually challenging stable historical groupings. And literary history has been split by two contradictory im-



pulses. In the one, literary history is charged with providing an account of literature that will be a reliable herald of texts that a reader has not yet read and that will recognizably characterize texts that she has. In the other, literary history is entrusted with its own overcoming—in suggesting the indispensability of close reading, with close reading being understood as the impulse to notice something new even in texts that have received very substantial amounts of commentary.<sup>11</sup> (This is nominalism to the nth power.)

Close reading, in other words, is nothing other than the attempt to present our descriptions of literary texts as if they were as close as possible to expressions of our acquaintance with them—and our most recent acquaintance, at that. And it has taken two forms. In the first, we encounter the problem of the relation between the already observed and the novel. The close reading that aims to report truthfully on an acquaintance with a poem has to look connected to that poem (and so must say recognizable things), but the ethos of close reading never allows one simply to sign off on another person's reading. Indeed, it does not encourage even approving self-quotation but rather pushes readers to aim at capturing the distinctiveness of our various new encounters with a poem. ("That's the thing about great literature. There's always something new in it.") Thus we see a writer like Cleanth Brooks giving his account of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and adopting an attitude toward Kenneth Burke's discussion of that poem that we might precisely call ambivalent: "I am happy to find that two critics with methods and purposes so different [as Burke and I] should agree so thoroughly as we do on the poem. I am pleased, for my part, therefore, to acknowledge the amount of duplication which exists between the two essays, counting it as rather important corroboration of a view of the poem which will probably seem to some critics overingenious. In spite of the common elements, however, I feel that the emphasis of my essay is sufficiently different from Burke's to justify my going on with its publication."<sup>12</sup>

The kind of ambivalence that Brooks manifests—Burke and I both corroborate one another's accounts and also differ from one another—discloses one version of close reading as an approximation to acquaintance. Yet the authority of acquaintance can also lead close reading to claim insight into the text as it hadn't quite been achieved by its author. This is the model of the reader as copy editor (or student of composition) that recruits readers as collaborators to authors (and enables authors to think of themselves as their own collaborators and copy editors). We can see its effects in both the rise of influential writing on rhetoric and composition in the eighteenth century (the lectures of a figure like Hugh Blair that demonstrate, for example, exactly how Addison's well-written essays on the pleasures of the imagination should be adjusted to make



them really well written) and Flaubert's obsessive nineteenth-century practice of revision and interest in criticism. These are versions of close writing that recruit the writing process to the aims of critical reading and put the text itself into play.

Such techniques for dealing with texts—Blair's, pedagogically, and, more impersonally, Flaubert's—are allied not simply with the notion of a communication between author and reader. They do not merely entrust the reader with the role of the particular friend who understands what the author said better than the author himself. The reader and writer collaborate on the explication of national languages themselves, as they write and read and rewrite in constant pursuit of the beauties of our various native tongues, diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of individual texts so as to gesture toward an elusive practical ideal beyond the speech and writing that we actually do. (From this mode we get accounts of the various kinds of metrical excellences—iambic pentameter for English, the alexandrine for French—and certain writers are said to be particularly adept at recognizing the various kinds of prose that can be written most effectively with the vocabulary streams that have contributed to their national languages.)

It is such reliance on close reading and the personal acquaintance of a literary scholar with the texts that she/he reads that has come to seem most problematic for a host of writers. From this host, I'll speak almost exclusively about two—Pascale Casanova (in her *World Republic of Letters* of 1999) and Franco Moretti (in his essay "Conjectures on World Literature" and his book *Maps, Graphs, Trees*). Casanova and Moretti are writing in the mode of what Moretti calls "sociological formalism" and of what they both see as "systematic" analysis, with Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Pierre Bourdieu as models. And one major effect of their reliance on a systematic approach is that they shift their relation to their materials and deliver themselves of insights that have all the impersonality of what Moretti calls "distant reading" (and this in spite of the distinctiveness of their authorial reports on the impersonal data).

Casanova writes as a sociologist of literature rather than a literary critic. Most of her subjects, being dead, will neither be offended nor ingratified by anything that she has to say about them. Most of the living will be annoyed or gratified less as individuals than as members of a larger national group. In particular, however, her training as a sociologist allows her to make the unapologetic statement that she will not be providing the close readings that have so frequently been the stock and trade of literary criticism and that she embraces her social scientific approach, which deals in populations rather than persons and in literature rather than individual novels or poems—at the explicit expense of analyses of the distinctiveness of individual authors and their texts.

This observation—that Casanova’s work makes its appeals impersonally—runs counter to much of what has been said of it. Her project in *The World Republic of Letters* has been to argue that a world republic of letters can be identified and described in precise forms that track the inequalities of literary capital and that Paris has for a substantial period been the capital city of that republic. Her position has sounded, on the face of it, like a blindly chauvinistic remark coming from anyone who writes, as Casanova does, as our correspondent in Paris. Yet we should not mistake her argument about the centrality of Paris in the world republic of letters for an expression of personal partiality cloaking itself in the language of system. For she first provides one of the most penetrating accounts of Johann Gottfried von Herder’s arguments on behalf of national literature (efficiently observing how the recovery of a prehistory for a given present and a discovery of native literature help to underwrite demands for national political identity) on the way to arguing that only moving past such chauvinistic pluralism will enable us to track actual inequality.

It is precisely the rejection of the argument that literature and the political self-determination with which it is allied are infinitely extendable—that all literatures are distinctive and ought to be acknowledged for their characteristic excellences—that she can criticize with particular force from the standpoint of sociological comparison. We have often talked as if literature required only modest capitalization, as if starving artists could set themselves up at their kitchen tables (as we are so satisfyingly told that J. K. Rowling did) and as if the literary world ought thus to be thought to have few entry requirements and little need for analyses that stressed inequalities of distribution. After all, Herder claimed that any group that recognized itself as having a literature was well on the way to being a nation—and thus promulgated the notion that national literatures and nations all had an equal right to existence.

Such a pluralistic and relativistic account of literature that imagines it as part of an infinite economy with thousands of flowers blooming is precisely the target of Casanova’s analysis. She accurately recognizes that treating the various elements—the national literatures—as freestanding entities that must all be accorded their rights and must have their virtues acknowledged absolutely precludes an analysis of the inequality of the operation of literature on a planetary scale. “Doing justice” to the various literatures and appreciating their distinctive spirits is, in other words, a project for another time—or another analyst. For her, the entire point of comparison—in classic social scientific fashion—is to identify inequalities and hierarchies as such (as if she were comparing gross national literary production across nations rather than trying to explain the importance of various reciprocal exchanges).

Casanova's claim to analyze literary cultural capital in planetary terms leads her to frame her study as an account both of literature in its circulation and distribution (the literature of writers, publishers, translators, and readers) and of what we might think of as the ur-market—the testimonials to authors and literature that fund the literary market proper. In much the same way that Bourdieu in *Distinction* asked his informants to declare their class position through the indirect route of indicating—over and over again—their preference for this piece of pop music or that classical symphony (instead of asking them to identify themselves in terms of class), Casanova populates the field of social regard simply by looking to the behavior of various countries. For her it's the grossness rather than the graininess of the terms of analysis that is significant. She does not mention the material support to the notion of literature that French *mairies* routinely engage in when presenting newlyweds with books (rather than coupons and product samples, as in various American cities), but she does point to the “cultural indicators” that Priscilla Clark Ferguson developed to compare literary practices in various countries—the number of books published each year, the sales of books, the amount of time each inhabitant spent reading, financial assistance for writers, “the number of publishers and bookstores, the number of writers whose portraits appear on banknotes and stamps, the number of streets named after famous writers, the space allotted to books in the press, and the time given over to books on television programs.”<sup>13</sup>

The point of the exercise is not to engage in close reading, which Casanova associates with “the persistent tendency of critics to isolate texts from one another” (3), but rather to “see in its entirety the configuration (to use Michel Foucault's term) to which all texts belong” (3). Franco Moretti will be interested in pointing to a market for novels that will be reliable enough to satisfy the taste for “regular novelty” and in the process to stimulate it. Casanova is after another target—a conception of the literary field so extensive as to embrace the illiterate, the lettered and unreading, and the literary elite as well.

This is as much as to say that Casanova's picture of the literary world looks less at texts as at the social idealization through which texts and authors are “operationalized.” “Belief” is a key word for her. Thus, while Moretti is content (at least on occasion) to stop with observing the necessity of a regular supply of a literary product like the novel for the provisioning of the imagination and the publishing industry, the element that establishes her terrain and makes it possible for her to speak of a world system of letters is what thinkers like Hume and Bentham identified as “social regard.” To foreground “belief” in literature is both to claim that literature is a system and also that one can best understand it through analyzing the movements of the system. Thus, the

overall structure of the world system enables literary works to “take their place” (3), and Casanova can claim that “each work that is declared to be literary is a minute part of the immense ‘combination’ constituted by the literary world as a whole” (3). While literary critics might debate over whether *Hamlet* ought to be considered Shakespeare’s greatest play or how Goethe’s *Faust* compares with *Hamlet*, she tries to compare the literary production of various different countries by looking less at the literature itself than at the various kinds of social behaviors that bespeak regard for literature itself. Not literature but how people act in relation to the idea of literature.

So far, so good. But the difficulty that Casanova encounters is one about who can speak for the system. Critics like Christopher Prendergast and David Damrosch have felt that her ears prick up at just the point at which someone mentions the name of Paris—much as most of us tune in when we hear someone uttering our own names.<sup>14</sup> And Prendergast in particular has argued that the systematic account yields up an account of Kafka, for instance, that makes it impossible for him to recognize the Kafka he knows from his alert readings because it suggests that Kafka was writing German under the influence of a language—Yiddish—he himself did not know. (This example is one that we shall return to later, but for now I acknowledge it simply to address the question of how far Casanova’s claims reflect personal partiality cloaking itself as system.) The answer that I imagine Casanova making in reply is that the best evidence of systematic operations is idealization itself—the perspicuousness of our attachment to what we don’t know, all that funds our reliance on lists of the “best” (the restaurant we haven’t yet tried but intend to, the book we will read because a particular reviewer approved it, the image we have of ourselves as better for wanting to go to a museum rather than a wrestling event).

Moreover, the efficacy of the system appears in the testimonials to it—and the idealizations of it—that spring from the lips of the comparative losers in the unequal distributions that the system accords. The systematicity of the system—its being a game that affects all the participants in it—can be demonstrated effectively by nothing so much as its being acknowledged by those it favors least. The winners, those to whom the system awards the greatest rewards, may be blinded by their privilege. They may, indeed, imagine that their superiority means more than it does or less than it does. (They may, that is, imagine that it is “only right” or that they aren’t really privileged, and suffer the agonies of literary accomplishment with all the other struggling artists of the world.)

Since the operation of the system as a system, then, depends on the participation of the least advantaged, they thus become for Casanova its native informants, the ones who can report most accurately on the

elements about which belief circulates. For the stability of the system revolves around the constant renewal and retracing of the establishment of creditworthiness—the sense that there will not just be another novel available to be read but that it will be a novel that one will have wanted to read. Here Casanova, like Bourdieu or Luhmann, makes the system itself the language through which persons communicate with one another, but always through indirection. For they speak through the credit they award to one another, thus creating a language that seems at best highly metaphorical and at worst simply mistaken to anyone trying to make statements about individual texts and individual writers. The scientificity of the social sciences involves developing the capacity to talk about fields of value, but it must continually subdue questions of specific reference in the process. Thus, Max Weber can very compellingly depict the practical irruption of the impulse to capitalistic production in the self-consciously and ostensibly otherworldly orientation of Protestantism, but that picture will never quite accommodate questions about this Protestant or that; Freud can speak of the psychic history of humanity, but continually raises protests when he tries to connect the collective picture to the individual; and Foucault can (in his most social scientific mode) depict how power comes from everywhere (to create panoptic systems) without actually touching individual cases.

Casanova's understanding of the operations of the literary system helps her to a claim about superior insight into its workings. She credits "many of the most prestigious contestants in the game of letters" with having given "an exact, though inevitably incomplete, picture of the laws of this economy" (10), but her major claim is that the best informants for anyone who seeks to "give an adequate description of the international republic of letters" are "the most dominated, which is to say the most lucid, for [they] alone [are] able to understand and describe [their] own position in the world of letters" (10). The most fluent and most centrally positioned, that is, may speak sentences, but the grammarians are the most dominated, the ones least born to the literary manor. The most dominated are less likely to consult their publishers' sales figures on their latest books and more likely to notice the existence of a national literary market with a substantial number of readers and purchasers of books. From their perspective and hers, the notion of the universality of literature amounts to a "monopolist's claim" that commands others to submit to its law of selection and see literature as "acceptable and accessible to all" (154). A national language, far from being a neutral platform, is a resource—and not simply because it offers up the possibilities for certain kinds of sounds and certain kinds of constructions, but because it provides a population of readers and speakers, a set of networks of reviewing and translation. Moreover, in keeping with Casa-

nova's systematic deployment of differentiation—the unremitting search for the work of inequality—a national language may also accrue capital from a country's political history. Paris, rather than London, is the capital of the republic of letters in part because of the appeal of the idea of freedom itself. The French revolution may have been overcome in the political arena, but the fact of the revolution in France and England's failure to have made the attempt matter as much as cheap housing in Montparnasse to establish Paris's preeminence as a literary and intellectual mecca that attracts writers actually or imaginatively. The abjection of the clear-sighted and dominated is to see that "they must first submit to the language of others, that of the colonizers."<sup>15</sup> The family romance of the clear-sighted and dominated is to see themselves as having come home to Paris, and to a Paris that is their home country. Or, as E. M. Cioran, the Romanian writer who both moved to Paris and also began to write in a hyperclassical French, put it, "to dream of a Romania that would have the destiny of France and the population of China."<sup>16</sup>

Moretti approvingly quotes Prendergast's verdict on Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*: "when trying to understand the world system of culture, 'a single, generalizing description misses too much and is destined to do so, if it is offered as *the* description.'"<sup>17</sup> I find such criticism of Casanova hard to fathom because, as I observed earlier, social-scientific method does not involve generalization, in as much as it is committed to developing ways of assembling and reading valuations without benefit of direct statements by individuals that would raise the question of generalization. (The utilitarianism of David Hume and Jeremy Bentham taught this approach to social scientists, who can produce gripping narratives out of the difference between what one would have expected on the basis of one's firsthand, anecdotal experience and the larger-scale measurement, and also to the world of popular entertainments that produce reality shows that demonstrate that one can make a narrative simply by creating and applying a scale—to judge weight loss, for example.) Casanova's discussion is methodologically unified, in that she identifies the way inequality operates in the literary field and can thus provide a fresh sense of how the linguistic materials of literature function in the unequal distribution of literary capital. Such methodological coherence, however, by no means involves her applying one description to everything she considers—any more than composing a symphony in D-flat or F-sharp amounts to the constant repetition of one note. What I take to be Prendergast's and Moretti's two different ways of mischaracterizing Casanova's position are not, however, important in themselves. But understanding Prendergast's objections and distinguishing them from Moretti's will help in the effort to identify the position that Moretti develops in essays like "Conjectures on World Literature," "Planet Hollywood," and the three essays that make up *Maps, Graphs, Trees*.



The criticisms that Prendergast lodges against Casanova's work are of the "yes, but" variety that characterizes much of our talk about aesthetic experience: "Yes, but you haven't taken into account this perception I've had of this work or this author." Prendergast defends close reading and casts doubt on Casanova's impatience with it. Such objections can easily be made to the writing of Casanova, Bourdieu, or Luhmann because their interest is in the combination of circulation and regularity in the distribution of social capital rather than in fine-tuned accounts of what particular authors might actually have meant or what particular works might actually have said. Exegesis is an afterthought or incidental matter rather than a central focus, and the autopoiesis of the system generates both the possibility of analyzing it as a system and the limits of the kinds of statements Casanova, Bourdieu, or Luhmann will feel moved to make. While the literary critic may judge a work as intrinsically great—or may make a limited comparison between it and other works in the same vein—the social scientist is less concerned with the ontology of the text than with its penumbra, the network of texts and practices that are a precondition for its effective existence and that treat values as recognizable only through comparisons.

This point helps to distinguish Casanova's work from Moretti's on "distant reading." For though Moretti describes himself as a sociological formalist and though he relies heavily on quantitative data, he is significantly less interested in the systematic aspect of his project than Casanova is in the systematic and methodological features of her work. To some extent, it would seem as if Moretti were—almost as if in response to Gayatri Spivak's having chastised him for attempting an all-encompassingly systematic approach—emphasizing the experimental aspect of his project rather than its justification by a holistic system. He suggests the importance of waves and trees as abstract models for thinking about convergence, on the one hand, and differentiation, on the other—depending upon whether we want to think in terms of world literatures or in terms of national literatures. But the abstract model is simply a less detailed way of rendering the agreement of a variety of scholars who testify that the novels of various different countries always produce a compromise between foreign form and local materials. It is, in other words, a schema that represents an accumulation of a number of exegetical claims.

Moretti is keenly aware of the fact that no individual can hope to write the literary history of world literature as an individual. He recognizes the importance of reports. But his version of the Bertrand Russell problem arises—do his various different scholarly informants speak the same interpretative language, or do some mean "table" when others mean "brown" or "wooden"? And this is a question that Moretti does not con-



front directly. Here the risk I run is that I will sound as though I merely mean to disapprove. For now, I will only say that that is by no means my aim but that I must sound as though I'm speaking in the mode of reproof for a minute or two more. For Moretti, like Propp, knows how to value other people's classifications; unlike Propp, however, he doesn't translate them into an overarching classification of his own. Thus, in the essay "Planet Hollywood," he takes up the classificatory categories of *Variety*, *Variety International*, and *Screen International*. He comments on the paucity of data for various countries and remarks that he has "unbalanced" information and offers his remarks with appropriate scholarly caution. But his geographical study of the patterns of diffusion of cinema leads him to certain remarks about the reach of various types of films (and their literary equivalents): "Stories travel well—better than other genres, anyway. . . . And stories travel well because they are largely *independent of language*. . . . This relative autonomy of the story-line explains the ease with which action films dispense with words, replacing them with sheer noise (explosions, crashes, gunshots, screams . . .); while this brisk dismissal of language, in turn, facilitates their international diffusion. . . . Relatively speaking, comedies do *not* travel well" (94). "All sublime nations resemble each other, we could paraphrase *Anna Karenina*, but when they start laughing, they all do so in their own unique way" (94–95).

Moretti's thought experiment with the diffusion of film, then, seems to suggest that the story—the action film—is by its nature better suited to widespread diffusion than the comedy. And it's a claim that he bolsters with an observation from deep history—namely, that one can see that "stories travel well" by pointing to the example of how "Indian and Arab tales crossed the Mediterranean, and transformed European storytelling" (94). All of this sounds convincing until I try to imagine the stories of the Arabian Nights or of Boccaccio as stories without their comedy. I believe that stories or action films have longer legs than do comedies in the abstract, but it's hard for me in the concrete to feel that Propp wasn't on to something comic when he talked about tricks and substitutions in discussing folk tales.

It's the elements that go to make up my conviction in Moretti's claim about the mobility of stories, and my doubt about his claim that comedy travels less well that I'll turn to now. That balance of conviction and doubt—or alternation between conviction and doubt—persists for me as I read *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. To do the graphs of the subgenres of the novel, Moretti (with Brad Pasanek collaborating) develops a list of subgenres ("the courtship novel," "the picaresque," "the epistolary novel," "the sentimental novel," and so forth). As he had earlier, he uses the generic designations that various scholars have provided (in the titles of their chapters or monographs and throughout their discussions). Yet he

laces his discussion with caveats (that the “chart shows neither detective fiction nor science fiction” since “their peculiar long duration seems to require a different approach” and that there are some “Draculaesque reawakenings” that will have to be accounted for on another occasion [31]), but one strange feature of the network of classifications is that most of the informants are working in independence of all the others. What are we to make of an analysis of a chart of subgenres that includes both F. W. Chandler’s account of the picaresque from his 1907 book *The Literature of Roguery* and Crisi Benford’s description of the multiplot novel from 2003? And how seriously are we to take the various different scholarly descriptions as full descriptions of a particular subgenre when “Nautical Tales” extends from 1828 to 1850 and thus doesn’t include *Robinson Crusoe*? The effort to yoke subgenres as formal categories with historical parameters represents an interesting attempt to talk about literary survival and extinction—with the market operating as a turbocharged version of evolution. Yet it’s not clear whether the time frames for the various genres are to be understood as exhaustive or episodic. And thus it becomes difficult to think of the taxonomy as a taxonomy rather than a collection of nonce terms, originally devised to show the limits of a particular scholar’s responsibility in a particular article or book rather than to make it possible for all the various scholars to apply similar terminology (which seems the most basic claim of a taxonomy).

Moretti’s aim, I think, is to capture the importance of perceived form and perceived similarities of form and theme among groups of novels, and he thus describes waves of novels of a particular sort going out into the environment of readers and either finding sustenance or failing in the attempt. The appeal of the gesture is that it seems to provide us with some sense of the losers as well as the winners in the game of literary survival. We seem, that is, to have more history—and that history is not exclusively a history of the victors. But just as I begin to accept the premise that “texts are certainly the *real objects* of literature” (76) but “not the right *objects of knowledge* for literary history” (76), I begin to doubt. I completely grant that there is something strange about describing the novel by means of a few especially fine examples (Richardson’s, Goethe’s, Austen’s)—just as there is something strange about the botanist’s custom of retaining actual leaves as a kind of standard for recognizing a particular kind of tree. But the abstractive and generalizing move here seems ultimately to return Moretti directly to the nature of the texts.

For anyone who has read William St. Clair’s *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, with its detailed account of the ways in which the publishing industry was not a neutral ballot box that registered public reaction, Moretti’s Darwinian literary history of individual genres (or subgenres) and their life spans looks a bit like an agriculture report that

has left out variations in rainfall totals in different years. He retrieves the story of the existence of various novels without registering the story of the “disappeared” readership that St. Clair identifies in talking about how the publishing houses’ recognition of the value of literary property led them to create wildly different, price- and class-stratified versions of contemporary literary reality. The world of elite readers and reviewers was actually contemporary with the initial publications; for readers of modest means, reading involved an anachronistic encounter with what St. Clair calls an “obsolete canon” of cheap reprints, anthologies, and abridgments.<sup>18</sup>

Information about the unevenness with which literature was distributed may not entirely disrupt Moretti’s (very hedged) suggestion that novelistic genres or subgenres died the death in response to “some kind of generational mechanism.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it may strengthen it. Once literature moves to the lower tranches, it may lose its appeal to first adopters—in much the way that clothing knockoffs may be the end of a cycle for a particular designer’s line. Yet the question of the distribution and the circulation of books and magazines seems to me to call out for fuller discussion, and I have to confess that I get more from a graph of St. Clair’s “demonstrating the correlation between price and quantity for a text in the Romantic period” and a wittily juxtaposed photograph of decreasingly sized editions of *Don Juan* (which describes virtually the same line as the price graph) than from Moretti’s graphs of novelistic genres (or subgenres).<sup>20</sup> But even when I find some of Moretti’s classifications relatively opaque and wonder exactly what novels appear in his various file folders, I begin to think that his real aim isn’t a taxonomy at all but rather a demonstration of the aims of method and methodology—the translation of the subjective terms of authorship and close readership alike into another language—and a simultaneous demonstration of skepticism about the ability of any methodology to complete itself and operate in such full consistency as to seem like a reliable artificial language into which everything, once coded, can be efficiently translated.

That combination of methodology and the demonstration of its incompleteness corresponds more to natural than to artificial languages. To get a sense of its force, we might consult a description that the artist Richard Prince gave of his year of renting movies: “World of Video was arranged into sections. Just like a library. New Releases. Horror. Sci-Fi. Gay and Adult Films. Music Videos, Musicals, Generals. Nostalgia. Foreign Language. Comedy. Children’s Films. How-to Films. Two-for-One. Sleepers. And Documentaries.”<sup>21</sup> What Prince’s list manifests is the irregularity of the categories. “New Releases,” “Two-for-One,” “Foreign Language,” and “Sleepers” look in some sense just like the other parts of the classification system according to which the videos are shelved,

but they warp the very system in which they appear. “New Releases” and “Two-for-One” may be spatial analogues to the other categories, but they introduce the alien conceptions of their dates of birth (their novelty) and their pricing (their particular cheapness).

The artist Barbara Bloom has, like Prince, called attention to the ways in which collections, which are conceptual devices for ordering various elements of apparently homogeneous systems, develop their own resistant languages from within. While the social sciences, on the model of the sciences, attempt to use uniform systems to analyze their various individual data, these artists are depicting classificatory systems as self-disrupting and thus showing the friction of language on language. Moretti seems drawn to the possibility of using social scientific method to allow the data (rather than speakers) to speak, but it seems to me that he’s after a target that is distinct from that of social science—something closer to the emergent or the future than to the past that has been the traditional preserve of social science. This is as much as to observe the importance of truisms of a social science like economics—that one will know of social scientific events chiefly when they’re in the past, that a recession will be documented only when it’s ending or that an *episteme* or epoch will become clear (as in Foucault’s work) once it has been replaced by another. What social science seems to me to have taught art of the kind that can plausibly be related to postmodernism is the importance of recognizing the need to acknowledge and try to speak a language that one does not entirely know. And what art of this kind hopes to teach us all is that we don’t need to wait for economic cycles or epistemic epochs to change, but that conceptual art itself is nothing other than the introduction of a language that its maker does not control. Visual and verbal art thus comes to participate less in the retrospectiveness of the social sciences than in the effort to track the present and anticipate the future that writers like I. A. Richards and Raymond Williams recognized when they spoke of how linguistic usage is in advance of thought (a claim that Robin Valenza has recently seconded from an entirely different perspective in talking about how examples from Samuel Richardson’s writing appeared in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* as new recruits to the language and a claim that we can all recognize in the frequency with which the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites literature to launch the genealogies of words).<sup>22</sup>

To point to the way in which both visual and verbal art may push themselves from a known language into an unknown one is, of course, to speak in defense of Casanova’s claim that Kafka’s work “can be considered as entirely translated from a language that he could not write, Yiddish” (269). She insists upon Yiddish (rather than the Czech to which Deleuze and Guattari trace Kafka’s linguistic subversiveness) as a formative or deformative force largely because her sociological background leads her

to stress how perceptions of relative value (the greater or lesser power of one literary linguistic field or another) constitute in and of themselves the reason for an attachment to a language. But, whereas social-scientific method may operate as an artificial language that can become a motivating force for being interested in one language or another without necessarily being able to speak it, the artists whom I've mentioned are perhaps less consistently interested in choosing the social-scientific language of evaluation *tout court* than simply in pushing consistent language—whether natural or artificial—past its own bounds.

Fredric Jameson has provided the beginning of an inventory of such literature in his essay "Culture" in *Postmodernism* when he speaks of how R. L. Doctorow "imposed upon himself a rigorous principle of selection in which only simple declarative sentences (predominantly mobilized by the verb 'to be') are received" and likens the effect to the "characteristic effects of Camus's novel *The Stranger*" that Camus achieved through his "willful decision to substitute, throughout, the French tense of the *passé composé* for the other past tenses more normally employed in narration in that language."<sup>23</sup> For Jameson, these cases exemplify "schizophrenic writing," as does Bob Perelman's poem "China." Jameson describes the lines of Perelman's poem as a set of captions provided to the photographs in a book "whose ideogrammatic captions remained a dead letter to him" (30) and goes on to speak of the importance of the text for introducing differentiation rather than integration. And the correction that Gayatri Spivak makes in quoting Perelman's remarks on the specific book that occasioned his poem serves less to repudiate Jameson's observations than to intensify them—by making ignorant multilingualism look like the inevitable position of any reading and writing subject: "I wrote the poem after looking, not at a book of photographs as Jameson writes, but at some sort of Chinese primer containing simply four-color pictures of 'the world': family, kitchen, school, rivers, airports, and village festivals."<sup>24</sup> From Perelman's position, encountering any language we don't know returns us to the situation we were in as we learned our first language: it exposes us to the ways in which we experience a language we supposedly know as a series of more and less confident surmises. The incomprehensibility of even the pictures in a primer does not simply teach us that we don't know Chinese; it teaches us that we don't know English.

The friction between the English that Perelman knows and the Chinese that he doesn't, and between either of those languages and the pictures that ostensibly serve as a bridge between them, is apprehensible particularly because of the conspicuous yoking of the two in the one poem. And this observation leads me to express the only fundamental reservation I have with Moretti's description of his project—that he ties his hands a bit in restricting his attention to the overview and to the

partial view—what he calls “the very small, and the very large: . . . the forces that shape literary history. Devices and genres; not texts” (G 76). Moretti’s account of “free indirect style” seems to me the most compelling aspect of the book because there he traces the way in which the absolutely fundamental features of his project—his interest in identifying a relationship between a social entity and an individual example—emerge in their purest form. Free indirect style is the stylistic equivalent of an amalgam of the individual speaking voice of a character and what that character would say if deducing a position from a larger perspective. It’s a stylistic analogue to a blend of Russell’s knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. It welds the perceptions that seem to be arrived at from immediate intuition with the perceptions that one would have if one could have perceptions deductively: induction and deduction together. Moretti goes on to distinguish among various different kinds of free indirect style, but his account places particular stress on the various different kinds of collectivities from which the deductive portion of free indirect style arises—social doxa for Jane Austen, social cohesion relying on the multiperson chorus for Giovanni Verga, the voice of the working class for Zola. It is, however, in his compelling discussion of James Joyce’s contemporaries and of free indirect style under intense pressure from first-person consciousness that we see Moretti at his most taxonomic:

Joyce’s generation unceremoniously drops all stylistic good manners, and pushes its field of observation well inside the secret, unconscious layers of psychic life. The ‘objective’ side of free indirect style does not quite disappear, if only because of the countless commonplaces that *Ulysses* inherits from *Bouvard and Pécuchet*: but Joyce reverses their function, and subordinates them to the centrifugal, idiosyncratic drift of Bloom’s associations. It’s the same double register, and the same final outcome, as that of *Crime and Punishment*: just as, there, the third person of free indirect style had approached the second person of dialogism, but had been finally ousted by it—so, in *Ulysses*, the third person is constantly drifting towards, but also yielding to the *first* person of Joyce’s chosen technique, the stream of consciousness. Here, too, cultural ‘interbreeding’ encountered a barrier that could not be passed. (G 88)

I accept all that Moretti says about free indirect style when he’s describing it as one term in a system.

And yet . . . it seems to me that Moretti’s focus on the novel—even the novel in profusion, the novel in bulk—ends by producing a history of literature that experiences little outside pressure. I know that he mentions war and censorship and audience acceptance. But what he doesn’t mention is the pressure that one kind of representation—and the waxing and waning of its fortunes—applies to another. Here I’m thinking not just of the kinds of oral narratives that Moretti knows well and that



he evokes in both his references to Propp and to Bakhtin's recurrent attention to orality. For Moretti's desire to use graphs, maps, and trees to make the history of the novel more perspicuous points to the novel's loneliness and vulnerability even in its triumph. For the story of the survival of the novel is also very much the story of the disappearance of other narrative forms—the disappearance of painting and sculpture that could tell the story of Narcissus and Echo or the stories of Jonah and Noah, the movement of drama into the margins of public life, and the death-by-preservation of oral narratives that exist as their own fossil remains within the pages of books.

Any study of the evolutionary history of any representational form, in other words, needs to incorporate into itself an account of its own nature—the things it is made of. One of the great advantages that books have had is that it has been hard, since the advent of the printing press, to eliminate all the copies of a particular story. Narratives that have been recounted in marble or limestone, or in paint on canvas, that have existed in unique copies have been vulnerable to time or iconoclasm, and their survival depended on sketches. But the multiplicity of copies of literary narratives—or, for that matter, the simple use of words—should not blind us to the pressures on the distribution system for narratives, should not make us imagine that they are always infinite in a virtual age or that Darwinian survivals straightforwardly reflect the ways in which novelistic production met consumer approval. For, as St. Clair has argued, in an extension of his work on the effects of intellectual property law and the publishing cartels of the period 1500–1900, the claiming of words as private property itself alters the possibilities for writing.

Here I'd like to commend not merely an attention to the distribution system for narratives and an attention to its effects. I'd also like to urge that our histories give a certain pride of place to individual examples that particularly address such questions about their own reception. Moretti talks about wanting to get away from a criticism that focuses on a diminishingly small canon because one can only admit into the canon an incredibly small number of texts or images that one has time to work into uniqueness. I think he's surely right about the kind of perfectibilist canon that Matthew Arnold introduced in "The Study of Poetry" as he lifted up various lines and poets for praise, only to conclude that they weren't, finally, really perfect. But I have two stories I want to tell you to give you a sense of what I would put in any literary history I might imagine now, and I raise these two examples because it's hard for me to think of them as delivering themselves in anything other than the units in which they appear—precisely because it would be impossible to identify the moments of self-differentiation and self-estrangement with any other units.



My first example is a Richard Prince painting (displayed in the recent retrospective of his work at the Guggenheim in New York). It is, in actuality, a speaking picture. On the canvas are stenciled the outlines of various letters that make up the following words: "I went to see a psychiatrist. He said, 'Tell me everything.' I did. And now he's doing my act." The joke is a joke not simply because of what it says but also because it describes a complete circuit. Anyone can remember it. And, were someone to say, as people are always alleged to have said about paintings of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, "I could do that myself," she would be right. With a little care of the kind that Martha Stewart has taught many to cultivate, one could prepare a canvas and stencil the letters exactly as Prince did. And the question about artistic originality doesn't stop there. For Prince draws his joke, as you probably all realized even if you hadn't heard it before, from collections of jokes that Borscht-Belt comedians once assembled as prompt books. This painting is one canvas hung on a wall, or—as Prince does the same joke on various occasions—several canvases hung on walls. With the unique instance—or the multiply unique instance—of the repeated story, Prince makes his painting something very nearly akin to a graph or a map or a tree of the tensions about the reproducibility of writing that a painting can highlight. The joke not as specific content to be parsed but the joke as maximal orality. Or, as another one of Prince's jokes puts it, "Man walking out of a house of questionable repute, muttered to himself, 'Man, that's what I call a business . . . you got it, you sell it, and you still got it.'" (Prince's title is "The Literature Rack.") But maximal orality—the joke that stays with you, that you give away and continue to have—with the condition of scarcity of the unique painting, even as the oxymoronic multiply-unique painting.

Here, lest I seem to be counseling a simple return to an oral tradition long departed, I should say that I mean to raise the question of how texts or paintings of texts might make us their transmitters and develop our consciousness of the conditions of their transmissibility. St. Clair has (along with James Raven, Peter Garside, and others) shifted attention from the issue of documentable and surmisable influence—one writer's having said she read another, the intuitable echoes of one writer's work in another. He offers information about exactly how many copies of particular texts were available in the English Romantic period and thus discusses the conditions of possibility for the apprehension of various texts, thinking, quite plausibly, that readers cannot activate or actualize a text that they don't have.

Yet even the important work being done on the circulation of printed materials and Moretti's attempt to use novelistic genres to point toward the differentiations to be drawn among various eras leave out the way

in which certain texts organize their own set of questions about their relation to the market in which they are elements. The Prince painting creates maximal interchangeability among its various different readers and recounters, but it also manages to stifle the notion of perfect equivalence among its transmitters as we come up against the sense of the anachronistic character of the jokes. Readable, hearable at any time, they are also marked by time. The jokes are, on the one hand, perfectly circular and homogeneous and, on the other, no longer really tellable. Out of apparently perfect conditions of circulation, the joke generates a language of its own obsolescence or obsolescence.

My second exhibit is Edgar Allan Poe's *The Gold-Bug*. There the narrator goes to visit a friend whom he knows casually rather than well; the friend hands him a drawing he's made of an insect he's found that he thinks is rare to the point of being an entomological discovery; the paper on which the drawing was done turns out, in the presence of the heat of a fire during an unaccustomedly cold spell, to hold a drawing of a death's head that coincides almost exactly in size and general shape to the drawing of the beetle on the other side and another drawing of a goat's head; and these drawings come to be recognized as elements of a coded message that gives directions to the location of an immense treasure.

Two aspects of the tale concern me here. First, the question of value. The tale initially establishes the value and importance of the message simply by understanding its material (deploying the materials of the writing almost as a social scientist would). The paper—or what had initially appeared to be paper—turns out to be parchment, and parchment in the oblong shape of a slip “as might have been chosen for a memorandum—for a record of something to be long remembered and carefully preserved.”<sup>25</sup> Second, the question of endurance or continuing existence. The tale suggests the evanescence or fragility of the message even in the process of reporting on its recovery. For the importance of the message—its needing to have been written as a memo by its author to himself—also points to its own susceptibility to loss. Roland Barthes describes reading as an activity we renew because we forget, but this is nowhere truer than with the memo: we all compose memos on the assumption that we will forget. Yet these memos are indices that can wander at a great remove from the things they point to. And Poe's tale, even in describing the recovery of an immense and virtually imperishable treasure, also charts the hazards of applying the directions of the decoded message. Legrand, the central character who has accidentally found the message, must both locate places associated with long-deceased former inhabitants of the island and also see how very nearly the reference to the seventh limb of the tulip poplar might have been rendered

inaccurate over time (since the *Liriodendron Tulipiferum*, the tulip-tree or tulip poplar [*L. tulipifera*], is a self-pruning tree that sheds its limbs in the course of growing and since the seventh branch named in the memo has died but not fallen by the time that Legrand, his servant Jupiter, and the narrator start their count [571]).

And then there's just the matter of misunderstanding in the application of the directions, as Jupiter drops the plumb line from the left rather than the right eye socket of the seventh branch of the tulip tree (so that an initial difference of two and a half inches that establishes the direction produces a substantial divergence when extended fifty feet). The tale constantly reminds us of its interest in indices and indexicals (so that most pronouns seem to need to be discussed); Legrand speaks of the bug as the index of the gold, and we are also told how far off one can quickly go in calculating on the basis of a small misidentification of the thing to which the index points. But perhaps the importance of the index displays itself in nothing so much as the prominence of the article "the" in the memo itself. Memos like the one on the parchment are condensed, telegraphic, pointed. The one in *The Gold-Bug* contains no verbs. What it does include, and to a remarkable degree, is articles—with "a" appearing twice and "the" appearing a full six times in the forty-five word memo.

The presence of the articles requires some explanation, I think, since memos as such typically discard them (as anyone can confirm by consulting their own grocery lists and Mapquest). The articles wouldn't be necessary to the memo under the ordinary conditions of a natural language. Yet the inclusion of the articles crucially enables the translation of the cipher, if only because it sustains the relative frequencies of the various letters of English, so that the letter "e" is predominant and "prevailing" (588). The possibility of decipherment—translation itself—here seems to rest on maintaining those frequencies and proceeding as if articles themselves were necessary to that purpose.

The memo on the parchment puts the memo's author and the memo's finder in equivalent positions. The memo's author had known both what he had written and also that he would forget. He, if he hadn't lost the parchment, would have had to work to decipher the directions that he had hidden from others—and himself—in writing in code. But, as I suggested earlier, I think that this particular tale is one that illustrates the importance of entire texts—as well as the units larger than whole texts and smaller than whole texts that Moretti commends. For while free indirect style (that smaller unit that Moretti features) continually chastens and constrains the individual speaker, substituting her intuitable words for a deductive nether nonvoice compounded of first person and third, Poe's tale goes farther. It disgraces individual voice and individual

psychology altogether in the process of having the unnamed narrator and the servant Jupiter conjecture that Legrand is insane and then allowing Legrand to pose as mad.

It's at this point that it becomes easy to see that the entire text—nothing smaller—has generated an amalgam of intuited and intuitable, on the one hand, and deduced and deductive, on the other, that is a larger scale, non-character-based version of free indirect style. The friction between Jupiter's dialect and Legrand's more standard English, that is, has forced the words they actually utter to seem to be arrived at by deduction. And this process represents in miniature the larger collision between the natural language the characters and the author speak and the artificial language of the code.

The ability to identify what we might think of as free indirect language in Poe's tale makes it possible to defend a claim of Casanova's about Kafka that various commentators have criticized. Her suggestion is that Kafka's style was profoundly affected by his deliberate attempt to inflect the German he knew with the Yiddish that he didn't, and such a claim can easily be recognized as a version of the suggestion that I'm making about Poe—that texts (as opposed to individual characters) employ free indirect language when they are operating with a combination of a known and an unknown language simultaneously. Sometimes the phenomenon occurs simply in the collision between different dialects of the same language (which take one another to be so nearly unknown that each must puzzle out the other, as in the tension between Legrand's language and Jupiter's). Sometimes it occurs in the collision between spoken and written forms of the same language (as in the case that Jameson mentions—Camus's *L'étranger*, with its systematic use of the oral *passé composé* for the written *passé simple*).

In moving past the ties to individual characters of free indirect style, free indirect language projects a speaking part for a text, making it a latter-day version of the “it” or “thing” narrative. In the eighteenth century, “it” or “thing” narratives (which, puzzlingly, appear as “spy” narratives in Moretti and Pasanek's roster) recounted the movements of objects. Life narratives of things, they particularly featured the circulation of banknotes and coins. *The Gold-Bug*, in discrediting the verbal exchanges between Legrand and the other characters as, alternately, the ravings of a madman and puzzled tolerance for such ravings, establishes them as a distraction from the story of the memo, an “it” that stresses neither money nor the journey. Instead, this “it” narrative sounds almost as if it were an autobiographical account of the narrative's discovery of its own attributes and powers. Imagine *The Gold-Bug* as memoir—something like what Mel Brooks's “2000 Year Old Man” gives us when he recounts not just the discovery of fire or the use of the first language (the language,

“Rock”). The tale that suddenly recognizes the possibilities of writing on both sides of a flat page, and of binding such pages together to make them less easily misplaced, is a tale that has learned to speak a language that is sublime or social scientific because it does not really locate itself in individuals and their thought. This is a text so autonomous that it has learned how to think for itself and to project its own improvements.

In talking about Poe’s text as I have, I mean to shift our discussion of planetary literature from a discussion about the empirical possibility of anyone’s reading the literature of all languages or reading all the literature of one language. Moreover, I want to suggest that an important observation about language—that it is a language only if it is apprehensible by more than one person—should be attached to individual texts rather than being treated, as it is by Moretti, as if it were an observation about texts and genres that secured the sufficiency of reports. A genuinely planetary approach to literature, I would argue, involves foregrounding the deductive aspects of literary analysis so thoroughly as to emphasize what is deducible over and above what is known by characters (or half-known, half-deduced by the characters to whom free indirect style is assigned). Such a position involves recognizing in the first place that even our close readings are reports—that close reading involves not just the demonstration of what we call literary evidence but also a deductive process that underpins such evidence even as it isn’t contained in it. And the view I’m advocating involves recognizing that Moretti’s progression in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* from the most external and abstract model (the graph of genres) to the least external (the comparison of various instances of free indirect style) is positive—and ought to go farther, to capture writing in its most deductive mode. What I’ve been calling the operation of free indirect language involves relating a language we know to a language we don’t know or no longer know. We can see its movements in Poe’s tale, in Casanova’s account of Kafka, and in Jameson’s references to the eccentric emergence of *passé composé* in Camus.

The conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner has said that Marxism is not an ideology but a methodology, and in the grip of this thought has stenciled words on walls or blasted holes into cutout pieces of plasterboard—sometimes indicating that the idea is in the collection of Carl Andre, sometimes insisting that even home owners who own the walls on which his work is stenciled acknowledge his right to publish other copies. Which means (as the Flaubert of *L’éducation sentimentale* would say): Sometimes painting or writing does as much analysis as any abstract model—even for history and literary history. Sometimes the deductive processes of painting or writing concentrate the elements of texts so thoroughly that they themselves circulate as analysis—language deduced rather than language known.

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

## NOTES

- 1 Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (January–February 2000): 54.
- 2 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," 55.
- 3 Ezra Pound, "Henry James," first published in *Little Review* (August 1918), collected in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 296.
- 4 A variety of different examples might be produced for a variety of languages and literatures. The most famous is Johann Gottfried von Herder's claim for the distinctive spirit of various languages, conceived less as falls into Babel from a supposedly universal language than as evident bases for autonomy. See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 750–79.
- 5 Kaczynski came to be known as the Unibomber. His manifesto about the environment appeared shortly before his arrest for a series of bombings directed primarily at university computer scientists.
- 6 Arthur O. Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," and René Wellek, "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History," in *Romanticism: Points of View*, ed. Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 66–81, 181–206.
- 7 Bertrand Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description," in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912; repr., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 46–59.
- 8 Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).
- 9 Paul de Man, "Excuses," in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 278–301.
- 10 Terry Eagleton has recently engaged a version of this question in his *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), writing that "for one kind of theorist, poems are just meaningless black marks on a page, and it is the reader who constructs them into sense." Eagleton, characteristically, develops this apparently dismissive remark in the direction of evenhanded common sense: "This is true in one sense and false in another" (108). But his remarks about the recognition of the difference between a poem and the stuff in which it appears echo a line that extends back at least as far as Matthew Arnold.
- 11 For a defense of close reading, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003). Spivak proposes the revival of area studies in the post-Cold War era with comparative literature and the humanities playing an important role. She speaks of the importance of noticing "that the sources of literary agency have expanded beyond the old European national literatures" and of attempting to avoid "losing the best of the old Comparative Literature: the skill of reading closely in the original" (6).
- 12 Cleanth Brooks, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes," in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947; New York: Harcourt, 1975), 151n.
- 13 Priscilla Clark Ferguson [Priscilla Parkhurst Clark], *Literary France: The Making of a Culture* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 217, as cited by Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 15–16. Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, hereafter cited in text.
- 14 See Christopher Prendergast, "The World Republic of Letters," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), 1–25. David Damrosch refers to the "implicit triumphalism seen in a work like Pascale Casanova's *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999), which might better be titled *La République parisienne des lettres*. An unsatisfactory account of world literature in general, Casanova's book is actually a good account of the operation of world literature within the modern French context." Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 27.



- 15 Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, précédé de portrait du colonisateur*, with a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre (Paris: Correa, 1957), 126, quoted in Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 259. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001) for a similar line of argument.
- 16 E. M. Cioran, cited in Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 184.
- 17 Moretti, "Planet Hollywood," *New Left Review* 9 (May–June 2001): 101; Christopher Prendergast, "Negotiating World Literature," *New Left Review* 8 (March–April 2001): 100–121 (hereafter cited in text).
- 18 William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 66–121.
- 19 Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 22 (hereafter cited as G).
- 20 William St. Clair, "But What Did We Actually Read?" *Times Literary Supplement*, May 12, 2006, 13–14.
- 21 Nancy Spector, *Richard Prince* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2007), 32.
- 22 Robin Valenza, "How Literature Becomes Knowledge: A Case Study," *ELH* 76, no. 1 (forthcoming, Spring 2009).
- 23 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), 24 (hereafter cited in text).
- 24 Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 176n37, quoted in Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 332–36, esp. 335n33.
- 25 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Gold-Bug," in *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 581 (hereafter cited in text).