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The Slaughterhouse of Literature

Franco Moretti

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Figures

The Slaughter

Let me begin with a few titles: *Arabian Tales*, *Aylmers*, *Annaline*, *Alicia de Lacey*, *Albigenses*, *Augustus and Adelina*, *Albert*, *Adventures of a Guinea*, *Abbess of Valiera*, *Ariel*, *Almacks*, *Adventures of Seven Shillings*, *Abbess*, *Arlington*, *Adelaide*, *Aretas*, *Abdallah the Moor*, *Anne Grey*, *Andrew the Savoyard*, *Agatha*, *Agnes de Monsfoldt*, *Anastasius*, *Anzoletto Ladoski*, *Arabian Nights*, *Adventures of a French Sarjeant*, *Adventures of Bamfylde Moore Carew*, *A Commissioner*, *Avondale Priory*, *Abduction*, *Accusing Spirit*, *Arward the Red Chieftain*, *Agnes de Courcy*, *An Old Friend*, *Annals of the Parish*, *Alice Grey*, *Astrologer*, *An Old Family Legend*, *Anna*, *Banditt's Bride*, *Bridal of Donnamore*, *Borderers*, *Beggar Girl* . . .

It was the first page of an 1845 catalog: Columbello's circulating library, in Derby: a small collection, of the kind that wanted only successful books. But today, only a couple of titles still ring familiar. The others, nothing. Gone. The history of the world is the slaughterhouse of the world, reads a famous Hegelian aphorism; and of literature. The majority of books disappear forever--and "majority" actually misses the point: 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 percent of all published novels.

And the other 99.5 percent? This is the question behind this article, and behind the larger idea of literary history that is now taking shape in the work of several critics--most recently Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau, Katie Trumpener, and Margaret Cohen. The difference is that, for me, the aim is not so much a change in the canon--the discovery of precursors to the canon or alternatives to it, to be restored to a **[End Page 207]** prominent position--as a change in how we look at *all* of literary history: canonical and noncanonical: together.¹ To do so, I focus on what I call *rivals*: contemporaries who write more or less like canonical authors (in my case, more or less like Arthur Conan Doyle), but not quite, and who interest me because, from what I have seen of that forgotten 99 percent, they seem to be the largest contingent of the "great unread," as Cohen calls it. And that's really my hope, as I have said: to come up with a new sense of the literary field as a whole.²

But of course, there is a problem here. Knowing two hundred novels is already difficult. *Twenty thousand*? How can we do it, what does "knowledge" mean, in this new scenario? One thing for sure: it cannot mean the very close reading of very few texts--secularized theology, really ("canon!")--that has radiated from the cheerful town of New Haven over the whole field of literary studies. A larger literary history requires other skills: sampling; statistics; work with series, titles, concordances **[End Page 208]**, incipits--and perhaps also the "trees" that I discuss in this essay. But first, a brief premise.

The School and the Market

The slaughter of literature. And the butchers--readers: who read novel A (but not B, C, D, E, F, G, H, . . .) and so keep A "alive" into the next generation, when other readers may keep it alive into the following one, and so on until eventually A becomes canonized. Readers, not professors, make canons: academic decisions are mere echoes of a process that unfolds fundamentally outside the school: reluctant rubber-stamping, not much more. Conan Doyle is a perfect case in point: *socially* supercanonical right away, but *academically* canonical only a hundred years later. And the same happened to Cervantes, Defoe, Austen, Balzac, Tolstoy. . .³

A space outside the school, where the canon is selected: the market. Readers read A and so keep it alive; better, they *buy* A, inducing its publishers to keep it in print until another generation shows up, and **[End Page 209]** so on. A concrete example can be found in James Raven's excellent study of British publishing between 1750 and 1770: if one looks at...

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