theories and methodologies

Beyond Darwinian Distance: Situating Distant Reading in a Feminist *Ut Pictura Poesis* Tradition

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> At bottom, [close reading is] a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously—whereas what we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. (Moretti 48–49)

THE CHALLENGE FACING "DISTANT READING" HAS LESS TO DO WITH FRANCO MORETTI'S ASSERTION THAT WE MUST LEARN "HOW *NOT* TO read" than with his implication that looking should take the place of reading. Not reading is the dirty open secret of all literary critics—there will always be that book (or those books) that you should have read, have not read, and probably won't read. Moretti is not endorsing a disinterest in reading either, like that reported in the 2004 National Endowment for the Arts' *Reading at Risk*, which notes that less than half the adult public in the United States read a work of literature in 2002 (3). In his "little pact with the devil" that substitutes patterns of devices, themes, tropes, styles, and parts of speech for thousands or millions of texts at a time, the devil is the image: trees, networks, and maps—spatial rather than verbal forms representing a textual corpus that disappears from view. In what follows, I consider *Distant Reading* as participating in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition—that is, the Western tradition of viewing poetry and painting as sister arts—to explain how ingrained our resistances are to Moretti's formalist approach. I turn to more recent interart examples to suggest interpretive alternatives to formalism for distant-reading methods.

In "Ars Poetica," Horace's *ut pictura poesis* ("as is painting, so is poetry") compares the two arts to explain why flaws in form might be considered excusable in larger works: "As is painting, so is poetry: some pieces will strike you more if you stand near, and some, if you are at a greater distance: one loves the dark; another, which is not

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afraid of the critic's subtle judgment, chooses to be seen in the light; the one has pleased once the other will give pleasure if ten times repeated" (72). Whereas Horace makes an analogy between poetry and painting, tying their kinship to a question of distance, Simonides focuses on the arts' opposition. Plutarch says that "Simonides calls painting silent [mute] poetry, and poetry speaking painting." Though most of the sister-arts tradition is characterized as a rivalry between representational forms, twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry has focused increasingly on the ethics of representation—particularly the ethics of looking and describing as a socially constructed activity. Drawing from feminist revisions of interarts engagements, I address Moretti's positioning of the distant reader as scientific observer and the unnecessary contest his rhetoric establishes between spatial and verbal representations. Looking to recent ekphrastic examples—poetry about the visual arts—I suggest that distant reading, untethered from formalism, can nonetheless present the literary scholar with valuable methodological opportunities.

Conditions of Distance

Thus far, most debates over distant reading weigh its merit against that of close reading and focus on the reader's or observer's position in relation to the text. The word *reading*, though, obscures the fact that the "condition of knowledge" required by distance reorients representational modalities from verbal to spatial. Representations of distant reading depend on visual metaphors, shape, proximity, color, or size in the search for repetition or change in patterns and trends. Drawing from evolutionary theory, Moretti proposes distant reading as a formalist approach to literary history that employs concentrated attention and observation to break language into smaller units that in aggregate can be rendered metaphorically and spatially. In his earlier essays in *Distant Reading*, methods of identifying smaller units, such as "clues" that are collected through close reading (80), give way in the book's later essays to the promise of computer-assisted units of measure, such as the number of words in a novel's title ("Style, Inc.") or in exchanges between characters ("Network Theory, Plot Analysis"). Tracing literary features as measurable units that take on spatial form as trees, maps, graphs, and network diagrams, he argues that as a series of "abstract social relationships," form provides "in its own modest way an analysis of power" (58–59).

Few are likely to disagree with his underlying argument that power (economic, aesthetic, labor, political) influences the selection of literary texts dividing the canon from what he calls, following Margaret Cohen, the "great unread" (45). The problem isn't that he creates models or makes abstractions; literary historians have been doing so for a long time. However, when we substitute looking for reading, we reorient the critical perspective from close to distant, introducing an epistemological and cultural shift in the observer's perspective as well. For the feminist scholar, the relocation of the critical gaze to a position of omniscient authority, combined with the dehumanizing scientific discourse that describes the separation of textual features from the whole, presents fundamental problems. Looking is never a neutral activity, but much of *Distant Reading* addresses literary history from the authoritative position of an omniscient scientific gaze. Style is broken into "discrete features" and "small changes" (163, 192). At the sentence level, clues—measured by their absence, presence, necessity, or visibility—are displayed as "trees," which serve as "cognitive metaphors" bridging the verbal and the visual (76). As a result, distant reading sounds a lot like literary Darwinism, in which objectivist scientific observation reveals literary form with the clarity and immediacy of a single image. This literary Darwinism is most visible in "The Slaughterhouse of Literature,"

when Moretti describes form as "*the repeatable element of literature*" visible over "many cases and many years." Moreover, the repeatable pattern—which, he suggests elsewhere, is best represented graphically—can be used to refute and silence his rivals: "This, then, is what formalism can do for literary history: teach it to smile at the colourful anecdote beloved by New Historicists" (86). Consequently, the move from observing discrete features to arranging them graphically becomes critically and ideologically charged; the ability to immediately impress a truth on the viewer by using an image seemingly distinguishes the distant reader as superior critic.

Distant Reading reignites long-standing philosophical, political, and cultural tensions in its attempt to transcend socially constructed boundaries between the temporal and spatial arts, boundaries most memorably articulated in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting* (1766). Lessing generalizes the domains of literature and painting as necessarily adhering to what he argues are the natural boundaries of their art: literature is necessarily time-bound, and the plastic arts are confined to the limitations of space (7–9). As W. J. T. Mitchell points out in *Iconology*, critics have questioned Lessing's boundaries, and yet "time and space are never innocent" (98); their contest is rife with ideological investments such that transgressing the boundaries of one—as Moretti does by spatializing literature—sets in motion a critical chain reaction. Formalism leads Moretti to argue that "[l]ess is more" so that he can concentrate on specialized textual features. But features extracted at an artificially objective distance understandably raise questions, and the methods by which we arrive at less are not only unclear but also problematic—less can also be less. Less can represent the overt assumption of power to silence and marginalize difference. He and other cultural critics agree that counting and being counted matters, even as such an activity can be made to serve different purposes. Casting a wider net by accessing larger volumes of text is certainly an important step toward recovering the 99.5% of literature that goes unread, but neither more text nor machine reading can diminish the problematic situation of the distant, objective viewer (66).

Since Moretti borrows ideas from evolutionary theory, one might expect him to be more conscious about the vexed role distant, dispassionate observation plays in the history of science, in which counting, dissecting, and abstracting features are also responsible for some of the worst examples of oppression. Instead, in "Network Theory, Plot Analysis," he turns to the promise of a "stern adulthood of statistics," which he describes as an antidote to the "theology" of literary studies (215). Whether Moretti is counting lengths of titles or words exchanged between characters in social-network diagrams of narratives, his formalism leads him to presume we can measure and observe texts from an ideal distance that will enable us to perform a "better formal analysis than we already do" (204). Perhaps distant reading is less in need of better statistics than a new approach to critical distance, an approach that can be seen in contemporary examples of ekphrasis.

My criticism here differs from that leveled at the Stanford Literary Lab when "Network Theory, Plot Analysis" was first published in *New Left Review* in 2011. For example, what first struck Kathryn Schulz in *The New York Times* as troubling is that "Moretti isn't studying a science. Literature is an artificial universe, and the written word, unlike the natural world, can't be counted on to obey a set of laws." Schulz's anxieties echo Lessing's: distant reading defies the artificial laws of art that divide spatial and temporal planes by representing the living word with spatial forms. Moretti's willingness to transgress these laws seems particularly fruitful for cultural criticism, especially if it helps expose literary histories that do not depend on the

genius of a rarified few. As an "artificial universe," literature is fertile ground for challenging our assumptions about literary selection.

Time and Space

The transition from time-bound linguistic representations of form to spatial representations of distant reading is not ideologically neutral. As he transitions from using tree as metaphor to tree diagrams and graphs in "Style, Inc." and network maps in "Network Theory, Plot Analysis," Moretti reasserts a political contest evident in his claim that the new historicists will be silenced by the superiority of literary forms rendered as images. The "stern adulthood of statistics" is designed to freeze the narrative-bound arguments of the new historicists, rendering those critics speechless (215). The act of spatializing literary representation, then, is professionally motivated. Moretti's distant reading is designed to assert a superior representation of literary history, so the failure of the *Hamlet* network diagrams in "Network Theory, Plot Analysis" is unsatisfying to him. About the play's social-network diagrams, he writes, "Four hours of action, that become this. Time turned into space: a character-*system* arising out of many character-*spaces*, to use Alex Woloch's concepts in *The One vs. the Many*." Later he adds, "The past becomes the past, yes, but it never disappears from our perception of the plot. Making the past just as visible as the present: that is one major change introduced by the use of networks" (215, 218). However, spatial representations are not unfettered from time. While Moretti presents the visualization of textual data as the spatial representation of the play's linear narrative, the density, incompleteness, and complexity of the graphs make it impossible to convey the entire plot.

Stymied by the limits of technology, "Network Theory, Plot Analysis" relies on hand-drawn relationships among the players in *Hamlet* and opportunistically uses network theory to present a visual display of the text. Despite Moretti's misgivings about the hand-drawn networks, the *Hamlet* visualizations reveal that social-network analysis might represent one aspect of how plot operates, and they identify centrality using a narrow definition of relationship: speech acts. Empirically, however, the graphs are failures. They are not abstracted, computer-generated distant readings that extract distinct, formal narrative elements that represent Shakespeare's plot, as Moretti and his team at the Literary Lab had hoped. However, one might argue that the graphs' failures invite play, recalling the critic from a distant view into conversation. As Moretti explains, "[O]ne can *intervene* on a model; make experiments. . . . [W]e would never think of discussing *Hamlet*—without Hamlet." He continues, "But this is exactly what network theory tempts us to do: take the Hamlet-network . . . and remove Hamlet to see what happens" (220). Manipulating the social-network model leads Moretti to consider, for example, if Horatio is more important to the structure of the play's social connectedness than Claudius. The model, instead of simply showing that Hamlet is central to *Hamlet*, invites the reader and the critic to reorient their perspectives—a strategy that might be used to address concerns about scientific scrutiny. By intervening in the model, we also acknowledge that it is no longer the original text but a new creation. Alterations to the network do not change the text. The text corpus becomes a new object of study, adding to, rather than detracting from, the available range of critical approaches we can bring to studying *Hamlet*.[1]

Moretti's failure in "Network Theory, Plot Analysis" to create a perfect network visualization is perhaps a feature, not a bug, in methodological design. He writes, "[W]hat I took from network theory was its basic form of visualization: the idea that the temporal flow of a dramatic plot can be turned into a set of two-dimensional signs—vertices (or nodes) and edges—that can be grasped at a

single glance" (211). While Moretti includes fourteen graphs of *Hamlet*'s network in the chapter, not one is satisfactorily representative of the play's plot on its own, much less interpretable in a "glance." As the drawings, mappings, experimentations, and play unfold, so too does the fiction that images are not also time-bound. Visualizations may be spatially arranged, but their interpretation unfolds over time. Immediacy is the image's greatest myth, so where Moretti hopes that maps, graphs, and trees might display "the *regularity* of the literary field," its "patterns, its slowness," he discovers that visualizations are imperfect vessels (86). Even if discernible visual patterns appear out of the "stern adulthood of statistics," they are unlikely to beguile and silence his academic rivals.

Distant Reading That Is Not Formalism

At the heart of *Distant Reading* is an ekphrastic invitation: "Come look with me." It is the same invitation the poet offers the reader when presenting an image, opening up a social exchange in which "reference to a second art gives a new and important role to the reader-spectator, who shares the writer's contemplation of an external artifact" (Stein 4). The situation of ekphrasis—the realization of an image through language—is a social encounter that raises ethical concerns. (As *sister arts* implies, ekphrastic relations can be amicable and contentious.)[2] Similarly, Simonides's contrasting of the arts—poetry as painting that speaks and painting as mute poetry—helps illustrate the political, cultural, and even moral stakes in describing an unseen, silent object. Therefore, when looking at art and representing otherness, the ekphrastic poet faces ethical challenges similar to those faced by the distant reader. The object of the gaze—whether an artwork or a text corpus—comes to depend on another medium to make itself present to the reader. According to Mitchell, the *ut pictura poesis* tradition is rife with political, moral, and social contests that are exacerbated in Western civilization because the seemingly transparent image repeatedly challenges the authority of language—and, by association, of theology. Language must fend off the image's assault by explaining the image away with words (*Picture Theory* 227). Despite ekphrasis's challenging representational landscape, twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets—aware of the ethical difficulties the ekphrastic situation presents—have approached ekphrasis with empathetic, socially adept strategies from which distant reading may benefit.

Just as the ekphrastic poet considers how to respond to the ideological challenges of representing the visual image, so too distant readers must consider the cultural, ethical, and political stakes of their observational position. If distance is a "condition of knowledge," we must consider the social, political, and ethical contexts that shape distance, just as we would consider these contexts in other forms of critique. The situation of distant reading requires that a literary critic or historian present a textual corpus that is inaccessible (because of its size) to an audience. In distant reading, scholars use computation and statistics to describe the collective literary body by extracting notable features that are rendered as an image, which the literary historian or critic then invites the reader to look at together. Since the explicit and implicit violence done in the name of extracting "representative" features—for example, in the case of the French naturalist Georges Cuvier and Saartjie Baartman[3]—is well-known, the literary critic engaged in distant reading must be not only conscious of but also responsive to the potential dangers of distance as a condition of knowledge.

Moretti's reliance on computation and his confidence in the omniscience of his data collection obscure the inherent social dynamics of scientific observation. Does distant reading as a methodology, however, necessitate an omniscient point of view? Perhaps

not. Elsewhere I have argued, for example, that feminist strategies for text analysis would consider the social, political, and ethical contexts that shape quantitative methods. Such feminist and similar postcolonial and queer strategies can be used to situate distant readings of large text corpora. Rather than dismiss distant reading as inherently objectivist, we can expand the range of possible stances we bring to the method.

Poets such as Elizabeth Alexander, Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Cole Swensen, Jorie Graham, and Susan Howe adopt observational positions in their ekphrastic poetry that counter or avoid visual objectivism. For example, in "The Venus Hottentot," Alexander adopts, through polyvocality, both the speaking position of Cuvier and the voice of Baartman, the woman on whom the Hottentot in the poem is based. Cuvier remarks, "Science, science, science! / Everything is beautiful," leading him to generalize that

> [f]ew will
>
> ever see what I see
> through this microscope.
>
> Cranial measurements
> crowd my notebook pages,
>
> and I am moving closer,
> close to how these numbers
>
> signify aspects of
> national character.

To which the Hottentot replies:

> Observe the wordless Odalisque.
> I have not forgotten my Xhosa
> clicks. My flexible tongue
> and healthy mouth bewilder
> this man with his rotting teeth.

Similarly, Bishop's speaker in "The Map" proposes that scientific representation requires a delicate hand: "Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West / More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers colors" (3). As Stephen Cheeke suggests, "Sometimes the encounter with alterity takes on special charge when it is not merely an occasion for the discovery of difference, but a place of *relation* and therefore of the possibility of exchange. As such, it may be the model for a more positive evaluation of aesthetic experience in terms of recognition or assent" (6). Or as Michel Foucault states, "The relation of language to painting is an infinite relation" (10). How might similar strategies enrich the literary historian's distant-reading perspective? Could we, for example, create egocentric social-network graphs that approach corpora from the perspective of texts that did not survive the evolution of literary forms? Could we, as Moretti does in *Hamlet*'s network, consider how the absence of popular literary texts influences computational models?

The motivation behind Moretti's collapsing of formalist approach and distant observer is personal. Moretti insists that "for me, formal analysis is the great accomplishment of literary study, and is therefore also what any new approach—quantitative, digital, evolutionary, whatever—must prove itself against: prove that it can do formal analysis, better than what we already do. Or at least: equally well, in a different key. Otherwise, what is the point?" (204). Indeed, what might be the point? Those of us who are interested in leveraging distance as a possible methodology still have more work to do to figure out what else might be possible.

Schulz is also upset about the danger Moretti's network analysis poses by fixating the living, breathing literary work and placing it into the space of a limited and admittedly insufficient network that cannot fully represent the text. "A lot goes by the wayside in this transformation," she notes, "including the content of those exchanges and all of Hamlet's soliloquies (i.e., all interior experience); the plot, so to speak, thins." Loss is not unique to distant reading. All forms of repre-

sentation—photographs, verbal descriptions, sculpture, audio recordings, video—involve loss. Tensions caused by such loss energize and complicate the ekphrastic situation. In his introduction to "Ekphrasis and the Other," Mitchell, likening poetic description of images to the situation of two radio personalities describing photographs to each other and to the listener, notes that words can "cite" but never "sight" the image (*Picture Theory* 191). No amount of description can present the listener with an exact reproduction. What Moretti promises of his visualizations recalls John Keats's "still unravish'd bride of quietness" on the Grecian urn, frozen moments that will leave us speechless (194). Despite Moretti's best efforts, though, not one social-network diagram stands on its own in "Network Theory, Plot Analysis" or anywhere else in *Distant Reading* as a perfect formal representation of the textual corpora. Each figure depends on a relation to other graphs, charts, trees, and maps—not to mention the text. While Moretti may hope that form rendered as a stilled spatial-temporal visualization will provide a final word, the *ut pictura poesis* tradition—in the mediation of text and image—suggests such a visual representation is unlikely to exist.

The image's representational loss, its complexity, its refusal of immediacy, its unwillingness to obey the poet's hopeful formal union, energize the antagonism that Mitchell describes as inherent in ekphrasis. Whether the image is Percy Bysshe Shelley's Medusa, who threatens to steal the poet's breath with her "ever-shifting mirror / of all the beauty and terror there—"; Keats's urn, which responds with empty syllogisms: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (195); or countless others, images frustrate our desire to fixate them, even as they seemingly strip away complexity. More important, the impulse to formalize and freeze the textual corpus in the frame of the visualization seems likely to do a disservice to both text and image.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century ekphrastic poetry teaches us that attempts to fixate the image, as Shelley and Keats do, only devolve in competition, but polyvocality, conversation, and community open up looking and representing as activities that lead to outcomes that are more productive and creative. For example, in *William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting*, Terence Diggory writes that Williams "paradoxically presents for interpretation an object that is turned away from the interpreter, like Brueghel's Virgin with her 'downcast eyes'"—a position of "subjection" that, Diggory argues, Williams entwines so closely with a "position of equality" that the two positions "are better viewed as correlatives rather than alternatives" to one another (104). In *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux points out that in "Mourning Picture" Adrienne Rich "speaks . . . for/as the image, deploying prosopopoeia as a tool of political liberation. It would become standard technique in feminist ekphrasis of the second half of the century as a way of envoicing women silenced in an image" (104). Alternatively, Bonnie Costello's *Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life, and the Turning World* reveals how Bishop's ekprhastic still lifes delicately balance the *vanitas* of description with careful attention to entropy. Costello writes, quoting Bishop, "Bishop's still lifes can display, then, poverty amidst riches or riches amidst poverty. It is a difficult ethical balance that she would struggle with through her work. How can 'pity' (think of how often the word arises in 'Questions of Travel' and how ambiguous its referent) combine with pleasure?" (90). The ethics of display and description lie at the heart of Bishop's art. We might turn to these examples, and countless others, for alternatives to objectivism in the development of distant-reading practices.

What frustrates Moretti at the end of "Network Theory, Plot Analysis" about his inability to draw spatiotemporal models that can speak for literary history is a problem that

offers the most promise to those of us who wish to use distant reading: text and image are never satisfied with each other. Whereas he hopes that distant reading will render a more perfect visual form, the history of visual and verbal representation suggests that the conversation and collaboration between close and distant reading, image and text, are most fruitful when they are ongoing, active, energized, and collaborative. Moretti shifts here from hoping for a perfect form in "Style, Inc." to quoting Paul Klee: "We construct, and construct, and yet, intuition remains a good thing" (211). Moretti believes the problem is one that can be fixed through future iterations of his work, but the *ut pictura poesis* tradition reveals that the problem is representational, not technical. The network graphs, instead of explaining *Hamlet*, draw even Moretti—whose explicit goal is to not read—into renewed engagement with the play, underscoring a recognition that distant reading is unlikely to become an end in itself. Inexorably, distant reading will invite us into the spaces left behind in its maps, graphs, and diagrams to explore through close reading and observation. While he may continue to search for the ideal spatial form to describe literary corpora through distant reading, we are not required to do the same. Switching readerly perspectives from close to distant to everywhere in between will more likely create networks of reading and representation—communities of selection and refiguration that combine several approaches. To move beyond distant reading, we must learn to create and to occupy many new critical distances—not by throwing distant reading out but by adding new models that demonstrate how we might do it differently.

Notes

1. Consider, for example, the productive critical deformance described in McGann (137–60).

2. Loizeaux offers readings of alternative ekphrastic relations.

3. Gould tells the story of Baartman, an African woman whose body, after her death, was dissected by Cuvier, who claimed to see apelike features in the remains. The account demonstrates the dangers of objectivist scientific observation.

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