



# How to Read Less: Raymond Williams, Franco Moretti, and the Crisis of the Canon

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## Introduction

The slightly polemical title of this article hints at a surprising parallel between two bodies of text which were written several decades apart and which at first sight have not much in common<sup>1</sup>: on the one hand, Raymond Williams' writings in which he laid down his ideas about structures of feeling and a selective tradition (predominantly *The Long Revolution* and *Marxism and Literature*), and on the other, Franco Moretti's works in which he developed his concept of distant reading (predominantly "Conjectures on World Literature", "The Slaughterhouse of Literature" and *Graphs, Maps, Trees*). Both Williams and Moretti are often seen as thinkers who paved the way for the emergent disciplines of Cultural Studies and Digital Humanities respectively, both of which were born of a need to overcome what the two scholars regarded as substantial crises of thinking and reading in academia. Moreover, Williams and Moretti set out from a similar problem which they suppose to be symptomatic of the crisis: the almost unchallenged literary canon and its continuous and self-perpetuating tradition. Stunned by the recognition that Literary Studies seems to rely on just a tiny canonical fraction of the immense number of books that have been written, the two thinkers interrogate how the canon is formed and established and how this tradition legitimises current ideological formations by privileging certain texts over others. One of the key problems that triggers both of their projects is consequently how to master the enormous incongruency between the number of texts that even the most avid reader can study and the "great unread" (Cohen 1999: 23) of books that simply fail to make the cut. In other words: how to read less and yet know more.

Comparisons between Moretti and older authors always circle around his concept of distant reading, which many literary scholars have seen as a watershed attack on the most fundamental principles of the discipline. This article deliberately refrains from adding to the already immense and often heated debate whether close or distant reading

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<sup>1</sup> Weigel (2015) and Underwood (2017) have noted connections between Williams and Moretti, but they have focused on epistemology and disciplinarity, rather than on method.



is better suited for analysing literary texts. Although many authors (cf. Burke 2011: 41-43; cf. Glaubitz 2018: 28) have called for a reconciliation and combination of the two methods (bringing different methods into dialogue is always a wise decision), I believe that the basic tenets of close and distant reading are so fundamentally different that any attempt to choose one over the other is futile because they do not claim to be able to do the same thing. If proponents of distant reading attack close reading for its false claims about the representability of individual instances, they overlook that a sincere close reading would always concede to rank the texts it studies into more and less relevant texts, or rather better and worse examples. A sincere distant reading on the other hand would never claim that computer-based tools employed to manage the otherwise unmanageable amount of data could reach a hermeneutic conclusion about the texts it studies without actually reading a considerable number of those texts. Franco Moretti makes it clear that quantitative research “provides *data*, not interpretation” (2005: 9, italics in original). Let us consider just one, admittedly exaggerated, example to show the futility of comparing the methods: if anyone were to study word frequency in Irish novels of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, would we apply the same standards for results from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as for other, more obscure, texts that belong to the great unread, although we are probably aware that *Ulysses* is in many ways unique? Or would we, as a consequence, have to design hardly productive corpora like ‘early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Irish novels minus *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* but including *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*’? Would any proponent of close reading, on the other hand, claim that a focus on individual passages from *Ulysses* could be representative of anything in the rest of the corpus?

It is misleading to see close and distant reading as polar opposites, but we tend to do so because we believe that the ‘reading’ that both concepts have in common is the same. But that is not true, since, as quoted above, close reading reads a text as text while distant reading reads a text as data. However, both forms of reading lead us back to questions of canon formation: what we read, why we read what we read, and how this selection can be put into perspective. That is why this article wants to outline parallels and differences not in terms of the merits of the respective methodologies, but rather in terms of the governing structures and political implications in both models that revolve around the formation and tradition of the literary canon.

### Selective Traditions

Raymond Williams’ ideas about canon formation are linked to his concept of a selective tradition. Williams first mentions the idea of a selective tradition in his book *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (cf. 1963: 308), and his lifelong occupation with the politics of tradition should also be understood as a form of critical engagement with the work of



his mentor F.R. Leavis. Leavis called one of his major works *The Great Tradition* (1948) and repeatedly stressed the tradition of a single common culture and its elitist canon, an idea which Williams rejected and supplemented by calling on the plurality of different class cultures and its corresponding texts (cf. Milner 1993: 38). It is with the publication of *The Long Revolution* in 1961 that Williams develops his ideas about the selective tradition in detail, and this is directly connected with his central concept of structures of feeling. Many scholars have commented on the “intentionally oxymoronic” (Pickering 1997: 37) nature of Williams’ term ‘structure of feeling’, as it tries to reconcile the antagonistic semantic fields of ‘structure’ and ‘feeling’. Critical consideration of the concept has often focussed on the second half of the term, ‘feeling’, which, with its reference to human experience, has been “widely dismissed by post-structuralists in the wake of Derrida” (Middleton 1989: 51). The ‘structure’ which Williams describes has received far less attention. Williams was influenced by Ruth Benedict’s ethnographic model which she called “patterns of culture” (1934), and in many ways structures of feeling is a transdisciplinary adaptation of Benedict’s concept. Both Benedict’s pattern and Williams’ structure attempt to identify general elements and relations within the objects, artefacts and societies that they study. This model can be exemplified by individual texts but has to be understood as woven into the texture of the vast majority of texts not used as examples as well. In this way, as all models tend to, the structure of feeling breaks down and simplifies a general sequence of elements into a repeatable and expectable design which represents a “particular community of experience” (Williams 1965: 64). Influenced by his own professional background, Williams privileges works of art when it comes to studying structures of feeling, and this is why the question which works of art are passed on from generation to generation gains relevance for him.

Raymond Williams addresses our reliance on individual examples to stand in for and explain a larger corpus when introducing the idea of the selective tradition in the third chapter from *The Long Revolution*, “The Analysis of Culture”. Since our reading of the structures of feeling of past generations depends on those texts which have survived or become canonical, Williams interrogates why certain texts have been forgotten while others are understood as emblematic for a period in question: “the survival is governed, not by the period itself, but by new periods, which gradually compose a tradition” (1965: 66). The formation of a canon or a selective tradition is an essential element in social organisation. Williams takes the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel as a case in point. No human being can ever come close to reading all of the novels of an epoch: “The real specialist may know some hundreds; the ordinary specialist somewhat less; educated readers a decreasing number”, writes Williams (ibid.). Overwhelmed by the sheer number of text production, we can only catalyse a “sense of the life” (ibid.) in any field of activity through selection. This selected sense of life then translates into the structure of feeling.



Although he does not reference Williams, Franco Moretti tellingly sets out from a very similar position in his essay “The Slaughterhouse of Literature”: “The majority of books disappear forever [...]: 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 per cent* of all published novels” (2013c: 66, italics in original). Moretti takes his cue from Margaret Cohen’s term the “great unread” (1999: 23) and asks an even more concrete question: why do some texts and authors overshadow our interpretation of a period, while “contemporaries who write more or less like canonical authors [...], but not quite” (2013c: 66-67) are completely forgotten? Here again, selection by what he calls the “blind canon-makers” (ibid.: 70) is vital: readers who select a book because others have selected it before them (and so forth), setting in motion a feedback loop of canonisation which is difficult to halt (ibid.: 69).

Both Moretti and Williams want to understand how this selection works, and in posing this question both are challenging canonical structures. Their answers differ, however. Raymond Williams, especially in his Gramscian re-formulation of structures of feeling as representing dominant, residual and emergent social formations (1977: 121-27), asks how structures of feeling govern the selective tradition and vice versa. Moretti, on the other hand, suggests a new methodology to make the great unread visible by using computer-based programmes and to employ “sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, concordances, incipits” (2013c: 67). The main advantage of this approach, next to its visually appealing use of graphs and diagrams, maps and trees, is, obviously, the significant increase in the quantity of texts that are made accessible for research. He concedes that in this scenario, knowledge of literature has to be redefined, as it “cannot mean the very close reading of very few texts” (ibid.). Williams, admittedly without such technological means at his disposal as Moretti has forty years later, instead stresses that the impossibility of knowing most of the texts can be partly answered by trying to understand structures of feeling, since these are bound to inform even a majority of the great unread.

### **Literature as a System**

What both approaches have in common is that they emphasise the way that texts articulate cultural and social meaning in their plurality, at the cost of the universalist claims of certain individual texts. Williams’ structures of feeling rest on the idea that one can only grasp the tacit communication between different works by looking at a whole generation of textual examples: “the significance of an activity must be sought in terms of the whole organization, which is more than the sum of its separable parts” (Williams 1965: 65). Since the elements of the structure of feeling are hardly ever written deliberately into texts, they resemble “a discursive structure which is a cross between a



collective unconscious and an ideology” (Storey 2006: 35). This collective unconscious leads to the claim that one can “perceive it operating in one work after another which weren’t otherwise connected – people weren’t learning it from each other” (Williams 1979: 159). This is the defining aspect of the structure and nurtures “the deep community that makes the communication possible” (Williams 1965: 65). Raymond Williams acknowledges that some texts are more relevant than others in articulating breaks and developments in value systems, but the focus never shifts from the way that texts speak as a group.

For Franco Moretti (or other proponents of Digital Humanities like Matthew Jockers or Matthew Kirschenbaum), the methodology of digital analysis presupposes that texts signify meaning not in isolation, but as a giant body of works (cf. Dobson 2019: 18-19). The whole idea of mining immense corpora of texts rests on the conception that elements reappear again and again which one would overlook when concentrating only on the figureheads of literary movements: “you invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter” (Moretti 2013b: 48, italics in original). Moretti’s solution is a marked rejection of the exemplary ways of reading that have become so characteristic for the humanities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Somewhat polemically he argues: “we know how to read texts, now let’s learn how *not* to read them. Distant reading: where distance [...] *is a condition of knowledge*” (ibid., italics in original). It is this form of distance which allows readers to take in more texts, even if none of them will be read closely, but to “understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something” (ibid.: 49). This way of emphasising literature as a system ties in with one of the general assumptions in digital reading where quantitative methods do not rule out qualitative methods, but where quantity always precedes quality: you count first and then (ideally) you read.

What lies at the bottom of this emphasis on the plurality of literary voices is of course a form of scepticism about the representativity of individual examples. In fact, it is paradoxical to single out for analysis texts like *Hamlet*, “Lines Written (or Composed) a few Miles above Tintern Abbey”, *Middlemarch* or *Ulysses* because they are so much better than the rest and yet claim that one might understand their respective genres and epochs rather by reading those than some of their more mediocre siblings. However, this is what literary criticism has often done, focussing on the exceptional “which close reading makes even more exceptional, by emphasizing the uniqueness of exactly *this* word and *this* sentence here” (Moretti 2005: 3, italics in original). But most criticism of close or symptomatic reading (as proposed by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*) has questioned ideological bias which might potentially predispose the critic towards finding those symptoms which they have been looking for selectively. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in response articulate the “desire to be free from having a political agenda that determines in advance how we interpret texts” (2018:



2616) and suggest the blurry concept of surface reading as a remedy, because they believe that this may bring scholars closer to reading and searching texts for what they call almost “taboo in literary studies: objectivity, validity and truth” (ibid.: 2617). These are grand claims, but Best’s and Marcus’s project in turn leads to a radically depoliticised view of literature, since any challenge to power relations and any investigation of patriarchal, colonial, nationalist, elitist or other structures in representations would be suspected of political partisanship.<sup>2</sup> Although methodologically surface reading may seem similar to distant reading, Moretti’s project is markedly different. Replacing the critic with a computer code may suggest the illusion of objectivity, but Moretti never loses sight of the fact that computer-based readings still require balanced forms of subjectivity.

Raymond Williams’ position, which obviously preceded the debate about close and distant, symptomatic and surface reading, seems clear. Committed to the idea that literary debate needs to be connected with broader political and social issues, he states that we need to read works of art in dialogue and as a community of texts precisely because this will help readers to understand the social character and the relationship between different social formations (cf. Higgins 1999: 3). This is an important step in order to make literature, and the study of literature, socially relevant. The canon is a structure to be challenged, but not because the works in the canon have to necessarily be exchanged for others; it is rather that investigating the formation of the canon and its selective tradition as a discursive practice will help scholars to navigate and tackle social conflict and the way that it is resolved in art.

## Questioning the Canon

We should take a moment to think about the essential features of the oft-quoted but methodologically vague canon. As both Williams and Moretti have noted, the sheer number of works that have been written over time makes it inevitable that a selection in terms of a canon is made in order to manage an otherwise unmanageable quantity. Whether the category used is broad like Romantic Poetry, Theatre of the Absurd, 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel, or highly specialised like Post-industrial Welsh novels after Thatcher or East London Hooligan Fiction, none of these categories would work, neither in terms of geography and time period, nor in terms of genre and topic, if these giant corpora were

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the call for objective criticism which is not influenced by political persuasions harks back to thinkers like Matthew Arnold in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who claimed that criticism had to be “non-partisan” and “transcend all particular social classes and interests, seeing the object as it really is” (Eagleton 1984: 60). Ironically, both Arnold’s illusion of not being influenced by his own class position, and Best’s and Marcus’ positivist claim that only the surface of literary texts matters, can be seen as equally informed by ideology, only a different one.





not filtered into a much smaller, and allegedly representative, number of hypercanonical examples. Thus, *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, or *Frankenstein* have over time acquired the status of the figureheads of English Gothic fiction, standing in for the great unread of this genre, while *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Blonde on Blonde* or *Blood on the Tracks* have come to stand in as representatives of Bob Dylan's enormous back catalogue. Looked at this way, the canon is a pragmatic necessity for the ordering principle of categorisation: "The canon, in predetermining value, shapes the past and makes it humanly available, accessibly modern" (Kermode 1989: 117).

Closely connected to this conception of the canon is the idea that works which are received into the canon are not only particularly representative for the group of texts that they are meant to exemplify, but they are also believed to be particularly good, allegedly transgressing questions of personal taste because they embody such universal values that it is their sheer quality which grants them their place in the canon. *Hamlet* or Beethoven's Seventh are then not only representative of the categories or genres they belong to (they are in fact decidedly different from the median average of Elizabethan drama or 19<sup>th</sup>-century symphonies), they are also so much better and more important for humanity. The Arnoldian elitist conception of culture as "the best that has been thought and said" and humanity's inevitable "pursuit of perfection" (Arnold 1903: xi) are the basis for this perspective on the canon.

Increasingly over the past few decades, however, this meritocratic conception of canon formation has been overtaken by attacks on the elitist and exclusionary principle of canonical discourses. Such criticism has been articulated by a myriad of post-war academic movements like feminism, postcolonial studies or post-structuralism.<sup>3</sup> Rather than seeing membership in the canon as the inevitable path for certain texts, people have started to ask questions as to why these texts belong to the showcase of literature and have convincingly argued that the canon exemplifies power relations much rather than literary merit (cf. Eagleton 1984: 92-93; cf. Damrosch 2006). Canonical texts in many cases legitimise contemporary and historical regimes of truth and power and thus need to be seen as manifestations of social formations. The working of the canon is two-fold: texts may become canonical because they already conform to hegemonic values, but they can in turn also be made to conform by their inclusion in the canon. This explains the dominance of, for example, white, male, middle-class authors whose texts often contribute to the continuity of hegemonic relationships in Western societies. Although a canon is far from homogeneous, patterns that subtly legitimise hegemony and its habits dominate: "Canonization is, at least in part, a process by which certain texts are privileged because they work with a normalized strategy or set of strategies."

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<sup>3</sup> Damrosch's (2006) distinction between a dominant hypercanon and both a shadow canon and a countercanon which challenge established binaries is helpful to understand this reorientation.



(Rabinowitz 1998: 212) And a normalised set of strategies obviously lies at the bottom of Raymond Williams' dominant structures of feeling.

For Raymond Williams, a critical perspective on the canon becomes an inevitable consequence of his political stance as an "oppositional intellectual" (Higgins 1999: 2), claiming in conversation with *New Left Review* that throughout his life he had "been arguing with what I take to be official English culture" (Williams 1979: 316). This official English culture that Williams was writing against was often a conservative version of English and literary studies, but also versions of Marxism or socialism and other academic and political 'schools'. Williams was not at home in any of such orthodox movements, and questioning established discourses that seemed too content with their systems of truth instead of challenging their own status quo became a prevalent attitude in his writing. Thus, a permanent or generic state of crisis within schools of thinking which requires constant reassessment and an ever-critical attitude seems to be an essential part of scholarly awareness for Williams. In fact, he calls it "not so much a matter of theory but [...] a problem of behaviour" (1965: 90) to re-describe and reformulate our vocabulary in thinking about literature and culture.

Most of Williams' work was aimed at "breaking down the inherited distinction between a high minority art and a mass culture by demonstrating the mutually constitutive nature of each" (Dix 2008: 3). Challenging the canon is instrumental here because it calls into question one of the essential discursive instruments in excluding certain works from the selective tradition. Moreover, practices of valorisation like the construction of a canon are to a huge extent governed by political aspects and the adaptability of works of art to hegemonic or dominant structures of feeling. Any contemporary social formation must manage its past in order to establish a true sense of self, either in the form of establishing coherence with contemporary actions and values, or as a deliberate shunning of, a symbolic break with, aspects of the past in order to explain and legitimise its *raison d'être*. This conception of the past does not have to be accurate and can easily incorporate invented traditions (cf. Hobsbawm 1983), but any version of the past "is intended to connect with and ratify the present", offering "a sense of *predisposed continuity*" (Williams 1977: 116, italics in original). For example, Williams writes that the "attention now given to the growth of working-class movements in the nineteenth century would have seemed absurd in 1880, and is governed [...] less by the material itself than by the knowledge of the fruition of these movements" (1965: 75). This line of argumentation "opens up the present to a consciousness of its attachments and selections, its determining lines of inheritance" (Hartley 2016: 127). The selective tradition is then contingent on ideological formations that necessarily assign historical relevance *a posteriori*.





Franco Moretti's scope is a bit different, since his category of focus (in line with his work in World Literatures or *Weltliteratur*) is not so much social class but nationality. He approaches the matter of the function of tradition with a view to how Eurocentrist perspectives have hindered a revalorisation of world literatures and gives a compelling example: in his essay "Modern European Literature: A Geographical Sketch", Moretti begins his argument by presenting two antagonistic models of European literature. The first one, taking its cue from Ernst Robert Curtius, understands Europe as a unified entity which is based on common values and principles derived from history (for Curtius, this centre is ancient Rome). The second one, however, sees Europe as divided and polycentric, where the lack of a centre is understood as a productive impulse for national literatures to flourish (cf. 2013a: 3-8). Both models develop coherent lines of tradition in order to arrive at their different interpretations of contemporary Europe: in Williams' terms, this is a "deliberately selective and connecting process which offers a historical and cultural ratification of a contemporary order" (1977: 116). Once we have understood how contemporary regimes of truth shape this tradition we can call the canonical role of texts into question. This does not mean that canonical works are automatically discarded, but it points out that quantitative methods can help to rediscover texts from the archive and understand how canon selection works (cf. Thomsen 2017: 56-57).

### Conclusion: Beyond a Crisis of Knowledge

In an online article for *The Nation*, Moira Weigel not only shows some interesting parallels in lineage (like their affiliation with *New Left Review*) between Raymond Williams and Franco Moretti, but she has also drawn attention to similarities between the two disciplines that both scholars are associated with. Cultural Studies, with its "somewhat uninformative title" (Eagleton 1984: 108), and Digital Humanities are characterised by an eclectic vagueness, which makes both Moretti and Williams representatives for only a tiny fraction of the work done in those fields, but they are undoubtedly two of the pioneers in outlining the fields' respective modes of thought.<sup>4</sup>

It is an irony of Western academic history that Cultural Studies, the discipline founded on Williams' ideas, would in time turn into an example of one of his most influential concepts: a social formation with its corresponding structure of feeling that would move from emergent to dominant in the course of three decades. Digital Humanities experienced a similar emergence in opposition (or as a reorientation) to the

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<sup>4</sup> Ted Underwood (2017) argues convincingly that the practice of distant reading (under different labels) started long before Moretti, but the combination of Moretti's intellectual project with the possibility of computer-based methods like data mining in his Stanford Literary Lab has led many to credit him with a pioneering role.



dominant form of Literary Studies as practiced for a long time. These parallels have their limits, as the process of emergence in Digital Humanities is still ongoing, and as Digital Humanities is rather set on a reform of the methods and tools that are being used, while especially early Cultural Studies focussed more on a reform of the objects of study. The use of computational methods in Digital Humanities has widened but not changed the material that is under scrutiny (even if the texture is now digital and, following Moretti, no longer text, but data); however, the way that this development has been pushed by many university administrations on the grounds of its alleged evidence-based objectivity is a clear sign of the methodologically emergent becoming institutionally dominant. With good reason, some critics have suggested that, unintentionally, Digital Humanities has “facilitated the neoliberal takeover of the university” (Allington et al. 2016). As emergent formations in the humanities, Cultural Studies and Digital Humanities can then offer a lucid perspective on social and cultural change.

Both Raymond Williams’ and Franco Moretti’s critique of the canon derives from a crisis that they diagnose in academia. Williams highlights the responsibility of “institutions which are formally concerned with keeping the tradition alive” (Williams 1965: 68). Schools and universities need to take their function as organic intellectuals in society serious and seek to allow for “reversals and re-discoveries” (ibid.) within the canon. But there is some marked criticism of the status quo in English academia at the end of the 1950s when he comments: “It is often an obstacle to the growth of a society that so many academic institutions are, to an important extent, self-perpetuating and resistant to change” (ibid.: 69). The whole project of Cultural Studies as Williams envisioned it (without using the term) aimed at a reform of the self-sufficient and elitist outlook of English Studies after World War II. The first one and a half decades after the war had shown that the massive demographic and social changes in the United Kingdom had not been picked up or reflected on by the university system. Williams’ call for understanding the ideological background of canon formation and his attempt to initiate a revalorisation of forms of art that had been relegated to secondary status for more than a century need to be seen in this light, even if today Cultural Studies itself runs the risk of becoming as established and ordinary as the discipline that it had reformed so significantly (cf. Rodman 2010).

Digital Humanities has sometimes been looked upon as a pragmatic project to “recover an assumed loss of disciplinary prestige and an interest in the humanities” (Dobson 2019: viii), but it has also responded to essential epistemological and ontological problems (cf. Berry 2012: 1). In an age in which algorithms and computer codes have shaped so many central areas of societal organisation, “[t]he digital assemblages that are now being built [...] provide destabilising amounts of knowledge and information that lack the regulating force of philosophy” (ibid.: 8). This crisis of knowledge and information leads to an overwhelming feeling of disorientation, and old



forms of crisis management need to adapt to this situation: “Technology enables access to the databanks of human knowledge from anywhere, disregarding and bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of knowledge in the state, the universities and the market” (ibid.). Berry calls the strategies to manage this crisis “computational rationalities” (ibid.: 9), which specifies the target of Digital Humanities quite aptly: not just quantification, but ways of navigating quantifiable data generated by computers.

The reason for the emergence of both Cultural Studies and Digital Humanities lies thus in crises of knowledge. Raymond Williams called for an inclusive definition of culture, and that entailed an inclusive corpus of texts which would not exclude certain works on grounds of their counterhegemonic potential. This does not imply that all texts are seen as equally good or important, but in terms of signification all texts can be relevant. Moretti and the Digital Humanities want to, on the one hand, also include more (if not all) texts, helped by the digital quantum leap in accessibility of texts. On the other hand, as the urge for computational rationalities shows, inclusion of texts/data has its limits and needs a new set of measures in order to make sense of altered epistemologies. In both cases, we need to recognise the cognitive limits to reading, but the perceived shortcomings in our ways of reading seem to lie at the heart of the respective crisis of knowledge. The solution, for Moretti and Williams, is to include *more* texts in an attempt to diversify and emancipate the way we study literatures and their cultural contexts. That this may imply reading *less* (or reading less closely) seems paradoxical at first sight, but since these approaches rest on the understanding of literature as a vast system or deep community, the abstraction of structures of feeling as well as computerised quantification can help us to understand the selective tradition underlying all social formations’ relationship with their pasts.

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