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# Tragedy, for Example: Distant Reading and Exemplary Reading (Moretti)

Paul Fleming

WHEN I WAS A GRADUATE STUDENT in the 1990s, a prominent theorist, the author of influential work on Derrida, DeMan, and others, came to campus to deliver a much anticipated lecture on Kant's *Third Critique*, and did so with aplomb: a brilliant, full-on analysis of one section of Kant's foundational work, a detailed reading delivered with precision, singular focus, and (as one was wont to say) "rigor." In short, a master class in close reading. After a few polite questions from the audience, a professor stood and said: "Sure, a fine reading, but unfortunately of the wrong passage; what you really should have been looking at was the following paragraph of the *Third Critique* . . ." and then went on to deliver a brilliant, full-on, detailed, rigorous reading of this *other* paragraph in Kant, a counter-lecture to the lecture we just heard, because if you *really* wanted to understand the stakes of aesthetic judgment you had to focus on just *this* passage.

We will return to this example; for now I only want to emphasize that close reading (admittedly, a loosely defined method that can take many forms) is never just about close reading; equally important, if not more so (since everything depends on it), is interpreting the *right* passage. An essential element of close reading relies not just on the quality of the reading performed, but also on the example chosen. It has to be the right example. In other words, close reading is always exemplary in a double sense: the exemplary reading of exemplary passages. Determining, deciding which passage is the right one, the one that has Auerbach's "radiating power" to illuminate much larger structures and contexts, will always be part of the interpretative battle; but there is no close reading without the (well-chosen) example.<sup>1</sup>

At first glance (but only first) digital humanities seems to provide a possible reprieve from examples, from exemplary passages, and to a certain extent from exemplarity in general. Part of the mission of trying to address the "Great Unread" is to be able to move beyond categories such as the canon, the representative example, the "classic," and so

on, so as to begin to confront literary history not as a set of exemplary case studies but as a system. With the acceleration of digitization, massive electronic archives, entire libraries being scanned, and thus the possibilities for data-mining and computational analysis on a scale unimaginable just a few decades ago, one is approaching, in the words of Matthew L. Jockers, a “tipping point,” in which “massive data sets are allowing for investigations at a scale that reaches or approaches a point of being comprehensive.”<sup>2</sup> When this is the case, one no longer needs to select exemplary texts or passages, but can analyze the extant body (or close to it) of, say, the nineteenth-century British novel. In fact, in dealing with such immeasurably large bodies of work, one should not even try to isolate relevant, representative examples. For Franco Moretti, the premise of exemplary reading in the face of the “Great Unread” is wrong: the whole is not an additive notion but the interconnection of all the parts. One needs to change simultaneously both the object (not select texts or passages, but something either bigger or smaller: one stylistic aspect or a whole genre; the use of pronouns or the literary market) and the method of literary history (embrace the possibilities that the digital archive offers). In *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, Moretti claims that when it comes to the nineteenth-century British novel, it is “not even a matter of time, but of method: a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it *isn't* a sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole.”<sup>3</sup> This means, in turn, that one has to ask different questions, which emerge solely out of the spirit of experiment. A literary example always has something to say; it is a coherent semantic unit, no matter how enigmatic, how hermetic—it speaks, and as readers we are trained to listen. The scanned corpus of six thousand novels, however, is silent; although composed of words, as a system it has to be approached as silent quantitative units. One needs to speak to it, to pose a question to it—a question that applies not to examples but to data units (word counts, sentence lengths, books sales, relative frequency, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

While some of the tension between close and distant reading, between micro- and macroanalysis, between philology (a love of the word) and computational analysis (the conversion of texts and concepts into quantifiable units) may be overcharged and misplaced, the methodological differences between digital humanities and traditional literary studies (of whatever stripe or school) do have the potential to be truly seismic. Indeed, the so-called “theory wars” of the 1970s, '80s, and '90s between structuralism and poststructuralism, between hermeneutics and posthermeneutics, between the Frankfurt School and deconstruction, or

between new historicism and deconstruction—all the back and forth passionately intoned to the tune of “which side are you on?”—now seem almost quaint. Despite all the real differences between these various methods (political, semiotic, philosophical, and otherwise), it was still nevertheless always about texts, philology, reading, the way the word relates to other words and the world (a question of degrees of history, of context, of closeness to the text, of “rigor”). In short, one still had to read. And what one read (and still reads) are literary examples, exemplary passages. It may be to different ends and with very different understandings of the example—whether representative or singular, encapsulating or withdrawing, rhetorical or literal, affective or hermetic, etc.—yet the fact remains that literary scholarship has largely been a scholarship of and on examples.

In what follows, I want to look at the status of the example and exemplary in digital humanities in two senses: first, in the straightforward sense of the place, function, and value of the literary example. While one can read a fine study such as Jockers’s *Macroanalysis* (2013)—a 200-page study from a cofounder of Stanford’s Literary Lab—and find just a few exemplary passages, and even less in the way of interpretations, in the past few years computational methods have started to change as a next wave of scholarship in the digital humanities comes into greater prominence and increasingly insists upon bringing together close and distant reading, computational analysis and exemplary exegesis as inextricable from one another. I am thinking, for example, of the work of Andrew Piper, Hoyt Long, Richard Jean So, Alan Liu, and Ted Underwood, among others.<sup>5</sup> One sees this new nexus between computational and exemplary analysis in the opening of Long and So’s “Literary Pattern Recognition” (2016), which explicitly develops a method that “synthesizes humanistic and computational approaches,”<sup>6</sup> and more extensively in Piper’s “Novel Devotions” (2015), whose aim “is to offer a methodological polemic against the either/or camps of close versus distant reading. . . . I want us to see how impossible it is *not* to move between these poles when trying to construct literary arguments that operate at a certain level of scale.”<sup>7</sup> Essential for Piper is that this oscillation between close and distant reading moves in both directions:

We not only gain insights into the specific subset of texts identified by the model, as the model provides the interpretive horizon through which these texts assume new meanings. But we recursively gain insights into the computational model itself through the detailed analysis of the texts it has identified. Close reading does not serve as a vehicle of confirmation, the repetition of computation at a different scale. Nor does it function as a tool of opposition, the illustration

of what computation cannot see. Rather, it is understood as a means of model construction itself, embedded within a larger process of circular discovery.<sup>8</sup>

In this combined method, one approach does not serve as the check for the other, quasiconfirming or denying its results (as the instance of final validity); rather, they recursively refine and hone each other, as in the return to one approach offers insights that, in turn, modify the other.

The second sense of example at stake in this essay is the exemplary author, the author that stands in for and represents a much wider school or field. It's astonishing how much of academic scholarship relies on, cites, and reproduces the work of a few (largely white, male) scholars. Here too one can see the degree to which literary studies (along with much research) is the work of and on a few examples.<sup>9</sup> As Piper argues in his forthcoming essay "Think Small," "Literary studies continues to have a penchant for great men." In the 2015 MLA bibliography, "the top 1% of authors, or 33 in total, accounted for 1,302 works, or 20.8% of the total. Four of these authors were women and one was not white (W. E. B. Dubois)."<sup>10</sup> When it comes to digital humanities, Moretti is certainly, especially for those coming from outside the field (such as myself), "the example": from coining the term "distant reading" to co-founding the Stanford Literary Lab, to quite simply the aura he bestows upon literary studies as one of its most prominent scholars of the last decades, Moretti—rightly or wrongly (but this is part of the contested state of examples)—stands in for much of digital humanities. Indeed, when one cites or when one fights with the digital humanities (whether from outside digital humanities or increasingly, from inside<sup>11</sup>), it is often with the work of Franco Moretti. In using Moretti as my example for the role of the example in digital humanities, one can rightfully ask: is he the right example today? Yet the fact remains that his work, for now at least, remains exemplary and, thus, deserves all the attention of a well-chosen example.

This essay focuses on two examples from Moretti's work: the first one a very brief moment, a mere footnote, from the foundational article "Conjectures on World Literature," the text that in many ways brought meta-analysis to a much larger public (with the ensuing heated debates that have not abated); the second example is a longer examination of the fascinating Literary Lab *Pamphlet #6*, "'Operationalizing:'" (2013) on Hegel's exegesis of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

## Example 1

What interests me in this essay is the force of example in the movement between exemplary and computational analysis. The fact that one moves from a close reading based on an example or two to a much larger meta-analysis is not surprising, and in fact forms the basis of Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature." His procedure here bears clear affinities to Erich Auerbach's famous (exemplary) method outlined in "The Philology of World Literature," which emphasizes a *point of departure*, an intuition, an insight, a "lever" that can order and interpret much bigger structures than the individual case or set of cases.<sup>12</sup> In "Conjectures," the point of departure comes from Fredric Jameson and the procedure is emphatically called "an example, not a model":<sup>13</sup> "A few years ago, introducing Kojin Karatani's *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Fredric Jameson noticed that in the take-off of the modern Japanese novel, 'the raw material of Japanese social experience and the abstract formal patterns of Western novel construction cannot always be welded together seamlessly'" (C 58). This is, in fact, the main conjecture in "Conjectures on World Literature"—Jameson noticing the tendency of a compromise formation in the Japanese novel between periphery and core, between local material and abstract form. Since Roberto Schwarz had made a similar observation with respect to Brazil, a pattern was starting to emerge: "It was all very interesting," writes Moretti, "but . . . it was still just an idea; a conjecture that had to be tested, possibly on a large scale" (C 59).

Moretti proceeds to run Jameson's idea through some twenty studies of literary history—"Four continents, two hundred years, over twenty independent critical studies" (C 60)—and finds extensive agreement with the conjecture: "When a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it's *always* as a compromise between foreign form and local materials. Jameson's 'law' had passed the test—the first test, anyway" (C 60). Now, as a rejoinder, one could say—and (too) often does say to some computational analysis—"We knew that, Jameson and Schwarz already pointed it out." But two things need to be emphasized: 1) Jameson only provided the point of departure; it is Moretti who proposes this starting point's lawful character beyond the one example, tests it, and provisionally confirms it; 2) Moretti (and many others) will admit that while the knowledge gained via macroanalysis may, at times, seem modest, it nevertheless is a further form of certainty, confirming what close reading already "knows" in its own way. What interests me far more, however, is moving in the other direction, from computational reading back to exemplary reading. How does the example interact with and effect the

modeling of the meta-analysis, and especially, how can the former exert Auerbach's "radiating power" to push the latter in new directions, as the impetus for further digital excavations?

Already in "Conjectures," Moretti provides a provisional answer. In a footnote toward the end of his exploration of "Jameson's law," Moretti mentions the process of reading the essential novels under investigation:

OK, I confess, in order to test the conjecture I actually did read some of these "first novels" in the end (Krasicki's *Adventures of Mr. Nicholas Wisdom*, Abramowitsch's *Little Man*, Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, Futabatei's *Ukigumo*, René Maran's *Batouala*, Paul Hazoumé's *Doguiçimi*). This kind of "reading," however, no longer produces interpretations but merely *tests* them: it's not the beginning of the critical enterprise, but its appendix. And then, here you don't really read the *text* anymore, but rather through the text, looking for your unit of analysis. The task is constrained from the start; it's a reading without freedom. (C 61)

When he returns to some of the key examples, Moretti admits that he is no longer really "reading," and certainly not performing exemplary, careful readings—that is, reading to be surprised, to discover new interpretations, or to reflect on the model—but merely scanning to find the unit of analysis. One could call this reading-as-validating, a key component of traditional computational analysis, in which one takes a closer look at a subset of texts to confirm whether the model indeed captured the anticipated results.<sup>14</sup> And, nonetheless, it is a disappointing moment, not because Moretti didn't proceed to provide a reading of these novels (one can only do so much in one essay) but, rather, because of the methodological matter-of-factness concerning the status of the example and its role in meta-analysis: it is not an integral part of the critical task, but a mere "appendix." Upon returning to the text, one carefully examines neither the example nor the model in light of the example. This is perhaps the form of "distant reading" one should be truly worried about—reading without interpreting, reading solely to validate.

## Example 2

Moretti, not surprisingly, has given further thought to the relation between distant reading and traditional literary theory. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books* from March 2, 2016, he notes that he insisted that *Distant Reading* and *The Bourgeois* be published on the same day, because they are "two sides of the coin," even if they don't add up to a whole:

I do things in the mode of *Distant Reading* that I could never do in the mode of *The Bourgeois*. But it also works the other way around. When I write a book with zero digital humanities content, or very little, like *The Bourgeois*, I find myself doing things that I cannot do with the other approach. Exactly what things are available in the one and in the other and *are they mutually exclusive*, I still haven't figured out how to think about this. But for me, this is going to be *the problem* for the years to come because *I don't want to give up any of these two realities. They are equally dear to me.*

**Q. So there hasn't been a sort of natural blending then into some sort of whole. It is still very much separate.**

It is. I am loosely planning a book on tragic form, which occasionally I try to conceive as a unification of the two. Who knows. This is planning. It is easy to plan. Doing is a different thing.<sup>15</sup>

This is the central question: to what degree are distant and close reading (still) “very much separate” (in Moretti’s work), and to what extent can they work hand-in-hand? Or are they, as Moretti asks himself, perhaps “mutually exclusive”? It is a real “problem”—theoretically, methodologically, and interpretively . . . but also institutionally, where the sense of “two cultures,” of a division between computational and exemplary analysis, still frequently obtains.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, the second example of combining close and distant reading comes most likely from the project Moretti mentions in this interview, “a book on tragic form,” which he “conceive[s] as a unification of the two.” Some of the first fruits of this attempt to find a “unification” appear to be found in *Pamphlet #6*. At stake in this pamphlet is bringing computational analysis to bear not only on literary history and systems (where it has been much more at home), but also on literary theory—and on nothing less than Hegel’s exemplary theory of tragedy.

One has to pause here and remark with admiration: the choice of combining computational humanities and literary theory could not be more overdetermined than Hegel’s reading of *Antigone*, especially for Moretti, who admits (above): “I don’t want to give up any of these two realities. They are equally dear to me.” One cannot miss the echo of Hegel’s famous description of tragedy in *Antigone* as the conflict between “two equally justified” powers—or, here, at least between “two equally dear” powers. I doubt the irony is lost on Moretti; the chosen encounter between computational analysis and literary theory could not be more exemplary . . . and perhaps more tragic.

The title of the pamphlet, however, is more sober: “‘Operationalizing’: or, the function of measurement in modern literary theory.” Not

exactly a barnburner of a term, “operationalizing” simply means “building a bridge from concepts to measurement, and then to the world. In our case: from the concepts of literary theory, through some form of quantification, to literary texts.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, operationalizing is the process of converting a concept into a quantifiable unit—something measurable—that in turn can be applied to literary texts. The concept that Moretti explores comes from his colleague Alex Woloch’s book on minor characters and is called “character-space,” that is, the battle for space within literary texts among characters, which when quantified amounts to the number of words, lines, paragraphs, references, and allusions that are ascribed to a character, whether in direct discourse or in description, free indirect discourse, etc. Quantifying “character space” in a novel is difficult, and probably cannot be satisfactorily done, but in traditional drama it is much easier, since one can simply count the number of words allocated to a particular speaker, which can then be adapted via network theory into the interface of “character-space” and “character-system” (the weighted links and direction of interactions between characters).

So let’s get to the heart of the matter and the crucial example from the pamphlet: Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Moretti does several things with the operationalized character space: first, he creates a histogram, or graph of the proportion of words allotted to each character, and then, a more dynamic character-system that weighs the number of words as well as their directionality, represented in the relative thickness of the arrows and the arrowheads. In the histogram, the word-space in Sophocles’ *Antigone* is as follows: Creon 28.7 percent, Chorus 19.8 percent, Antigone 16.5 percent, Guard 9.5 percent, Messenger 7.3 percent, Tiresias 6.1 percent, Haemon 6.0 percent, Ismene 5.2 percent, etc. (O 7). One clearly sees that Creon gets the most words, a full 12 percent more than Antigone, who surprisingly also has less to say than the chorus. A small insight, to be sure, but interesting (and precise); so too the relative importance of the guard (9.5 percent), but then again even Creon calls him “a chatterer by nature.”<sup>18</sup> The network of the character-system, however, is more revealing, for here Antigone is not only the main speaker of “her” tragedy, but she has more dialogue with her sister Ismene than with anyone else, just as Creon speaks (far) more to the chorus, Haemon, and the guard than he does in conversation with Antigone. In fact, he has quite little to say directly to her (O 7).

With this conversion of abstraction into concrete images, it becomes clear that Creon occupies the center of the tragedy; he is the discursive center around which the dialogue turns. All fine and interesting, and for Moretti it is proof positive that one can indeed convert a literary

theoretical concept into a dynamic, quantifiable unit and its representation. But this is not really what Moretti is after, nor the tool for getting there, at least with respect to his big argument in this pamphlet, one with nothing less than Hegel's theory of tragedy at stake. The theoretical gauntlet he throws down is explicit:

Measurement as a challenge to literary theory, one could say, echoing a famous essay by Hans Robert Jauss. This is not what I expected from the encounter of computation and criticism; I assumed, like so many others, that the new approach would change the history, rather than the theory of literature; and, ultimately, that may still be the case. But as the logic of research has brought us face to face with conceptual issues, they should openly become the task of the day, countering the pervasive clichés on the simple-minded positivism of digital humanities. Computation has theoretical consequences—possibly, more than any other field of literary study. The time has come, to make them explicit. (O 9)

Here we have it: computation as a challenge to literary theory. Unlike the “Conjecture” essay, computation does not merely mobilize a “point of departure” drawn from theory (e.g., Jameson's insight); rather, computation with its own theoretical consequences shall now “challenge” literary theory on its own ground. The billing is perhaps a bit unfortunate, driven in part by the reference to Jauss, in part by the understandable desire to counter the notion of “the simple-minded positivism” of computational analysis. That said, posing their interaction as a “challenge” does make “unification” all the more difficult; one side, it seems, will walk away a winner. But, again, to Moretti's great credit, he doesn't shy from going straight to one of the central theories of literature (and philosophy): Hegel's definition of tragedy as developed in the *Aesthetics* via Sophocles' *Antigone*, the pinnacle of the tragic art for Hegel (and the motor of the dialectic, i.e., of his entire system).

Moretti takes on Hegel's theory of tragedy by utilizing a third mode of operationalizing character space: creating a list of most distinctive words (MDW), which are defined by the ratio of their expected use (based on their frequency in the text as whole) to their actual use by a particular character; the higher the ratio, the more distinctive the word is for a character. The test for Sophocles' *Antigone* is the degree to which the MDWs of Creon and Antigone relate to Hegel's famous definition of tragedy as the conflict between “two equally justified powers,” that is, the “the chief conflict . . . is that between the *state*, i.e., ethical life in its spiritual universality, and that of the *family* as the natural ethical life.”<sup>19</sup> In the first run of most distinctive nouns, Moretti finds:

ANTIGONE: brother mother marriage home friend love honor tomb hades  
misery law

CREON: ruin evil fear woman men god money

And then of most distinctive verbs:

ANTIGONE: die leave go share rest

CREON: let take stand shall find tell make may know be

The nouns, Moretti admits, are pretty much what one would expect from reading Hegel, especially for the character Antigone, while the verbs portray Creon and the State less as a “spiritual universality” (*geistige Allgemeinheit*) and more as the “mere power to coerce.” But this less-idealized notion of the state has long been a claim of Hegel scholarship, and thus this operationalization via MDWs has largely achieved a mild corroboration.

Moretti himself admits: “I was hoping for more than this.” This sentiment, I note, is at once understandable and odd—understandable, because, sure, one wants something new, something exciting, something against the grain; but odd, because what is wrong with confirming a longstanding understanding of a text, one as influential as Hegel’s, especially when one’s method is to model, quantify, run the numbers, and then see what emerges? “Hoping for more”—Piper dubs such moments “the ‘strange hermeneutics’ of computational reading” (which could also be called “the hermeneutics of strangeness” as a parallel to Gadamer’s “hermeneutics of suspicion”) in which one “puzzle[s] over the meanings of quantitative facts or just get[s] bored by their incapacity to tell us anything new.”<sup>20</sup> And Moretti is obviously a bit bored by the results, which compels some (strange) suspicion and a desire for different, more surprising and counterintuitive, outcomes. This wanting “more,” however, does push Moretti back to the text, to close reading, in order to see what he might have “missed.” In other words, in this later essay he does exactly the type of reading he didn’t do in “Conjectures”: he returns to the text not to scan for the “unit of analysis” but to reread and see what might have gone wrong and consequently adjust the parameters. This is not reading-as-validation—and thus a better procedure, even if pursued for the wrong reasons.

“I was hoping for more”—to get this more, Moretti returns to the exemplary passages in the *Aesthetics* defining drama, and especially tragedy, which is dialogic speech proffered *gegeneinander* (which I leave untranslated for now):

in [dialogue] alone can the individual agents express face to face [*gegeneinander*] their character and aim . . . come into conflict and so actually move the action forwards.

an ethically justified “pathos” which they assert against one another [*gegeneinander*] with the eloquence of their “pathos” . . . in solid and cultivated objective language.<sup>21</sup> (O 11)

Via a return to Hegel’s exact wording—to exemplary reading—Moretti can modify the parameters for computing the MDWs: until now, the ratio included *all* of Antigone’s and Creon’s words throughout the drama, and not only those spoken *gegeneinander* (literally “against one another,” and by extension also “face-to-face”), that is, the words restricted to their particular conflict. “I had completely overlooked this conjunction of self-expression with the *gegeneinander*; that’s why the results had been so predictable” (O 11–12). The strange hermeneutics of Moretti’s pamphlet—not necessarily its method, but to speak with Hegel its “pathos”—comes to the fore in this sentence: first, what is wrong with predictable results, whether via exemplary or computational humanities? Part of the point of operationalizing a concept (that is, “measurement as a challenge to literary theory”) should be embracing a certain degree of sobriety. Second, Moretti seems to chafe at the possibility (why? this wasn’t the case with Jameson’s law) that the initial results are predictable simply because Hegel is, well, generally right. Why the palpable disappointment? One senses a certain “counterintuitive bias” at work, in which the reentry into exemplary reading is designed to “correct” the quantitative parameters to produce (hopefully) more interesting results.

Based on the newfound centrality of *gegeneinander*—the product, I note, of returning to the text, to the exemplary passage, in order to recalibrate the MDWs—Moretti produces another list, now limited solely to the words directly exchanged between Antigone and Creon. Here the list looks quite different:

ANTIGONE: gods son power corpse

CREON: death woman evil

None of Antigone’s MDWs remains the same, and other than “son” none comes from the lexicon of family/domestic sphere; and with Creon, who already deviated from the state-lexicon (in favor of the power-lexicon, but we already knew that), only “woman” and “evil” remain from the first list, and decisively there is no hint left of the law of the state.

Moretti now has the desired result (i.e., one that’s no longer “predictable,” the “more” he was hoping for). Both characters lose their speci-

ficity, especially Antigone, removing her from any notion of the law of the home. And why? Because, so writes Moretti, “the truth is that, when Antigone and Creon are *face to face*, their language becomes, not more *substantial* and *objective*, as Hegel would have it, but less so” (O 12; my emphasis). With this line we enter the belly of the beast, where computational analysis (in the form of operationalization) and exemplary reading (isolating the key passages and terms, and then interpreting them) meet, since what is at stake is the good, old-fashioned, hermeneutic question: what do *gegeneinander*, “substantial,” and “objective” mean in this Hegelian context? We will return to this shortly.

Moretti then gives the following example of stichomythia, or verse-speech, the rapid fire back and forth between Antigone and Creon, which lacks the “substantial” and “objective,” but is the epitome of his understanding of *gegeneinander*:

CREON: You alone among the Cadmeans see this.

ANTIGONE: They see it too; but they curb their tongues to please you.

CREON: Are you not ashamed of thinking differently from them?

ANTIGONE: There is no shame in showing regard for those of one’s own stock.

CREON: Was not he who died on the other side also your brother?

ANTIGONE: My brother with the same mother and the same father.<sup>22</sup>

Moretti parses this dialogic stichomythia as much narrower speech than Hegel’s “cultivated objectivity,” offering instead a rhythmic repetition and negation of one statement by another (see-see, ashamed-shame, brother-brother) that does *not* evoke the “large value systems” at stake in the tragedy:

There [at the scale of the play as a whole], the conflict between Antigone and Creon had found expression in their very different “objective languages”; in stichomythia, it has been drastically contracted to the opposite sides of a lowest common denominator. The dramatic effect is heightened—but at the expense of semantics. It is not in these lines that we can find the meaning of Antigone.

It is not in these lines. . . . Yet, the operationalization of Hegel’s theory of tragic collision has led us precisely to these lines. Another mistake? No; this time, god forgive me, the mistake was Hegel’s—it lay in the connection he posited between face-to-face confrontations and the “gebildete Objectivität” [cultivated objectivity] of tragic language. (O 12)

Let’s recap how Moretti got here. First, the operationalization of character-space, character-systems, and MDWs in Antigone; this quantification of a concept is then brought into dialogue with Hegel’s famous definition of the conflict between the law of the state and of the home. The

first analysis tends to support Hegel with mild corrections; this result is unsatisfying, so Moretti returns to the exact language of Hegel's text and sees that the intimate relation between *gegeneinander* and self-expression will frame and define "the meaning of Antigone." And just this parameter (face-to-face), defined by Hegel and then operationalized, leads not to "cultivated objectivity" but to scenes of stichomythia: words exchanged like punch and counterpunch, rhythmic in their delivery, but reduced in their semantic depth. Moretti thus concludes: "The moment of crisis is not a moment of truth: it exerts too much pressure on the acting subjects for Hegel's 'cultivated objectivity' to shine through. And a whole new relationship between conflict and values becomes necessary as a result" (O 12–13).

This is a big claim—the need for a whole new theory of tragedy and its relation between crisis and truth, conflict and values, thanks to operationalizing—that is perhaps due to a certain "counterintuitive" bias as a guiding heuristic ("I was hoping for more"). Nevertheless, the bravado with which Moretti tries to "unify" his two "equally dear" methods, computational and exemplary analysis, is instructive in its own right. Unlike in "Conjectures," close readings help to reset the parameters for the operationalization, which in turn effect the close readings, etc. There is a recursive movement between close reading and computational analysis—but with new problems or points of contention emerging through this return to exemplary readings.

For Moretti, everything hinges on the interpretation of the adverb *gegeneinander*: "against each other," "in opposition to one another," but also "toward each other" (it doesn't need to be agonistic), and more loosely "face-to-face." This last translation is just one possibility, one mode of opposition expressed by *gegeneinander*. In dialogue, the essence of dramatic form, words of opposition do not need to be directly spoken to the one opposed; the phrase just means words spoken against one another—whether in person, behind the back, in other contexts, etc.<sup>23</sup> So, yes, opposition is expressed in dialogue, but not necessarily in the face of the opponent. In the above two quotes from Hegel that Moretti emphasizes, the first indeed allows "face-to-face" as a fine translation; but in the second, *gegeneinander* can and should be read far more capaciously (which is why it was translated as "against one another"). Antigone, for one, asserts her "ethically justified pathos" against all and in all contexts and conversations—Creon, Ismene, the Chorus, all who will listen (or not). There is, then, no textual reason, neither semantically nor in the Hegelian context, to take the German word *gegeneinander* as the basis for restricting the MDWs to face-to-face conversations between Antigone and Creon.

But even if one grants this restriction of MDWs to face-to-face exchanges between Antigone and Creon, one still needs to parse what Hegel means by “cultivated objectivity” to see if it appears in their face-to-face encounters. And Moretti, I want to argue (returning to my opening anecdotal example), misses the essential—yes, the exemplary—passage by citing a mere fragment of it. The full passage reads:

What drives them to act is precisely an ethically justified pathos which they assert against one another [*gegeneinander*] with the eloquence of their “pathos” not in sentimental and personal rhetoric or in the sophistries of passion, but in an objectivity that is as solid [or: dignified] as it is cultivated [*in jener ebenso gediegenen als gebildeten Objektivität*]. (Sophocles above everyone else was a master in the depth, measure, and plastic, living beauty of language of this kind.) At the same time, however, their pathos is pregnant with collisions and it leads them to injurious and guilty acts. But they do not claim to be innocent of these at all. On the contrary, what they did, and actually had to do, is their glory. No worse insult could be given to such a hero than to say that he had acted innocently. It is the honour of these great characters to be culpable. They do not want to arouse sympathy or pity, for what arouses pity is not anything substantive, but subjective grief, the subjective depth of personality. But their firm and strong character is one with its essential pathos, and what excites our admiration is this indestructible harmony and not the pity and emotion that Euripides first has slipped into expressing.<sup>24</sup>

In this passage from Hegel, it becomes clear that “pathos” and “solid, cultivated objectivity” relate less to particular words, e.g., distinctive words, and more to *how* the words are spoken, which both is harder to quantify and marks the unique rhetoric of tragic expression at its pinnacle (i.e., *Antigone*): a rhetoric that is neither “sentimental” nor “personal,” but rather concrete, clear, to the point, and spoken without affect, without “subjective grief.” It is a language of affirmation stripped of passion, without any desire to engender pity or move the other (which is seen as inseparable from the tragic since Aristotle). To aim for affect, for pity, is the opposite of what is substantive. “Solid and cultivated objectivity”—such language is matter-of-fact and simply informs the interlocutor: “Yes, I did the deed”—And why? “Because it is who I am and, thus, it was right thing to do.” In substantial, objective language, there is nothing to hide, no subterfuge, and certainly none of Oedipus’s legendary “not-knowing,” his “struggling for a consciousness” (Hölderlin). *Antigone* is a profoundly Lutheran tragedy *avant la lettre*; its central gesture is: “Here I stand, I can’t do otherwise.” Creon and Antigone know exactly where they stand and why they cannot do otherwise; this is cultivated, dignified objectivity. Their pathos is their character, what they are through and through; it is an honor to be culpable.

Based on this second return to Hegel (albeit, to a different exemplary passage), let's take another look at Sophocles' *Antigone*. One can, in fact, scan for the unit of analysis (honor to be culpable, rejection of pity, absence of affect, etc.) and land on the very first words exchanged between Antigone and Creon, since with them, everything is already spoken that sets the tragedy along its irreversible course. Antigone "does not claim to be innocent." No, her deed is her glory, paraded in front of Creon. In fact, the crime, the deed is so clear, so matter-of-fact, that it doesn't even need to be spoken:

CREON: You there, you that are bowing down your head towards the ground, do you admit, or do you deny, that you have done this?

ANTIGONE: I say that I did it and do not deny it.

CREON: (*to Guard*) You may take yourself to wherever you please, free from the heavy charge. (*Exit guard*) (*to Antigone*) But do you tell me, not at length, but briefly: did you know of the proclamation forbidding this?

ANTIGONE: I knew it; of course I knew it. It was known to all.

CREON: And yet you dared to transgress these laws?

ANTIGONE: Yes, for it was not Zeus who made this proclamation.<sup>25</sup>

This dialogue—yes, both "face to face" and "against each other" (*gegeneinander*)—provides not only the very first words directly exchanged between Antigone and Creon, but also the *beginning* of the same passage that Moretti's MDW analysis leads him to quote: "Yet," Moretti claims, "the operationalization of Hegel's theory of tragic collision has led us precisely to these lines."<sup>26</sup> Why? All one needs to know about *Antigone* in Hegel's interpretation (following the very parameters of "face-to-face" and "cultivated objectivity") is contained in the first words exchanged between them . . . in fact, in Antigone's first words to Creon: "I say that I did it." What is so striking in this passage (and what makes a MDW so fraught here) is the predominance of pronouns—Creon refers to "this" and Antigone repeatedly simply describes the deed as "it." That is, "it" is so clear it doesn't need to be articulated. From the very first words spoken face-to-face, it is all about pathos, which is not affect but ethics ("a firm and strong character"), about taking a solid, substantive, objective stand that does not argue for innocence.

The essence of tragedy for Hegel is clear enough, and in a way Moretti's first MDW list actually led him there: "The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification; while each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other. The consequence is that in its moral life, and because of it, each is nevertheless involved

in guilt.”<sup>27</sup> Dramatic poetry in the form of tragedy concerns the differentiation of ethical powers, their particularization into characters; they can only stand opposed (against one another), with each side appearing one-sided (the law of state vs. law of hearth), yet substantial and objective (since it is about principle, positions, not persons). In Hegel’s interpretation of *Antigone* there is only one significant question: “Did you do it?” And only one significant answer: “Yes.”

With Hegel’s two “equally justified power[s],” we return to the question: what does all this—Moretti, Hegel, operationalizing, and exemplary passages—mean for the status of the example and exemplary reading in the digital humanities? Expressed more precisely: what does it mean for Moretti as my example of a digital humanities scholar using examples, and for his attempt to “unify” his “two equally dear” interpretive methods?

When it comes to exemplary passages, one of the major driving forces of the computational humanities, particularly with the next wave of scholars such as Piper, Long, and So, is to create models that lead to new and unexpected exemplary passages, new ways of reading, because one is reading different things, that is, new examples. And as Long and So emphasize in “Literary Pattern Recognition,” machine learning can and should (when well designed) lead us to see things differently, because it can pose different questions to a different (much vaster) body of work, which—and this is essential—in turn necessitates closely reading these examples produced via machine learning in dialogue with those emerging from literary theory, requiring us to engage and to compare both set of examples—the quasicanonical and the machine-produced. This dimension of computational humanities or cultural analytics bears great potential, even for those who do not practice computation, because it produces new examples, exemplary passages that one needs to engage and interpret, that then have implications both for the analysis of other exemplary passages *and* the (quantitative) model that produced them in the first place. As Piper underscores, it needs to be a recursive relation.

As both the interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books* from 2016 and “Operationalizing” from 2013 underscore, Moretti is still struggling with bringing examples to bear on meta-analysis (and vice-versa). One issue with his operationalizing Sophocles is that he adjusts the parameters not because the example doesn’t fit the existing model (Hegel’s reading of *Antigone*), but because it fits it too well. Yes, we all want new examples, but the impetus and method need to be correct. What Moretti doesn’t do is to allow the result (“I was hoping . . .”) to lead him to question and reflect on the model itself. For example, to ask: is a MDW the best interpretive tool to explore the relation between *gegeneinander* and “cultivated objectivity” when, as one sees from Sophocles’ tragedy,

neither Antigone nor Creon in dialogue even need to mention by name the transgression in question? Mere pronouns suffice. And this isn't because the "moment of crisis is not a moment of truth" that results in a stichomythic rhythmic stuttering, but because the truth is nothing that is concealed, unknown, or needs to be clarified; it simply needs to be affirmed in dignified, composed speech. In Moretti's overdetermined scene of confronting close and distant reading—his proxy for this "challenge" in the form of Antigone and Creon, and its most canonical, influential reading—one senses the tragic structure he sees between the two interpretive methods has not been resolved or, to speak with Hegel, has not been sublated. They remain two "opposed sides," each of which, "if taken by itself, has justification" but only by "denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other." Perhaps it is time to move beyond this tragic structure, and this may mean we need to look to other examples in and of digital humanities. They are already there.

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#### NOTES

1 As exaggerated as this anecdote may sound, one only needs to recall that nothing less than the question of salvation (and countless wars and other atrocities) depends on deciding which Biblical passage is exemplary: "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (James 2:24): or, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28).

2 Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana-Champaign: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2013), 4, 7.

3 Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Model for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 4.

4 See Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), 165.

5 To be fair, Jockers insists on just this point in *Macroanalysis*, it just isn't a prominent part of this work itself. He too proposes a "blended approach": "It is exactly this sort of unification, of the macro and micro scales, that promises a new, enhanced, and better understanding of the literary record" (Jockers, *Macroanalysis*, 26).

6 Hoyt Long and Richard Jean So, "Literary Pattern Recognition: Modernism between Close Reading and Machine Learning," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 2 (2016): 236.

7 Andrew Piper, "Novel Devotions: Conversional Reading, Computational Modeling, and the Modern Novel," *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 69.

8 Piper, "Novel Devotions," 68–69.

9 See Chad Wellmon and Piper, "Publication, Power, and Patronage: On Inequality and Academic Publishing," forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*. Looking at four top journals in the humanities from 1969–2015, Wellmon and Piper find: "The top twenty percent of institutions account for 86% of the articles, while the top ten PhD-granting institutions, which represent less than 3% of all institutions in our data set, account for just over half (50.6%) of all articles published." Available online at:

[https://chadwellmon.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/wellmon\\_piper\\_academic\\_inequality\\_ci\\_2017.pdf](https://chadwellmon.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/wellmon_piper_academic_inequality_ci_2017.pdf).

10 Piper, "Think Small," forthcoming in *PMLA*. On the role of gender, publishing, and philosophy, see Kieran Healy, "Gender and Citation in Four General-Interest Philosophy Journals, 1993–2013," *KieranHealy.org*, February 25, 2015, <https://kieranhealy.org/blog/archives/2015/02/25/gender-and-citation-in-four-general-interest-philosophy-journals-1993-2013/>.

11 In the process of writing this essay, I learned that *PMLA* will be publishing a special section on Moretti authored predominantly by digital humanists foregrounding the issue of modeling in his computational work.

12 One of Erich Auerbach's examples of a point of departure would be to examine how a particular set of Dante verses is interpreted over several centuries, from the first commentaries into the sixteenth century, and then from Romanticism forward.

13 Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (Jan/Feb 2000): 58 (hereafter cited as C).

14 See Piper, "Novel Devotions," 67.

15 "The Digital in the Humanities: An Interview with Franco Moretti," by Melissa Dinsman, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 2, 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-digital-in-the-humanities-an-interview-with-franco-moretti/>. My emphasis.

16 In an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel* from June 6, 2016, Moretti himself underscores this strong sense of two cultures:

SPIEGEL: Wait a minute: . . . are you saying you don't feel understood?

MORETTI: I want to build a bridge between the new and the old, but neither of these two worlds seems interested.

SPIEGEL: What's the problem then?

MORETTI: The people from Digital Humanities scrunch up their noses, because I also want to talk about Viktor Shklovsky, Max Weber, and Karl Popper. And the colleagues who do close readings are of the opinion that I am betraying the discipline to the barbarians. Don't misunderstand me, I like what I do, but in a certain sense was never as isolated as I am today. There is something comic about it.

See Moretti, "Gute Programmierer wollen keinen Job an der Uni," interview by Anne Haeming, *Der Spiegel*, June 6, 2016 [<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/franco-moretti-als-ob-ich-die-literatur-an-barbaren-verrate-a-1096078.html>].

17 This essay appeared simultaneously in a slightly different form in *New Left Review*. I will quote from the Literary Lab *Pamphlet #6* that is readily available online. Moretti, "'Operationalizing': or, the function of measurement in modern literary theory," 1 (hereafter cited as O). <https://lilab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet6.pdf>.

18 I use the same edition as Moretti, the recent Harvard Loeb translation: Sophocles, *Antigone, Women of Trachus, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), line 320.

19 Cited in Moretti, "'Operationalizing,'" 10–11; G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2:1213. (Translation slightly modified.)

20 Piper, "Novel Devotions," 70.

21 See also Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1172–73 and 1214–15.

22 Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 508–13.

23 For example, "gegeneinander arbeiten" simply means "to work against one another," which certainly means to "actively" do so, and may be done "directly," but not necessarily "face-to-face." On the contrary, it is more likely to occur behind one another's back.

24 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1215, trans. modified, my emphasis.

25 Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 441–450.

26 I am still puzzled by this claim, since the lines Moretti cites from *Antigone* contain *none* of the most distinctive words (unless “death” = “dies”), as if their absence had to lead us here. It may lead us to lines “like these,” where no distinctive words occur . . . but then any lines where they don’t appear would be “precisely these lines” (which is pretty imprecise). I note that other than the word “laws,” none of the MDWs appear in the passage I cite, though it certainly contains the honor of the great character in being culpable.

27 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1196.