The Slaughterhouse of Literature

Moretti, Franco, 1950-

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Franco Moretti

The Slaughter

Let me begin with a few titles: *Arabian Tales, Aylmers, Annaline, Alicia de Lacey, Albigenses, Augustus and Adelina, Albert, Adventures of a Guinea, Abbess of Valiera, Ariel, Almacks, Adventures of Seven Shillings, Abbess, Arlington, Adelaide, Aretas, Abdallah the Moor, Anne Grey, Andrew the Savoyard, Agatha, Agnes de Monsfoldt, Anastasius, Anzoletto Ladoski, Arabian Nights, Adventures of a French Sarjeant, Adventures of Bamfylde Moore Carew, A Commissioner, Avondale Priory, Abduction, Accusing Spirit, Arward the Red Chieftain, Agnes de Courcy, An Old Friend, Annals of the Parish, Alice Grey, Astrologer, An Old Family Legend, Anna, Banditt's Bride, Bridal of Donnamore, Borderers, Beggar Girl . . .*

It was the first page of an 1845 catalog: Columbell's circulating library, in Derby: a small collection, of the kind that wanted only successful books. But today, only a couple of titles still ring familiar. The others, nothing. Gone. The history of the world is the slaughterhouse of the world, reads a famous Hegelian aphorism; and of literature. The majority of books disappear forever—and "majority" actually misses the point: if we set today's canon of nineteenth-century British novels at two hundred titles (which is a very high figure), they would still be only about *0.5 percent* of all published novels.

And the other 99.5 percent? This is the question behind this article, and behind the larger idea of literary history that is now taking shape in the work of several critics—most recently Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau, Katie Trumpener, and Margaret Cohen. The difference is that, for me, the aim is not so much a change in the canon—the discovery of precursors to the canon or alternatives to it, to be restored to a

prominent position—as a change in how we look at *all* of literary history: canonical and noncanonical: together.[1] To do so, I focus on what I call *rivals*: contemporaries who write more or less like canonical authors (in my case, more or less like Arthur Conan Doyle), but not quite, and who interest me because, from what I have seen of that forgotten 99 percent, they seem to be the largest contingent of the "great unread," as Cohen calls it. And that's really my hope, as I have said: to come up with a new sense of the literary field as a whole.[2]

But of course, there is a problem here. Knowing two hundred novels is already difficult. *Twenty thousand?* How can we do it, what does "knowledge" mean, in this new scenario? One thing for sure: it cannot mean the very close reading of very few texts—secularized theology, really ("canon"!)—that has radiated from the cheerful town of New Haven over the whole field of literary studies. A larger literary history requires other skills: sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, con-

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[1] For the precursor thesis, which is quite widespread, see, e.g., Margaret Doody, "George Eliot and the Eighteenth-Century Novel," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35 (1980): 267–8: "The period between the death of Richardson and the appearance of the novels of Scott and Austen . . . sees the development of the paradigm for women's fiction of the nineteenth century—*something hardly less than the paradigm of the nineteenth-century novel itself*" (my emphasis). Trumpener follows in part the precursor model (as in her discussion of national tales and historical novels) and in part the alternative model (as in the concluding paragraph of her book: "What a geopoliticized investigation of romantic fiction reveals is not only Scott's centrality in establishing a novel of imperial expansion but also *how differently some of Scott's contemporaries imagined a critical, cosmopolitan fiction of empire*" [*Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 291; my emphasis]). Cohen's opening chapter, "Reconstructing the Literary Field," is the most resolute statement I know of the alternative thesis: "From my literary excavation, Balzac and Stendhal will emerge as literary producers among other producers, seeking a niche in a generic market. . . . Balzac and Stendhal made their bids for their market shares in a hostile takeover of the dominant practice of the novel when both started writing: sentimental works by women writers. And they competed with writers challenging the prestige of sentimentality with other codes which contemporaries found equally if not more compelling" (*The Sentimental Education of the Novel* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999], 6).

[2] As the rest of this essay makes clear, I don't really believe that professors can change the canon. Even if they could—and even if, say, ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred, or two hundred novels were added to the nineteenth-century canon—it would be a

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cordances, incipits—and perhaps also the "trees" that I discuss in this essay. But first, a brief premise.

The School and the Market

The slaughter of literature. And the butchers—readers: who read novel A (but not B, C, D, E, F, G, H, . . .) and so keep A "alive" into the next generation, when other readers may keep it alive into the following one, and so on until eventually A becomes canonized. Readers, not professors, make canons: academic decisions are mere echoes of a process that unfolds fundamentally outside the school: reluctant rubber-stamping, not much more. Conan Doyle is a perfect case in point: *socially* supercanonical right away, but *academically* canonical only a hundred years later. And the same happened to Cervantes, Defoe, Austen, Balzac, Tolstoy. . . .[3]

A space outside the school, where the canon is selected: the market. Readers read A and so keep it alive; better, they *buy* A, inducing its publishers to keep it in print until another generation shows up, and

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dramatic change *for the canon*, yes, but not for the question I address here. Reducing the unreads from 99.5 to 99.0 percent is no change at all.

[3] My model of canon formation is based on novels for the simple reason that they have been the most widespread literary form of the past two or three centuries and are therefore crucial to any social account of literature (which is the point of the canon controversy, or should be). Given what I have just said, John Guillory's focus on poetry in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) strikes me as very odd; it makes of his book a Janus-like creature, always right in its specific analyses but wrong in its general claims. Yes, the academic canon was indeed the one he describes, but the (more significant) social canon was different and completely unrelated to it. Similarly, the rise to prominence of metaphysical poetry was indeed a significant change within the academy, but outside the academy it was no change at all, because lyric poetry had already virtually lost its social function (for Walter Benjamin, this happened sometime between Heine and Baudelaire, eighty years before the New Critical canon). English professors could do with poetry whatever they wanted, *because it did not matter*. In the near future, who knows, the same may happen to novels. Right now, Jane Austen is canonical and Amelie Opie is not, because millions of readers keep reading Austen for their own pleasure; but nothing lasts forever, and when readers will no longer enjoy her books (they have seen the movies, anyway), a dozen English professors will suddenly have the power to get rid of *Persuasion* and replace it with *Adeline Mowbray*. Far from being a socially significant act, however, that change in the (academic) canon will prove only that nineteenth-century novels have become irrelevant.

so on. A concrete example can be found in James Raven's excellent study of British publishing between 1750 and 1770: if one looks at the table of "the most popular novelists by editions printed 1750–1769," it's quite clear that the interplay of readers and publishers in the marketplace had completely shaped the canon of the eighteenth-century novel many generations before any academic ever dreamed of teaching a course on the novel: on that list of editions, Sterne is first, Fielding second, Smollett fourth, Defoe fifth, Richardson sixth, Voltaire eleventh, Goldsmith fifteenth, Cervantes seventeenth, and Rousseau nineteenth. They are all there.[4]

The Blind Canon Makers

So, the market selects the canon. But how? Two economic theorists, Arthur De Vany and W. David Walls, have constructed a very convincing model for the film industry (a good term of comparison for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels):

> Film audiences make hits or flops . . . not by revealing preferences they already have, but by discovering what they like. When they see a movie they like, they make a discovery and they tell their friends about it; reviewers do this too. This information is transmitted to other consumers and demand develops dynamically over time as the audience sequentially discovers and reveals its demand. . . . A hit is generated by an information cascade. . . . A flop is an information bandwagon too; in this case the cascade kills the film.[5]

A demand that develops "dynamically" and "sequentially": what this means is that "the probability that a given customer selects a par-

[4] See Raven, *British Fiction, 1750–1770: A Chronological Check-List of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 14–7. Let me make clear that, although canonical novels are usually quite successful right away, the key to canonization is not the extent of a book's initial popularity but its steady survival from one generation to the next. As for the exceptions to this model, they are neither as common nor as striking as the critical legend would have it. *The Red and the Black*, supposedly ignored by nineteenth-century readers, went through at least seventeen French editions between 1830 and 1900; *Moby-Dick*, another favorite counterexample, went through at least thirteen English and American editions between 1851 and 1900. Not bad.

[5] De Vany and Walls, "Bose-Einstein Dynamics and Adaptive Contracting in the Motion Picture Industry," *Economic Journal*, November 1996, 1493.

ticular movie is proportional to the fraction of all the previous movie-goers who selected that movie." It's the feedback loop of "increasing returns," where "past successes are leveraged into future successes" until, in the end, "just 20% of the films earn 80% of box office revenues" (1501, 1505). Twenty percent, eighty percent: what an interesting process. The starting point is thoroughly *poli*centric (thousands of independent moviegoers, without hidden puppeteers of any sort)—but the result is extraordinarily *centralized*. And the centralization of the literary market is exactly the same as for films. After all, this is precisely how the canon is formed: very few books, occupying a very large space. This is what the canon *is*.

As more readers select Conan Doyle over L. T. Meade and Grant Allen, more readers are likely to select Conan Doyle again in the future, until he ends up occupying 80, 90, 99.9 percent of the market for nineteenth-century detective fiction. But why is Conan Doyle selected in the first place? Why him, and not others? Here the economic model has a blind spot: the event that starts the "information cascade" is unknowable. It's there, it *has* to be there, or the market wouldn't behave as it does, but it can't be explained. Moviegoers "discover what they like," but we never discover *why* they like it. They're the blind canon makers, as it were.

Now, this is understandable for economic theory, which is not supposed to analyze aesthetic taste. But literary history is, and my thesis here is that what makes readers "like" this or that book is—form. Walter Benjamin, *Central Park*:

> Baudelaire's conduct in the literary market: Baudelaire was, through his deep experience of the nature of the commodity, enabled, or perhaps forced, to acknowledge the market as an objective. . . . He devalued certain poetic freedoms of the romantics by means of his classical use of the Alexandrine, and classical poetics by means of those *caesurae* and blanks within the classical verse itself. In short, his poems contain certain specific precautions for the eradication of their competitors.[6]

Formal choices that try to "eradicate" their competitors. Devices—in the market: this is the idea. Formalism, and literary history.

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[6] Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" (1937–38), *New German Critique* 34 (1985): 37.

First Experiment

So, I started working on two groups of texts: the rivals of Austen and the rivals of Conan Doyle. But here I will limit myself to the latter, because detective stories have the advantage of being a very simple genre (the ideal first step in a long-term investigation), and because they possess a "specific device" of exceptional visibility and appeal: clues.[7] I brought to my graduate seminar about twenty detective stories of Conan Doyle's times; we combed them for clues, and the results are

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[7] On the significance of clues see Victor Shklovsky, "Sherlock Holmes and the Mystery Story," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990); Siegfried Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman: Ein philosophischer Traktat*, vol. 1 of *Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971); Theodor Reik, "The Unknown Murderer," in *The Compulsion to Confess: On the Psychoanalysis of Crime and Punishment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959); Ernst Bloch, "A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988); Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction," in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977); Umberto Eco, "Horns, Hooves, Insteps: Some Hypotheses on Three Types of Abduction," in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); and Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes" (1979), also in *The Sign of Three*, where clues are presented as the veritable origin of storytelling: "The hunter may have been the first to 'tell a story' because only hunters knew how to read a coherent sequence of events from the silent (even imperceptible) signs left by their prey" (89).

   I speak of clues as a *formal* device because their narrative function (the encrypted reference to the criminal) remains constant, although their concrete embodiment changes from story to story (they can be words, cigarette butts, footprints, smells, noises, and so on). Shklovsky makes the point with characteristic intelligence: "One critic has explained the perennial failure on the part of the state investigator and the eternal victory of Conan Doyle's private detective by the confrontation existing between private capital and the public state. I do not know whether Conan Doyle had any basis for pitting the English state against the English bourgeoisie. Yet I believe that if these stories were written by a writer living in a proletarian state, then, though himself a proletarian writer, he would still make use of an unsuccessful detective. Most likely, it is the state detective that would be victorious in such a case, while the private detective would no doubt be floundering in vain. In such a hypothetical story Sherlock Holmes would no doubt be working for the state while Lestrade would be engaged in private practice, *but the structure of the story would not change*" (110; my emphasis). The case of Austen's rivals is more complex; it cannot possibly be reduced to just one device, and many other things change as well. I will present the results of this parallel study in a future article.
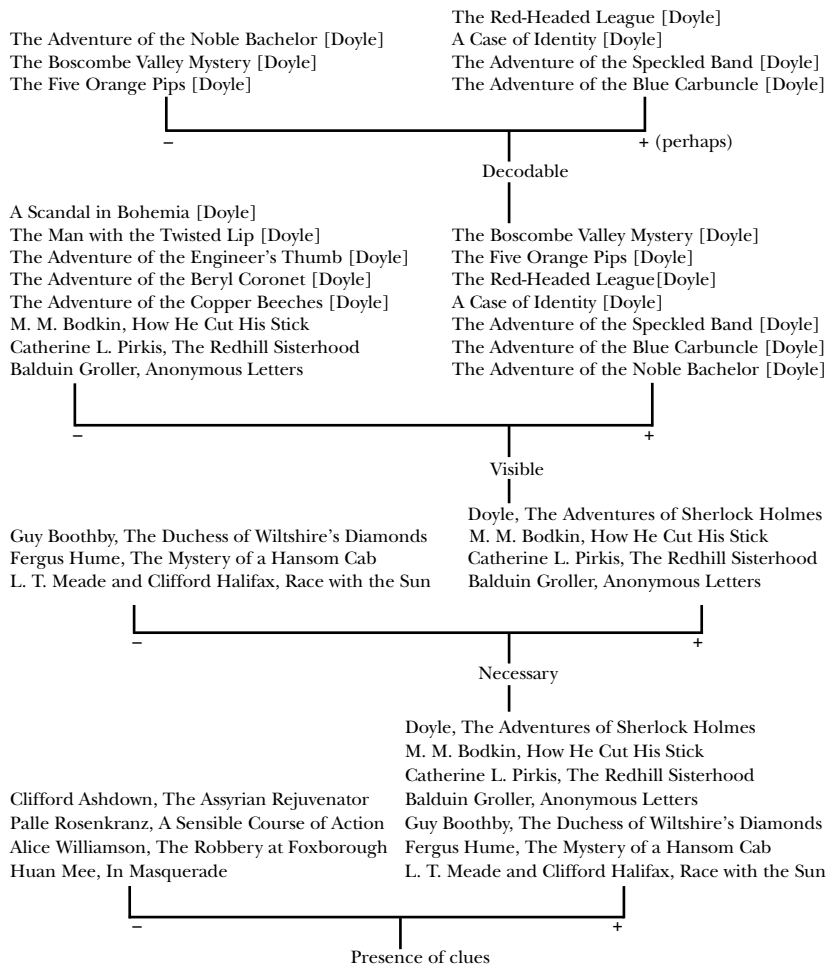
The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor [Doyle]
The Boscombe Valley Mystery [Doyle]
The Five Orange Pips [Doyle]

The Red-Headed League [Doyle]
A Case of Identity [Doyle]
The Adventure of the Speckled Band [Doyle]
The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle [Doyle]

–   + (perhaps)

Decodable

A Scandal in Bohemia [Doyle]
The Man with the Twisted Lip [Doyle]
The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb [Doyle]
The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet [Doyle]
The Adventure of the Copper Beeches [Doyle]
M. M. Bodkin, How He Cut His Stick
Catherine L. Pirkis, The Redhill Sisterhood
Balduin Groller, Anonymous Letters

The Boscombe Valley Mystery [Doyle]
The Five Orange Pips [Doyle]
The Red-Headed League[Doyle]
A Case of Identity [Doyle]
The Adventure of the Speckled Band [Doyle]
The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle [Doyle]
The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor [Doyle]

–   +

Visible

Guy Boothby, The Duchess of Wiltshire's Diamonds
Fergus Hume, The Mystery of a Hansom Cab
L. T. Meade and Clifford Halifax, Race with the Sun

Doyle, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes
M. M. Bodkin, How He Cut His Stick
Catherine L. Pirkis, The Redhill Sisterhood
Balduin Groller, Anonymous Letters

–   +

Necessary

Doyle, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes
M. M. Bodkin, How He Cut His Stick
Catherine L. Pirkis, The Redhill Sisterhood

Clifford Ashdown, The Assyrian Rejuvenator
Palle Rosenkranz, A Sensible Course of Action
Alice Williamson, The Robbery at Foxborough
Huan Mee, In Masquerade

Balduin Groller, Anonymous Letters
Guy Boothby, The Duchess of Wiltshire's Diamonds
Fergus Hume, The Mystery of a Hansom Cab
L. T. Meade and Clifford Halifax, Race with the Sun

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Presence of clues

Figure 1 The presence of clues and the genesis of detective fiction

visualized in the tree of figure 1.[8] Where two things stand out from the very first branching, at the bottom of the figure: first, that quite a few of Conan Doyle's rivals use no clues at all; second, that these writers are all completely forgotten. Form, and the market: if a story lacks a certain device, a negative "information cascade" is triggered, and the market rejects it. Readers must have "discovered" clues, which probably explains the second bifurcation, these strange stories where clues *are* present, but have no function, no necessity (in Boothby they are "planted" on the last page of the story; in "Race with the Sun," the protagonist figures them out, then forgets and almost gets killed). A bizarre arrangement, which must have come into being more or less like this: some writers sensed that these curious little details were really popular, so they decided to use them—but they didn't really understand *why* clues were popular, so they used them in the wrong way. And it didn't work very well.

Third bifurcation; clues are present, they have a function, but are not visible: the detective mentions them in his explanation, but we have never really "seen" them in the course of the story. Here we lose the last rivals (which was exactly what I had expected)—but we also lose half of the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which I hadn't expected at all. And at the next bifurcation (clues must be decodable by the reader: soon to be the First Commandment of detective fiction) things

[8] The initial sample included the twelve *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, written in 1891 and 1892, and seven stories drawn from *The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes*, *Further Rivals of Sherlock Holmes*, and *Cosmopolitan Crimes*, all edited by Hugh Greene between 1970 and 1974: Catherine L. Pirkis's "Redhill Sisterhood" (1894); Guy Boothby's "Duchess of Wiltshire's Diamonds" (1897); L. T. Meade and Clifford Halifax's "Race with the Sun" (1897); M. M. Bodkin's "How He Cut His Stick" (1900); Clifford Ashdown's "Assyrian Rejuvenator" (1902); Palle Rosenkranz's "Sensible Course of Action" (1909); and Balduin Groller's "Anonymous Letters" (1910). A little later (when a student suggested that perhaps Conan Doyle's success depended on the prestige of the *Strand*) I added a couple of stories published in the same magazine, Huan Mee's "In Masquerade" (1894) and Alice Williamson's "Robbery at Foxborough" (1894). Again, this was an initial sample, designed to get started; later I put together a more reliable series. Incidentally, Greene's three volumes were immediately reissued by Penguin, became a BBC series—and then disappeared; they have been out of print for many years, with no sign of a further resurrection. A similar destiny has befallen most women's novels reissued after 1970 by independent and mainstream presses. Changing the academic canon may be relatively easy, but changing the social canon is another story.

get even stranger. It's not always easy to decide whether a clue is decodable or not, of course, but still, even being generous, there are decodable clues in no more than four of the *Adventures* (and being strict, in none).[9]

When we first looked at these results in the seminar, we found them hard to believe. Conan Doyle is so often right—and then loses his touch at the very end? He finds the epoch-making device but does not work it out? It didn't make sense; the tree had to be wrong. But the tree was right—in the forty-odd stories Conan Doyle wrote after the *Adventures,* one finds exactly the same oscillations—and it actually highlighted an important Darwinian feature of literary history: in times of morphological change, like the 1890s for detective fiction, the individual writer behaves exactly like the genre as a whole: *tentatively.* During a paradigm shift no one knows what will work and what won't; not Ashdown, not Pirkis, and not Conan Doyle; he proceeds by trial and error, making fewer errors early on, when the problems are simpler—and more errors later, when they are more complex. It makes perfect sense. And as for finding a great device and not recognizing it, the same thing happened to Dujardin, in the same years, with the stream of consciousness: he found it, and he immediately lost it. And the reason that he and Conan Doyle didn't recognize their discoveries is simple: *they were not looking for them.* They found them by chance, and never really understood *what* they had found.

What I mean by "chance" here, let me open a brief parenthesis, is that Conan Doyle stumbled upon clues while he was working at something completely different, which was the myth of Sherlock Holmes. Think of the opening scenes of the *Adventures,* when Holmes "reads" a whole life from the signs on the body of his client: this is what Conan Doyle wants from clues: a support for Holmes's omniscience. They are a function of Holmes, an attribute, like coke and the violin. Then Conan Doyle starts "playing" with clues and eventually turns them from a mere ornament into a puzzle-solving mechanism: he finds a *new use* for them—"refunctionalization," as the Russian formalists called it;

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[9] For instance, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," usually seen as a splendid cluster of clues, has been repeatedly criticized by articles pointing out that snakes do not drink milk, cannot hear whistles, cannot crawl up and down bell cords, and so on.

"exaptation," as Gould and Vrba have called it within the Darwinian paradigm. But he is not looking for this new use, and he never fully recognizes it.

And he is not looking for the new use for an interesting reason. Clues begin as attributes of the omniscient detective, I have said, and then turn into details open to the rational scrutiny of all. *But if they are the former, they cannot be the latter*: Holmes as Superman needs unintelligible clues to prove his superiority; decodable clues create a potential parity between him and the reader. The two uses are incompatible: they may coexist for a while, but in the long run they exclude each other. If Conan Doyle keeps "losing" clues, then, it's because part of him *wants* to lose them: they threaten Holmes's legend. He must choose, and he chooses Holmes.[10]

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[10] But was Conan Doyle really the first to make such a full use of clues? It is a big question, to which I briefly (and by no means conclusively) reply that a glance at some supposed precursors suggests that although clues surface here and there in the nineteenth century, before Conan Doyle they have neither his arresting "strangeness" ("I could only catch some allusion to a rat" ["The Boscombe Valley Mystery"]) nor the structural function of revealing the past to the detective. In Fergus Hume's *Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886), for instance, the clue of a half-ripped letter is duly reproduced and decoded, but it merely adds a new subplot (while in Wilkie Collins's *Moonstone* [1868] a similar note does nothing at all). In Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Pelham* (1828) a miniature found at the murder site points clearly toward a certain character—who turns out to be innocent. In Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) the Holmes-like bravura piece of the reading of clues ("And so your husband is a brickmaker?") is completely unconnected with the mystery, while Detective Bucket relies for his part on witnesses and personal reconnaissance. The most vivid clue in *The Moonstone*—a smear of paint on a nightgown—also points toward the wrong man and is anyhow dwarfed by an absurd story of opium-induced somnambulism, while other clues are thoroughly manipulated by this or that character. Most striking of all, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley* (1862) uses a genuine legion of clues, but . . . for ethical rather than hermeneutical purposes: they prove that a character has something to hide (and they do it remarkably well) but don't contribute to the solution of the mystery. They are atmosphere; sinister details, signs that something is wrong: not ways to solve the problem. Tellingly, they gravitate toward the beginning of the story, to get it started and capture the reader's attention: then they gradually disappear, and the solution is again reached by different means.

It's the problem with all searches for "precursors": they are *so* sloppy. They play and play with the device (as a rule, devices don't develop abruptly, out of nothing, but are around for some time, in one form or another), but cannot figure out its unique structural function. That, and that only, is the real formal discovery: sudden,

The Tree

Parenthesis closed, and back to the real protagonist of this essay: the tree of figure 1. I began using it merely as a sort of shorthand visualization, but after a while realized that it was more than that: it functioned like a cognitive metaphor, that made me quite literally *see* literary history in a new way. First of all, in terms of the forces that shape it. Think about it: what "raises" this tree, this branching pattern of literary history? Texts? Not really: texts are distributed among the various branches, yes, but the branches themselves are not generated by texts: they are generated by *clues*—by their absence, presence, necessity, visibility, et cetera. The branches are the result of the twists and turns of a *device*, of a unit much *smaller* than the text. Conversely, the branches are also part of something much *larger* than any text, which is the *genre*: the tree of *detective fiction*. Devices and genres: two *formal* units. A very small formal unit and a very large one: these are the forces behind this figure—and behind literary history. Not texts. Texts are real objects—but not objects *of knowledge*. If we want to explain the laws of literary history, we must move to a formal plane that lies beyond them: below or above; the device, or the genre.

And genre also changes, in this new view of history. Usually, we tend to have a rather "Platonic" idea of genre: an archetype and its many copies (the historical novel as *Waverley* rewritten over and over again; the picaresque as Lazarillo and his siblings). The tree suggests a different image: branches, formal choices, that don't replicate each other but rather move *away* from each other, turning the genre into a wide field of diverging moves. And *wrong* moves, mostly: where nine writers out of ten (and half of the tenth) end up on dead branches. This was my initial question, remember: what happens to the 99.5 percent of published literature? This: it's caught in a morphological dead end. There are many ways of being alive, writes Richard Dawkins in

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"punctual": a revelation, the last piece of the puzzle. And of that, all the "precursors" in the world are incapable: one looks at nineteenth-century clues, and is astonished at *how long it took for two and two to make four*. Mysteries were conceived, clues were imagined—but they were not connected to each other. It's the conservative, *inertial* side of literary history: the resistance to new forms; the effort *not* to change, for as long as possible. In a minute, we will see more of it.

The Blind Watchmaker, but many more ways of being dead . . . many successful books, but infinitely more books that are *not* successful—and this tree shows why.[11]

Wrong moves, good moves. But in what sense "good"? In terms of the external context, no doubt: the growing skepticism about the reliability of witnesses, and the parallel insistence on "objective" evidence, must have "prepared" an audience for clues, and so, too, the intellectual trends mentioned by Ginzburg (attributionism, then psychoanalysis). All true. Still, I suspect that the reason clues were "discovered" by European audiences was first and foremost an internal one. Detective fiction, writes Todorov, is made of two separate stories (crime and investigation, past and present, *fabula* and *sjuzhet*), and these two stories "have no point in common" (44). Well, not quite: clues are precisely that point in common. An incredibly central position, where the past is suddenly in touch with the present; a hinge that joins the two halves together, turning the story into something more than the sum of its parts: a structure. And the tightening up starts a morphological virtuous circle that somehow improves every part of the story: if you are looking for clues, each sentence becomes "significant," each character "interesting"; descriptions lose their inertia; all words become sharper, stranger.

A device aimed at the "eradication of . . . competitors," wrote Benjamin: clues. A device designed to colonize a market niche, forcing other writers to accept it or disappear. In this sense, clues are also what is missing from De Vany and Walls's model: the recognizable origin of the "information cascade" that decides the shape of the market. A little device—with enormous effects.[12]

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[11] Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1986).

[12] "When two or more . . . technologies 'compete' . . . for a 'market' of potential adopters," writes Brian Arthur, "insignificant events may by chance give one of them an initial advantage in adoptions. This technology may then improve more than the others. . . . Thus a technology that by chance gains an early lead in adoptions may eventually 'corner the market' of potential adopters, with the other technologies becoming locked out. . . . Under increasing returns . . . insignificant circumstances become magnified by positive feedbacks to 'tip' the system into the actual outcome 'selected.' The small events of history become important" ("Competing Technologies, Increasing Returns, and Lock-in by Historical Events," *Economic Journal*, March 1989, 116, 127). Insignificant events, insignificant circumstances: for Arthur, these "small events of history" are often external to the competing technologies and there-

94e, 96e, 98ehj, 99g   94m, 99e

‑   +

Decodable

94em, 96e,
98ehj, 99eg

94dfhikl

‑   +

Visible

93e, 94o, 95e,   94defhiklm,
97a, 98in, 99rt   96e, 98ehj, 99eg

‑   +

Necessary

91bcdf, 92bcehij,
93abc, 94agjnp,
95abcdgijlnop,
96acdfh,   91ae, 92adfgk,   93defghi, 94bcf,   93e, 94defhiklmo, 95e, 96e,
97bc, 98fglmopq, 93g, 94bc, 95km, 95fhk, 96begi,   97a, 98ehijn, 99egrt
99abcdfhijklmpsu 98cdk, 99oq   98ab, 99n

Entirely absent   Evoked   Symptoms   Clues proper

‑   +

Presence of clues

Figure 2 Clues in the Strand magazine, 1891–99

Second Experiment

Forms, markets, trees, branches—much as I liked all these things, they rested on a very narrow and haphazard collection of texts. So I decided to look for a more respectable series, and asked Tara McGann, my research assistant at Columbia, to find all the mystery stories published in the *Strand* during the first Holmes decade. The total came to

fore may end up rewarding the (relatively) *worse* design. In my reconstruction, by contrast, the small event of clues is located inside the given (literary) technology, and contributes to a (relatively) *better* design. Different. Still, it seems to me that Arthur makes two independent claims: first, that under certain conditions small initial differences have growing long-term effects; second, that these differences may be external to the technologies themselves. (An "external" explanation, in our case, would sound something like this: "Doyle was selected not because of how he wrote but because the *Strand* gave him unique visibility." Plausible, but false: in the 1890s the *Strand* published over a hundred different detective stories.) The present essay entirely corroborates the first claim and follows a different path regarding the second, but if I understand Arthur's point, whether differences are internal or external (and whether the prevailing technology is better or not) is a matter not of principle but of *fact*, which must be settled case by case on the basis of historical evidence. After all, if it is perverse to believe that the market always rewards the better solution, it is just as perverse to believe that it always rewards the worse one!

108 (plus another 50 items or so that sounded like mysteries: "The Minister's Crime," "A Mystery of the Atlantic," etc.), and—it took time. But I have read them all, and figure 2 visualizes the results.[13]

Mixed results. On the one hand, the right side of the figure closely resembles the first tree; on the other, the genre looks more complicated, more bushlike. Down at the bottom there are two large new branches: stories in which clues are not actually present but are evoked by the characters ("If only we had a clue!" "Did you find any clues?") and others in which they are present, but in the skewed form of medical symptoms. The first group is curious, is like a window on the initial stages of a new device: the trick has become visible, recognizable, it has a name, everybody wants it and talks about it . . . but talking about a device is not the same as actually "doing" it, and this naive verbal *escamotage* never works too well.

The stories in the second group ("symptoms") are interesting in another way: they don't pretend to have clues but try to replace them with something else. And symptoms, of course, are the very origin of clues: they are the "small details" of medical semiosis whose significance was pointed out to young Conan Doyle by Joseph Bell, the Edinburgh professor of medicine who was the model for Holmes. Basically, then, these stories are replaying the film backward; and it's reasonable, this regrounding of clues in their original intellectual humus. But there is a problem: "clues are seldom coded, and their interpretation is frequently a matter of complex inference," writes Umberto Eco, "which makes criminal novels more interesting than the detection of pneumonia."[14]

Precisely. And just as clues are usually more interesting than symptoms, Holmes's cases are more interesting than the *Stories from the Diary of a Doctor* or the *Adventures of a Man of Science*—and much more successful.

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[13] The tree charts the stories according to their publication dates (1894c, 1891a, etc.); as the detailed bibliography would be almost as long as the essay itself, however, the editor of *MLQ* has wisely suggested that I omit it.

[14] Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 224. Eco makes a similar point in "Horns, Hooves, Insteps," 211–2.

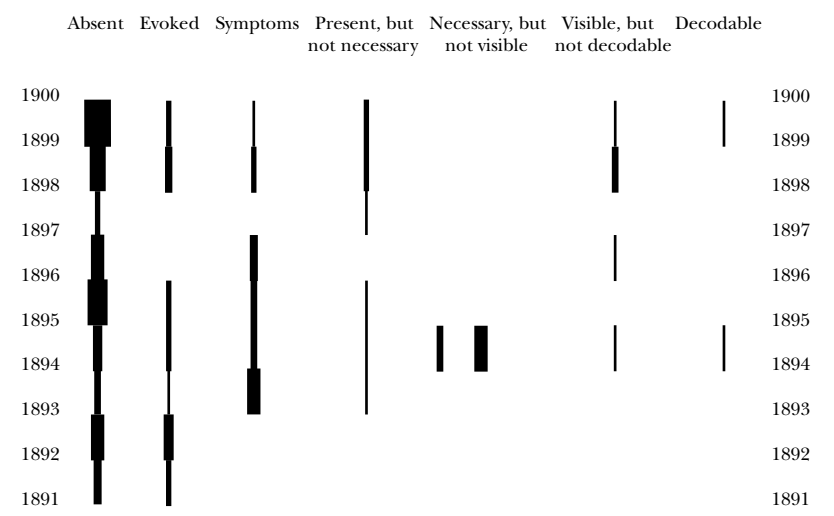| Absent	Evoked	Symptoms	Present, but not necessary	Necessary, but not visible	Visible, but not decodable	Decodable

Figure 3

Trends

From the morphology of the second sample, to its temporal distribution: figure 3, which shows how the various branches become more crowded over time (thicker line), or less crowded (thinner line), or disappear altogether. This kind of visualization helps to see historical trends—and "symptoms," for instance, do indeed look stronger early on and then seem to peter out, after they lose their competition with clues. And it makes sense, in evolutionary terms. But on the other hand, if you look at the far left and far right of the diagram, you find something that does *not* make sense at all. Stories completely without clues and stories with fully formed ones: here trends should be at their sharpest: a clear drop, a clear rise. But nothing of the sort. Mysteries with decodable clues don't gain ground, and mysteries without clues don't lose it (if anything, they become more frequent!).[15]

[15] Of the two stories with decodable clues, the one from 1894 ("Martin Hewitt, Investigator: The Affair of the Tortoise") is at least as dubious as Conan Doyle's "Speckled Band," while the other ("Stories of the Sanctuary Club. The Death Chair," by L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace) gives the reader a big help with its telltale title (the death chair is a catapult that throws people hundreds of feet up in the air and into a neighboring park).

This is fascinating, because it goes so stubbornly against common sense. And not just my own Darwinian sense: when I presented the tree at the School for Theory and Criticism, at Dartmouth (not a very Darwinian environment), I received endless objections—but no one challenged the idea that stories without clues were doomed, and those with clues would become more frequent. That an epoch-making device should be widely imitated *makes so much sense.* And it does. But it doesn't happen.

Why not? I can think of two possibilities. The first is that Conan Doyle's rivals are still exploring alternatives: in 1899, for instance, "Hilda Wade" tries to replace the study of clues with that of personality and the investigation of the past with the prediction of the future.[16] Very courageous idea—but a little weird. Between 1896 and 1899 there are also four series unified by the figure of the villain (*An African Millionaire*, *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings*, *Hilda Wade*, and *Stories of the Sanctuary Club*), which is a very popular choice in the 1890s (Dracula, Svengali, Moriarty, Dr. Nikolas . . .) and also a remote source of detective fiction, *Kriminalliteratur.* This is why we don't find more clues, then: the competition is still on: Conan Doyle's rivals are still hoping to find something better. They won't, but they're still trying.

Second possibility (which does not exclude the previous one): in 1891, when clues showed up, these writers were all already formed, and they simply couldn't change their writing style—even Conan Doyle never really learned how to use the new device. For clues to really take roots, then, a new generation was needed (Agatha Christie and company) that would *begin* to write within the new paradigm. It's a good instance of the rigidity of literary evolution: you only learn once; then you are stuck. You learn, so it's culture, not nature: but it's a culture which is as unyielding as DNA. And the consequence of this is that literary changes don't occur slowly, piling up one small improvement upon another: they are abrupt, structural, and leave very little room for transitional forms. This was a striking result of this research: the *absence* of intermediate steps. A jump—Conan Doyle. Another jump—Christie. End of the story. The rest are steps *to the side*, not forward.

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[16] "The police . . . are at best but bungling materialists. They require a *clue*. What need of a *clue* if you can interpret character?" ("Hilda Wade. IV. The Episode of the Man Who Would Not Commit Suicide," by Grant Allen).

These two explanations are both "tactical"—confined to the 1890s—and neither one questions the final triumph of clues: the fact that ten years later, or twenty, clues would be everywhere, and stories without them dead. But what if these expectations were wrong? What if the pattern of figure 3 were not limited to the 1890s but returned in the 1910s, or the 1930s? Let me be clear: I have no data for this hypothesis (and someone else will have to do the reading this time), but it's an intriguing possibility, worthy of being formulated at least. So, here is Todorov on detective fiction:

> Two entirely different forms of [narrative] interest exist. The first can be called *curiosity*: it proceeds from effect to cause: starting from a certain effect (a corpse and certain clues) we must find its cause (the culprit and his motive). The second form is *suspense*, and here the move is from cause to effect: we are first shown the causes, the initial *données* (gangsters preparing a heist), and our interest is sustained by the expectation of what will happen, that is, certain effects (corpses, crimes, fights). (47)

Curiosity, and suspense; detection, and adventure; a backward-looking narrative logic, and a forward-looking one. But the symmetry is misleading, because adventure stories are not just one narrative choice among many, but the most powerful form of storytelling from the beginning of time until today. Having challenged their appeal by enforcing a veritable *rationalization of adventure*—a Weberian universe, where not only have all the most exciting events already happened when the story begins, but they can only be reexperienced under strict logical constraints—having thus disenchanted the fictional world was the great achievement of clues. But the attempt could only succeed up to a point. Strong enough to branch off into a new genre, with its own market niche, clues could not really defeat the forces of cultural *longue durée*, which have returned to occupy bookstalls and movie screens around the world.[17] It's the formidable stability of narrative morphology; *histoire immobile*, in Fernand Braudel's great oxymoron.

[17] In the detective stories of the 1890s the resistance to Conan Doyle's rationalization of fiction takes many forms, my personal favorites being "A Thing That Glistened" (by Frank R. Stockton), "The Case of Roger Carboyne" (by H. Greenhough Smith), "A Work of Accusation" (by Harry How), "The Man Who Smiled" (by L. T. Meade and Clifford Halifax, from *The Adventures of a Man of Science*), and "The Star-

The Three Histories

I have insisted on the role of form in the marketplace. But in *history*? Is
there a temporal frame, a historical "tempo," that is unique to forms?
Here is Braudel on the *longue durée*:

> From the recent experiments and efforts of history, an increasingly
> clear idea has emerged . . . of the multiplicity of time. . . .
>
>   Traditional history, with its concern for the short time span, for
> the individual and the event, has long accustomed us to the headlong,
> dramatic, breathless rush of its narrative.
>
>   The new economic and social history puts cyclical movement in
> the forefront of its research and is committed to that time span . . . an
> account of conjunctures which lays open large sections of the past, ten,
> twenty, fifty years at a stretch ready for examination.
>
>   Far beyond this second account we find a history capable of tra-
> versing even greater distances, a history to be measured in centuries
> this time: the history of the long, even of the very long time span, of the
> *longue durée*.[18]

Event, cycle, structure ("for good or ill, this word dominates the
problems of the *longue durée*" [31]): as a rule, every literary text com-
prises all three of Braudel's histories. Some elements are entwined with
contemporary events; others, with a span of decades; others still, with a

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Shaped Marks" (also by Meade and Halifax, from *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings*).
In "A Thing That Glistened" a deep-sea diver who is trying to recover a stolen
bracelet is attacked by a shark, which swallows his underwater lamp; struck by the
idea that "this creature has a liking for shiny things," the diver cuts the shark open
and finds not the bracelet but a bottle, filled with phosphorescent oil, containing a
cylinder with the confession of a murder for which his innocent brother is about to
be executed. In "The Case of Roger Carboyne," the mystery of a mountain climber's
death is solved when an "aeronaut" confesses to having inadvertently fished him up
with the anchor of his balloon and then dropped him. In "A Work of Accusation" a
somnambulist artist paints the face of the man he has murdered, then has a heart
attack. The man who smiled is a civil servant who, as a consequence of "a shock,"
laughs in such a way that he literally drives people crazy; when he is almost eaten
alive by a tiger, the countershock cures him. Finally, in "The Star-Shaped Marks" a
group of murderers set up an X-ray machine in the building next door and bombard
the victim with radiation through the bedroom wall.

    As this short list shows, many writers tried to outdo Conan Doyle by abandoning
logic altogether and reintroducing the marvelous—what may be true but is not
believable, as Aristotle's *Poetics* would have put it.

    [18] Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée," in *On History*,
trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 27.

duration of centuries. Take *Jane Eyre*: Jane's threat to keep Rochester prisoner "till you have signed a charter" points to recent (British) political events; the *Bildungsroman* structure, to the previous (Western European) half century; and the Cinderella plot, to a (worldwide) *longue durée*. But the really interesting thing is that Braudel's (spatio-) temporal layers are active not just in different textual locations (which is obvious), but in locations that are *different in nature*: the first layer usually points to what is *unique* to the given text, while the other two point to what is *repeatable*: what it shares with some (the *Bildungsroman*) or even ("Cinderella") with many other texts.

Here form comes in. Because form is precisely *the repeatable element of literature*: what returns fundamentally unchanged over many cases and many years.[19] This, then, is what formalism can do for literary history: teach it to smile at the colorful anecdote beloved by New Historicists—"the most capricious and the most delusive level of all" (Braudel again [28])—and to recognize instead the *regularity* of the literary field. Its patterns, its slowness. Formalism and literary history; or, literature repeats itself.

The Great Unread

The main lines of this argument had already been drawn when a Columbia graduate student, Jessica Brent, raised a very intelligent objection. The tree, fine: a good way of "seeing" a larger literary history. Clues, fine: they offer a good general sense of the genre. And no

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[19] Tentatively, large genres like tragedy, or the fairy tale, or even the novel, seem rooted in the *longue durée*, while "subgenres" (the gothic, the silver-fork school, the *Bildungsroman*, the nautical tale, the industrial novel, etc.) thrive for shorter periods (thirty to fifty years, empirical findings suggest). The same seems true of devices: some of them belong definitely to the *longue durée* (agnition, parallelism), while others are active for a few generations and then dwindle away (free indirect style, clues).

Let me add that, whereas the idea of a literary *longue durée* is not hard to grasp, that of a literary "cycle" seems much more dubious: although the time span of many subgenres is roughly the same as that indicated by Braudel, the defining feature of the economic cycle (the ebb and flow of expansion and contraction) is nowhere to be seen. If literary historians are to make use of multiple temporal frames, then, they will have to reconceptualize their relationship. Similar reflections occur in one of the rare pieces of literary criticism to take Braudel's model seriously: Fredric Jameson, "Radicalizing Radical Shakespeare: The Permanent Revolution in Shakespeare Studies," in *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995).

objection to the idea that Conan Doyle's narrative structure may be better designed than that of his rivals (although of course one could argue forever on that "better"). But if this approach is generalized as *the* method for the study of noncanonical literature (as I was certainly inclined to do), then there is a problem: if we search the archive for one device only, and no matter how significant it may be, all we will find are inferior versions of the device, *because that's really all we are looking for.* No matter what our intentions may be, the research project is a tautological one: it is so focused on a canonized device (and canonized for a good reason, but that's not the point) that in the noncanonical universe it can only discover . . . the absence of the device, that is, of the canon. True, but trivial.

Jessica Brent was right, period, so all I can do is explain how my mistake came about. Face to face with the forgotten 99.5 percent of literature, and perplexed by its size, I couldn't simply "start reading": I had to read in the light *of something*—and I chose the 0.5 percent that had been canonized. "Irreplaceable advantages" of historians, writes Braudel with his characteristic euphoria: "Of all the forces in play, we know which will prevail, we can make out beforehand the important events, 'those that will bear fruit,' to whom the future will finally be delivered. What an immense privilege! From amongst all the jumbled facts of our present lives, who could distinguish equally surely the lasting from the ephemeral?"[20]

What an immense privilege . . . sometimes. With Conan Doyle's rivals, who are basically a duller version of the "lasting" phenomenon, yes. But in other cases the privilege may well become blindness. When an entire genre disappears, for instance—as in Margaret Cohen's work on French sentimental novels—the method I have sketched would be an *obstacle* to knowledge.[21] The same is true of the "lost best-sellers" of Victorian Britain: idiosyncratic works, whose staggering short-term success (and long-term failure) requires an explanation in their own terms. And so too for those "crazy devices" that one encounters here and there in

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[20] Braudel, "The Situation of History in 1950," in *On History,* 16–7.

[21] "The great challenge confronting any excavation [of the literary archive] is to denaturalize expectations and take forgotten literature on its own terms," writes Cohen in her introduction. "Without understanding that forgotten works are shaped by a coherent, if now lost, aesthetic, one simply dismisses them as uninteresting or inferior in terms of the aesthetic(s) which have won out" (21).

the archive: stylistic clusters or plot sequences that are so weird that they can't be replicas of other texts, but something else altogether.

My final guess, then, is that in the great unread we will find many different kinds of creatures, of which my "rivals" are only one instance. This is why the tree is useful: it is a way to "open up" literary history, showing how the course selected by European audiences (Conan Doyle, the canon) is only *one* of the many coexisting branches that could *also* have been chosen (and weren't). What the tree says is that literary history *could be different from what it is.* Different: not necessarily better. And there are strong reasons for its being what it is; most of my article tries precisely to explain why Conan Doyle's selection makes sense. But "explaining" means organizing the evidence we have so as to account for a given result: it doesn't mean maintaining that that result was inevitable. That's not history; that's theodicy. Inevitable was *the tree,* not the success of this or that branch: in fact, we have seen how *unlikely* the branch of clues was in the 1890s.

Inevitable was the tree; many branches, different—and for the most part still completely unknown. Fantastic opportunity, this uncharted expanse of literature; with room for the most varied approaches, and for a truly *collective* effort, like literary history has never seen. Great chance, great challenge (what will knowledge indeed mean, if our archive becomes ten times larger, or a hundred), which calls for a maximum of methodological boldness: since no one knows what knowledge will mean in literary studies ten years from now, our best chance lies in the radical diversity of intellectual positions, and in their completely candid, outspoken competition. Anarchy. Not diplomacy, not compromises, not winks at every powerful academic lobby, not taboos. Anarchy. Or as Arnold Schoenberg once wonderfully put it: the middle road is the only one that does not lead to Rome.[22]

[22] The reader who has made it this far probably knows that the conjunction of formalism and literary history has been a constant (perhaps *the* constant) of my work, from the essays "The Soul and the Harpy" and "On Literary Evolution" (in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms,* 3d ed. [London: Verso, 1997]) to the introductory chapters to *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987) and *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London: Verso, 1996) and the six "Theoretical Interludes" of *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998). In these books I discuss extensively the relationship between form and ideology, which I could not address here for reasons of space.