

# Graphs, maps, trees

A man who wants the truth becomes a scientist; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?

Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*

The title of this short book deserves a few words of explanation. To begin with, this is an essay on literary history: literature, the old territory (more or less), unlike the drift towards other discourses so typical of recent years. But within that old territory, a new object of study: instead of concrete, individual works, a trio of artificial constructs—graphs, maps, and trees—in which the reality of the text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction. ‘Distant reading’, I have once called this type of approach;<sup>1</sup> where distance is however not an obstacle, but a specific form of knowledge: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Forms. Models.

From texts to models, then; and models drawn from three disciplines with which literary studies have had little or no interaction: graphs

<sup>1</sup> ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review* 1, Jan–Feb 2000.

from quantitative history, maps from geography, and trees from evolutionary theory. The distant reason for these choices lies in my Marxist formation, which was profoundly influenced by Galvano DellaVolpe, and entailed therefore (in principle, if not always in practice) a great respect for the scientific spirit. And so, while recent literary theory was turning for inspiration towards French and German metaphysics, I kept thinking that there was actually much more to be learned from the natural and the social sciences. This book is a result of that conviction, and also, in its small way, an attempt to open a new front of discussion.

Finally, these three models are indeed, as the subtitle intimates, abstract. But their consequences are on the other hand extremely concrete: graphs, maps, and trees place the literary field literally in front of our eyes—and show us how little we still know about it. It is a double lesson, of humility and euphoria at the same time: humility for what literary history has accomplished so far (not enough), and euphoria for what still remains to be done (a lot). Here, the methodology of the book reveals its pragmatic ambition: for me, abstraction is not an end in itself, but a way to widen the domain of the literary historian, and enrich its internal problematic. How this may be done, is what I will try to explain.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This book was first imagined at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, and presented in an early version as the Beckman Lectures at Berkeley, and then elsewhere. My thanks to the many people who have helped me to clarify my ideas, and to Matt Jockers, who patiently taught me how to improve the book’s visual side.