The Bestseller as the Black Box of Distant Reading: The Case of Sherlock Holmes

Jernej Habjan

ZRC SAZU, Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies, Ljubljana, Slovenia; LMU, Munich, Germany
jernej.habjan@zrc-sazu.si

This article sketches out a possible solution to Franco Moretti's problem of explaining the phenomenon of devices that preclude conscious perception and at once boost sales. By analyzing Moretti's example of Conan Doyle's clues as subjectivizing signifiers, and their enthusiastic early reception as a practice of a subjective fidelity to an artistic event, I see a properly scientific stance in Moretti's reluctance to give a proposed scientistic account of this subjectivation.

As Leah Price puts it, book history is wedded to "an ethically-driven conviction that apparently passive and nameless readers have the power to make meaning" (Price). It seems that it is due to this apparent passivity and namelessness of readers that Franco Moretti ("End" 75; "Moretti" 106) admits, quoting a critic of his quantitative history of early detective fiction, that literary history cannot explain how readers of radically new texts are "influenced by formal properties without being fully conscious of the influence." This article sketches out the kind of ethics and of reading-without-knowing-it that Price and Moretti may be thinking of respectively. To this end, I approach Moretti's scientific problem from the perspective of Alain Badiou's (*Ethics* 46) ethics of the subject as precisely "'some-one' who exists *without knowing it*." I take this path not in order to forsake science for what Moretti calls metaphysics—in a move typical, for Moretti, of contemporary literary studies—but, on the contrary, in order to grasp his science as science by suggesting a punctual, delimitating philosophical intervention in his scientific problem, which is what philosophy is supposed to do in relation to science according to Althusserian epistemology.

In 2000, Franco Moretti asked what it might mean for literary studies to move beyond the world canon, and gave the following negative

91

answer: "One thing is 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" (Moretti, "Slaughterhouse" 208). Five years later, a positive answer followed in the form of retrospection: "[W]hile recent literary theory was turning for inspiration towards French and German metaphysics, I kept thinking that there was actually much more to be learned from the natural and the social sciences" (Moretti, *Graphs* 2). Indeed, at the start of the decade that, in the part of humanities that engages with the current decline of the U.S. cycle of accumulation, has just closed with the replacement of deconstruction with a historical analysis of capitalism, Moretti rejected the deconstructive close reading on behalf of the "distant reading" of the "world literary system" (10–12, 9). He produced the new object of knowledge by relying on world-systems analysis, and he conceptualized it by applying the models of graph, map, and tree. And he reflected on this use of natural and social sciences as an alternative to the dominant enthusiasm of contemporary literary criticism for "metaphysics."

Moretti's responses to critics are scientific as well. This is especially clear in the rare cases when he accepts criticism. For example, Moretti demonstrates distant reading by testing the hypothesis that, on the peripheries of the literary world-system, the novel expands by adapting to an external influence, whereas in the core the expansion is spontaneous. Claiming that the former is the rule, not the latter (Moretti, "Conjectures" 60–1), Moretti effectively introduces the rule/exception opposition and projects it onto the core/periphery dyad in order to show a more concrete relation between the periphery-as-the-rule and the core-as-the-exception. Met with the objection that even a central author like Fielding admitted the influence of Cervantes, he accepts it. However, he does so because it draws to his attention a possible theoretical, not empirical, objection: the materialist theories of form as an irreducible compromise (Moretti, "More" 79; "End" 73). Unlike most of his critics, Moretti is therefore aware that a theory cannot be falsified by empirical facts, but by a stronger theory of these facts (which is the point of both the French and British epistemological tradition, say, of both Louis Althusser and Paul Feyerabend).[1] Like any proper theory, Moretti's is the strongest where it seems the weakest, the most conservative.

This particularly holds for another—the other—acceptance of criticism. One of the ways Moretti (*Graphs* 70–78) estranges the canon is by producing a tree of the evolution of the early detective story as materialized in *The Strand Magazine* of the 1890s. In the device of clues, as the genre's universal formal element, he finds the criterion of bifurca-

tion, branching the stories off on the basis of the presence, necessity, visibility, and, finally, decodability of their clues. Moretti notices that the higher a story climbs, the more popular it is. This is why Arthur Conan Doyle's *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* remain bestsellers to this day, and almost everything else became forgotten almost immediately. However, what Moretti also notices is that even most of Conan Doyle's clues are merely necessary, not decodable, which leads him to the conclusion that the first readers of detective stories embraced a device that even Conan Doyle often failed to use properly. Steven Johnson, a commentator on the tree, asks, "How is the reader influenced by formal properties without being fully conscious of the influence? *Graphs, Maps, Trees* is silent on the question" (cited in Moretti, "End" 74). Johnson suggests applying notions of cognitive science, and Moretti admits placing a "black box," a gap in the argumentative chain, where the answer should be, expressing, moreover, openness to this kind of suggestion (75). He can explain that subsequent generations of readers chose, and in time canonized, Doyle because they trusted the choice made by the first generation; but he cannot explain this choice, and so he agreed, and continues to agree (Moretti, "Moretti" 106), that the "black box" may very well be unpacked by cognitive science. In my view, it is this admission of ignorance that keeps Moretti's project in the field of science because from the scientific viewpoint the "box" contains, I claim, precisely someone "influenced by formal properties without being fully conscious of the influence."

So let me examine these formal properties in the case of Sherlock Holmes stories, whose focus on the plot Conan Doyle himself judged as inferior to the character-depicting historical novels (McDonald 133–4, 171), planning to kill Holmes off in the last of the *Adventures* (141)—even though his first novel accepted for publication was his first Holmes narrative, and his *Adventures* were an immediate bestseller. Just to give an idea of their "boom": in 1891—the year of, say, the publication of the first bookseller lists (Bassett and Walter 206), and of the introduction of free compulsory primary education in Britain (Baggs 278)—Conan Doyle published the first six of the *Adventures* in *The Strand Magazine* after a decade of unsuccessfully trying to write for the sustenance that his provincial medical practice could not provide. That year, fees and serial and book rights brought him five times what his family practice had a year before. No later than October 1892, the first book edition was published in 10,000 copies as volume one of "The Strand Library," establishing him as a bestselling author. In 1893, *The Strand* reached a million readers in Britain alone by commissioning and publishing *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (McDonald 118–42).

In selecting a typical detective story with clues, it may be best to trust the selection of Victor Shklovsky, who is unmatched when it comes to treating form as the universal feature of literature. Shklovsky chooses Conan Doyle's "sealed-room" mystery "The Adventure of the Speckled Band." As a formalist he treats it as a sum of typical devices and hence as a typical example of the entire genre of detective story. However, due to the structuralist and Moretti's subtilizations of formalism, one can approach the story as a structure rather than a sum, and therefore as a typical example not of the entire genre, but of the subgenre of detective story with clues. As a typical example of this subgenre, however, the story can be read as a typical example of a specific supplement to the entire genre, a supplement to something that is reconstructable only thanks to its supplement. Just how paradigmatic these stories with decodable clues are of the entire genre is unwittingly revealed already by Shklovsky, who, neglecting to do the archeology of Moretti's kind, sees a typical example of the entire genre where Moretti sees only one of four leaves on one of eight branches of the tree of the genre (with the rest of the leaves on the branch of present, necessary, visible, and decodable clues being "The Red-Headed League," "A Case of Identity," and "The Blue Carbuncle"). However, this illusion cannot be explained away by Shklovsky's formalism because Peter McDonald's (118–71) Bourdieuan anti-formalist analysis of Conan Doyle misses the significance of clues as well, attributing his success to the character of Holmes.

Let me summarize the plot. A client of Holmes' suspects that her step-father may have been responsible for the death of her orphaned twin-sister; the deceased was an heiress planning to get married, while he is a violent impoverished aristocrat, who closed off the family estate for all but a group of gypsies and some animals that he brought from India, from where he fled because he had killed his butler in a fit of anger. One night, when her stepfather was smoking in his room adjacent to the rooms of his stepdaughters, the client's sister tells the twin that she has been hearing a strange whistle for the past few nights; the twins agree that it is probably coming from the gypsies, and return to their rooms, which they lock, as always, because of the animals. A few hours later the client hears her sister's shriek, a whistle, and a metallic sound; she runs to the sister only to hear her dying words, "It was the band! The speckled band!" (Conan Doyle, *Sherlock* 352), which, as Shklovsky (108) notes, can refer either to a ribbon or to a gang. The client reports to Holmes that there was no sign of violence, and suggest that "the speckled band" refers to the colorful gang of gypsies. Eventually, she explains her fear to him: two days before, she had to move into the room of the deceased because

of some home repair, and the very next night she heard the whistle. As soon as the client leaves, her stepfather visits Holmes, warning him not to get involved. However, Holmes and Watson nonetheless visit the estate secretly to test the weak hypothesis about gypsies. The client tells them that the home repair is probably an excuse to move into the twin's room. Therein, Holmes notices a bed clamped to the floor, and two connecting and useless objects recently placed above it: a rope of a dysfunctional bell and a ventilator communicating not with the outside, but the neighboring stepfather's room. Therein, Holmes sees a chair against the wall, a small dog lash, a safe, and, on it, a saucer of milk appropriate for a cat, which the household did not have. He decides to spend the night, together with Watson, in the room of the deceased, and to direct the client to her old room. In the middle of the night, Holmes sees a light in the stepfather's room, beats the ventilator with a stick, and hears a whistle and a dying scream. He and Watson enter the neighboring room to see the safe open, and the client's stepfather dead on the chair, with the dog lash in his arms and "the speckled band" on his head. The stepfather had used the milk to train an Indian snake with an invisible deadly bite to crawl down the ventilator and the bell-rope into the neighboring room, and to return, at the sound of a whistle, into his room, where he would lock it back into the metallic-sounding safe using his dog lash. As Holmes struck the snake on the other side of the ventilator, it crawled back and in self defense bit the closest creature, which happened to be the murderer.

Every motif is then either a partial clue to the mystery of the term "the speckled band" or a clue to a false, suspense-producing solution. Indeed, Shklovsky (104–16) analyzes the story as a sum of either partial or false clues. In my view, the story is a structured text and not a mere sum of devices. The story has the structure of an Aristotelian plot, which is "disjointed and dislocated" as a whole if any of its incidents are "transposed or withdrawn" (Aristotle 1451a 30–35), and is as such probable even if impossible, complying with Conan Doyle's (*Adventures* viii) focus on "the anticipation of what might have been, not of what is." Dorothy Sayers concludes her 1935 Oxford lecture "Aristotle on Detective Fiction" with the following piece of advice: "[A]ny writer who tries to make a detective story a work of art at all will do well if he writes it in such a way that Aristotle could have enjoyed and approved it" (Sayers 35); and she opens the lecture by noting that "[t]he crawling horror of *The Speckled Band* would . . . have pleased him" (24). It seems that this is also what Moretti ("Slaughterhouse" 215n9) thinks as he classifies the text as a story with clues, even though he is aware of the critiques that point to the fact that snakes do not hear whistles, drink milk, or climb ropes. To this kind

of criticism Sayers might evoke the following Aristotelian reply: "[I]t is a lesser error in an artist not to know, for instance, that the hind has no horns, than to produce an unrecognizable picture of one" (Aristotle 1460b 31–32).

The answer to what exactly this structure pertains to may lie in the way Moretti supplements the formalist theory on art as a sum of devices. Among the devices summed up by Shklovsky, Moretti emphasizes clues as a device that turns a sum into a structure, and all other intra-textual devices into a model of extra-textual reality. He explicitly talks about both kinds of effects of clues. First, clues are

> a hinge that joins the [past and the present] together, turning the story into some-thing 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." (Moretti, *Slaughterhouse* 218)

Second, this "device allowed … Doyle … to capture a salient aspect of a historical transformation, and 'fix' it for generations to come: … the impact of rationalization over adventure" (Moretti, "End" 74n11).

Yet Moretti focuses on the first, intra-textual effect (which seems to valorize Holmes' own identification of detection with "art for its own sake" [Conan Doyle, *Sherlock* 249]), presumably because, as a materialist, he is looking for the historical dimension of the genre in its structure, not in its representation of extra-textual reality. This may be why he does not make explicit the relation between the intra- and extra-textual effects of clues. I try to do this, but, again, precisely in order to highlight the intra-textual dimension of clues. To this end, I claim that this relation between clues and extra-textual reality has two sides. It is obvious that clues (but also Holmes' science books, encyclopedic knowledge, magnifying glass, etc.) are so many metonymies of rationalistic reality. But on the other hand, clues render the entire text a metaphor, a condensation, of this real-ity, because they rationalize all other literary devices (with Holmes either reading all literary devices as clues or discarding them as false solutions, which, however, are rational even before they are discarded, insofar as they contribute to narrative suspense). In this way, clues inform the text as a model of reality; detective stories model the rise of modern science because, thanks to their clues, they are structured like modern science.

This is because the structure of modern science is—as shown, on the basis of Lacan's *écrit* "Science and Truth," by, say, Jean-Claude Milner, and developed for literary theory by Rastko Močnik (see Milner, and Močnik

172–85, respectively)—the structure of the signifying chain, which is authorized by its own criteria rather than by referring to some external being supposedly untarnished by the signifying practice of formalization (like Feyerabend's theorized empirical reality or, say, Althusser's theorized "real" object). Far from describing "real" objects from a seemingly spontaneous, non-reflexive viewpoint, science constructs objects of knowledge, as models of "real" objects, from a perspective established by science itself precisely on the basis of a critique of such spontaneous descriptions. Science does not describe facts; it replaces ideological descriptions of "facts" with propositions that are falsifiable by subsequent scientific propositions, which, again, intervene not into facts, but into the ideological remnants of the existing scientific propositions on these "facts." In short, science describes facts as always-already described in unfalsifiable, pre-scientific ways.

Science therefore exists as a signifying chain totalized by one of its own links; namely, the one that signifies nothing and hence signification, the chain, itself, representing the utterer for this chain. This utterer is thus not a being external to the chain, but a being reduced to the uttering of the signifier without the signified; that is, of the signifier of the chain. The utterer is, for example, neither the Philosopher, who authorizes pre-modern scholasticism, nor the ironic simulation of the Philosopher, which authorizes the postmodern literary and critical reliance on what Moretti calls metaphysics,[2] but a Cartesian subject authorized by the uttering of the signifier that renders the chain of signifiers sensible and is itself made sensible as the chain's signifier. This utterer is neither the source of the pre-modern argument with authority nor the object of postmodern anti-argumentative ironization, but simply that which remains of the utterer's being once any reference to it has been forbidden by modern science as the argument *ad hominem*. "'*L'homme c'est rien—l'œuvre c'est tout*,' as Gustave Flaubert wrote to George Sand," says Holmes to Watson as he solves the case of "The Red-Headed League"—referring, granted, to not one, but two authorities, but only so as to be intelligible to Watson (Conan Doyle, *Sherlock* 251). In short, the story with clues has the structure of an utterance as a sensible, scientific signifying chain.

Let me then return to the summary of the story's plot, this time from the perspective of the theory of signifier. In each case, Holmes starts his analysis when he recognizes in a traumatic mystery addressed to him by a client an empty signifier that can be made sensible by science. At this point, he starts to reconstruct the signifying chain, the scientific utterance, in which the empty signifier can become sensible precisely as the empty signifier of that chain. Put in his own words, "all life is a great chain, the

nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link of it" (Conan Doyle, *Sherlock* 14). In our case, "the speckled band" is a signifier onto which the dictionary, ideology at a zero-degree, projects two signifieds ("ribbon" and "gang"), the particular Orientalist ideology one signifier ("gang"), and the modern scientistic ideology none. For according to science, the signifieds "ribbon" and "gang" are themselves signifiers, which, however, cannot form a sensible chain together with the rest of the clues, particularly with the signifiers of the intact room and of the violent death. According to science, "the speckled band" is an empty signifier, a metaphor that activates the poetic function of language, signifying the signifying practice itself.

Holmes thus reconstructs this signifying practice as he plays the role of the detective, of which Žižek and Močnik give the following definition: "[T]he crime scene offers a set of clues, senseless elements, scattered 'without any rules,' and the detective *guarantees with his sheer presence that all these elements will retroactively obtain 'meaning'*" (Žižek and Močnik 329). This can be put in Holmes' words as well: when the confused Watson concludes, after examining the estate, that the calm Holmes must have seen more than himself, Holmes retorts: "No, but I fancy that I may have deduced a little more" (Conan Doyle, *Sherlock* 364; for Watson's simplicity as an allusion to the naivety of deterministic naturalism, see Moretti, *Signs* 147). Thus, Holmes collects the clues of the signifying practice, the signifiers with signifieds, that could be quilted into a sensible chain by "the speckled band." Because "the speckled band" signifies the entire chain, the individual links of the chain, the clues, are but metonymies of the absent object substituted by the utterance; the signifiers "bell-rope," "ventilator," "plain wooden chair against the wall," "dog lash," "a small saucer of milk," and "iron safe" signify merely places grazed by the absent object. This is why the signifiers as a whole, a chain without the quilting point, enable only the metonymical displacement of this object along the chain, the crawling of the snake out of the victims' sight.[3] However, the process is dialectical: each decoded clue contributes to the chain of metonymical omissions of the object, and hence to the prolongation of the chain itself. This chain eventually circles around the object and connects with the empty signifier that has fueled its prolongation, saturating itself as the utterance with which the utterer cultivated the object, that is, domesticated the snake and the stepdaughter.[4] The detective story connects—like the Uroborus—the end with the beginning. In Moretti's words:

> Detective fiction's ending is its end indeed: its solution in the true sense. The *fabula* narrated by the detective in his reconstruction of the facts brings us back to the beginning; that is, it abolishes narration. Between the beginning and the end

of the narration—between the absence and the presence of the *fabula*—there is no "voyage", only a long *wait*. (Moretti, *Signs* 148)

In this way, Holmes reconstructs the circumstances in which the stepfather of the deceased domesticated an uncontrollable object into a subservient tool: a snake into a weapon, excommunication into a rent. However, this domesticating utterance has the structure of a fantasy: it presupposes that it can control its uptake by the addressee; that this addressee is passive; that the signifying chain linking the safe to the stepdaughter will hold; in short, that the Other exists. The stepfather of the twins presupposes that the twins are twins: that the first one will unknowingly take up his utterance, and that the other one will do the same, like a twin. But the utterer's Other, the addressee, is itself just an utterer: the deceased does take up the snake at the level of I, identity, sleep, but she rejects it at the level of the utterer, the Cartesian subject that survives the death of the I. After the death of the I emerges its remainder, the subject as the metaphor that condenses the absent object, the slippery snake, into the signifier "the speckled band" and addresses it to the sister. And the sister, herself a subject, addresses this metaphor to Holmes as her Other, the subject supposed to know. Holmes, however, who does not presuppose the existence of such a bearer of the knowledge of the metaphor's literal meaning, reads this metaphor precisely as a metaphor, as a zero-element of a scientific utterance, as a signifier of a signifying chain that can be reconstructed.

That Holmes is beyond ideological interpellation—immune to ideology materialized in opinion, hearsay, *topoi*, and the knowledge we are supposed to have because we believe that the Other has it—is spontaneously conferred by Watson as he notes with considerable anxiety:

> His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics he appeared to know next to nothing. Upon my quoting Thomas Carlyle, he inquired in the naivest way who he might be and what he had done. My surprise reached a climax, however, when I found incidentally that he was ignorant of the Copernican Theory and of the composition of the Solar System. That any civilized human being in this nineteenth century should not be aware that the earth travelled round the sun appeared to me to be such an extraordinary fact that I could hardly realize it. (Conan Doyle, *Sherlock* 11)

As shown by Žižek and Močnik (298), this asocial trait of the detective, his *splendid isolation*, condenses the asocial nature of the very process of reading in modernity, reflecting thereby, by this image of the detective as a secluded reader of clues, the reader's asocial individualism, which is a material condition of the reception of modern literature. (For the detective as an embodiment of the reader of his story, see also Moretti, *Signs* 148.)

Holmes—who is not subjected to the desire of the Other, but persists in his own desire-as-drive and is driven by drugs or violin when there is no signifier, no case, available[5]— reconstructs the utterance and returns it to the utterer, the stepfather, in its inverted, true form, which communicates the utterer's unconscious desire. The object-cause of this desire is the absence from the field of the Other; that is, from social relations: from India, the village community in England, the medical profession, and the stepdaughters' will (which he tries to alter without even being excluded from it). This absence is what his utterance, the crime, is meant to prevent, yet the utterance is rejected as senseless, asocial, by its addressee (Holmes, social relations), the Other itself. The utterance hence fails to prevent the utterer's absence from society precisely because it is not an utterance, insofar as it is rejected by society and returned to the utterer as his true, unconscious desire of being absent from society: Holmes, rather than taking up the signifier "the speckled band," reconstructs the signifying chain for which this signifier represents the criminal as the subject of the desire of absence. The stepfather becomes the addressee of his own utterance, and as such, as deprived of his utterance, he is deprived of the masterful distance from the object, that is, of the circumstances that have kept the snake at bay: "the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another," says Holmes (Conan Doyle, *Sherlock* 367) when he sees the speckled band on the head of the dead stepfather, the signifier on the remains of the I.

Stories with clues, such as "The Speckled Band," are, as we have seen, structured like science, which lies precisely in this structure, in the chain that derives its sense from itself, without sophistically introducing the external being. This self-efficiency of the story is guaranteed by the *a priori–a posteriori* status of the empty signifier, which is effectively the criminal's name: from the perspective of ideology—say, the client's or Holmes' feminine intuition, being—the name is given *a priori*, and from the viewpoint of science it is given only *a posteriori*. The story is precisely this transition from the ideological to the scientific perspective—say, from the client's belief that her sister was murdered by her stepfather to the knowledge of this murder. The story is a process of reducing the being that science cannot quilt onto the chain; put in Shklovsky's terms, the story is a process of replacing false solutions with the real one.

The story with clues, however, is not simply "told in two parts," as Shklovsky (107) says of "The Speckled Band"; the second part—Holmes' *a posteriori* explanation of the crime (which is given a special chapter in the novels: "The Conclusion," "The Strange Story of Jonathan Small," "A Retrospection," and "Epilogue")—is *a priori* present as early as the client's first visit to Holmes. The two parts meet at the moment of an attempt to

repeat the crime, to, say, murder the surviving twin. Like the name, the crime manifests itself twice, since the second manifestation is necessary to everyone involved: it is necessary if the legal ideological apparatus, which believes in a given name, is to perceive the crime at all and uptake Holmes' knowledge of it; if Holmes, who knows the right name, is to prevent the crime; and, finally, if the name itself, the criminal as subject, is to realize its unconscious desire and let itself be caught. (A note on the final point: like Holmes, the criminals belong to the rentier class; what drives them is not money, but an idiosyncratic obsession due to which they attempt to repeat their crime despite Holmes' presence, often visibly relieved as he catches them, erasing them from the Other; and the criminals of Conan Doyle's successor, Agatha Christie, proudly admit the crime themselves as Poirot reconstructs their utterance, crime, for them.)

"[T]he plot of a detective story is thus 'auto-reflexive'; it is a story about an attempt to reconstruct a story," claim Žižek and Močnik (330); put in the well-known formula of detective fiction quoted by Moretti (*Signs* 148), "the author is to the reader as the criminal to the detective." As we have seen, this is why the story does not need external supplements, commonplaces that were spontaneously sought by the detective stories without clues in the arsenals of contemporary ideologies. Moretti ("Slaughterhouse" 215–6; *Graphs* 70–78) notes that the early authors of detective fiction used clues regularly, but improperly, which suggests that they used them because they were aware of their affect on sales; such clues introduced mysteriousness, oddities, the detective's distinction, the criminal's immorality, medical symptoms, or plain redundancy. One should add here that this non-Aristotelian multitude of incidents derives from the fact that the authors that used clues without knowing what to do with them did so spontaneously, that is, in line with contemporary ideologies: before the introduction of clues, the detective story was a *bricolage* of obscurantist elements of spiritualism, the second rise of the gothic novel, neo-romantic individualism, the moralism of late-Victorian culture, positivism, and so on.

Let me conclude my commentary on Moretti's hypothesis on the formal invention of clues by resorting to Badiou's theory of event, which also posits science as a non-empiricist, signifying practice, juxtaposing it (Badiou, *Second* 118–9), moreover, to both cognitive science (which was suggested to Moretti) and deconstruction (which Moretti denounces). Far from trying to forsake Moretti's science for what he calls metaphysics, I take this philosophically marked path in order to grasp his science as science by suggesting a punctual, delimitating intervention in his scientific dilemma, a gesture of the kind that the early Althusser (74–83) attributed to philosophical practice in its relation to science.

To sum up Badiou's theory of event, using my example: The situation formalized by Moretti is a multiple of detective stories. As such, it is constituted by its unknown—by that which is not articulated, named, in the situation's languages—that is, by the absence of the aesthetic use of clues: the situation is a multiple because it fails to articulate the clues that could formally unify this multiple. This absence is hence the truth of the situation. Conan Doyle negates this absence by naming it precisely as absence, as the empty form informed by clues. He therefore names the absence as form, as that which is neither the detective nor any other positive narrative element, but the very empty space between the elements. Conan Doyle's clues are a revolutionary break, a "jump" (Moretti, "Slaughterhouse" 222) in the history of the genre, insofar as, unlike the cocaine or the violin (215), they are not just another attribute of the "bourgeois" detective (212n7); that is, insofar as they serve not the "myth of Sherlock Holmes" (215), but the plot as the artistic dimension of the story. As such, they are the eventual supplement to the situation. The first readers of Conan Doyle read the situation from the perspective of this supplement: after the event of clues, the stories without clues became unreadable, anachronistic, for these readers. This audience is thus faithful to the event of Doylean clues, doing for all the stories what Holmes does for individual stories (which is another way of saying that the detective embodies the reader of a detective story). In this way, the first audience produces the truth as an immanent break with the situation—as a gap that is irreversible—but achieved by appropriating the situation's own elements—by unifying these elements into a form. As such, the first audience enters into the composition of Conan Doyle's stories that are the subject of truth, the bearer of this fidelity to the event of formal unification of the genre.

This event is already betrayed by those of Conan Doyle's stories that use clues to name not the absence, the relations between the elements of the story, but one of these elements—say, the detective. The event is then betrayed by the next generations of readers, who have not fidelity, but knowledge as the belief that the Other knows—the belief that the first generation must know why it chose Conan Doyle; these generations also name the truth of the situation by choosing one of the positive elements; namely, the first generation as the subject supposed to know. Finally, the event is betrayed by the commentary of Moretti's tree that positivizes the truth of the situation as the minds of the first readership, which are said to be penetrable by cognitive science.

Moretti ("Slaughterhouse" 210, 211), on the other hand, names the first generation of readers "the blind canon makers," and adds that these are also a "blind spot" (211, 218) of economic analyses of the cultural market, whose concept of the information cascade can account for the

choices of all generations but the first one, and a "black box" of literary historiography itself: "[T]he event that starts the 'information cascade' is unknowable" (211). Thus, Moretti unwittingly, by remaining faithful to science as a procedure of truth, achieves an epistemological break, separating the falsifiable science that is "silent" (as the cognitivist commentary goes) from the eternal, unfalsifiable ideology that gives a cognitivist answer to its own question, "How is the reader influenced by formal properties without being fully conscious of the influence"—the question that philosophy answers merely negatively, punctually, by reiterating the question itself: "In so far as he enters into the composition of a subject, in so far as he is self-subjectivisation, the 'some-one' exists *without knowing it*" (Badiou, *Ethics* 46). The "black box" contains the subject, not the mind.

NOTES

[1] "An investigation or an observation is in fact never passive: it is possible only under the direction and control of theoretical concepts directly or indirectly active in it—in its rules of observation, selection, classification, in the *technical* setting that constitutes the field of observation or experiment. Thus, an investigation or an observation, even an experiment, first of all only furnishes the *materials* which are then worked up into the *raw material* of a subsequent labour of transformation that is finally going to produce *empirical* concepts. By 'empirical concepts', then … we mean the result of a process of knowledge, itself complex, wherein the initial material, and then the raw material obtained, are transformed into empirical concepts by the effect of the intervention of *theoretical concepts*—present either explicitly, or at work within this transformative process in the form of experimental settings, rules of method, of criticism and interpretation, etc. … We must never lose sight of the fact that, understood in the strong sense, theory is never reducible to the real examples invoked to *illustrate* it, since it goes beyond any given real object, since it concerns all *possible* real objects within the province of its concepts" (Althusser 48–51).

"It is this *historico-physiological character of the evidence*, the fact that is does not merely describe some objective state of affairs *but also expresses subjective, mythical, and long-forgotten views* concerning this state of affairs, that forces us to take a fresh look at methodology. It shows that it would be extremely imprudent to let the evidence judge our theories directly and without any further ado. A straightforward and unqualified judgement of theories by 'facts' is bound to eliminate ideas *simply because they do not fit into the framework of some older cosmology*. Taking experimental results and observations for granted and putting the burden of proof on the theory means taking the observational ideology for granted without having ever examined it. . . . The first step in our criticism of familiar concepts and procedures, the first step in our criticism of 'facts', must therefore be an attempt to break the circle. We must invent a new conceptual system that suspends, or clashes with, the most carefully established observational results, confounds the most plausible theoretical principles, and introduces perceptions that cannot form part of the existing perceptual world" (Feyerabend 52, 22–3).

[2] For the argument from authority, which predominated in scholasticism and was rejected by early modern philosophy, see Ducrot (157–69); and for the postmodern abandonment of the detective story as the paradigmatic genre of modernist epistemophilia for science fiction as the paradigm of postmodern possible-worlds ontology, see McHale (16).

³ Put in the semiotic terms in which Moretti developed this problematic in 1979 and then in 1983: "Clues … are not facts, but verbal procedures—more exactly, rhetorical figures. Thus, the famous 'band' in a Holmes story, an excellent metaphor, is gradually deciphered as 'band', 'scarf', and finally 'snake'. As is to be expected, clues are more often metonymies: associations by contiguity (related to the past), which the detective must furnish the missing term. The clue is, therefore, that particular element of the story in which the link between signifier and signified is altered. It is a signifier that always has several signifieds and thus produces *numerous* suspicions" (Moretti, *Signs* 146).

⁴ A deployment of animals as a weapon or an accomplice that backfires on the deployer is a leitmotiv in Conan Doyle; consider the geese in "The Blue Carbuncle," the hound in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the private zoo in "The Noble Bachelor," the mastiff in "The Copper Beeches," and, why not, the pygmy in *The Sign of Four* and the herd of naive red-headed men in "The Red-Headed League." Holmes as an agent of the dialectic of Enlightenment?

⁵ Solving the case of "The Red-Headed League," he says: "It saved me from ennui … Alas! I already feel it closing in upon me. My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so" (Conan Doyle, *Sherlock* 251). And when Watson asks him—again, not without anxiety—if he is on morphine or cocaine, he replies: "My mind … rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world" (ibid., 108).

WORKS CITED

Althusser, Louis. *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists, and Other Essays*. Ed. Gregory Elliot; trans. Ben Brewster et al. London: Verso, 1990.

Aristotle. "Poetics." Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Vol. 2. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984. 2316–40.

Badiou, Alain: *Ethics*. Trans. Peter Hallward. London: Verso, 2001.

– – –. *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*. Trans. Louise Burchill. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

Baggs, Chris. "How Well Read Was My Valley?" *Book History* 4 (2001): 277–301.

Bassett, Troy J. and Christina M. Walter. "Booksellers and Bestsellers." *Book History* 4 (2001): 205–36.

Conan Doyle, Arthur. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. London: Smith, Elder, 1903.

– – –. *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories I*. New York: Bantam, 1986.

Ducrot, Oswald: *Le dire et le dit*. Paris: Minuit, 1984.

Feyerabend, Paul: *Against Method*. London: Verso, 1993.

McDonald, Peter D. *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987.

Milner, Jean-Claude. "The Doctrine of Science." Trans. Oliver Feltham. *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious* 6 (2000): 33–63.

Močnik, Rastko. "Toward a Materialist Concept of Literature." *Cultural Critique* 4 (1986): 171–89.

Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on World Literature." *NLR* 1 (2000): 55–68.

– – –. "The End of the Beginning." *NLR* 41 (2006): 71–86.

– – –. *Graphs, Maps, Trees*. London: Verso, 2005.

– – –. "More Conjectures." *NLR* 20 (2003): 73–81.

– – –. "Moretti Responds (III)." *Reading Graphs, Maps, Trees: Critical Responses to Franco Moretti.* Ed. Jonathan Goodwin and John Holbo. Anderson, CA: Parlor Press, 2011. 105–07.

– – –. *Signs Taken for Wonders.* 2nd ed. Trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller. London: Verso, 2005.

– – –. "The Slaughterhouse of Literature." *MLQ* 61.1 (2000): 207–27.

Price, Leah. The Tangible Page. *London Review of Books* (31 Oct. 2002): 38.

Sayers, Dorothy. "Aristotle on Detective Fiction." *English* 1.1 (1936): 23–35.

Shklovsky, Victor. *Theory of Prose.* Trans. Benjamin Sher. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.

Žižek, Slavoj, and Rastko Močnik. "Spremna beseda." G. K. Chesterton et al., *Memento umori: teorija detektivskega romana.* Ed. Slavoj Žižek and Rastko Močnik. Ljubljana: DZS, 1982. 295–348.

Uspešnica kot črna škatla oddaljenega branja: primer Sherlock Holmes

Ključne besede: literarna zgodovina / oddaljeno branje / Moretti, Franco / detektivska zgodba / kartezijanski subjekt / Doyle, Arthur Conan

Zgodovina knjige je po Leah Price »zavezana etični drži, v skladu s katero predpostavlja, da je domnevno pasivno in anonimno bralstvo zmožno ustvarjati pomen«. Zdi se, da mora prav zaradi te domnevne pasivnosti in anonimnosti bralstva Franco Moretti pritrditi kritiki njegove kvantitativne zgodovine zgodnje detektivske zgodbe, da literarna zgodovina ne more pojasniti dejstva, da na bralstvo radikalno novih tekstov »učinkujejo formalne poteze, ne da bi se tega povsem zavedalo«. Poskušali bomo pokazati, o kakšni etiki oziroma branju brez zavedanja utegneta govoriti Leah Price oziroma Moretti. K Morettijevemu znanstvenemu problemu bomo pristopili z gledišča Badioujeve etike subjekta kot ravno »nekoga«, ki obstaja, *ne da bi to vedek*. Namen tega pristopa ne bo odklon od znanosti v smeri tega, kar Moretti zavrne kot »metafiziko«, odklon, ki je po Morettiju značilen za sodobno literarno vedo. Nasprotno, s tem pristopom bomo poskušali obravnavati znanost prav v njeni znanstvenosti, saj bomo izpeljali točkoven, delimitirajoč poseg v Morettijevo znanstveno dilemo, kakršnega Althusserjeva epistemologija pripisuje filozofski praksi v razmerju do znanstvene.

Marec 2012