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Signs Taken for Wonders by Franco Moretti

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poems themselves, however, certain gaps appear, as the contributors find themselves relying on varieties of theoretical shorthand, such as the aforementioned opposition between imagined and "real" worlds. It is at moments like these that one becomes aware of the need for a sufficiently subtle theory of mediation in English leftist aesthetics, a need that Williams and others have gone part of the way towards fulfilling, but which nevertheless remains a problem.

It would be a serious distortion, however, to imply that this area of interpretation is problematic solely as a result of the contributors' preference for no-nonsense habits of thought, for there are at least two other significant factors involved. The first of these is the ideological atmosphere that prevailed in Italian literary life after the war. The prominence of the neo-realist aesthetic in leftist circles and its endorsement by the Italian Communist Party reenforced the tendency to classify literature according to whether it "addressed" or "evaded reality." By the late fifties and early sixties, the authority of this distinction was clearly declining, but its ghost continued to haunt the aesthetic pronouncements of writers with leftist sympathies for some time afterward; and as a result the contributors to this volume have had to contend with a certain number of statements and formulations that presuppose some version of this dichotomy. The second and more important factor has to do with the limits imposed by the nature of the volume itself. Although the editors are to be commended for refusing to restrict their project to the purely literary matters with which most collections of this sort content themselves, the space of an introductory essay reviewing an author's entire career is in most cases not sufficient to do more than sketch the preconditions of an interpretation that would seek to understand in detail the significance of a body of complex literary texts with respect to the social totality. The editors of *Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy* have performed a valuable service in bringing the works of these writers and their social and historical context to the attention of a wider audience. One hopes that the book will stimulate further interest and encourage others to build on this foundation.

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Signs Taken for Wonders
By Franco Moretti
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Franco Moretti's volume is a collection of seven previously published essays, preceded by a brand-new methodological introduction. The work undoubtedly represents a rich contribution not only to the discussion of the individual topics dealt with (English baroque drama, nineteenth-century novelistic "monsters"—Dracula and Frankenstein—the urban personality in Balzac's novels, nineteenth-century detective fiction, the "tearjerker," Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *Waste Land*), but also to the debate "on the aims and methods of literary historiography." Thus, the manifold subject matter of this volume may perhaps be tackled best by retracing and discussing the theoretical and methodological direction of Moretti's research.

"Literary texts are *historical* products organized according to rhetorical criteria" (p. 9): in Moretti's view, then,

the task of criticism, as a historical discipline, will be to underscore the historically conditioned quality of each literary text by identifying its rhetorical function within the cultural system to which it belongs. The aim of the literary critic—that is, of the literary historian—is not to stress how such and such a literary work still "speaks" to the twentieth-century reader, but rather to show the distance which separates us from it, the distance which marks it as "unredeemably uncontemporaneous" and makes it an irrepeatable, irreversible historical fact. Hence, Moretti's advice to the literary historian, that he should avoid the obvious "masterpiece," in order to devote a systematic attention to the investigation of "minor" literary forms (the "tearjerker," the thriller, etc.) which spontaneously refuse to "speak" to us, that is to yield to any merely empathetic, immediate, approach. In this way, it may be possible to correct the widespread tendency to regard literary history as a sequel of exceptional events constantly engaged in the breaking of norm and conventions, as if in the face of a general ideological consent literature could but be the place of dissent and subversion. It is true that some literary forms seem to have played a totally "negative" historical role (such is the case—according to Moretti's persuasive analysis—of late sixteenth-century tragedy, the function of which was to delegitimize the idea of the absolute sovereign from both a rational and an ethical point of view), but such gestures, albeit transgressive of the past and the present by which they were produced, were but the herald of a future whose conventions they helped to shape and consolidate. Besides, the so-called bourgeois literature seems to be born as a reaction to the absolute character of tragic negation: and it is not by chance that, from Schiller to Freud, the realm of aesthetics has been conceived as a meeting ground for "life" and "values," as "compromise-formation" between the return of the repressed (which includes part of the superegotistical—that is, of the historically conditioned—agency) and the reality principle (pp. 29-41).

As for Moretti's own historico-critical work, it can be characterized as an attempt to grasp the historically determined features of the literary object not so much by reconstructing its genesis within a homogeneous diachronic series, but much rather by relating it—in a synchronic perspective—to facts and problems lying outside the literary field (pp. 17-26). More specifically, Moretti's critical practice can be seen as situated at the meeting point of a structural interest for the syntagmatic organization of literary texts, and a socio-historical interest, with its assumption that a text signifies only by being paradigmatically related to the totality of the cultural system to which it belongs. As there is no doubt that the sociological interest is predominant in Moretti, his effort to take the syntagmatic study as a starting point can be seen as an attempt to ground his analyses in those very specific and concrete features of the literary page which the sociology of literature and literary historiography have all too often dealt with in a cursory manner. Thus, for instance, in his analysis of nineteenth-century detective fiction, it is precisely by focussing on the peculiar fabula-plot relationship of the typical detective story that Moretti can reach a definition of its paradigmatic function: the fabula (that is, the solution of the "case") being such as to radically question the value and the meaning of the plot (that is, of the deceitful, superfluously digressive, narration), and its implied pedagogy being therefore absolutely negative ("If you read a detective story, you read a detective story. It doesn't help you 'in life'; there is no *Bildung*" [p. 155]), the function of this literary form will be to create a precocious

model of the autonomy of cultural forms, typical of twentieth-century mass culture.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that Moretti's methodological proposal is but a modest opting for a kind of updated eclecticism capable of bestowing a greater rigor and completeness on sociological analysis. A sociological criticism which should simply apply to the study of literature the theoretical contribution of other disciplines would hardly be—in Moretti's view—more than a "parasitical embellishment," "a novelesque surrogate for more substantial disciplines" (p. 131). A true sociology of literature should not, therefore, passively adopt sociological hypotheses, in the hope that they will cast some light on literary texts; much rather, it should be the ground for testing and modifying them. If a historian's or a sociologist's work can prove invaluable for the understanding of literary phenomena, why shouldn't literary critics elaborate their own original hypotheses, which in turn could be tested and made use of in other fields of research?

Moretti's own strategy in his essay on *The Waste Land* can be taken as an illustration of such ambition. In order to discuss the features and the function of Eliot's mythical method, Moretti makes use of Polany's socio-economic hypothesis (according to which the twentieth century witnesses the crisis of the idea of the self-regulating market which had dominated nineteenth-century culture) and of Lévi-Strauss' anthropological hypothesis on the nature of mythic thought. But precisely by measuring the gulf which separates the iron-law of classification at work in the primitive myth and the approximate character of Eliot's "analogical" method, Moretti can ground his tentative definition of mass culture and its own mythology ("a mythology no longer based on taboo, on the forbidden, but on what is permitted" [p. 229]). Of course, such a definition is largely indebted to the analyses of Barthes, Baudrillard, Adorno and Horkheimer, but it is only the concrete literary analysis that allows Moretti to re-synthesize this material in a critical and original way. Moretti's desire to go beyond the mere literary (or aesthetic) field often ends up by his yielding to a generalizing temptation, along the lines of what he himself dubs "*Zeitgeist* fallacy." To counteract the tendency to see in each literary form the paradigm of a whole epoch, he underscores the need to develop an awareness of the dialogical character of literary productions: if it is only by grasping the rhetorical and functional opposition between literary forms within a given cultural system that we come to a proper understanding of them, the *Geist* of an age will be "no longer 'summed up' in individual exemplary forms but [. . .] set up for a period through a kind of parallelogram of rhetorical forces, with its dominant, its imbalances, its conflicts and its divisions of tasks" (p. 26). But in spite of these just qualifications, it is to be wondered whether it is really possible to thoroughly accept Moretti's self-critical attitude: his "generalizing immodesty" doesn't seem to be an error which can be easily obviated but perhaps a sort of "original sin" of his own method of inquiry. A sociology of symbolic forms aiming at elaborating its own original sociological hypotheses will be all too often forced to embark on generalizations which, though "adventurous," are undoubtedly potentially productive. For example, Moretti's essays, as a whole, aim not only at defining the specificity and the historical function of the works and the genres discussed, or at sketching a tentative rewrite of the history of modern literature as a reaction to the Elizabethan tragic, but also—by reconstructing the decline of the "free subject" and its *Bildung* on the literary scene—at pinpointing the elusive traits of contemporary mass culture. Thus, the "generalizing immodesty" appears to be not so much a limit but, perhaps, the raison d'être

itself of Moretti's work.

On the other hand, what seems to deserve some critical qualification is the adialectical eclecticism which every now and then lurks (or rather gives the impression to be on the point of lurking) behind Moretti's work. His ambition to graft, on the trunk of a rigorous literary historiography, a sociology of literature conceived as a ground for testing and coordinating sociological (as well as psychoanalytical, historical, economic, anthropological, etc.) hypotheses might turn literary criticism into a chaotic space where—as happens in Eliot's *Waste Land*—a mass of heterogeneous voices meet by means of the very lowest common denominator. It is true that, all in all, Moretti manages to keep under firm control and to utilize convincingly the impressive bulk of historical and theoretical material which forms the texture of the book: but this—in my opinion—is a proof not so much of the persuasiveness of his method as of his own unquestionable critical maturity.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that Moretti's methodological and theoretical argument is just a superfluous superimposition on his concrete critical practice. Not only does his discussion on the aims and methods of literary historiography help the reader follow the line of his research, but it provides a lucid and sometimes provocative investigation of a number of crucial theoretical issues. Besides, it is precisely by making his theoretical reflection explicit that Moretti can show how theory always interacts with the critic's work in a productive way, and how it constitutes "the life-blood of all real research" (p. 132). As Moretti says, and convincingly demonstrates, "*on s'engage*" (and this is vital for the health of literary criticism): we'll see about the rest.

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