

The Critic as Accountant

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Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (New York, Verso, 2013), 224 pp., \$26.95 cloth.

The question of “reading” today remains a central site of debate. How one reads literary and cultural texts inevitably takes part in broader struggles over the priorities of social life, which is why discussion often manifests in polarizing terms. Broadly speaking, contemporary debates over reading center around what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call “surface reading” and “symptomatic reading” (“Surface Reading”). While symptomatic reading, Best and Marcus argue, is based on the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that reads texts critically for what they conceal (in other words, reading as critique), surface reading advocates the appreciation of a text’s surface details.

As Charles Sumner suggests in his response to Best and Marcus’s defense of surface reading – an affirmative reading of texts that has been echoed by other writers like Rita Felski (“Context Stinks!”), Michael Warner (“Uncritical Reading”), and Bruno Latour (“Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”) – surface reading has not only become highly influential in literary and cultural theory; it has often led to “a literary critical version of consumerism” (“The Turn Away From Marxism, or Why We Read the Way We Read Now” 34). It is a mode of reading that naturalizes market relations and is ultimately unable to adequately account for the very surfaces it affirms. This is because, Sumner suggests, it is not possible “to determine what the surface of an object or text is without first understanding the ‘deep history’ of its production” (27). In contrast to surface reading theory, he suggests not only that literary and cultural forms are shaped by historical relations

“outside” of their immanent form, but that those “deep”-lying historical relations also shape how we identify and “read” forms; they are responsible for making the surface intelligible in the first place. Reading is therefore obliged to investigate the determining conditions of literary and cultural forms if it is to take part in transforming (not affirming) the existing social relations of inequality that are normalized in cultural surfaces.

Franco Moretti’s *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* would seem, in this context, to offer a critical alternative to the surface reading that has overtaken literary and cultural theory and that Sumner argues is a consequence of “the turn away from Marxism.” Broadly situated in the tradition of Marxian literary analysis, the book examines the figure of the bourgeois in British and European literature as part of the development of capitalism from the eighteenth through the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, Moretti addresses the “prose” and “key words” of novels depicting the bourgeois and how these cultural forms “fit” the changing “class realities” – that is, the relation of “culture” and “property.” A book on “the bourgeois” seems indeed to mark a turn to the class concepts and class analysis that treat cultural surfaces not autonomously but in relation to their material roots. As Moretti emphasizes in his opening pages, “the bourgeois” was almost never used even in the literature of the nation at the center of the industrialization (where “middle class” instead became preferable as class divisions in England deepened), and even today the concept is rarely used in left scholarship on either the nineteenth century or the contemporary era.

The Bourgeois speaks to this paradoxical situation of an increasingly powerful class prone to subterfuge. The essays comprising *The Bourgeois* develop a narrative about the stylistic decline of the bourgeois literary figure – a formal development, Moretti emphasizes, that takes place alongside *the economic ascendance* of the bourgeois class. In contrast to readings of the Victorian era as championing realism and analytical clarity, *The Bourgeois* suggests Victorian prose is better characterized by its linguistic opacity and equivocation. The book begins with an analysis of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, moves on to early and mid-nineteenth century novels by such

writers as Scott, Austen, Eliot, Craik, Gaskell, and Balzac, turns to writers of the "semi-periphery" like Machado, Verga, Prus, Dostoevsky, and finally to the work of Ibsen. Moretti shows that bourgeois prose starts with the "heroic" "adventures" of enterprise and ends with uneventful narratives filled with the (increasingly oppressive) details of everyday life. That is, the bourgeois becomes suppressed by linguistic style (16-17), which Moretti connects to the figure's emerging "self-repression" (17). It is, in this sense, style that identifies the bourgeois in novels, especially as the nineteenth century progresses. In fact, "where capitalistic structures solidify, narrative and stylistic mechanisms replace individuals as the centre of the text" (17).

One of the book's central arguments is that, before industrialization the rising class position of the bourgeois led to an aspiration for "comfort." "Caught in a never-ending struggle against the vagaries of *Fortuna*, this early bourgeois is orderly, careful, with the 'almost religious respect for facts' [...]. He is a man of details. He is the prose of capitalist history" (184). But after industrialization, "the bourgeoisie becomes the dominant class; and one with the immense means of industry at its disposal" (185). Consequently, "Details are dwarfed by the imagination; the real, by the possible. It is the *poetry* of capitalist development" (185). The bourgeois figure begins as a heroic subject only to become a rather unheroic chronicler and then camouflager of the everyday. This cultural trajectory manifests stylistically in increasingly evasive language. The last three chapters of the book ("Fog," mostly on British writers; "'National Malformations': Metamorphoses in the Semi-Periphery" addressing Italian, Spanish, Polish, and Russian novelists; and "Ibsen and the Spirit of Capitalism," analyzing the trajectory of Ibsen's plays) focus especially on this key literary shift. Namely, the turn away from the "analytical," "rational" and "precise" nature of a prose heavy with literalism to an increasingly complex linguistic style among Victorian writers, whose use of metaphor and "syntactical complexity" serves in effect to "disavow" their class power (110).

What Moretti calls "Victorianism" is a "re-enchantment" of culture. A central result, he argues, is that "hegemonic capitalist culture" came to rest

“largely on anti-bourgeois values” (22). Which is to say that Moretti reads “bourgeois values” as primarily values associated with the Enlightenment (the cultural values of the early radical bourgeoisie) – a point to which I will return. It is this “bourgeois” tendency – consolidated in the Victorian era – to dissimulate their class power and retreat culturally and politically into a “fog” of opportunistic evasiveness that Moretti’s book traces in prose. He suggests that the concept of “Victorianism” (a particular form of bourgeois “hegemony”) remains an important concept today because there is “a parallel between Victorian Britain and the post-1945 United States, highlighting the paradox of these two hegemonic capitalist cultures [...] resting largely on anti-bourgeois values” (22).

The book thus contributes both to contemporary debates over “reading” literary and cultural form and to the growing wave of scholarship on the Victorian novel and culture and the connection to issues of finance and economy.¹ More broadly, it takes part in pressing discussions emerging in social theory and the mainstream media about how we “read” crisis-ridden capitalism today.

As I mentioned, the book examines the figure of “the bourgeois,” and this focus on figuration and form is central to Moretti’s mode of analysis – *and its limits*. It is also what connects *The Bourgeois* to Moretti’s more widely known method of “distant reading,” contrary to his own (and others’) claims, a point that will be developed below after analyzing in some detail a few aspects of the book’s main assumptions about class and their implications for reading.

But first, why does Moretti focus so extensively on prose style and key words? “Through them,” he explains, “the peculiarities of bourgeois culture will emerge from the implicit, and even buried dimension of language: a ‘mentality’ made of unconscious grammatical patterns and semantic associations, more than clear and distinct ideas” (19). Moretti argues that while “great ideas” have in the past been the focus of much scholarship, the bourgeois “mentality [...] remains still largely unexplored”; and it is best explored through attention to what he calls “the minutiae of language” (19). Since the book aims to show the relation between these forms and

"property," a central question will be: what does Moretti's mode of reading bourgeois prose teach us about the class position of the bourgeoisie? How far does it advance beyond the dominant readings of cultural surfaces?

In chapter one, "A Working Master," Moretti argues that the first part of *Robinson Crusoe* is "a perfect illustration of the adventure-mentality of early modern long-distance trade" which was based, following Weber, on "irrational or speculative" activities or "acquisition by force" (26). It is not the adventures, though, that make the novel "a great modern myth" (28), Moretti emphasizes, but the fact that work rules on land (and adventures the sea) (29). He later points out that this is the same structure of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*: "a history that begins with the 'capitalist adventurer,' but where the ethos of laboriousness eventually brings about the 'rational tempering of his irrational impulse'" (32). "Robinson's hard work on the island," Moretti writes, "is indeed the greatest novelty of the book" (33). Through the course of the novel, Moretti argues, Robinson shifts from capitalist adventurer to becoming the "working master" (33), one of whose primary concerns is to assure the reader that he did not remain "idle" – a fact that Moretti sees as reflecting a new class position of the bourgeoisie, which no longer has a "master," but works as if it does. Robinson's continual labor speaks, not to the way that labor is the source of use value on the island (not to a mode of production) but a "culture of work" (30, emphasis). And this culture of work is driven by a kind of double-consciousness. Citing Kojève's reading of Hegel, Moretti emphasizes the compulsion of the bourgeois to work for himself as if he is "work[ing] for *another*" (qtd. 30). "Working for himself, *as if he were another*: this is exactly how Robinson functions," Moretti writes (30).

However, what Moretti means by "master" is quite significant, for it shows that Moretti's theory of the bourgeois class – which begins by foregrounding "property" – is a theory of class *power* and control, rather than a theory of property relations (from which class power derives). It is part of a broader (Weberian-Foucauldian) matrix of assumptions that reads capitalism primarily in terms of the administration of work and the market, and which leads him to focus primarily on matters of cultural and political (il)legitimacy rather than the material relations of the bourgeoisie.²

Moretti writes of Robinson: “One side of him becomes a carpenter, or potter, or baker, and spends weeks and weeks trying to accomplish something; then Crusoe the master emerges, and points out the inadequacy of the results. And then the cycle repeats itself all over again. And it repeats itself, because work has become *the new principle of legitimation of social power*” (30). “Master” here is a figure of control – someone with power and who *disciplines* the worker, encouraging more work. However, this in fact describes not a master – that is, not an owner of property (who does not simply discipline workers but appropriates their surplus value in the process of production) – but instead a manager. The “master” does not demand more labor because the product is inadequate (either in quality or quantity). It is not for the “products” that the bourgeois puts the worker to work but for the surplus value congealed in them. Moretti’s argument that “work has become *the new principle of legitimation of social power*” is not a cause but an effect.³ Work becomes a “principle” of “power” in capitalism, not due to an insecure mentality, as Moretti suggests, but a consequence of the property relations which increasingly divide the world into owners of the means of production and subsistence and the propertyless who are forced to sell their labor to survive. The expansion of the forces of production within these relations of ownership make it possible for capital to squeeze more and more value out of the working class – which involves the introduction of technology and the extension of the working day and the number of working days. Moretti notes the increase in average number of working days per year, but he treats this more as a reflection of a new culture of work and the disciplining of the population rather than as a cultural superstructure that obscures and normalizes the expansion of economic exploitation. Along these lines, Moretti offers a close reading of Robinson’s “grammar of *growth*” (56), which emerges in Robinson’s detailed description of his labor and its results on the island: sentences which often specify his *instrumental* approach to his work, what might be called its in-order-to-do-something-else character, exemplified for instance when Defoe writes “[...] and *having stowed* my boat very safe, I *went* on shore *to look* about me [...]” (cited in Moretti 53, with his emphases). It is in this context that one of Moretti’s

overarching arguments in the book is that, "It has been a great achievement, bourgeois prose – and a very *laborious* one [...]. If *The Bourgeois* has a protagonist, this laborious prose is certainly it" (18).

Throughout the book, Moretti draws on a Weberian reading of capitalism in terms of the market and the rationalization of culture that develops with industrialization. Class, for Weber, is not a matter of relations of property, but chances on the market. Rationalization and "disenchantment" for Weber emerge as one of the fundamental aspects of capitalist administration of finances and trade, which increasingly begins to structure culture and consciousness. In this context, Moretti's focus on "social power" emphasizes, not the economic relations between the bourgeoisie and the working class, but the "regulating" mechanisms of culture that are in fact *effects* of the relations of production. For this reason he turns to Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" (57). Robinson's language, he argues, reflects what Bourdieu calls the "structured structures" that seem to "come into being without any plan, by the slow accretion of distinct but compatible elements" and that in turn serve to "regulate" the reader's representation of temporality (57).⁴

An important counterpoint to Moretti's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* is Marx's analysis of the novel in *Capital*. He too addresses Defoe's novel as part of a broader lesson in reading bourgeois culture. But it is a lesson in the development of commodity relations and the fetishism that obscures their source in labor: a lesson in the material basis of "immaterial" value and meaning (cultural forms). Bourgeois economists have long celebrated Defoe's novel as a narrative showing the capitalist *market's* roots in "nature" and thus naturalizing capitalism, Marx notes. Against this market-reading, Marx argues that the real significance of the novel is its "simple and transparent" depiction of "all the essential determinants of value" (*Capital*, I:170). Robinson, Marx writes, "has needs to satisfy, and must therefore perform useful labours of various kinds" (169), and he divides his time between different activities.

Despite the diversity of his productive functions, he knows that they are only different forms of activity of

one and the same Robinson, hence only different modes of human labour [...]. Whether one function occupies a greater space in his total activity than another depends on the magnitude of the difficulties to be overcome in attaining the useful effect aimed at. (169-70)

And, with such items as the pen, ledger, and watch he scavenged from the ship (themselves congealed labor), he develops a “catalogue of the useful objects he possesses, of the various operations necessary for their production, and finally of the labour-time that specific quantities of these products have on average cost him” (169-70). To put this another way, because Robinson does not have a worker or slave to work for him on the island (until he forces Friday to do so), he must work for himself, and in doing so becomes attuned to the role of labor time in the production of needed objects of survival.

Moretti's reading makes the necessity of Robinson's material activity something that results from an “external” compulsion (he works “as if for another”), not *a basic necessity of material life*. But labor only *becomes* an external “compulsion” under specific social relations – under class relations, relations in which the products of social labor are appropriated privately by a few. And this is precisely Marx's point. He contrasts Defoe's depiction of “free” and “independent” labor to the labor relations of the feudal era, where relations of “personal dependence” in which labor and its exploitation take place do not require “labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality,” as they do under capitalism (170). Marx writes, “Every serf knows that what he expends in the service of his lord is a specific quantity of his own personal labour-power” (170). In other words, the appropriation of surplus labor was an open fact of society, not hidden as it is in commodity relations of capitalism, which “conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly” (168-69). Not only is the labor congealed in the commodity obscured under capitalism, but so too is the bourgeoisie's appropriation of workers' surplus labor in the process of production.

It is in this sense that Marx and Engels write in the *Communist Manifesto* that the bourgeoisie

has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superior," and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment" [...]. For exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. (qtd. in Moretti 101-2)

At stake here is the relation between pre-capitalist exploitation (based on force, and accompanied by the powerful role of the Church in justifying it) and capitalist exploitation, based on exchange, or the cash-nexus (*not political force*). Marx and Engels theorize this as a form of "direct" exploitation, not because they claim the bourgeois has done away with ideology and become "realistic," as Moretti claims (102), but precisely because the bourgeoisie obscures the basis of its wealth in the surplus labor of the other in the apparently "force-less" relations of exchange. In reality, of course, the worker must sell her labor because she has been violently stripped of the means of production by the developing bourgeois relations of production. The bourgeoisie is *a relation* to labor, and specifically an *owning* relation to labor power, codified in the political framework of democracy. The propertylessness of the laborer – which is the condition of his or her exploitation and the owner's profit under capitalism – is however translated by bourgeois ideology into the "freedom" of wage labor and "equality" in the market. In doing so, these ideological narratives obscure the historical – changeable – origins of capitalism as well as the possibility of a society in which the needs of people (not profit) are the priority. Critical readings that seek to go beyond ideas that naturalize capitalism, Marx suggests, therefore need to treat the concrete of cultural forms and practices not in their own terms but in relation to their outside: the relations of production.

Yet because Moretti's concern is primarily the formal change in prose and how this corresponds to changes in culture and political legitimacy (hegemony), the fundamental roots of the bourgeois mode of

production become backgrounded. This is not to say that Moretti does not address matters of exploitation and the conflict between workers and the bourgeoisie. Rather, they become absorbed in the cultural superstructure, where formal “minutiae” of texts become the focus, and their causal connection to the social relations of production become increasingly indistinct. The focus on cultural forms is part of a formalist treatment of class that dwells in description.

As the book develops, for instance, Moretti highlights the ways in which accumulation corresponds with the growth of accounting and an increasingly precise depiction of the everyday that (in the second chapter) he locates in the “serious” style of the bourgeois. This is reflected in the dramatic increase in “fillers” in narratives (what happens between the turning points of the plot) over the nineteenth century. Early on, in the novels of Goethe and Scott, for instance, the fillers focus on the everyday and their effect is “enough to ‘reawaken’ the everyday, making it feel alive, open” (75). What is significant about this style, Moretti argues, is that it represents “a new, truly *secular* way of imagining the meaning of life” (75). Following Weber and the early Lukács, Moretti emphasizes that bourgeois prose reflects the “growing *regularity* of private life” (80) and the new systematic and regular rhythms and repeated activities. Fillers “offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life” (81), which he connects to a mode of “honesty,” fact-checking and fact-facing that has its parallel in the “double-entry” bookkeeping of the capitalist. It is, he writes, “a process that begins in the economy and in the administration, but eventually spills over into the sphere of free time, private life, feelings, aesthetics” (82). This extends Moretti’s earlier treatment of the “economy” in terms of “administration” necessary for accounting for accumulation – that is, a reduction of the mode of production to the mode of exchange and the analytical calculation, direct prose, and rationality this requires. But the bourgeois concern with calculation is itself an effect not of culture or values but production – the advances in the productive forces through which the capitalist accumulates capital by appropriating the surplus labor of others.

The "private life" of the bourgeois depends on the social subjugation of others in the division of labor. The bourgeois, then, emerges in Moretti's analysis as primarily the embodiment of administrative reason. Literary analysis of the bourgeois figure becomes a descriptive account of that administrative reason in culture: a literary critical accounting of administrative reason – and, just as important, its re-enchantment.

His third chapter on "Fog" highlights the turning point in his bourgeois narrative, for it chronicles the increasing sense of "illegitimacy" of the bourgeois, which is reflected in a shift in narrative form, from precision and an analytical presentation of character to an evasive style of prose. This is evident for instance in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* where "Poetic intelligence sees mankind's extinction – and buries it within an unfathomable linguistic maze" (109). But it also emerges in Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman*, Gaskell's *North and South*, and Smiles' *Self-Help*, where new uses of adjectives give prose "greater emotional strength" (130), and "serious" is displaced by "earnest" as part of a new sentimentalism that fears (analytical) knowledge and champions only the "useful" (135-37). Adjectives that used to describe objects now describe states of mind (e.g., from "strong raft" to "strong will"), a shift from the material to the immaterial conveying evaluative "judgment" (not clarity of description or accuracy), though it does so indirectly. This turn from disenchantment to re-enchantment, according to Moretti, marks the emergence of the (emotional, moral) Victorian "mentality" (129) that constitutes "the first instance of cultural hegemony in modern history" (134), due to Britain's position in nineteenth-century capitalism. As the British bourgeois gained economic and political power, and the (cultural) choices they made (reflected for instance in "the metaphorical veil projected by adjectives over reality" and the embrace of ethics) "had a unique weight in undermining the 'realistic' (Marx) or 'disenchanted' (Weber) representations of modernity" (134). "Hegemony" here, then, signals those ideas that displace other, earlier, representations of capitalism ("modernity").

Because Moretti is so attentive to prose forms, *The Bourgeois* offers an insightful *immanent* analysis of literary forms and styles. His demonstration of the evasiveness of language in the novels and the way this reflects the

efforts of the bourgeois to dissimulate their class power raises important issues. He makes a provocative claim that “The more indispensable realism is, the more unthinkable it becomes” (186). In developing this argument, he points to the importance of the way Ibsen’s plays expose the “grey area” in which the bourgeois increasingly operate legally and morally. And in this context he argues that the lesson of Ibsen today is the “Recogni[tion of] the impotence of bourgeois realism in the face of [contemporary] capitalist megalomania” (187). Other critics of realism make realism constitutively impossible – i.e., following Derrida and de Man, a dominant trend in analyzing realism has involved showing that the appeal to the real is structured by the slippages of language. This argument is updated in the reading of Victorian texts by, for instance, Anna Kornbluh, whose analysis radically dematerializes the material relations of capital through a tropic reading of capitalism as “a metaphysical system capable of deflecting the question of its groundlessness” (9). Moretti by contrast suggests, not that capitalism is groundless, but that the ground of culture is class power, and that the contradictions and evasiveness of texts needs to be connected to class and class power. It is not an immanent function of the texts themselves or the errancy of language.

As significant as this formal analysis of realism’s increasing impossibility is, it treats bourgeois subterfuge as a manifestation of an increasingly insecure bourgeois mentality, not a structural aspect of capitalism. It is indeed the case that the early bourgeois championed rationality and knowledge in a way that the later bourgeoisie did not. But even at this stage, though some early bourgeois economists came to understand the role of labor, they steadfastly obscured the way in which labor time determines value and mystified the basis of capitalist profit in exploited labor. If the bourgeoisie became “self-repressed” stylistically, this is not a result of becoming “ashamed” (13) of themselves as class divisions develop (a phrasing which hints at the way Moretti’s analysis of the bourgeois “mentality” ultimately pathologizes class and obscures the economic dynamics of capitalism). Nor does it reflect a loss of political legitimacy. On the contrary, the shift from scientific precision and

analytical clarity in prose to poetic equivocation through the second half of the nineteenth century reflects the new monopoly status of the bourgeoisie, which is reflected in the accumulated political power (its control of the state), and the deep expansion of imperialism. This brought unprecedented wealth as well as explosive class struggles, not only in the British and European contexts but in the colonies of the imperialist powers.

To put the point differently, Moretti forgets that dominant literary (and cultural) realism rarely exposes the basis of class relations – even in its “realist” modality. This is because, in attending to the details of everyday life – which is the space of commodity relations and thus the inversion of economic relations – realism *repeats* bourgeois clichés and values. Bourgeois realism, in other words, is the space of ideology. It is in this context that Lukács addresses “the conflict between realism and naturalism” (*Studies* 5) and proposes that most “realist” novels are in effect forms of naturalism because of the way in which their depiction of the objective and subjective details of reality actually obscures the social totality (5-7). To go beyond the ideology, i.e., to read the literary representation of the bourgeois in a way that goes beyond the surfaces of capitalism, requires connecting cultural values and mentalities not just to class power and administration but to the primary class relations and the class conflicts that result from them. Namely, not just the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the feudal aristocracy (which tends to be the main class conflict in Moretti’s book, and especially in the chapter on writers of the “semi-periphery,” where the “defeat” of the bourgeois by the aristocracy is the focus), but the fundamental contradiction between the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

These are the relations that remain indistinct in Moretti’s formal analysis of figuration. But this is the result of Moretti’s method. As he puts it, “I will focus less on the actual relationships between specific social groups – bankers and high civil servants, industrialists and doctors, and so on – than on the ‘fit’ between cultural forms and the new class realities: how a word like ‘comfort’ outlines the contours of legitimate bourgeois consumption, for instance” (4). Leaving aside that the “class realities” here are not rooted in material relations of production but consumption, he suggests that it is possible to address “class

realities” as *reified forms*, rather than social relations. But this separation of social “relationships” from class “realities” empties class reality of its material content.⁵ Moreover, as he also argues, it is not possible to treat social relations as shaping culture since culture and class are in the end a “parallel series”:

What kind of history – what kind of *evidence* is that offered by literary works? Clearly, never a direct one: the mill-owner Thornton in *North and South* (1855), or the entrepreneur Wokulski in *The Doll* (1890), proves exactly nothing about the Manchester or Warsaw bourgeoisie. They belong to a parallel historical series – a sort of cultural double helix, where the spasms of capitalist modernization are matched and reshaped by literary form-giving. (13-14)

Yet this is a rather “foggy” way of theorizing the relation between “capitalist modernization” – an allusion to production – and culture. The parallel relation suggests “series” that never meet (thus one cannot be said to “determine” the other), while the image of the “double helix” suggests that culture and production co-determine each other. But this image is then modified to suggest that economic “spasms” shape literary form. This is an overdetermined theory of overdetermination that resists the charge of “economism,” as has become a protocol of social theory. Actually, this is a very familiar reading of the economy – one that has dominated Marxian and left cultural theory since the 1970s, with “the turn away from Marxism” that was itself a relay of capital’s turn to more flexible modes of accumulation and the accompanying onslaught against the working class. It is a way of talking about the relationship between culture and class that avoids any causal explanation and in effect keeps attention on the cultural: a way of emphasizing the “complexity” of class and avoiding the “vulgarity” of “reducing” culture to class. Moretti’s resort to overdetermination, of course, would not be so significant if the book was not such a strong objection to the role of evasiveness and linguistic “complexity” in legitimizing class inequalities.

To state the problem another way: Moretti's analysis of the culture and class of the bourgeois remains a largely cultural analysis, because the class "roots" he focuses on are in fact superstructural relations.

The lesson the reader ultimately learns from *The Bourgeois* is this: the capitalist used to be heroic; now this figure has descended into cultural/political illegitimacy, while nonetheless controlling more wealth the world over. But this does not so much expose the hidden dynamics of capital as it articulates the liberal critique of the lack of "transparency" and the call for restoring the public's faith in banks, CEOs, and government, through institutional reforms – i.e., championing the need for institutional changes to bolster capitalism by restoring its transparency, honesty, etc. This is an argument that has become extraordinarily popular with such recent books as Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and Michael Lewis's *Flash Boys: A Wall Street Revolt*. The popularity of such texts derives from the way their brutal exposures of inequalities and systematic corruption end up restoring faith in a reformable capitalism: a more "humane" level of exploitation with higher corporate taxes (Piketty) and more oversight (Lewis). Such changes may bring about important local reforms but they block analysis of the systemic contradictions of capital that lead to ever more catastrophic crises. Moretti's appeal to class relations and property, while at the same time emptying out class relations from property, is part of the double-move of cultural theory today by which it opposes the cultural contradictions and oppression of capitalism while regularizing capitalist exploitation.

But perhaps even more significant is that Moretti's association of "bourgeois values" with the heroic administrative reason of the early bourgeoisie gives his analysis a nostalgic aura. Following Weber, he highlights the secularism of bourgeois values (and like Weber absorbs relations of exploitation in trade) and critiques the way in which Victorians failed to establish "cultural hegemony" and "restored" the spiritual and emotional "fervors." The problem with the bourgeois, in effect, is not so much that they exploit others as that they have given up on science, rational knowledge, and a commitment to accurate accounting, and thus "What has

evaporated is the sense of bourgeois *legitimacy*: the idea of a ruling class that doesn't just rule, but *deserves* to do so" (20).

It is precisely this nostalgia that serves to connect *The Bourgeois* to "distant reading" – the method of literary criticism for which Moretti has become most well-known in recent years, and which is the title of another book he published in 2013. Now a pioneering method in the digital humanities, distant reading is a method of data analysis of the archive that Moretti has been developing for years, and which has led to his co-founding of the Stanford Literary Lab with Matthew Jockers in 2010. As opposed to "close reading," which focuses on a small body of works in the established canon and tends to prevent comparative analyses of the world's literature, "distant reading" of the archive of "world literature" (which draws on the method of "quantitative formalism"⁶) allows a more comprehensive understanding of developments of literature across centuries and nations, Moretti suggests. Which is to say that "distant" means huge quantities of forms – hence "quantitative formalism" – and requires software that can accumulate and analyze the vast amounts of data in the archive. Distance, Moretti argues, "*is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems" (*Distant Reading* 48-49). Distant reading, Moretti suggests, leads to a more "objective," scientific approach to literature and thus avoids the "theological" interpretations of the traditions of "close reading." The idea here is that the text needs to be addressed empirically and scientifically (often through statistical analysis of semantic fields) in order to reveal patterns of genre, speech, syntax, etc. But empirical data and its patterns cannot be read on their own terms without obscuring the complex material determinations that bring it about. Objective knowledge of the social is not an effect of quantitative analysis of form but the dialectical analysis that treats the concrete form in relation to the social totality (not just cultural relations).

One might say, in this regard, that Moretti sees Robinson Crusoe as heroic because he embodies the very mode of cataloguing of the

everyday that Moretti has revived for the digital era of "big data." *The Bourgeois* and the method of "distant reading" do not represent two fundamentally different projects, but two different applications of the same class formalism.

To be clear, Moretti writes in *Distant Reading* that he considers *The Bourgeois* "a book that couldn't be more unlike [*Distant Reading*] in spirit and execution" (6). Yet, as I have begun to suggest, the same approach to rational administrative reason ultimately disconnected from property relations informs both texts. Speaking about the differences of the two books, he concludes that "I prefer studying tides and moon independently of each other" (6), which is another way of saying that he studies the effects of class in culture separately from their causes in class. But this mode of "study" – which treats class and culture "independently" – describes the very logic of formalism. Indeed, we have already seen that he separates culture from class even when talking about the connection between the two. This in part explains why some critics have found *Distant Reading* highly alienating yet relished the pleasure of reading *The Bourgeois*. In a Symposium on *Distant Reading* in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, for instance, one critic writes, after a rather scathing critique of Moretti's "techno mimicry,"

So I recommend you skip *Distant Reading* and read *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, the second of two Moretti books published this season, instead. A perfect antidote to the tedious academic squabbles chronicled in the first book, *The Bourgeois* offers a glorious mental ballet, a testament to Moretti's virtuosic style as a thinker and critic. Can he write! And practically no bean counting in this one – no graphs, no maps, no trees. (Alexander R. Galloway, "Everything is Computational")

Of course, many other critics have rejected Moretti's "distant reading" for its effort to reduce literary forms to calculation (for treating literary criticism as a science), and for the method's uncritical approach to data

mining. Lauren Goodlad and Andrew Sartori are quite right to point out that the method deployed by Moretti “consists in machines counting what human programmers and archivists designate worthy of counting,” and thus that it depends on its own unspoken presuppositions (606). But one also needs to address that the technology itself is an extension of *the relations of wage labor*, and the presuppositions reflect the ideology that naturalizes it. Big data and its modes of knowing are being driven by the globalization of production. Under an increasingly global system, the accumulated surplus is being invested in new technologies that enable increasingly more flexible appropriation of surplus value from around the world. Big data capitalism is a highly profitable industry today because it facilitates the immensely complex global “supply chains” of Wal-Mart and the rapid and volatile trading on the world’s stock markets, not to mention the expansion of high-tech forms of surveillance in which the capitalist state is investing in the attempt to quash growing class antagonisms and dissent.⁷ The software and hardware being developed create increasingly automated systems – which is to say not only that they are used to reduce labor but that they are *built* on the basis of exploited human labor and serve to facilitate the future extraction of surplus labor.

These developments in digital capitalism themselves make necessary new consciousness skills for the emerging workforce, and it is ultimately in this context that formalist reading needs to be situated. Formalist reading, which is developed in many idioms in the (post)humanities today, helps to reconfigure social knowing for a post-critique era. Big data capitalism requires sophisticated, worldly surface readers. To be more specific, it needs subjects with a new attentiveness to the “global” aspects of the world and even an awareness of deepening inequalities. At the same time, subjects need to be capable of tracing formal patterns in texts and developing models that “synthesize” data and anticipate (market) trends. Formalist reading is particularly important because through it the data analyst can provide complex maps of data while treating formal patterns and trends as ultimately separate from the class dynamics of history that render the analyst’s life more and more precarious. Formalism, in short, is

the mode of knowing needed to retool the workforce for a new stage of capitalist accumulation and austerity.

This is why – in contrast to most critiques of Moretti's quantitative formalism – mine concludes that the central problem is not that it suppresses literary enjoyment and affect or champions rationality and abstract thinking. "Transformative reading," as Robert Faivre argues, *requires* abstract knowledge, because transformative reading "is the science of the advancing productive forces, reading the world not only to interpret it, but to change it" (194). The problem is that Moretti's defense of reason and abstract knowledge and clarity is ultimately *disconnected* from the relations between capital and labor and in effect normalizes the existing property relations that prevent the productive forces from being used to meet the needs of the many. Knowledge is valued insofar as it grasps forms, not as the basis of understanding the social totality and the dialectics of material change. And this severing of rationality and culture from class, in the end, is precisely what Moretti's analysis *shares* both with other defenders of surface reading and with the close readers who insist that literature is the sublime zone of the incalculable.

To put what I have argued another way, the real significance of *The Bourgeois* is that it is part of a (re)turn to material relations in the (post)humanities that in fact *de-materializes* the material. It advances a mode of reading based on administrative reason that is actually a new metaphysics of capitalism in disguise.

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Notes

¹ This is a trend of course "officially" signaled in the late 1990s in what Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee called "the new economic criticism" (*The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Interface of Literature and Economics* [1999]), but it has become a particularly important topic in the field of Victorian scholarship published around the time of the 2007 financial crisis, and particularly since then. See for instance: Francis O'Gorman's *Victorian Literature and Finance* (2007);

Mary Poovey's *Genres of the Credit Economy* (2008); Kathleen Blake's *Pleasure of Benthamism: Victorian Literature, Utility, Political Economy* (2009); Nancy Henry and Cannon Schmitt's *Victorian Investments: New Perspectives on Finance and Culture*; Audrey Jaffe's *The Affective Life of the Average Man* (2010); Tamara S. Wagner's *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction: Plotting Money and the Novel Genre, 1815-1901* (2010); and Anna Kornbluh's *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (2014).

² It is in this context that he also draws on Wallerstein's theory of "world system" (itself more a theory of world trade than class relations between labor and capital) as a basis for his comparative analysis of Victorian novels in the "core" and "semiperiphery" of the world system.

³ As a result, what is obscured is that Robinson is in fact never a "master" in the way Moretti describes (i.e., a manager). He is either a laborer (subsisting on the results of his own labor), or he takes the products of the labor of others (in the case of Friday's labor and the labor of his slaves on the plantation).

⁴ It is worth noting that the focus on the "regulation" of life, temporality, and affect has today become the focus of the discourse of biopolitics, which has its more recent roots in Foucault, but is also very much indebted to the analysis of instrumental reason developed by Weber and others. The main difference is that whereas biopolitics seeks to champion the "life" that resists and exceeds instrumental reason, Moretti in many ways updates instrumental reason for the digital era of capital: big data capitalism.

⁵ It also undermines his claim that literary forms are "the fossil remains of what had once been a living and problematic present" (14), thus requiring the working backwards from form to living, conflicting class relationships.

⁶ For an example of "quantitative formalism" and its approach, see the Stanford Literary Lab's Pamphlet 1: "Quantitative Formalism: An Experiment" (litlab.stanford.edu).

⁷ It is important to note that a recent report in the *Washington Post* indicates that the Secret Service is currently looking to invest in software

that can detect "sarcasm" for its surveillance of social media (see Katie Zezima, "The Secret Service wants software that detects sarcasm"). In other words, software and data scientists who can "parse language" to determine "legitimate" threats are not autonomous from the social relations of production.

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