

***Falso movimento* (Moretti 2022): Memories and Translations**

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ABSTRACT*

The last monograph of Franco Moretti – *Falso movimento* – was published more than a year ago, in January 2022, but has so far only been translated in German, and not in English. Regarding the international success of *La letteratura vista da lontano* (2005), this fact is surprising. Several reasons could explain the delay in publishing an English translation; this paper will highlight a point that could make the reception of this new monograph uncomfortable in English language scholarship: it clearly expresses doubts about how the distant reading has shaped the humanities. These doubts can only surprise a large part of English language scholarship: it majorly considers *La letteratura vista da lontano* as a pertinent and iconoclast history of literature. Paying attention to Moretti’s heritage and reception in diverse languages highlights the importance of *Falso movimento*: it should be considered as challenging to scholars both within and outside of the digital humanities.

KEYWORDS

Moretti; Humanities; Interpretation; Distant Reading; *Falso Movimento*

1. INTRODUCTION

The last monograph of Franco Moretti – *Falso movimento* – was published more than a year ago, in January 2022, but has so far only been translated in German, and not in English (as of early May 2023, to my knowledge). Regarding the international success of *La letteratura vista da lontano* (2005) in the digital humanities, this fact is surprising.¹ It is even more striking that *La letteratura* was published in its original Italian language and in its English translation in the same year. It is therefore appropriate to present an analysis of this multilingual case at the AIUCD conference 2023 from a non-Italian perspective but based on the original Italian work of Moretti. Several reasons can explain a delay in publishing an English translation, from practical ones to complex possibilities. This paper will highlight an issue that could potentially make the reception of this new monograph uncomfortable in English language scholarship: it clearly expresses doubts about how this distant reading has shaped the humanities.² These doubts can only surprise a large part of English language scholarship: it majorly considers *La letteratura vista da lontano* as a pertinent and iconoclast history of literature. The general tone used by Moretti in *Falso movimento* illustrates lucid and cold memories of “il camino percorso” – and describes how far we have come with the distant reading: “The point is not to feel nostalgia, and even less to recriminate, but to understand.”³ Even if nostalgia is not on Moretti’s agenda, his evaluation is quite reserved. He asserts that the digital humanities have lost the form and the social dimension of the literature, “reducing it to a pale reflection.”⁴ Such a perspective enters into direct conflict with the more pragmatic English language perspective, as *Falso movimento* posits in the conclusion: if many changes took place in the digital humanities, one did not see *the* transformation “that seemed possible at a certain moment. It is maybe because the digital humanities escaped the confrontation with the big aesthetic and scientific culture *del Novecento*, by preferring the narrower perimeter of the recent American criticism.”⁵ The last

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¹ The 2023 article by Primorac et al. illustrates well the case: the work of Franco Moretti is at the center of this article entitled “Distant Reading Two Decades on: Reflections on the Digital Turn in the Study of Literature,” but *Falso movimento* is not discussed, and not even quoted in the bibliography.

² Several authors have of course discussed the distant reading concept and effects, a discussion beyond the scope of this short article. See e.g. Da, “The Computational Case against Computational Literary Studies” (2019); Piper, “Do We Know What We Are Doing?” (2020); Ciotti, “Distant Reading in Literary Studies: A Methodology in Quest of Theory” (2021); Primorac et al., “Distant Reading” (2023).

³ Moretti, *Falso*, 11: “Non si tratta di avere nostalgia, e men che meno di recriminare. Si tratta di capire.” The English translations are mine.

⁴ Moretti, *Falso*, 11: “Si perde la forma, si perde la dimensione sociale della letteratura, e la si riduce a uno scialbo riflesso.”

⁵ Moretti, *Falso*, 149: “Ma dei singoli cambiamenti non sono *il* cambiamento che era un tempo sembrato possibile. Forse, è perché le *digital humanities* hanno fuggito il confronto con la grande cultura estetica e scientifica del Novecento, preferendo l’assai più angusto perimetro della critica americana recente.”

sentence could be accompanied by the Italian song *Tu vuò fà l'americano*⁶ Let's recognize it: the recent monograph of Moretti confronts the "American" perception of the digital humanities, and this requires further analysis.

2. LA LETTERATURA (2005) AND ITS TRANSLATIONS

Published in 2005 in both its original Italian language and its English translation, *La letteratura vista da lontano* has become a kind of textbook of literary reading in English language scholarship, as the subtitle suggests: *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*. It is interesting to note that the French translation, published three years later (2008), reformulates the English subtitle in its own way: *Graphes, cartes et arbres: Modèles abstraits pour une autre histoire de la littérature*. There is obviously nuance between presenting "a literary history," or "une autre histoire de la littérature," ("another history of the literature"). The English subtitle suggests that a key has been found to present the literary history: it illustrates the hope that Moretti said was lost in 2022, the transformation "that seemed possible at a certain moment."⁷ This victorious perception of the distant reading is a major way in which *La letteratura* has presented itself throughout the English translation, and has also influenced the French reception, as it is clear in the 2022 French collected essays *La fabrique numérique des corpus en sciences humaines et sociales*. In it, the heritage of Moretti is presented by Juliette Mayer as a major and uncontested methodology: "[Working] on big scale corpora implies methodologies and tools that give a considerable space to the 'distant reading' – methodologies and computing tools that allow to reveal recurrent patterns, schemes, tendencies in big textual corpora – transformed in 'data' analyzable, quantifiable, and searchable by algorithms (Moretti 2005)."⁸ The same vision is shared by Bénédicte Terrisse and Werner Wögerbauer, who mention in 2022 the publication of *Falso movimento* in a footnote, but without integrating it in their argumentation.⁹

But it should be highlighted that Moretti has maintained a prominent role to the close reading in *Graphs, Maps and Trees*, if it is read not only from a pragmatic point of view. I have always considered this 2005 book not as a textbook of the distant reading, but as a prudent essay, keeping a strong concern for interpretative core skills needed by humanists. It should even be noted that the third part – *Trees* – focuses on the "micro-level of stylistic mutations"¹⁰: there are definitively close-reading elements in this book. Moreover, Moretti describes, as a "major issue of its own right," the fact that "the models I have presented share a clear preference for explanation over interpretation; or perhaps, better, for the explanation of general structures over the interpretation of individual texts."¹¹ If, in *Falso movimento*, the questions of the interpretation and individual texts come back to center stage (see Section 3), they were already present in *La letteratura*. With lucid perception, Moretti concludes *Graphs* by stating that he presented "a materialist conception of the form," a conception duly rooted in a sociological analysis that recognizes the form as a social force.¹² A balanced view is promoted here, including an exhaustive perception of the humanities' core skills. Eva Geulen's comments in *Falsche Bewegung*, point out the unavoidable but mysterious relationship between form and history.¹³ But such an evaluation could also describe *Graphs, Maps and Trees*.

Considering these remarks, one can start to perceive that *Falso movimento* is closer to *La letteratura* than expected. There is no need for reassurance considering that Moretti "did not lose the faith" – according to Demetrio Marra –¹⁴ or that there is "hope in a new start" – according to Danilo Soscia.¹⁵ Such perspectives miss the point: *La letteratura vista da lontano* was already highlighting the possible holes and issues of the quantitative analysis. For seventeen years, Moretti has been an actor and observer of the developments of this reading from a distance. In 2022, he simply published the next portion of his thoughts, focusing on the missing points referenced in 2005. Eva Geulen considers, in a quite dramatic way, that *Falso movimento* "not only counts the loses, but also recalculates the costs [*eine Gegenrechnung aufmachen*]."¹⁶ Such an opinion overlooks that the main elements of Moretti's 2022 analysis already existed, at least *in nuce*, in *Graphs, Maps and*

6 This song was written by Renato Carosone in 1956; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tu_vuò_fà_l'27americano

7 See footnote 6 above.

8 de Maeyer, "Travailler les corpus de presse numérique, un travail d'artisan?", §4.

9 Terrisse and Wögerbauer, "La carte et la frise : des métaphores aux diagrammes", §9 : "L'un des représentants les plus éminents de leur utilisation pour figurer des phénomènes de l'histoire littéraire est Franco Moretti", with a reference to *Falso movimento* in footnote 33.

10 Moretti, *Graphs*, 91.

11 Moretti, *Graphs*, 91.

12 Moretti, *Graphs*, 92.

13 Geulen, "DISTANT READING UP CLOSE: Moretti zieht Bilanz", 5: "'Es gibt keine Formen ohne Geschichte' (Falsche Bewegung, 142). Und es gibt auch keine Geschichte ohne Formen. Aber wie Formen und Geschichte aufeinander bezogen werden können, bleibt ein Rätsel".

14 Marra, "Sul Falso movimento di Franco Moretti (e cioè sull'intera collana, se vogliamo)", online.

15 Soscia, "La svolta quantitativa spiegata a mio figlio", online.

16 Geulen, "DISTANT READING", 3.

Trees. I would say that “la facture est salée” – the bill is heavy – only for those who thought they had finally arrived in a wealthy humanist paradise, digital one.

3. FALSO MOVIMENTO: MEMORIES OF SEVERAL PASTS

The last remarks of Section 2 help one to understand why it is not a surprise to read Moretti, in 2022, pleading for attention to be given to the individual texts. He comments on the Ngram patterns in this way: “The text was at the center of the study of the literature: in this case, it is a little dot. It has been reduced to a little dot”; we arrived at “a story of the literature without texts. Without texts – in the sense that they are too many, naturally, and then, they cannot be studied in their individuality anymore.”¹⁷ Moretti starts *Falso movimento* from the arrival point of *La letteratura*: the loss of attention to individual texts and to interpretation, as discussed in Section 2. The image of a text reduced to a “little dot” – *un puntino* – is surely a metaphor that will remain as illustration of this book, since it expresses the present feelings of a lot of digital and/or humanist scholars. It should be noted that Moretti relates the power of this form influencing the world of interpretation, instead of the quantitative explanation. The quantitative analysis can move only “tra forma e forma” and considers the form as a finished product, measurable with a calculating mindset and applicable to many kinds of relationship.¹⁸ That’s surely one of the most provocative points of the book and merits in-depth testing. For the author, it is not a question, but a conviction that leads him to a strong affirmation: “Diciamo la verità: la storia della cultura merita di meglio”, “we say the truth: the history of the culture deserves better.”¹⁹ For Moretti, *l’heure est grave*: loss of strong explanations and ambitious concepts; this is the “reality of the digital humanities.”²⁰ At this point, it becomes clear that *Falso movimento*’s English translation and reception will be a challenge for scholars and teachers.

Beyond the quite short retention of quantitative literary research, the title of the book refers also to a deep European literary history. As explained by Moretti himself in a 2022 blog article, the title *Falso movimento* is inspired by a German movie by Wim Wenders, *Falsche Bewegung* (1975), inspired itself by a novel of Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–1796). This cultural background explains why the book has already been translated in German: *Falsche Bewegung. Die digitale Wende in den Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften* (2022). The subtitle – “the digital *Wende* in the literary and cultural humanities” – makes the reference to Wenders’ movie stronger. The German translation definitively puts its own touch on this subtitle, since *die Wende* also means the “turn-around,” a peaceful historical and political process in the former German Democratic Republic, in the years 1989 and 1990, that led to the reunification of Germany.²¹ Is there a way to maintain a positive perception of the digital turn, despite *Falsche Bewegung*? I will let German readers confirm what kind of *Wende* they perceive in the digital turn. But such a reappropriation in another language and culture in any case demonstrates the strong impact of *Falso movimento*. It highlights the central role of Goethe and his work in the current discussions about distant reading.²² The – momentaneous? – silence of the English and French about the book could be another way to express that “something happened.” For once, humanist scholars take their time, what should be always the case when translation is at stake.

I would have preferred that the German subtitle evoke the figure of a “digital Meister,” a *digitaler Meister in den Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften*. Indeed, Wenders and Goethe are both narrating the initiation of a young man, Wilhelm Meister. The Wilhelm Meister of Wenders is less successful than the one of Goethe. Travelling through Germany – still divided in 1975 – Wenders’ Meister expresses his melancholia at the end of the movie, saying: “Avevo l’impressione di aver mancato qualcosa, e di continuare a mancare qualcosa, a ogni nuovo movimento”; “I had the impression to have missed something, and to continue missing something at each new movement”.²³ It is not obvious to qualify such travel as a *Wende*, a peaceful “turn-around” process. Almost fifty years after the movie of Wenders, our present “digital Meister” faces a world tempted again by division, even if transformed by digitization.

¹⁷ Moretti, *Falso*, 24: “Il testo era al centro dello studio della letteratura: in questo caso, e un puntino. È stato ridotto a un puntino”; we arrived to “una storia della letteratura senza testi. Senza testi – nel senso che ce ne sono troppi, naturalmente, e quindi non li si può più studiare nella loro individualità.”

¹⁸ Moretti, *Falso*, 36: “L’interpretazione si muove tra la forma et il mondo, andando in cerca del significato storico delle opere; la quantificazione si muove tra forma e forma, tentando di tracciare le coordinate di un futuro atlante della letteratura. Per la prima, la forma è *une forza, un agire*, un modo di ‘plasmare’ l’esistente che va accolto con sospetto, contrastato, e infine smascherato. Per l’altra, la forma è un *prodotto finito*: da misurare a mente fredda, e collocare all’interno di un vasto sistema di rapporti.”

¹⁹ Moretti, *Falso*, 99.

²⁰ Moretti, *Falso*, 127.

²¹ See <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wende>.

²² See for example Andrew Piper and Mark Algee-Hewitt, “The Werther Effect I: Goethe, Objecthood, and the Handling of Knowledge” (2014); Da (2019, 633-634); Piper (2020, 7; in answer to Da); Primorac et al. (2023, 1).

²³ Moretti, *Falso*, 9-10.

4. CONCLUSION: AT THE HORIZON

Challenging the quite successful initiation of Wilhelm Meister of Goethe remains a task of European literature. A detail went unmentioned by Moretti: in Goethe's work, Wilhelm reads Shakespeare and plays Hamlet. At the end of this conference paper, we reach the missing point: the English language and culture. Hamlet has inspired Wilhelm by Goethe, who inspired Wilhelm by Wenders, who inspired Moretti in *Falso movimento*. Logically, it means that "tôt ou tard", sooner or later, English language scholarship should consider Moretti's *Falso movimento*. Translators and publishers will surely be encouraged by the positive insights also present in the book, culminating with this statement: "The day the abundance of data will open the road to ambitious concepts – instead of discouraging them – this day, the quantitative history of the culture would have truly started, and the confrontation with the 'other' humanist disciplines will finally become possible."²⁴ Will the more positive Wilhelm of Goethe encourage the melancholic Wilhelm of Wenders to pursue the digital humanities distant reading adventure coined by Moretti? A modest but clear answer can be given to this question: whatever happens, this task will be probably performed by the next generation, those who still did not make too many *wrong moves*.

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²⁴ Moretti, *Falso*, 127: "Il giorno che l'abbondanza di dati aprirà la strada a concetti ambiziosi, invece di scoraggiarli – quel giorno, la storia quantitativa della cultura avrà davvero inizio, e il confronto con le 'altre' discipline umanistiche diventerà finalmente possibile."