

The Atlas and the Slaughterhouse: Moretti's Perspective on Canonicity

OANA FOTACHE

Résumé: *Le sujet de l'article porte sur les enjeux de la théorie historiographique de Franco Moretti, vue en relation avec le canon littéraire et avec les débats autour de ce concept, devenus très vifs dès 1960. L'Atlas et l'Abattoir sont deux métaphores qui, selon Franco Moretti, rendent plus visibles les dimensions réelles du champ littéraire et arrivent à repositionner la question du découpage historique et de la canonicité, en dépassant les coordonnées traditionnellement acceptées de notre discipline.*

Keywords: *Franco Moretti, canon, genre, literary field, literary history*

The canonical debate has always been alive throughout the historical unfolding of literature, even – or perhaps especially – in its pre-autonomous age. As Jan Gorak maintains in his important book *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (1991), this is one literary idea whose genesis with the Ancient Greeks still illuminates contemporary understanding. Gorak remarks that “Aristotle understands *canon* as a flexible measuring rod for human activities whereas Augustine sees it as the only intermittently comprehensible source for a divine plan. Future generations of sacred and secular critics will often seek to combine elements of both positions, despite the contradictions in which this involves them. Later critics want their canonical authors to appear mysterious and endlessly fascinating but also to serve as the source, as Scripture was for Augustine, of the binding traditions that regulate a community.”¹ In other words, to combine the ambiguous charms of Medusa’s gaze with the prestige and immobility of a founding figure like Homer’s. Both seek an arresting effect on the audience; and what else did Harold Bloom express through his concept of “canonical strangeness” in *The Western Canon* (1994)?

What is at stake here is the question of agency; the canon-maker (the clerical or secular critic) is also responsible for the social function that a particular canon is bound to serve. This holds true even for the defendants of the aesthetic principle as the singular evaluation standard of canonicity, such as Bloom.

It is not my intention here to trace the intricate history of the notion of canon. I am more interested in its crisis and ways of survival. The following pages will focus therefore on the case of a contemporary anti-canonical literary theorist, Franco Moretti.

As many critics have pointed out, the opening of the canon and the current debates over its principles and purposes originate in the 1960s with their questioning of

academic curricula and the emergence of the cultural studies perspective. Yet beyond the immediate context of the '60s, the "explanation" for this crisis lies in the very notion of a closed canon, a notion developed far back in the Early Christian era by St. Augustine and other Church Fathers². A closed canon is grounded on *normativity* and *selection*, which in turn trigger issues of authority, and is definitely more powerful and effective than an open one. According to Rudolf Pfeiffer³, the term was first put to literary use in 1768, as a list of authors (which is in no way an indicator that such a practice was not active before this date). So during the Enlightenment individuality as a constitutive principle becomes a defining feature of the canon, besides selection and its normative function. And from their beginnings in the Romantic Age, literary histories assumed the mission of putting forward national canons that would serve identity and didactic purposes. In this latter respect the Romantics aligned with their predecessors. With the national conscience as the new norm, replacing the classical understanding of the canon but preserving the necessity of a referential standard, Romanticism imposed its own literary canon. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht points to this affinity between "canon" and "classic"⁴ that is still preserved in later literary periods. The propensity towards perennial value animates post-classical canons up to the historical avant-garde movements.

Attempts to counteract the culturalist move against the classical academic canon, a move that often performed a partial deconstruction and simply replaced a canon with another (or with many others, actually) have been made before Bloom's influential book. I will only mention the different perspectives adopted by Charles Altieri⁵ ("An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon", 1983) and John Guillory⁶ (*Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, 1993), before passing on to the discussion of my case study.

Altieri defines canons in a classical manner, as "selective memories of traditions or ideals"⁷. Yet he insists that the construction of a canon is a historical phenomenon and the issue of who has the authority to make the selection is crucial. The critic reiterates the new historical credo according to which "the theoretical terms needed to speak about a canon [are] severely tarnished by the history that authorizes them."⁸ This circular movement proves the artificiality and also, paradoxically, the inevitability of the canon in the framework of the literary age it purports to organize. Both the classical and the subsequent canons convey at the same time a normative and a descriptive intention.

Similarly, but in the wake of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the literary/artistic field, John Guillory refers to the historical and also institutional conditions that influence the inclusion of some authors into the canon. At the same time, since it represents "the cultural capital" of the Academy, the canonic principle cannot be undermined by canon revision or enlargement. Guillory proposes that the debate on the canon should be distinct from the one on multiculturalism, as "the most interesting question [...] is not the familiar one of which texts or authors will be included in the literary canon, but [...] why the debate represents a crisis in literary study"⁹.

The context of this debate is both historical and theoretical. From a certain understanding of the canon emerges a particular literary historical narrative that attempts to represent the process of (national) cultural identity formation through literature and provide a set of literary norms in the process. The ancient Aristotelian view on canon as measurement still holds its validity, as Gorak remarked. Before Franco Moretti, several other theorists tried to imagine alternative ways of conceiving literary tradition and literary historiography. Among them, the Russian Yuriy N. Tynianov, a member of the Formalist School, who in 1929 published a groundbreaking article titled “On Literary Evolution”¹⁰. Expanding the principles and argument formulated in the 1928 paper “Theses on Language” (co-authored with Roman Jakobson), Tynianov’s main point here is that literary history should abandon its obsession with the psychological study of the authors and with establishing a causal relationship between the writers and their *milieu*, and focus instead on the literary system and its social and historical connections. He proposes to consider the literary work and literature as a whole as complex systems, a view that would be later embraced by Northrop Frye, Claudio Guillén, and others.

Franco Moretti is an Italian-born literary theorist and historian, trained in the Marxist tradition, who later taught comparative literature at Columbia and Stanford universities in the United States. While not being primarily a theorist of the canon, his books on the novel (*The Way of the World*, 1989; *Modern Epic*, 1995; *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900*, 1998; *The Novel*, 2 vols., 2006) and on literary historiography (*Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for Literary History*, 2005; *Distant Reading*, 2013) display a view of the literary field that entails significant consequences on the understanding of the canon as well. Moretti employs the perspective of literary geography in his study of the novel, to which he adds quantitative history and evolutionary theory in his theoretical manifesto *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. His main object of interest is “literature, the old territory (more or less), unlike the drift towards other discourses so typical of recent years”¹¹. This “return” to literary studies represents an argument that Moretti’s Marxist formation should not be read as mere culturalism; yet it is apparent in his view on the literary field as mass production. As similar as this may sound to Tel Quel theorists’ discourse, it is actually very different from their text-centered analysis. Moretti’s view shifts from “the text” to lists of texts which require other methodologies than the usual ones adopted in the field. He writes: “the study of national bibliographies made me realize what a minimal fraction of the literary field we all work on: a canon of two hundred novels, for instance, sounds very large for nineteenth-century Britain (and is much larger than the current one), but is still less than one per cent of the novels that were actually published: twenty thousand, thirty, more, no one really knows – and close reading won’t help here”¹².

This is the only instance in the book where the term “canon” is mentioned. The relationship that preoccupies Moretti is not the one between canon as a (short) list of works and the comprehensive capacity of the audience given the limits of human memory; but the relationship between the amount of what literary history and tradition at large preserve and what is actually written and published during a certain period.

Moreover, the theorist implicitly points here to the connection between the canon understood in the traditional sense and close reading as an analytical tool. (Let us remember that even the large, monumental type of national literary history resorts to close reading inside its monographic chapters.)

How should the literary historian approach his object then? Looking for a third way between the highly selective view of the literary tradition that results in a rigid canon and the equally schematic perspective of cultural studies, Moretti strives to move away from measuring literature towards mapping it. The first book where he tested his theoretical project in a systematic manner is the *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (1998)¹³.

The *Atlas* strives to develop a geography of the novel both theoretically and analytically. The book includes 91 maps that are to be read against the text, not as mere illustrations of the arguments and ideas, but as visual constructs that supplement (and cannot be replaced by) the text. Moretti argues that the expansion in space reflected in the 19th century novel corresponds to the enlargement of the literary field that took place during the same period. Following the model established by Fernand Braudel in his *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949), where the historian's focus shifted from the singular historical 'event' to series, cycles and longer time spans, Moretti studies the novel's relation with the nation-state, the city, and its public. Similarly to Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the chronotope or Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folktale, the individual literary works are replaced by entire forms and genres as objects of the theory.

This interest for categories instead of distinct (canonical) works also informs the five-volume Italian edition of *The Novel (Il Romanzo, 2001-2003)*¹⁴ and its shorter English version¹⁵. The first volume of this latter edition reconstructs the "History, Geography, and Culture" of the Novel at a truly global scale, following the diachronic development of the genre from the Ancient Greeks, then in Medieval France, Premodern China, England during the Enlightenment, India, Latin America, and Africa, to name but a few cultural areas that come under focus in the panoramic chapters.

The second volume deals with novelistic "Forms and Themes": the epic, the supernatural, social types represented in realistic novels, novelistic time, the chronotopes of the sea, innovation and experiment, etc. The large-scale chapters are paired with readings that trace the instantiation of a certain theme, or form, in a particular novel – and these are always canonical novels. Yet their canonicity resides in inaugurating a series, in establishing a prototype that functions *because* it is confirmed by its successors. Some of these novelistic prototypes (or canon peaks, in the traditional perspective) emerge in the middle or towards the end of their series, and consequently reconfigure the whole series that is perceived as such because of them. Literary phenomena that traditional literary histories have cast in the paradigm of the *pre-* and *post-* (be it a period, a school, a movement, or even a certain canonical writer) are placed by Moretti in relatively homogenous series which resemble the formalist paradigms. The apex of the series – the canonical literary work – distinguishes itself because of an exceptional feature that would afterwards be imitated and become habitual.

Anticipating the broad study of the literary field attempted in *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, Moretti published in 2000 an article titled “The Slaughterhouse of Literature”¹⁶. There he traced the origin of a specific device of detective fiction in the stories penned by Arthur Conan Doyle. His choice of a canonical writer is motivated by Doyle’s being canonized by the audience and not by the academic/critical circuit. For Moretti, the space where the first stages of canonization take place is the market, not the school (and here his sociological reading takes a distance from the Marxist economic schemes). The spectacular interpretation of the emergence of clues as a central device for detective fiction is not meant to reinforce Conan Doyle’s status in the history of the genre; the exceptional case study is only the pretext for a move towards different layers of historical analysis – the device and the genre. In Moretti’s words: “Devices and genres: two formal units. A very small formal unit and a very large one: these are the forces behind [...] literary history. Not texts. Texts are real objects – but not objects of knowledge. If we want to explain the laws of literary history, we must move to a formal plane that lies beyond them: below or above; the device, or the genre.”¹⁷

These formal units have the advantage of bringing together canonical and non-canonical texts, and thus do justice to “the great unread”, as Moretti calls the leftovers of the canonical slaughterhouse. Yet the demonstration displays a certain ambiguity, since the canonical peaks are still in place and even reinforced by the analysis. Moretti’s intention is actually not to undermine or revisit the canon; but to enlarge the object of literary history so as to include “the literary field as a whole”. The lesson of Russian formalism has been learnt well: literary periphery is as important as the centre when the historian tries to represent the dynamics of literature.

A similar position had been taken by Alastair Fowler in his 1979 article on “Genre and the Literary Canon”¹⁸. Fowler had two important intuitions: of the plurality of canons in a certain literary period (he counts six of these: official, personal, potential, accessible, selective, and critical); and that of the link between canon and genre. Changes in the canon are connected to the revaluation or devaluation of genres. And some genres are “more” canonical than others in a particular literary system.

Moretti’s focus on peri-canonical literature resorts to literary geography and its atlases in order to cast light on what is generally ignored by literary histories centered on the canon, and thus to reconstruct the lively profile of a literary period. What is still preserved by this distant reading is the totalising view so typical of traditional literary historiography. Working on the largest scale available – that of world literature – totality is hard to avoid; and also hard to accomplish. Moretti’s work on the novel and its genres takes some important steps in this direction.

NOTES

¹ Jan Gorak, 1991. *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*. London: The Athlone Press, p. 34.

² See Gorak, *op. cit.*, Chapter 1.

- ³ Rudolf Pfeiffer, 1968. *History of Classical Scholarship from the Beginning to the End of the Hellenistic Age*. Oxford: Clarendon-Oxford University Press.
- ⁴ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, 1988. "‘Phoenix from the Ashes’ or: From Canon to Classic", in *New Literary History*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Critical Reconsiderations (Autumn, 1988), pp. 141-163.
- ⁵ Charles Altieri, 1983. "An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon", in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Canons (Sep., 1983), pp. 37-60.
- ⁶ John Guillory, 1993. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. The University of Chicago Press.
- ⁷ Altieri, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Guillory, *op. cit.*, p. vii.
- ¹⁰ Yuriy Tynianov, 1929. "On Literary Evolution", in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: an Introductory Anthology*. Ed. Vassilis Lambropoulos and David Neal Miller. Albany: SUNY Press, 1986, pp. 152-162.
- ¹¹ Franco Moretti, 2005. *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for Literary History*. London: Verso, p. 1.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
- ¹³ Franco Moretti, 1998. *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900*. London-New York: Verso.
- ¹⁴ Franco Moretti (ed.), 2001-2003. *Il Romanzo*, 5 vols. Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore.
- ¹⁵ Franco Moretti (ed.), 2006. *The Novel*. Princeton University Press.
- ¹⁶ Franco Moretti, 2000. "The Slaughterhouse of Literature", in *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61.1 (Mar 2000), pp. 207-227.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- ¹⁸ Alastair Fowler, 1979. "Genre and the Literary Canon", in *New Literary History*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Anniversary Issue: II. (Autumn, 1979), pp. 97-119.

University of Bucharest

**L'histoire littéraire en mouvement /
Literary History in Movement**

