
**REACHING A METHODOLOGICAL CONSENSUS:
THE CHALLENGE OF APPROPRIATING LITERARY HISTORY**

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Abstract: The task of developing an appropriate methodology in order to address the requirement of literary historiography has apparently troubled philosophers and literary theorists alike in the past and the present. The question of identifying a common factor around which such a classification may be structured is another issue that has warranted multiple responses, particularly in the twentieth century. Franco Moretti in "The Soul and the Harpy" tries to develop his ideas concerning both literary historiography as well as literary scholarship. He calls for developing a discontinuous history of literature that should rely on form or genre as the principle around which classification should be directed. His idea of form has its origin in the science of rhetoric that deals with behavior and in particular is concerned with the art of persuasion. Moretti observes that rhetoric's "aim is not to ascertain an intersubjective truth but to enlist support for a particular system of values." (Moretti 3) He further explains that literary discourse like other discourses such as law, politics, ethics etc. had its origin in rhetoric and therefore in order to correctly address the problem of literary scholarship and classification the focus has to invariably shift here

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Moretti's deliberation on the subject of rhetoric has precedence in another Marxist thinker Raymond Williams who argued that in the pre-bourgeois world rhetoric was not divided into different categories and diverse disciplines such as literature, science, theology, history etc. shared similar forms of expressions. The emergence of multiple types of discourses according to Williams is a mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century development. He further posits that "The replacement of the disciplines of grammar and rhetoric (which speak to multiplicities of intention and performance) by the discipline of criticism (which speaks of effect, and only through effect to intention and performance) is a central intellectual movement of the bourgeois world." (Williams 148) But while expressing these sentiments Williams also clarifies that despite the apparent divide between the multiple types of writing it is still very difficult to totally divorce one form of writing from another and therefore they still share similarities. He gives the example of a scientific research paper that while trying to adopt an impersonal stance it invariably resembles the narrative structure of literary works. Therefore he argues that "over a practical range from stance to selection, and in the employment of the vast variety of explicit or implicit propositions which define and control composition, this real multiplicity of writing is evident, and much of what has been known as literary theory is a way either of confusing or diminishing it." (Williams 148) Hence Raymond Williams not only challenges the relevance and application of literary theory but also highlights the need for developing a new social theory that may bridge the gap between rhetoric and criticism and therefore may help in consolidating and expanding

the discipline of literary scholarship.

Moretti approaches the question of multiplicity in a different manner and though he highlights the affinities that different kinds of rhetoric may share, his primary engagement is with literary discourse. He suggests that rhetorical figures and the longer combinations that help in the formation of long narratives are essentially harbingers of deep rooted worldview of every age. They represent the unconscious culture of the era and their effectiveness lies in the ability to last in a civilisation without being detected. The existence of such a worldview entails that "Mentality is what changes most slowly. The history of mentalities is the history of slowness in history." (Moretti 6) At this point while he declares that literary history is an essentially slow and discontinuous process, he also brings to the surface the argument that even during such long periods certain innovative writings did get composed and most of the time because of being against the spirit of the world the work fails to garner the required success. But it is also explained by him that while examining the literary history of an era one cannot simply focus on the innovative works and discard the regular compositions which according to Moretti should form the primary axis of classification. He gives the example of Shakespeare and attempts to challenge the belief that the greatness of his works shaped the literature of his era. Taking an opposite stance Moretti argues that despite his greatness Shakespeare did not exist outside the rhetorical practices of his age. He gives the example of tragedy, the genre that attained its peak of development during the Elizabethan era and suggests that the reason tragic genre and its practitioners excelled in that age was because the society at that time was still

an organic whole and though it was witnessing conflicts occurring inside and outside, the faith that such conflicts could be reconciled still existed in the society. This argument of Moretti introduces us to the primary sentiment that he expresses throughout "The Soul and the Harpy" which is literature produced in every era is a product of its times. Sometimes he calls this "Weltanschauung" or "mentality" and at other times the subconscious culture. His suggestions regarding the production of literary texts though share a certain amount of coherence with the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin as in perceiving literature as a product of social forces. However their articulations do not tally with each other at all points. In particular Bakhtin differs from Moretti in considering that a literary text is not only shaped and produced by the worldview of its age in fact the several centuries of human civilisation that preceded such a production and the centuries that have actively pursued that piece of work are all alike responsible for contributing and shaping the scholarship associated with that text. He also cites the example of Shakespeare and argue that the playwright would not have been so successful in endowing his works with such immense layers of meaning had his works been a product of only his own time. He rightfully argues that Shakespeare would have himself not been aware of the multiple layers of meanings with which his works would be associated in the centuries to come. At this juncture one does find certain similarity between the articulations of Bakhtin and Moretti in the sense that each one of them actively associate that hidden social factor in their attempt to contribute towards the construction of a concise literary historiography. But as stated above their ideas are at several places actively antithetical to each other. For example while Bakhtin regards the great works of past to be still competent enough to yield different levels of meanings to the different generations that may pursue them in the days to come. In short while Bakhtin is suggesting the construction of discipline of literary scholarship as an open system that will not only include the immediate context of the literary production but would also include the past as well as the centuries that followed. On the other hand Moretti tends to perceive literary scholarship as a closed system that shall not operate with the delusion that a work of antiquity was produced keeping in mind the meanings that it will yield to the future generations. According to him every age produces literature for its own sake and it is inevitably a work of its subconscious culture. His ideas tend to suggest that outside its age a work of literature or any other branch of rhetoric is endowed with layers of meanings which may not be rightfully associated with

it. At this point he also discusses the divorce between the discipline of literary history with other branches of social science, particularly history. The reasons that he attributes to this divorce are the ambiguous nature of literary scholarship that instead of relying on reason and empirical research finds itself resting on openness, ambiguity and difference,

"all of which stress the non-univocal semantic character of a literary text." (Moretti 21)

Hence in order to build a history of literary texts it is important that literary scholarship should adopt a more rational and convincing methodology. His demand for a rational and empirical system of literary interpretation does not mean that he discards the polysemic nature of language. Instead he articulates a scientific way of describing his intention by positing that

"These analyses must approach the text not as if it were a vector pointing neatly in one direction, but as if it were a light source radiating in several directions or a field of forces in relatively stable equilibrium".

(Moretti 22)

He builds on his hypotheses by suggesting that such a kind of empirical and testable interpretation is possible only if one starts analyzing and describing literary texts as structures because that way any addition, subtraction or transformation in the meanings of the elements of a text will no longer be acknowledged as a legitimate practice.

"Rather, it will be treated as a legitimate act only if it contributes towards improving the total knowledge of the text, and thus towards strengthening these connections, those 'prohibitions' which, as an organized whole, it imposes on the interpreter."

(Moretti 22) Thus he believes that the day literature overcomes the practice of interpreting a text in whatever possible way, it will take a giant step towards attaining methodological solidity. His idea of building a rigorous mechanism of checks in order to ascertain the validity of research is again as earlier mentioned based upon the concept of form or genre. He acknowledges the importance that literary genre gathered in the twentieth century and declares that literary scholarship has acquired significant development by imparting due importance to form. Moretti's concept of form and its relevance as opposed to literary periods or great writers also echoes the sentiments that evolved within the discipline of literary theory in the 1960s and the following decades where thinkers such as Michel Foucault in essays like "What is an Author?" attempted to guide literary scholarship away from the narrow constraints of author function and to take it to larger structures of literary discourse. However while addressing the issue of author function and criticizing western literary scholarship for being too

actively engaged with it, he also acknowledges the existence of several schools of discursivity and he credits certain great thinkers and writers such as Sigmund Freud, Frederic Nietzsche and Karl Marx as being the founders of discursivity in their individual field. So while Foucault endeavors to rid literary discourse from the subject of author while reaffirming the existence of great rhetoricians whose writings cannot be isolated to their individual age, Moretti on the other hand persists at incorporating rhetoric with historiography as the viable tool to fix a non-continuous yet dependable history of literary texts. As per him attempting to visualise certain great rhetoricians as authors who were beyond the age in which they were born would be a too adventurous move. He incorporates the Freudian concept of the unconscious in "The Soul and the Harpy" to argue that literature is a branch of rhetoric that invests its practitioners with the ability to express that which has been repressed in the society but only with the employment of suitable filters. Secondly while musing upon the historical evolution of literature he also notices that for every age literature served as a tool of negotiating with its desires and the extent to which those aspirations could be met. Therefore literature took the form of the reality principle in Freudian terms or otherwise reality principle guided the composition of literary texts in every age with the primary objective of seeking maximum happiness for

the authors as well as the readers. Moretti's depiction of literature as a social product expressing the repressed subconscious culture can also be linked with Bakhtinian concept of carnivalesque. The carnival as Bakhtin argued can be understood as a trope in literature that expressed the laughter and the suppressed voice of the masses which otherwise remains absent from works of high literature. The ungoverned and the free mode of expression that carnival depicts can be seen as a deliberate move that attempts to break away from the imposed decorum and the inhibitions and this in turn subverts the dominant style. The insistence of Moretti to include popular literature as a valued form in literary scholarship apparently echoes these ideas. He rues the neglect of a major part of literary heritage by theorists and historiographers and rightfully so. His insistence merits attention because neglecting a major part of the rhetoric that dealt with popular literature could only mean obtaining a semi-refined pursuit of knowledge and thus the epistemological venture of developing a suitable methodology must include the texts that have been actively pursued by the masses in every age and only after having examined and acknowledged the importance of this huge fragment of cultural rhetoric one can assume that literary scholarship will someday be able to do justice to its immense potential.

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