

# SCALE, DATA, AND WORLD LITERATURE

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## 3 GOALS

- (1) To describe and rework the way we argue about world literature
  - (2) To consider the relationship between world literature and data-mining
  - (3) To argue for a new ontology of the literary object
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PART I  
LITERARY CRITICISM, THE LAST 15 YEARS

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# THE "CRISIS" IN CLOSE READING

1995 / Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading"

1999 / Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*

2000 / Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature" ("distant reading")

2001 / Wai-chee Dimock, "Deep Time: American Literature and World History"

2003 / David Damsoch, *What is World Literature?*

2003 / Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*

2004 / Christopher Prendergast, ed., *Debating World Literature*

2004 / Bruno Latour, "Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"

2009 / Marcus and Best, "Surface Reading"

2013 / Apter, *Against World Literature*

2013 / "After Critique," special issue of *English Language Notes*

2013 / Moretti, *Distant Reading*

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# A CONFLUENCE OF THREE THINGS

- A renewed interest in the category of the “world” as a figure or even method for literary analysis, conceived geographically, historically, and conceptually (origin: globalization? environmental humanities?)
- A new interest in data-mining/machine reading approaches to literary history (origin: quantification? institutional prestige?)
- A certain exhaustion with prominent modes of reading, addressed to either “close” or “symptomatic” reading (origin: institutional failure? formal shift? midlife crisis?)

*These are distributed differently across the various spheres of national-language and comparative studies of literature, but have at various moments touched on all of them.*

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# CAN WE DISAGGREGATE?

Early on the situation in world literature was to establish two major binaries:

- (1) Moretti, Casanova, and Damrosch, Dimock vs. Spivak and Apter (aka world literature vs. untranslatability)
- (2) Moretti and Casanova vs. Damrosch, Dimock (aka world-systems vs. world literature, data vs. humanism)

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# HISTORICAL SHIFTS

- (1) Though from 2000-2005 we might have been willing to say that Moretti occupied both the world-systems and the quantitative analysis positions, since 2009 his controversial work has focused almost entirely on quantitative analysis. (Stanford Literature Lab) Thus Moretti and Casanova right now no longer “belong” to the same zone.
- (2) The world literature vs. untranslatability debate has largely abandoned the question of distant reading/quantitation, just as Moretti has abandoned the question of world literature (a phrase that appears almost not at all in his work after 2005 or so). Thus the “world literature” debate shifts frames, and is to some extent now largely an institutional question.
- (3) The generally later arrival of the critique of symptomatic reading (in favor of, say, “surface reading” [Sharon Marcus]) can be folded in with “distant reading”—though proponents in neither group would make this argument—if we understand both to belong to a general reaction to the “death of theory,” here conceived as a kind of exhaustion with 30 years of a certain mode of politico-formal critique.

## MORE CONTRASTS

Data/Distant  
Moretti

vs.

Close Reading  
Damrosch, Spivak, Marcus, Dimock, Apter, McGurl

"Beyond" critique  
Moretti, Casanova, Marcus, McGurl

vs.

"Old" (symptomatic) critique  
Damrosch, Spivak, Apter

All this is review. But what if we imagine that most (if not all) of these opposed forces are on the same side? I propose that from a certain perspective they are: that they all (or almost all) seek to substantially *enlarge* the scale at which we discuss literature and literariness. These enlargements are historical (Dimock, Damrosch), geographic (Damrosch, Moretti, Dimock, Casanova, Spivak, Apter), quantitative (Moretti), or systems-oriented (Casanova, McGurl, Moretti).

From this perspective we might say that in the last ten years literary criticism constitutes a *crisis of largeness*.

PART II  
SCALE; OR, THE CRISIS OF LARGENESS



# WHAT IS SCALE?

This suggests that we could usefully think about the role “scale” is playing in some of our recent considerations of literary activity. I want to begin by addressing the way scale is used in another discipline, Geography, where it has a significant history of theoretical and practical debate.

What is analytic scale?

D.R. Montello on “phenomenon scale”:

“Numerous concepts in geography reflect the idea that phenomena are scale-dependent or are partly described by their scale.” ... it is widely agreed that “the scale of analysis must match the actual scale of the phenomenon... Identifying the correct scale of phenomena is, thus, a central problem for geographers.”

Scale is thus method that relates to – reflects, maybe, determines, maybe – its object.

Moretti: close reading *determines* literary history. But let us not be fooled into thinking that our methods are monoscalar. Take close reading.

# ANALYTIC SCALE

Implications?

You can create problems (interesting ones!) for both object and method by changing scale in any direction.

How so?

How can you "think" of world literature or the *longue duree* at scales of close reading?

Solutions?

"Deep time" (affinity without influence); "world literature" (a mode of reading that attends to particular features of the text; typologies of literary systems (Frye; but more recently Beecroft); grand narratives (Auerbach, Lukacs); systems theory; data.

# THE BASIC SCALAR QUESTION

What do the scales at which literature can (or cannot) be analyzed tell us about the phenomenon of literature?

Or a slightly more metadiscursive framing:

What do the scales at which we have analyzed literature tell us about what we think the phenomenon of literature is?

And of course the basic version of the question, which we would have to ask *before* asking the above:

What *are* the scales at which literature *can* be analyzed? Does it make sense to think of literature in scalar terms at all?

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a detour and a caveat

a detour and a caveat

# BRIEF DETOUR 1: THE "DISASTER" OF THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES

That it segregates these questions almost entirely from the work most literature scholars do: one solution to what is in fact a problem calling out for multiple solutions.

This produces tension, suspicion, radicalism, utopianism, conservatism... and, in the politics and institutional politics of higher education, the usual gullible and venal bedfellows.

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# CAVEAT ON EXTRATEXTUALITY

What is the relation between the extratextual and the literary phenomenon? That is, can we restrict literary ontology to a particular field of play ("only the words on the page," e.g.). No. No one reads this way; even the closest of close readers has recourse to the extratextual in a variety of guises (philosophy, history, biography, medium, genre, e.g., but even in a more limited way paratext and context. This is Stanley Fish's deconstruction of a pure textualism: a practical impossibility is taken to be the marker of an ontological stability. But we can also get here via Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*.

The effect in either case is to flatten out literary ontology and to show us that whatever scales are for literature (but also presumably for anything else) they operate as heightened sites of awareness, or more intense clusters of nodes, in an essentially horizontal system in which all levels have access to all other levels in the ontological field.

This leads to my first axiom:

**(Axiom 1) Literary scale has *only* provisional hierarchies; or: the ontology of literary scale is flat.**

PART III  
FIVE ARGUMENTS FROM SCALAR ONTOLOGY



# TOWARDS A SCALAR ONTOLOGY OF LITERATURE

- (1) Literature produces information at a *variety* of scales, ranging from what we might think of as the very “small” (phoneme, rhythm, syntax) to the very “large” (the nature of language or representation, the *Weltanschauung*).
- (2) Close reading is a pattern of analysis that reads evidence at a variety of scales with varying intensities, but involves almost inevitably an attention to small pieces of “data” or “evidence” drawn directly from a “primary” text. In close reading the ratio of interpretation to data is always very high (20 pages on a single sentence, e.g.). Often explanations for the ontological uniqueness of the literary (as resistant to politics or to interpretation, e.g.) rely on how literature acts at this high-ratio scale. To accurately describe close reading would be to describe the system or pattern of scalar relationships that it constructs, and to note how and when certain scales function as interpretive targets (that is, as “interpretations” or “arguments”) and how and when they function as interpretive sources (as data).

(Footnote): Thinking this way may well allow us to bring together—as having roughly the same scalar pattern of analysis—a variety of modes of reading that privilege the movement between small sources (data) and large targets, including New Criticism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and new historicism.

# TOWARDS A SCALAR ONTOLOGY OF LITERATURE

- 3) Some contemporary arguments about literature are obviously about scale: data-mining vs. close reading is quite obviously about scale. But so is, surprise, world literature vs. untranslatability: since here the argument is that the ontology of the smallest scales of the literary object resists any shift into scales that exceed the reach of its "original" language! We cannot make larger-scale claims about world literature because untranslatability means that we are never talking about the *same thing*. (You might think of Dimock's "deep time" as a way of circumventing this critique.)
- 4) We may well want to think of scales as being of different types. For instance we could imagine "material" scales at which literature generates information. By material I mean that they produce in the world some kind of mediatic marker, a physical trace (as for instance a series of vibrations in the air, or a set of marks on stone, or a particular arrangement of marks, vibrations, or writing surfaces) that testifies to their potential activity. Likewise we could imagine a set of "formal" scales, which would have to do with structures and patterns that emerge from modes of social and institutional practice, which the literary object simultaneously uses and expresses. We could then produce a hierarchical model of those scales, as follows:

# MATERIAL AND FORMAL SCALES

## Material scales

*Having to do with the actual objects, their substrates, and their physical forms, and the ways those objects and forms produce and generate meaning; moving from the smaller to the larger, though not without hiccups.*

Phonemes/syllables

Words

Sentences (lines)

Paragraphs (stanzas)

Chapters (sections)

Work (recognized as a “complete” object)

Series of connected works (linked by paratexts)

Oeuvre (linked by biography)

School (linked by social affiliation/membership)

Style (as a “world”-organizing feature)

Medium (like style a possible subtending scale as well)

## Formal scales

*Having to do with structures and patterns that emerge from modes of social and institutional practice, which the literary object simultaneously uses and expresses.*

Figure

Micro-genre (the anecdote, the joke, the dialogue)

Sub-genre (SF, the sonnet; I am cheating with the prefixes)

Genre and Supergenre (novel, *monogatari*, epic, poetry, theater)

Macrogenre (prose, verse, performance)

Mode (epic, pastoral, elegiac)

Cultural type (art, legal document; fiction and nonfiction)

Social form (*Weltanschauung*; see also new historicism)

Historical context (includes scales from the moment to the era)

Species

# TOWARDS A SCALAR ONTOLOGY OF LITERATURE

- 5) And yet: compare the way scalar activity works in literature to the way it works in the visual system. If I want to look at a regular old physical object (say a building) with my physical eye, as I move away from it I lose detail but I may begin to perceive kinds of organization that were invisible too close up. The pebbly concrete resolves into a uniform yellowish-brown, but now I can see how the balconies on the different floors are in tension and symmetry. As I keep moving away I see the building as a chunky geometric solid, and then I can't see it at all, or only as a bump on a skyline. That's how the physical eye works: things get smaller and less internally distinct as distance increases and scale gets bigger.

But the fun thing about some literary texts is that you don't have that kind of inevitable trade-off, or you don't inevitably have it in the same geometric way. Rather, there are little parts that contain much more of the whole than you'd expect, or that seem to contain swaths of context, or whole other works, or possible commentaries that haven't been written yet.

This leads to my second and third axioms:

**(Axiom 2) Literary scale is always (potentially) fractal**

**(Axiom 3) Shifts in literary scale are always (potentially) frictionless**

# PART IV

## FOUR TASKS FOR A SCALAR ONTOLOGY



## SEE THINGS IN A NEW WAY

- (1) Via “phenomenon” scale it forces us to understand our methods as a matter of ontological practice.
  - (2) Placing the various elements of literary scale on a table makes them amenable for certain kinds of intellectual operations (modeled, perhaps, on those of the table of knowledge that Foucault describes in the middle section of *The Order of Things*).
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# HIGHLIGHTS INTERESTING PROBLEMS

1. Asks us to think about how analytic scale interacts with
    - a. Methods of reading that operate at different scales (data-mining vs. close reading, e.g.)
    - b. The enlargement of scale in geographic, historical, or conceptual terms
  2. Returns us, via the relation between the small and large, to the larger problem of freedom and necessity, which we must recognize as a fundamentally “modern” problem that speaks directly to the relation between the (social) sciences and the humanities.
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