REVISITING FRANCO MORETTI'S CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF LITERARY GEOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The research observed Franco Moretti, an influential Italian literary critic who had made significant contributions to the field of literary geography, a cross-disciplinary theory that utilized geographical methods to analyze and understand literary and cultural materials. Moretti's approach to literary geography diverged from traditional and orthodox methods, offering a fresh perspective. The research applied a qualitative method with a close-reading approach to evaluate and explore Moretti's conceptualization and implementation of literary geography through a systematic three-step research process. The first step involved identifying the intellectual and theoretical sources of inspiration that have influenced Moretti's work. The second step focused on illuminating Moretti's innovative understanding and interpretation of literary geography as well as his integration of literary maps into the analysis of literature. Lastly, the research investigated two case studies to further exemplify Moretti's practices in the field of literary geography. The first case study regarded Jane Austen's fiction, where Moretti's approach unveils Austen's geographical imagination of Britain in her novels. The second one centers on Mary Mitford's 'Our Village', where Moretti discovered the circular narrative pattern. By undertaking these three comprehensive steps, the research offers valuable insights into literary geography's conceptual and methodological dimensions. Additionally, it endeavors to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the interdisciplinary nature of literary geography, thereby inspiring scholars and researchers to delve further into the intersections between geography, literature, and culture.

Keywords: Franco Moretti, literary geography, literary map

INTRODUCTION

Franco Moretti is an Italian literary critic, positivist, and leftist intellectual. He is known for his mobile interfaces (Arseniev, 2021), academic mobility (Velmezova & Kull, 2021), and unrestrained individuation (Ercolino, 2021), as he constantly changes his workplaces and research focuses. Moretti receives his early higher education at the University of Rome. In 1990, he relocated to the United States and worked at Columbia University until 2000. At that point, he moved to Stanford University and established the Center for the Study of the Novel in 2000 and later the Stanford Literary Lab in 2010. Since 2016, Moretti has joined the Digital Humanities Institute in Switzerland, becoming a leading figure in the international movement of 'digital humanities'.

Actually, Moretti's academic career can be divided into two phases: close reading and distant reading (Cistelecan, 2020). The second phase began with *Atlas of the European Novel* (Moretti, 1998), namely, literary geography. Though Moretti is widely recognized for his concepts of 'distant reading' and 'quantitative formalism' (Pilshchikov, 2022), as well as his practice of digital humanities, it is important to acknowledge the significance of literary geography in his intellectual journey. In fact, Moretti's concept and application of literary geography have not only anticipated but also propelled his subsequent endeavors in quantitative and digital experimentation.

Literary geography refers to a branch of humanity that uses geographical methods to study literary materials. Specifically, literary geography aims at the cross-disciplinary study of literature, geography,

and spatial theory. W. G. Hoskins's book *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) revolutionized the perception of landscape. He argued that landscape is not limited to the natural sciences but is a reflection of a nation's social and cultural history (Taylor, Donaldson, & Gregory, 2018). This humanistic view of geography has paved the way for the development of literary geography. Marc Brosseau's *Geography's Literature*, published in 1994, is an iconic work in the history of literary geography. Before 1994, literary geography was mainly concerned with the literary imagination and representation of geography. In the 1970s and 1980s, the study of maps in literary works gradually attracted attention. In the 1990s, another new direction of geographical study began to emerge, emphasizing the social, cultural, and political contexts in which literature is created and received. The spatial turn of cultural studies and the cultural turn of geography in the late 1990s and early 2000s have stimulated the exchange of ideas and theories across disciplines (Hones, 2017).

Drawing inspiration from Western Marxism, Moretti's approach to literary geography deviates from conventional and established methods, presenting a novel and thought-provoking perspective. This departure prompts the research to embark on a comprehensive and systematic reassessment of Moretti's conceptualization of literary geography, particularly with regard to his innovative use of the literary map as a tool for interpreting literature. By delving into the intricacies of Moretti's approach, the research aims to shed new light on the potential of literary geography to uncover hidden spatial dimensions and enrich the understanding of literary works.

METHODS

In the research, a qualitative approach with a close-reading method is employed to critically investigate and evaluate Moretti's concept and practice of literary geography. This is accomplished through a three-step research process, focusing on the analysis of Moretti's representative works, specifically the *Atlas of the European Novel* (Moretti, 1998) and *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (Moretti, 2005).

First, the research probes into the sources of inspiration that have shaped Moretti's conception of literary geography. By exploring the intellectual and theoretical influences that guided his thinking, a deeper understanding of the origins of Moretti's innovative approach can be gained. Moreover, the research expounds on Moretti's distinctive interpretation of literary geography, illuminating the unique perspectives he brings to the field. By closely examining his theoretical framework and the fundamental principles he employs in crafting literary maps, the significance of his contributions to this interdisciplinary domain can be further comprehended.

Finally, the research presents two compelling case studies to illustrate Moretti's implementation of literary geography: Jane Austen's fiction and Mary Mitford's *Our Village*. These case studies serve as concrete examples that demonstrate the practical implications and insights that emerge from the application of Moretti's approach to literary geography.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

There are three major sources of inspiration for Moretti to conceive and practice literary geography. The first source dates back to the late 1950s when Moretti's father drew young Moretti's attention to 'four large marble maps of the Mediterranean' in Via dei Fori Imperiali (Moretti, 1998). This encounter left an indelible impression on Moretti and ignited his fascination with geography. The sight of these magnificent maps has sparked a deep curiosity within young Moretti, planting the seeds of a geographical dream that would shape his future endeavors. The maps' intricate details and expansive scope open his eyes to the potential connections between geography and literature, igniting a desire to explore the spatial dimensions of literary works.

Moretti's understanding of literary geography has also been gradually shaped by the subtle influences of various notable Western Marxist scholars. When Moretti was in Italy, he was heavily influenced by contemporary Western Marxism. During his college years, Moretti engaged in leftist politics, befriended Perry Anderson, and published papers and books in the most influential leftist academic journals and presses in the West, namely, *New Left Review* and *Verso*.

Among these Western Marxist scholars, Fredric Jameson, Algirdas Julien Greimas, and Pierre Bourdieu are of profound significance. According to Moretti (1998), Bourdieu's influential work, The Rules of Art, which illustrates the literary field of Flaubert's Sentimental Education, has served as inspiration for Moretti to incorporate cultural and social space into the realm of literary analysis. Additionally, Perry Anderson's thought-provoking work, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, has demonstrated to Moretti the power and allure of utilizing geography as a tool for cultural analysis, particularly through the depiction of geographical distributions of Marxist thinkers. This exposure to Anderson's work has unveiled to Moretti the capacity of geography to shed light on the cultural dynamics and intellectual landscapes that shape literary production and reception.

Nonetheless, the most immediate and direct impetus for Moretti's creation of *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900* should be attributed to Fernand Braudel, a prominent figure in the French Annales school of historiography. Moretti (1998) has explained that Braudel's statement, "We have museum catalogues, but no artistic atlases...", prompted him to address this potential gap by conceiving the idea of producing a literary atlas specifically focused on European fiction.

Moretti (1998) acknowledges that some literary atlases have existed prior to his undertaking. Examples of such atlases include J.G. Bartholomew's *Literary and Historical Atlas of Europe*, Michael Hardwicke's *Literary Atlas and Gazetteer of the British Isles*, David Daiches's *Literary Landscapes of the British Isles: A Narrative Atlas*, and others.

However, these existing literary atlases of European nation-states merely fill Braudel's gap in quantity rather than quality. In these works, maps often play a marginal role, remaining silent and absent from the process of interpretation (Moretti, 1998). In a word, in traditional literary collections, the map is treated as a form of 'present absence'. Moretti disagrees with this approach, as he believes that "geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history 'happens', but an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth...a map is precisely that, a connection made visible – allows us to see some significant relationships that have so far escaped us." (Moretti, 1998). Moretti's journey towards a qualitative transformation in literary cartography is not without challenges. Financial and technical setbacks keep interrupting his progress, and he encounters failures along the way. Nevertheless, his unwavering determination leads to the creation of a book featuring 91 maps and diagrams. As Moretti (1998) states, his ambition is to "restart the wider enterprise of a historical atlas of literature".

By recognizing the sources of influence and acknowledging Braudel's call for artistic atlases, Moretti's conception of literary geography becomes situated within a broader intellectual context. The subsequent part of this research aims to investigate how Moretti effectively integrates the concept of a literary map into his literary analysis, representing a crucial step in his methodology.

It is a common belief among cartographers that "a good map is worth a thousand words", and Moretti (1998) agrees: "because it produces a thousand words: it raises doubts, ideas." Moretti is dedicated to bringing a completely different view and experience of literary geography to a broad audience. He believes that the implementation of literary geography consists of three steps: (1) selecting appropriate textual units and collecting large amounts of data; (2) re-planning the map according to the data; (3) applying the generated map to explain the evolving process and the general pattern of literary history.

Moretti's first step in literary geography is to select a proper research unit and collect large amounts of data and information. Traditional literary geography follows the 'close reading' approach typical of literary criticism, focusing in detail on a single author or a particular text. Moretti goes in the opposite direction, focusing more on the elements either 'above' or 'below' the text. The elements 'above' the text include typical genres such as tragedies and novels, as well as subgenres/genres such as historical novels, gothic novels, and detective novels. His purpose is to depict the history of dynamic spatial literature by tracing the distribution and diffusion of genres in geographical space. Whereas the element 'below' the text normally refers to a specific element of the text's narrative, such as walking, litigation, clues, luxury goods, and so on. Moretti's approach is to "abstract them from the narrative flow and construct a new, artificial object". (Moretti, 2005). He agrees with the proposition that "indivisible units [serve] as analytical tools for the study of dynamic processes in literature" (Marková & Novaes, 2020).

Then, Moretti designs and draw maps according to different elements. This process is also called 'visual representation' or 'visualization', which is considered a 'field-defining' practice in literary geography (Moretti & Sobchuk, 2019). Unlike various non-representational theories, literary/cultural geography is only possible using representation (Anderson, 2019). Hence, representation or visualization is the core of literary geography. Under the trend of quantitative historiography, Moretti gradually abandons conventional hermeneutics and turns to the quantification of extensive literary works (Moretti, 2020). Moretti first tries quantitative criticism in *Atlas*. His early quantitative research relies on more basic software and tools. For example, he uses Excel to make simple statistical tables and charts, and many of the maps in the book are even hand-drawn. Later, in 2005, he published *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, a collection of his early quantitative literature studies, including various quantitative charts, spatial maps, and evolutionary trees. The 2018 Cambridge literary geography roundtable conference suggested that the future of literary geography relies on collaboration. There are three ways of collaboration: collaboration between researchers, collaboration between teachers and students, and public literary geography (McLaughlin, 2019). In 2010, Moretti founded the Stanford Literary Lab with Matthew Jockers, which means he has moved into a new quantitative research phase, from individual research to teamwork.

Moreover, Moretti's literary cartography project at ETH Zurich, which is called *A Literary Atlas of Europe*, has begun using Geographic Information System technology. Hence, planning and mapping no longer rely solely on human hands but on big data. It should be noted that Moretti's drawing process is actually inspired by Karl Popper's *Method of Trial and Error*, which is to achieve a given research goal through continuous experimentation and elimination of errors. This purely empirical research method tests the subject's clear cognition of the goal, the comprehensive grasp of the research object, and the precise control and appropriate adjustment of the variables. Moretti's each map and chart reflect his selection and combination of textual elements. Thus, his maps are not intended to show precise positions but rather to reveal relative positions and their networks of relationships. As Andrew (2018) maintains, all the 'spatial events' and 'textual events' can be social and political events.

Moretti's ultimate goal is to employ maps

to explain literary history. Moretti (1998) proposes that the key function of literary maps is to reveal the internal logic of narrative. Moreover, literary maps can provide a unique 'narrative universe', in which the literary elements are arranged in different combinations enough to re-emerge the forms hidden in the text, 'exposing' the neglected map of literary history, thus bringing unexpected modes of literary interpretation (Moretti, 2005). In other words, Moretti tries to use the map to draw people's attention to the problem of history and form and put forward a new paradigm for writing literary history. Literary form is the result of the interaction of two different forces, the internal force of rhetoric and the external force of society, and a true literary history should, therefore, cover both forces and their dynamic connections. Moretti has been looking for the history of literature in the form of space and time, and the literary map is an important breakthrough.

In the last section of the research, Moretti's two case studies are examined closely, demonstrating his utilization of maps as a means of interpreting literature and history. The first case study delves into Jane Austen's fiction, while the second one focuses on Mary Mitford's *Our Village*.

In the first case, Moretti intends to disclose and prove the symbolic relationship existing between Jane Austen's fiction and the construction of the national identity of Great Britain in the eighteenth century. Moretti (1998) emphasizes that the novel is the artistic

imagination and formal representation of the nation-state, even the 'only symbolic form'. In order to clarify the symbolic relationship between the novel and the nation-state, Moretti (1998) takes six of Austen's masterpieces and plots the locations of the beginning and the ending of each book on a map of Britain. This map is titled *Jane Austen's Britain* (Figure 1).

As Figure 1 demonstrates, Moretti uses a triangle to indicate the beginnings and a circle to indicate the endings. *Northanger Abbey* starts at Fullerton and ends at Woodston; *Sense and Sensibility* are Norland Park and Delaford, respectively; *Pride and Prejudice* is Longbourn and Pemberley; *Mansfield Park* is Portsmouth and Thornton Lacey; *Emma* is Hartfield and Highbury; *Persuasion* begins at Kellynch Hall with no clear end. Based on the systematic combing and visual presentation of the starting point and the ending point of the plot of Austen's masterpieces, Moretti (1998) discovers a rule or hidden pattern: Austen's conception of Britain merely refers to 'England' without Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, that is, England without the 'Celtic fringe'.

Moreover, since the plot usually begins in the heroine's hometown and ends in the marriage residence of the hero and heroine, the two geospatial flows point to the traditional British 'National Marriage Market' (Moretti, 1998). The marriage market gave British women in the 18th century the opportunity and right to a certain degree of spatial mobility, and Austen narrowed the spatial mobilization of this special social

Figure 1 Jane Austen's Britain (from Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*)

relationship to England, the 'hometown' she identified with. Austen lived in Great Britain during the Industrial Revolution, but England, presented in her novels, has limitations, and there is a huge difference between the historical and geographical space of the novel. In other words, Austen overlaps the image of England with that of Great Britain as a nation-state. In this sense, Austen acts as the 'helper' of the modern nation-state image construction. She compresses the real geographical space of Great Britain and places the heroes and heroines in the English homeland that is without war, invasion, overseas colonies, and 'barbaric language'.

The representation of the nation-state in Austen's novels is not only to rebuild the safe 'home', but also to symbolically resolve the historical conflicts between the state and the local. Since the 18th century, the peak of the enclosure movement, the take-off of the Industrial Revolution, and the convenience of transportation have led to the gradual evolution of the nation-state from an abstract concept to a means of rule, profoundly affecting everyone. The contradiction between the local and the state has become increasingly intensified. Since the nation-state represents 'a wider, more abstract, more enigmatic dominion' (Moretti, 1998), a new symbolic form is needed to understand the nation-state. The plot of Austen's novel begins by showing the crisis of the homeland, and through a seductive journey and a happy ending (the marriage between the local gentry represented by Elizabeth and the national aristocrat represented by Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*), attempts to reappear and symbolically resolve the contradictions between the nation-state and the local, the new and the old. Moretti (1998) states that Austen rewrites 'the strange, harsh novelty of the modern state, and turns it into a large, exquisite home'. Consequently, the collusion between Austen's novels and the image of the British nation-state is clearly revealed.

The second case study is Mary Mitford's *Our Village*, which is taken from Moretti's *Graphs*. *Our Village* is a collection of about 100 literary sketches of country life written by Mitford, originally published in the 1820s and 1830s. The series first appeared in *Ladies Magazine* under the full title *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery*. This vivid series is based on the life of 'Three Mile Cross', a small village where she lives. Taking the 24 stories in the first volume of *Our Village* as the research object, Moretti (2005) selects three elements, including the characters' relationships (Ellen, Hannah, Cousin Mary), natural landscapes (Frost and Thaw, Violeting, The first primrose), and collective activities (Cricket and Maying) in the stories. Then, he begins marking the starting and ending points of each character's 'country walk' in the village. Unexpectedly, the narrative flows of *Our Village*, after being visualized, present a 'circular' pattern (Figure 2).

According to Figure 2, the main characters' walks are centered around the village, resulting in a double-decker circular narrative map. The proximity of individuals to the inner circle corresponds to a closer integration of the landscape with human activity, resulting in a smaller scale of farm work. Conversely, as the relationship between characters becomes more distant, the landscape takes on a more natural character, accompanied by a larger scale of farm work. It turns out that the village's kinship and social relations are reflected in a circular pattern in the space. Moretti argues that the simplicity of the rural geographical environment and social space leads to the circular narrative pattern. In order to know whether the previous pattern is a coincidence, Moretti (2005) tweaks the variables and redraws a map of the 'spatial division of labor' (Figure 3), with the character's occupation as a key element.

As shown in Figure 3, the occupations that

Figure 2 Mary Mitford, *Our Village*, Volume 1 (From Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*)
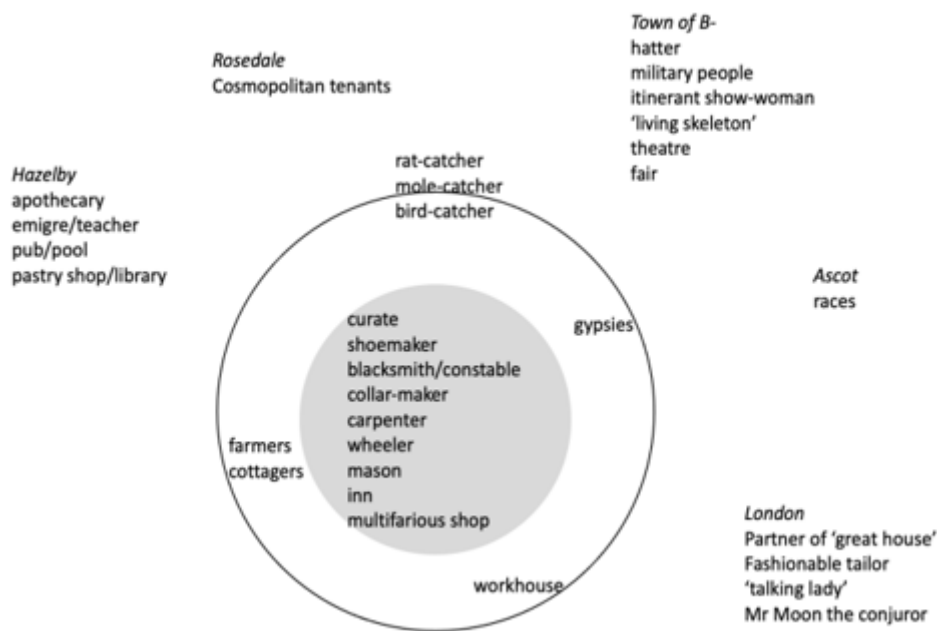
Figure 3 Mary Mitford, *Our Village*: Spatial Division of Labour (From Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*)

provide life services, such as priests, shoemakers, craftsmen, carpenters, and hotel employees, tend to be located in the village's central area. The gypsies, who are marginal groups, and the rat and bird catchers, who are not common in daily life, occupy the peripheral position in the division of labor space but still belong to the scope of village life. In Mitford's Our Village, most people living in town B, far from the village, are soldiers, itinerant showgirls, opera houses, markets, and other personnel related to military, entertainment, and trade. Inhabitants in the outskirts of London encompass a range of individuals, from fashionable tailors and affluent homeowners to professional workers like magicians, who are even more distanced from the daily experiences of the villagers. In essence, those occupations closely tie to everyday needs or root in traditional folk practices are situated nearer to the center of the village. Conversely, specialized, standardized, and recreational occupations tend to gravitate away from the center, representing a more peripheral presence for villagers.

Through these maps, Moretti has found the hidden circular narrative pattern in Mitford's narrative, which reflects the ancient picture of rural life before the Enclosure movement in England–self-sufficient, isolated, and cyclic. For people who often travel for work or tourists, a village is just one stop (starting point, midpoint, or destination) on a broader journey. However, for the villagers who have always lived in the closed area, life, work, marriage, and love revolve around the village, so the village has become the center of the world.

Moretti's literary cartography has been influenced by Bakhtin's notion of chronotope. Chronotope refers to the time-space relation in narratives, which becomes the basis for digitally mapping spatial meaning in literary works (Bushell et al., 2022). Moretti's discovery of the 'circular pattern' coincides with Bakhtin's narration of the idyllic chronotope. By visualizing the plot narratives of Mitford's *Our Village*, Moretti further confirms Bakhtin's conjectures and elaborations on the cyclic nature of pastoral life presented in idyllic novels. Moreover, Moretti's literary maps help to reveal or recreate the self-sufficient and secluded life in English country novels before the Enclosure Movement and the Industrial Revolution.

CONCLUSIONS

The research has undertaken a systematic and comprehensive exploration of Moretti's notion and practice of literary geography by uncovering the sources of inspiration, elucidating his unique understanding, and providing examples through case studies. Through the investigation, it becomes evident that diverse intellectual and theoretical foundations, particularly Western Marxist thoughts and French historiography, underpin Moretti's conception of literary geography, attesting to his interdisciplinary consciousness and endeavors. Through his integration of the literary map into his analysis, Moretti has expanded the scope of literary studies and paved the way for further interdisciplinary research. The two case studies serve as compelling examples that highlight the capacity of literary geography to enhance comprehension of the intricate interplay between space, narrative, and socio-historical contexts.

In summary, the research contributes to the ongoing discourse on literary geography through the lens of Moretti's work and offers insights into the

interdisciplinary nature of this field. It aims to foster a deeper appreciation for the dynamic relationship between literature, culture, and space, enabling scholars and researchers to gain a nuanced understanding of the intricacies of literary works. However, it is important to note that this research adopts a qualitative approach with a close-reading method, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The focus on a limited number of case studies and the subjective nature of interpretations could potentially restrict the broader applicability of the research conclusions. To address this limitation, future studies could consider integrating quantitative or mixed method approaches to complement the qualitative analysis.

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