

## Literary Evolution: A Response to Franco Moretti

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The evolution of a narrative genre—its rise and decline, spreading and replacement—cannot be explained independently of extra-literary circumstances and conditions. So argues Franco Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*, his most sustained meditation to date on theoretical issues in literary historiography. Moretti's claim rests on detailed statistics for the British novel indicating that between 1740 and 1900 at least forty-four distinct generic variations—each lasting roughly a quarter century—emerged and disappeared in successive clusters of more or less half a dozen at a time. This periodic turnover of whole groups of novelistic genres suggests for Moretti a systematic external pressure on the literary field:

When one genre replaces another, it's reasonable to assume that the cause is internal to the two genres, and historically specific: amorous epistolary fiction being ill-equipped to capture the traumas of the revolutionary years, say—and gothic novels being particularly good at it. But when several genres disappear together from the literary field, and then another group, and so on, then the reason has to be different, because all these forms cannot have run *independently and simultaneously* into insoluble problems—it would be simply too much of a coincidence. The causal mechanism must thus be external to the genres, and *common* to all: like a sudden, total change of their ecosystem. (Moretti 20)

Looking for a systematic external pressure that would account for the widespread regularity and simultaneity of the generic turnover, Moretti hypothesizes that some kind of “generational mechanism” might be active. He quotes from Karl Mannheim's classic 1927 essay “The Problem of Generations” to the effect that “a rhythm in the sequence of generations” determines the coming and going of different genres.

Readers familiar with Moretti's work will recognize the punctuated, discontinuous, neo-Darwinian model of evolution that provides the analogical backbone for the hypothesis. In the programmatic essay “On Literary Evolution” in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, it allows him to sketch a picture of two hundred years of European literature oscillating between relatively long periods of stasis and short periods of proliferation and change. In *The Way of the World*, it helps explain how it was possible for the Bildungsroman, “to emerge victorious from that veritable ‘struggle for existence’ between various narrative genres that took place at the turn of the eighteenth century” (Moretti 10). What is new is the matching of extensive quantitative data about various novelistic genres, from ‘Picaresque’ to ‘Imperial gothic,’ with the neo-Darwinian paradigm. The result is stunning. His findings, though provisional (due to gaps in the database) will be a gold mine for further work in the field for years to come.

To say this, however, is not to assent to Moretti's "generational" hypothesis. It may be perfectly reasonable, capable, if not of neat and final confirmation or disconfirmation, at least of some testing against relevant aspects of British literary history, and against what we know about patterns of novelistic production, dissemination, and reception. But it must also be added that for the hypothesis to hold, it would have to be subjected, Popper-style, to a range of counter-considerations, none of which really get a look in. And as Moretti quite rightly concedes, his explanatory apparatus (however modified) cannot account for the significantly longer generic cycles of detective fiction and science fiction. The most serious riposte to the hypothesis, however, is that people are born—and generations begun—everyday. So what explains the 25-30 years cycle with which novelistic genres emerge and disappear? Moretti is not sure. As he worries out loud, "generation is itself a very questionable concept. Clearly, we must do better" (Moretti 22). In a modest fashion I want to take up Moretti's challenge and propose an alternative explanation of generic change: one that combines the geographer David Harvey's influential theory of "time-space compression" with the legacy of Mikhail Bakhtin. The point is not to furnish a comprehensive theory of literary change, nor even to provide a general approach to the problem. What I attempt is considerably more open ended and inconclusive. But I would like to believe that what follows is a necessary part of any larger and more ambitious venture.

In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope" Bakhtin has a highly suggestive thing to say about genre, which may be retained as a productive starting point (whatever consequences it was meant to have in his own arguments). This is the proposition that each genre possesses its own unique and specific sense of space and time; the premise is predicated on the assumption that space and time are not just neutral abstractions, but vary in quality over time, implying that genres from different historical periods imagine the relationship of space and time differently. It is a proposition we are generally inclined to take for granted when it comes to the difference between, say, the Greek epic and the nineteenth-century European novel, but the principle invites us to subtler differentiations for a whole range of distinct generic forms: between the Industrial novel and the Pastoral novel, for instance, or the Oriental tale and the Bildungsroman. Bakhtin, of course, never goes so far. But at the risk of doing violence to Bakhtin's theory, might it not be possible to read his proposition in relation to Harvey's theory of time-space compression?

In *The Condition of Postmodernity* Harvey argues that since Renaissance times, day-to-day experience in urban societies has been characterized by periodic mutations in time-space dimensionality. He captures these mutations, entailing the speeding up of all facets of social life, in the notion of "time-space compression." Although Harvey is careful not to overstate his case, he attributes these intense moments of mutation in our quotidian grasp of time and space to the mechanism of capitalism in its unceasing quest for new markets and new technological innovations (such as the railway, the telegraph and steam-shipping) that will reduce the turnover time of capital for reinvestment. He is therefore tempted to see our so-called postmodern times as a new installment in the "history of successive waves of time-space compression generated out of the pressures of capital accumulation with its perpetual search to annihilate space through time and reduce turnover time" (Harvey 306). For our purposes, what is important to bear in mind is that this process of time-space compression is not gradual or continuous in character. Rather, it occurs in discrete phases of short and concentrated bursts. The world at any particular moment is not the product of a smooth linear compression of time and space, but the result of a punctuated, discontinuous historical unfolding—not unlike the neo-

Darwinian model of change.

These periodic eruptions of time-space compression, Harvey argues, “so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves” (Harvey 240). I want to push this line of thinking a little further: if during periods of intense technological and economic change, conceptions of time and space undergo adjustment and alteration, is it not conceivable that prevailing generic conventions might become inadequate as spatio-temporal indicators, thereby opening an aesthetic vacuum to be filled by new genres? In other words, could not periodic moments of time-space compression constitute a crisis for active literary forms, providing a window of opportunity for *innovation*? Yes, if Moretti is right (as I think he is) about literature’s ideological function: to reduce social tensions created by historical transformations by integrating new experiences into meaningful symbolic horizons. As he explains in the introduction to *Modern Epic*: “[Literature] has a problem solving vocation: to make existence more comprehensible, and more acceptable. And, as we shall see, to make power relations more acceptable too—even their violence” (Moretti 6).

Obviously, I do not believe long-term socio-economic trends to be the only factor driving literary change; still less that literary historiography should be reduced to this dimension. Many other variables—technical, psychological, generational—have a significant role to play. But my wager here is that, amongst a range of explanatory possibilities, Harvey’s notion of time-space compression is particularly suited to explaining sudden, radical developments in generic form. Harvey himself suggests that a text such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, wherein several simultaneous events are sometimes recounted from a variety of spatial perspectives, should be understood as attempting to capture the experience of time-space compression under modernity. Along similar lines, but more generally, I want to suggest that whole sets of textual conventions, those very conventions that loosely bind a network of individual works into a particular genre, emerge precisely at such moments of time-space compression.

I will try now to verify this still quite abstract hypothesis by putting it to work in a concrete instance. My own bailiwick is modern Japanese literature, so I will stick to it, focusing on a literary-historical development that has previously attracted both Western and Japanese critics’ attentions: the inward turn of Japanese narrative fiction in the late Meiji and Taisho periods. This development is usually explained in quasi-psychological terms. Critics like to say that the move inward, the constriction of the proper field of narrative fiction to matters of the self, represented a defensive maneuver at a time when urbanization and industrialization was producing a pervasive sense of uncertainty and anxiety. By withdrawing from the fluidity of the external, social realm into the safety of an internal, domestic sphere, so the argument goes, writers were able to define the proper boundaries of literary practice against the threat posed by the accelerated mechanization of modern life.

Couched in these general terms, it is hard to disagree with the explanation. But critics tend also to link the turn inward with some indigenous literary tradition presumably reaching back hundreds of years. So, for instance, the critic Uno Kōji wrote that the so-called “Watakushi Shōsetsu” or I-novel, the most prominent generic manifestation of the inward turn, “undoubtedly belongs to the bloodline of Matsuo Bashō” (Tanaka 424). And Paul Anderer, who has considered the problem most fully in English, has argued that since the *Tale of Genji*, if

not earlier, Japanese fiction has figured place in familiar terms, and that this proclivity explains the failure of many late-Meiji and Taisho prose narratives to directly engage with the new urban landscape that characterized Tokyo in the grips of accelerated modernization. Influenced perhaps by Isoda Kōichi, who has argued that most Japanese writers responded to modernization in fact by recreating Tokyo in their fiction as a village, Anderer observes: "This city, whose population doubled between 1895 and 1923, and whose topography, architecture, and transportation systems underwent change... has functioned in literature as a largely alien and intrusive presence, and lies as far beyond the borders of Japanese fiction as a foreign country" (Sharpe 227). Anderer's description of the retreat and withdrawal of modern Japanese fiction from the challenge of engaging with the rapidly urbanizing Tokyo landscape is no doubt right. It resonates with the orthodox assessment directed at Japanese "naturalists," which has it that they could not feel comfortable in urban life. But Anderer's hypothesis about it, centering on what he alleges is a "conditioned literary reflex" that reaches back 1000 years to the *Tale of Genji* is highly problematic, uncritically appealing as it does to some such tendency inherent in Japanese culture to figure place in familiar terms as the final frame of reference.

The terms of the argument alter, however, if we posit the move inward was in part fueled by a qualitative shift in the experience of time and space in early twentieth century urban Japan. The I-novel and the more general inward turn then appear as aesthetic solutions to objective problems. A more interesting picture emerges, one that allows us to sense, if we will, the pull of history and the genres it generates.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tokyo was among the fastest growing cities in the world, due to a massive influx of working class migrants flooding in from the countryside in search of work. From just under two million inhabitants at the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, the city swelled to approximately 3 million the year Emperor Meiji died, outstripping London, Paris and New York in the rate of population growth. As Hiromichi Ishizuka and Yorifusa Ishida point out, by 1907, one in two citizens of Tokyo was not "native born." With the weekly influx of hundreds of newcomers, the breakdown of old neighborhoods and turnover of residents in newer ones, and the widening physical separation of home and workplace, a great crowd traversed the city more frequently and for longer distances than ever before.

The physical consequence of such explosive demographic growth was new neighborhoods on the city outskirts, enormous increases in density within the city limits, and since 1903 when the first rails were laid, rapid expansion of the city along the electric streetcar lines. At least as impressive was the establishment of urban commodity culture, highlighted by the opening of the city's first department store, Mitsukoshi, in 1904, followed by the increasing bustle and prosperity of modern shopping streets such as Ginza. New forms of pastime and entertainment, on a scale unparalleled in the earlier experience of the city, captured the imagination of city dwellers: Hibiya Park opened in 1903 as the city's first Western-style park; Electricity Hall opened in the same year as the city's first permanent motion picture theater, with the numbers multiplying in the years to come; in 1907 the nation's first gramophone company was established, with domestic production and sales starting in 1910, followed by unprecedented hits of popular song recordings such as "Kachusha no uta" in 1914 and "Gondora no uta" in 1915.

In his pioneering 1908 tome on urban reform, *Toshi no kenkyū*, the social critic Miyake Iwao attempted to

convey the changes Tokyo was undergoing at the time by trying to imagine what it would have been like for someone like the historical poet Rai Sanyō to experience first hand a busy street corner of Ginza:

Suppose he were alive today, what would it have been like for Rai Sanyō to stand on the corner of a Ginza street for five minutes? He would have perhaps fainted on the spot from the brain shattering sounds of trains and carts passing haphazardly by, motor cars flying among them. One may say such things are the result of the progress of civilization, but at what cost, when our minds are overstrained to such a degree? If the person drawn to the vanity of city life were to think sensibly, he would surely concur with Sanyō and wish for the country life instead. (Miyake 22, my translation)

Clearly, the late-Meiji and Taisho periods were a heady time to be alive in Tokyo. Life was changing fast, and new and unimagined possibilities seemed to be opening up. Yet—it is a striking fact—very little of this urban upheaval was analyzed, much of it scarcely even registered, by contemporary Japanese writers, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of them lived in or near Tokyo at the time. The so-called Romantics like Kunikida Doppo derived their artistic inspiration from rural scenes and man's relations with nature; the Naturalists, such as Tayama Katai and the later Shimazaki Tōson among others, focused their attention on the depiction of daily realities within the personal and familial environment; even the Tanbi writers like the early Tanizaki Junichirō and Nagai Kafū and the Shirakaba writers including Shiga Naoya and Arishima Takeo—both groups of writers all born and living in Tokyo—never paid much attention to the dynamic growth and change the city was undergoing at the time.

In a series of influential texts on postmodernism Fredric Jameson has outlined the need for a new 'cognitive mapping of postmodernist urban space. Jameson argues that we are "in the presence of something like a mutation in built space" which we are unable to comprehend completely. This is because "we do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace." Our sensual understanding of the built environment of the postmodern city is still lodged in the world of modernism: "our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism" (Jameson 38-9). In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode speaks of a "tension between paradigmatic form and contingent reality" — to describe something commensurable: the difficulty of reconciling ideal literary paradigms with practical realities. I want to suggest that Japanese writers at the turn of the century faced just such a dilemma: the struggle to find an appropriate form and language in which to chronicle or narrate the ceaseless flux of modern metropolitan life; to uncover a way to decipher the new experiences of space and time. But because metropolitan modernity could no longer be contained in older, more traditional narrative forms, Japanese writers lost faith in literature's capacity to grasp reality and consciously retreated into a form of introspection, *inadvertently*—if I may put it like this—creating a new genre in the process, the deeply psychological, highly domestic I-novel. To put it another way, the inward-turn of late-Meiji and Taishō literature was not the result of some kind of innovatory moment, but the unintended consequence of a generation of Japanese writers' failure to imagine an appropriate literary form and language for capturing the profound reorganization of time and space occurring in Japan at the time—an inability which, more by accident than by design, produced new literary conventions and a new literary genre of introspection.

But if I may sound, very briefly, a theoretical note: doesn't our knowledge of the I-novel thrive on a kind of

blindness to the presence within modern Japanese prose of the very devices and features that are supposed to make the I-novel what it is? For what we regard, not always approvingly, as the key attributes of this most “Japanese” of genres—the confessional tone, the introspective focus, the domestic subject matter—are not, in actual fact, difficult to detect elsewhere in late-Meiji and Taishō literature. That, of course, raises the question of whether the I-novel makes sense any longer as a descriptive and normative concept. I don’t know. I want to try to remain an agnostic on that question. All I want to offer here is an explanation that goes some way towards accounting for some kind of emergent tendency—some shift in narrative logic and orientation—that was not confined to the I-novel alone, but manifest throughout Japanese fiction, even among so-called “anti-I-novels” such as Tanizaki Junichirō’s *Chijin no ai* and Nagai Kafū’s *Bokutō kidan*. And I assume that this shift had to do with a turning away from the hustle and bustle of the outside world, that is to say, a turning inward.

To demonstrate what I mean, let me turn to a brief analysis of a novel that has hitherto never been associated with the I-novel genre, Natsume Sōseki’s *Sanshiro* (1908), published a year after Tayama Katai’s *Futon*, considered by many to be the founding text of the I-novel tradition. The second chapter of this classic coming-of-age tale opens with a well-known passage describing the title character’s initial impressions of Tokyo, circa 1908:

Tokyo was full of things that startled Sanshiro. First, the ringing of the streetcar bells startled him, and then the crowds that got on and off between rings. Next to startle him was Marunouchi, the busy commercial center of the city. What startled him most of all was Tokyo itself, for no matter how far he went, it never ended. (Sōseki 17)

Sōseki, like no other writer of his day—not Ōgai, not Kafū—captures in *Sanshiro*’s impressions the physical thrill of modern Tokyo, the boundless energy and impatience expressed in its dynamic landscape. Through the enumeration of the multifarious sounds and scenes of the city, Sōseki articulates a vision of Tokyo as a city splitting at the seams with new people, new technologies, and new experiences. At once, however, we are pulled up short, and reminded that all this modernization comes at extreme social and environmental costs:

Everywhere he walked there were piles of lumber, heaps of rock, new homes set back from the street, old warehouses rotting in front of them. Everything looked as though it were being destroyed, and at the same time everything looked as though it were under construction. (Sōseki 17)

Tokyo is in a process of flux, subject to the constant rebuilding of its material spaces; this flux produces the characteristically modern urban experience of disorientation:

To *Sanshiro*, all this movement was horrible. His shock was identical in quality and degree to that of the most ordinary country boy who stands in the midst of the capital for the first time. His education could no more soften the blow than might some store-bought remedy. He felt a large chunk of self-confidence simply disappear, and it made him miserable. (Sōseki 17)

*Sanshiro* is very much the type described by Georg Simmel in his 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” Newly arrived in the city from the countryside, where “the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly,” he is the archetypal greenhorn, especially susceptible to “the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” (Simmel 175).

What were the personal consequences of engagement with the metropolitan setting? According to Simmel, as

their senses are bombarded, individuals resort to stratagems of inward retreat and social distance. And indeed Sanshiro does turn away from the metropolitan setting, turning increasingly introspective during the course of the novel. As John Lewell observes, “*Sanshiro* is Sōseki’s first complete analysis of an introverted personality” (Lewell 292). What I find fascinating is that it is only in the second chapter (discussed above) that we get a view of central Tokyo. The rest of the novel takes place in the outlying ward of Hongo, where Sanshiro lives in a boardinghouse and attends the Imperial University. In descriptions of the University campus, Sōseki rarely fails to use the word *mori*, which means “grove, forest,” or—because of the close connection of shrines with trees—“a grove where a shrine is located.” It is as if Sōseki the writer also wishes to avoid the metropolitan setting. In fact, many critics have described Sōseki’s next novel, *Sorekara*, which shows many of the characteristic of his later works, as his first psychological novel. Edwin McClellan has gone so far as to criticize it for “its brooding, introspective quality” (McClellan 34).

What I am trying to suggest is that the turn inward associated with the I-novel was not limited to the I-novel alone, but apparent across the entire spectrum of Japanese literature at this crucial historical juncture. Instead of struggling to discover a new literary form and language to capture the fluxus of the new cityscape, most Japanese writers of the late-Meiji and Taishō periods were content to simply avoid the ceaselessly reshaping capital. By deploying plots based on themes such as travel, nostalgia, or domesticity, these writers found ways to skirt, forget or simply shut out the seemingly intangible and indescribable realities of the fast transforming city. Of course, literature that circumvents the urban is certainly not particular to the late-Meiji and Taishō periods, with antecedents going as far back as, say, the hermit literature of Kamo-no-Chōmei or the travel literature of Bashō; but that the anti-urban theme should be taken up so fervently by contemporary writers speaks, I think, to the severe difficulties these new writers faced in engaging with the tumultuous changes taking place in Tokyo, changes resulting from what I have been referring to as time-space compression.

I have chosen to test my hypothesis against the inward turn of modern Japanese literature not because I regard it as providing an ideal type of literary-historical development in general, but because I believe it raises analytical issues of wide import and because I know enough about the context in which it took place to be confident of my empirical and theoretical judgments about it. It goes without saying that a different example might lead to a significantly different theorization. This brief essay should not be regarded as a definitive statement of my hypothesis, but an invitation to comparison, elaboration, and critique.

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