



Critical Response II. "Relatively Blunt"

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Critical Response

II

“Relatively Blunt”

Franco Moretti

Katie Trumpener compares me to Cleanth Brooks, no less, and says many other nice things, for which I am grateful; yet, I wish she had read my essay with a little more care.¹ It is also not easy to understand what exactly she disagrees with. For what I can see, however, there are three main points of contention: causality; statistics; and the comparative method.

Causality. Here, apparently, I both “avoid assigning causality: it remains hard to be sure who or what is creating discernible changes,” and assign it to the wrong factor: “Moretti’s assumptions about marketplace factors are too monocausal.” In fact, I do explicitly locate the decisive cause for the shortening of titles (and, later, their differentiation) in the expansion of the market: first, by showing the inverse correlation between the two, and then conjecturing how changes in market size may have con-

1. “By the 1830s,” Trumpener writes, “Moretti assures us, the generic subtitle begins vanishing from most British book titles.” I don’t assure that; if anything, a footnote suggests that, between 1830 and 1850, there was an *increased* attention to the role of subtitles. Elsewhere, she writes that, for me, subtitles “are too explicit and crude to hold real interest.” True, *A Tale of Other Times* is crude; but, crude or not, I make clear that subtitles are “invaluable for the analysis of novelistic subgenres” (exactly Trumpener’s point)—and announce further research on the subtitle in “or” (*Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*). But no: “by programmatically omitting subtitles from his analysis [Moretti] obviously weakens the accuracy of his statistical argument about length.” Obviously . . . had Trumpener looked at figure 6, she would know that the length of titles follows exactly the same curve whether one edits them or not (the unedited chart being—obviously—a couple of words longer throughout the period). But Trumpener does not look at graphs: from her article, one could never tell that “Style, Inc.” has one per page. We should all “read *more*,” she writes at the end of her article: “more widely, more deeply.” Yes.

cretely “cascaded” down to the structure of titles. Trumpener provides no data to contradict this hypothesis, nor does she challenge the fact that circulating libraries—these key multipliers of literary circulation—take novelistic titles, and regularly shorten them. Finally, there is no objection to my thesis on how the ultimate forms of short titles—proper names and abstractions—may have come into being.

So. I assign causality at three distinct levels: that of systemic constraints; of “local,” but widely disseminated institutions like circulating libraries; and of specific generic and ideological choices. Trumpener objects to none of this; she simply disregards it, to propose instead “a labor-intensive way to find answers—by tackling publishers’ archives, reading individual manuscript drafts in rare book libraries, and trying to figure out, book for book, who determined each novel’s title: author, publisher or publicist. Such investigation would involve real footwork.” *Real* work; not like databases. And yet, “figuring out, book for book, who determined each novel’s title” is hardly the point, here, because the behavior of a large system is *not* the same as the sum (of the behaviors) of its individual elements. When a system changes *en bloc* in the same direction, we must look for general reasons for the change, operating *at the level of the system as such*, and applying simultaneously to all its components (along the lines of Bourdieu’s “field”). In this specific case, the market is my candidate. If there are alternative hypotheses, let’s discuss them.

Statistics. “The current essay,” Trumpener writes, “shows statistical analysis as a relatively blunt hermeneutic instrument, redeemed mainly by Moretti’s own exegetical verve” (p. 170). Thanks for the verve, but—why exactly is statistics blunt?² And why set quantitative evidence in opposition to “attention to syntax, linguistic register, and grammar”? From the moment I started using external models for literary study—evolutionary theory, over twenty years ago—I realized that their great advantage lies

2. *Relatively* blunt, *mainly* redeemed ... Curious, these adverbs. But then, the entire article inclines towards the conditional: “Such investigation *would involve* real footwork—and *probably* more commitment ... than Moretti *would want to make*—More in-depth study *might move us*—Yet the jog needed ... *might equally* be supplied—This *may be* a plausible theory in Britain—The contents of titles ... *might mean* something *subtly* different—It *may well be* that across Western Europe...—his findings *may not be readily* generalizable” (pp. 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 170). Yes: everything *could* be this way or that. The point of doing research is the pleasure of using the indicative.

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precisely in the fact that they renew and galvanize formal analysis. At times, the external model makes literary structures more perspicuous: it's the case of maps. At other times, it provides a conceptual architecture for the history of forms: evolutionary theory. And quantitative series, for their part, allow us to see new problems, whose solution is usually found at the level of formal choices (linguistic, rhetorical, or a mix thereof). The specific relationship between literary form and nonliterary model varies from case to case; but the relationship is always there. So, it is not despite graphs that I quote Shklovsky and Benveniste more often now than twenty years ago; it is *because* of them.

Finally, the comparative method. "Moretti is interested here in the history of British book titles," writes Trumpener near the end of her response, "but his findings may not be readily generalizable."³ She, for one, "would argue rather for the continued usefulness of older comparative methods, particularly those associated with comparative literature" (p. 170). I will let readers judge whether my work—taken as a whole—is or is not "associated with comparative literature." But there is no doubt that "Style, Inc." deals only with British titles, and its findings may indeed "not be generalizable"—which, of course, is the reason why I don't generalize. Why did I only use British data, then? Because they were the only ones that existed! When data from different cultures were available I have made use of them—after all, the opening figure of *Graphs, Maps, Trees* charts comparable developments in Britain, Japan, Italy, Spain, and Nigeria. In this case, it was impossible—though of course I would have loved to have parallel series for France and Germany and Italy and China and Japan. One day, it will be possible. And I will do it.

3. "Elsewhere in Western Europe," she writes, "titles become shorter without any prompt from Britain's vast book industry. . . . In seventeenth-century France, relative brevity of title was sometimes deployed as a stylistic marker" (p. 168). Elsewhere in Western Europe—maybe; but we aren't offered a single instance. As for "seventeenth-century France," the claim is based on three—three—titles, only two of which, as Trumpener notes, prove her point. Two, out of many hundreds?