

The background of the cover is a painting. On the left, a large, glowing orange face with red eyes and a beard is superimposed over a dark, atmospheric scene. In the foreground, a figure in a dark, hooded cloak stands with their back to the viewer, looking towards the right. To the left of the figure, there is a desk with several books and a quill pen. The overall mood is mysterious and scholarly.

EDITED BY
**SIMON RICHTER AND
RICHARD BLOCK**

GOETHE'S GHOSTS

READING AND THE PERSISTENCE OF LITERATURE

A white rectangular label is positioned at the bottom center of the cover, below the subtitle.

Goethe's Ghosts

Reading and the Persistence of Literature

Edited by
Simon Richter and Richard Block



CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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Introduction—Ghosts and the Machine: Reading with Jane Brown

Richard Block and Simon Richter

Perhaps it isn't so foolish to wonder what the old men—Faust and his creator—thought about ghosts and those who see them.

—“Faust and the Gothic Novel,” 68

My goal is that the ghosts be recognized and their insubstantiality welcomed into our discourse rather than left to haunt its margins.

—*The Persistence of Allegory*, 241

APARTMENT 50 IN BOLSHAYA SADOVAYA ulitsa 302-bis in the Moscow of Mikhael Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* is known as the evil apartment. Behind its inconspicuous door the most incongruous and untoward events occur. On Walpurgis Night, the newly rejuvenated Margarita obliges the request of Woland, a mid-twentieth-century version of Goethe's Mephisto who appears to have strayed into Soviet-era Moscow, and agrees to serve as hostess to the ghostly souls who rise from hell for the festive occasion. The confines of the apartment prove elastic, easily expanding to absorb hundreds and thousands of guests and presenting them with an elegance unknown to Muscovites. Clad only with a necklace bearing the image of a black poodle, Margarita greets them all with easy grace. Among them is Frida, a young woman haunted by the daily appearance of a checkered table cloth like the one with which she suffocated her newborn infant, the result of a rape. The discrepancy between her plight and that of Goethe's Gretchen makes the allusion all the more pointed and poignant. When, at the end of the long evening, Woland wishes to reward Margarita for her services, she selflessly asks that Frida be released from her torment. Woland wonders how Mercy stole under the door and into the apartment in a manner that, for readers of the second part of Goethe's *Faust*, strangely recalls the intrusion of Care into Faust's home in act 5. Her wish is granted, as is her fervent unspoken wish to be rejoined with the Master, her broken and timid lover, author of an unfinished novel about the last days of Christ. We could say that the Master is haunted by many things, among them his failure to measure up

to Faust, his would-be model, whose name Bulgakov initially intended for his hero, only to put it under erasure.

If literature, to paraphrase the Gospel of John 14:2, is a house with many mansions, then the apartment on Bolshaya Sadovaya is certainly one of them. We begin this introduction to a volume of essays on *Goethe's Ghosts: Reading and the Persistence of Literature* with reference to this scene from Bulgakov's novel because it seems to us to instantiate perfectly the kind of response to literature that we are eager to explore and that we find exemplified in the career of one of America's most accomplished Goethe scholars, Jane Brown. As the author of five monographs on Goethe—two of them devoted to *Faust*—as well as the substantial and frequently consulted entry for *Faust* in the online *Literary Encyclopedia*, Brown has done more than any other scholar to introduce modern readers to the ghosts that haunt Goethe's literary house.¹ In this sense she is the picture of hermeneutic grace. But more than this, her service in the name of Goethe has allowed her to articulate a powerful conception of literature and literary interpretation that exceeds the confines of our working definitions. She has worked tirelessly to remind us of the immensity of literature's house, calling to mind authors, plots, and conventions that gave structure to the house for centuries before fading in the face of the apparent triumph of modern literature. If we briefly suspend our unreflected convictions about the superiority of our modern modes of literature—not the brilliance of individual works, but the limited set of models for creating meaning—we might concede, for the sake of the argument, that the difference between the streets of Moscow in the 1930s and the grand realm of Woland's apartment is not unlike that between our conventional ways of thinking about literature and the perspectives opened by Jane Brown's work. Even if cultural studies, queer theory, and feminism have multiplied the subjects and objects of our study, they have often done so at the expense of literature as literature by the rightful urgency of their claim, failing to realize, as we all tend to do, that within the commodiousness of the house of literature as Brown conceives it, there is not only ample room for such concerns, but we can find entire and largely forgotten regions of nonnormative representations and subject positions. It is in those regions that Brown tends to the ghosts that persist in haunting literature's house.

Goethe was not spooked by ghosts. Indeed, he relished and welcomed their company. Think of the many ghosts that inhabit his works: the ghosts in *Clavigo*, in the ghost stories of the *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten*, the ghosts of antiquity and his own father in the *Italienische Reise*, the "ghost" of Wilhelm Meister's father in the company's production of *Hamlet*, and the many ghosts in *Faust*. In fact, the first words of *Faust* in the dedicatory poem amount to a welcoming gesture that is cognate with Brown's approach:

Ihr naht euch wieder, schwankende Gestalten
 [. . .]
 Ihr drängt euch zu! nun gut, so mögt ihr walten,
 Wie ihr aus Dunst und Nebel um mich steigt
 (1–6)

(Once more you hover close, elusive shapes
 [. . .]
 Nearer yet you crowd! So be it! Do your will
 as forth from mist and fog you rise about me²)

Through their insistent self-imposition upon the poet's consciousness, a signature effect is achieved:

Was ich besitze, seh' ich wie im Weiten,
 Und was verschwand, wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten
 (31–32)

[What I possess seems something far away
 and what had disappeared proves real]

The foreground of the present recedes into the distance. In its stead, the disappeared past not only intrudes but attains a more intense reality. And how, might we ask, is this process accomplished? Brown's gloss on the dedicatory poem provides both the answer as well as an example of the manner in which she summons the ghosts of literature.

In its form "Dedication" reveals its implicit concern with the nonillusionist drama. It is written in *ottava rima*, a highly formal stanza that Goethe otherwise used for allegorical poetry. Thus the choice immediately suggests that here, too, allegory will prevail over realism. More important, *ottava rima* is the meter of Renaissance epic; except in seventeenth-century Spain, where various epic meters were consistently used in the drama, and in German romantic imitations of Spanish drama, it is not a dramatic meter. Thus the meter immediately locates the play in the nonillusionist tradition. (*Goethe's "Faust"* 40)

In other words, literary ghosts from the past (the Renaissance, seventeenth-century Spain) make themselves known through formal means (*ottava rima*) and through eschewing dramatic illusion (realism) and opting for an apparently obsolete mode (allegory), and thus achieve a status of heightened reality. If this is close reading (and it is), it is a closeness that depends on a persistent relation to historical distance and the ability of literary ghosts through their haunting ways to convey meanings and forms of meanings long past.

Brown's readings of Goethe (and Shakespeare, Calderón, and Vondel, on one side of Goethe, and Droste-Hülshoff, Wagner, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Hofmannsthal, on the other) always involve a tandem relation between formal and historical concerns. All of Brown's scholarship turns on a few major insights, which, taken together, make up an alternative model of literature for our time. According to Brown, the crucial moment in literary history is the sixteenth century, when "Aristotle was assimilated into the Latin grammatical tradition" (*Persistence* 1). Aristotle's *Poetics* provided a new vocabulary and a new model for conceiving drama (and by extension narrative), although dramatic practice at the time was beholden to older conventions linked with religious belief. The result was a protracted Europe-wide period of some three hundred years during which two rival dramatic theories and practices not only coexisted, but also struck a variety of accommodations. As Brown writes: "During this period the apparently competing forms actually enriched one another" (*Persistence* 2). Let's call the "competing forms" by name. Brown identifies the new model variously but consistently as "Aristotelian," "mimetic," "illusionist," "neoclassical," and "realist." What she means by this cluster of names is those models of drama that operate within the comparatively narrow parameters of Aristotle's terms (mimesis, character, plot, etc.) as they were appropriated in the sixteenth century and unpacked and reshuffled over time. Thus "Aristotelianism" encompasses both strong mimetic impulses (linked with the representation of historical reality) and highly formalist or structuralist concerns (for example, the formalism of the neo-Aristotelian Chicago School in the mid-twentieth century). As for the older model of drama, Brown refers to it with several opposite terms ("non-Aristotelian," "nonillusionist"), though "allegory" and "allegorical" are by far the most important. The allegorical mode allows its practitioners a great deal more representational latitude (including the invisible, the abstract, and the forbidden) by virtue of its capacity to represent something through something else.³ By the same token, allegorical drama is not invested in the production of illusion; instead, it revels in an abundance of formal conventions that acknowledge their artificiality *in allegorical terms*: *All the world's a stage*, the trope of the *theatrum mundi*. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, a number of new—that is, "modern" allegorical forms (masque and opera)—emerged (defying the putative superiority of "modern" mimetic drama), and a number of master allegorists operated within the tensions among these modes (Shakespeare, Calderón, Vondel). For all of allegory's resilience over three centuries, in the long run mimetism prevailed. It was Goethe who, at the end of the process, according to Brown, "recognized the cultural wealth about to be lost and mounted an effort to recover the older tradition" (*Persistence* 2). *Faust*, she writes, is "a summa: the entire evolution of the European stage is there for all to

see" (*Persistence* 215).⁴ Goethe, she goes on to say, was "the last great allegorical dramatist of the European tradition. His synthesis of allegory and mimesis, opera and Greek tragedy did not survive his own death" (*Persistence* 221).

Given this articulation of the sense of profound loss at an evaporating, dissolving, or fragmenting world coincident with Goethe's death, one can easily imagine that some form of melancholy might figure here. And since Brown privileges the concept of allegory, one may suspect that Walter Benjamin must be close at hand. Brown does acknowledge Benjamin and Benjaminian readings of allegory in Goethe (e.g., Heinz Schlaffer⁵ and Jochen Hörisch⁶) and recognizes the contributions they make as historically situated readers. For Benjamin, she argues, "Baroque allegory incorporates within itself the abyss that tragically prevents the identity of signifier and signified required by allegory. It is a problematic description of Baroque dramatic allegory, but accurate about the problem of allegory in his [Benjamin's] contemporaries. With this shift dramatic allegory is now mourning in Benjamin's sense: it can only mark its incapacity to mean" (*Persistence* 237). Relative to the allegorical projects of the Baroque and Goethe, the anxiety inherent in Benjamin's concept of allegory seems exaggerated (*Persistence* 151) and limiting, precisely because Benjamin fails to take into account "the broader context of drama and Aristotelianism" that Brown's book *The Persistence of Allegory* provides. By the same token, Brown makes short shrift of Erich Heller's judgment that "Goethe avoided tragedy."⁷ It is, writes Brown, "more accurate to acknowledge that he [Goethe] is rooted in a dramatic tradition much broader than tragedy" (*Persistence* 179). In responding to Heller and Benjamin, Brown explicitly refers each to those vast regions of the house of literature that escape their ken, and implicitly refers to Goethe's ease with the ghosts of forgotten rooms and chambers.

In contrast to the melancholy familiar to us from Benjamin's reading of Dürer's engraving, Brown shows us a Goethe whose relation to earlier literature is marked by allusiveness, satire, parody, clowning, theft, and what she, most importantly, calls playfulness. In other words, all meaning is created and conveyed through a kind of artful orchestration of prior language, texts, plots, forms, and genres, such that the slightest quiver summons apparitions from some distant region of literature's house. In her reading of the second act of *Faust II*, for example, she identifies a parody of the parody in Aristophanes's *The Frogs*. Parody, she argues, is "in a sense, the highest form of art for Goethe" (*Goethe's "Faust"* 177). And parody operates on the basis of allusions that "no longer simply identify or generate positions on particular themes or issues, nor do they simply place the play in contexts or traditions; now we see that allusiveness per se is the defining quality of art for Goethe" (177). In her reading of act 3, the famous "Helena" act, Goethe's text achieves a self-awareness of

the poet's relation to antiquity and tradition by enacting that very relation: Euphorion and Lynceus are lined up with Hermes as clown, rogue, and thief (*Goethe's "Faust"* 208). "All poets are thieves who exploit their predecessors. Goethe reveals that he himself is a thief in modeling the birth of Euphorion on that of Hermes. This is yet another perspective on the allusiveness of *Faust*" (209). Brown goes on to identify a vast array of thefts and allusive thefts in *Faust*, all driven by desire for and resulting in some apprehension of beauty, and comes to the conclusion that "the poet as thief, therefore, embodies a kind of theodicy, for he reinterprets violence and theft as manifestations of the creative principle in the world" (209). The subjectivity of the poet stands in relation to the world. But, as Brown notes in her conclusion, art "by its nature does not deal directly with the world" (*Goethe's "Faust"* 257). Where the poet lives is in the vast house of literary tradition. "The object of *Faust's* allegory is no longer the cosmos, but its representation in art, which can be achieved only through the combination of extreme irony and extreme formal virtuosity" (*Persistence* 215). This is Brown's considered opinion. Or, as she put it thirty years earlier: "The play has not and never will change the world: it can only make us understand it 'playfully'" (*Goethe's "Faust"* 241).

The ghosts Brown encounters in Goethe's texts and in the literary traditions he alludes to are, in the first instance, literally ghosts. In *Persistence of Allegory*, she writes brilliantly about ghosts in Seneca, Caesar's ghost in Shakespeare, ghosts in Goethe's *Clavigo*, in Ibsen and Strindberg, noting a tendency toward interiority and psychologization as allegory gives way to mimesis from Goethe on. In a telling aperçu, Brown notes that "perhaps the only thing Shakespeare and Aristotle obviously had in common [. . .], besides stature, was that *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* shared responsibility for the great popularity of paternal ghosts" (*Persistence* 182). The point, however, is that all of these ghosts function as allegorical figures for a relation to a past (recent or distant) that depends on the efficacy of the ghosts' haunting, which is to say, the reader's *susceptibility* to the ghost's haunting. As Brown's remarkably swift and deft analyses of passages, plots, and plays indicate, she is, as a reader, so calibrated with an uncommon erudition in early modern and ancient literature as to register the most subtle ectoplasmic shifts in roaming the house of literature. If she is right that "allusiveness is the defining quality of art," we are confronted by two related and impossible demands: first, the literary equivalent of a moral imperative (namely, at the very least, to be aware of "the ways in which we read, and the grounds on which we reject, a great many other works in our tradition" [*Goethe's "Faust"* 251]); and second, our limited resources for fathoming the sheer immensity of the house of literature. If Brown's erudition recalls that of past master readers (among them her own distinguished mentor Stuart Atkins), we have the distinct sense that the traditions of scholarship that enabled these remarkable readers are fading and

becoming unfeasible. At the same time, we more and more live with the paradoxical sense of increasing access through technological means and foreshortened perspective because of the economic and cultural urgencies of our time. The ratio of house to home, of Google books to the paltry bookshelves of our minds, may cause us to despair. Literature is at once sublime (in Kant's mathematical sense) and far too familiar. Are Goethe's ghosts and the ghosts of literature in general doomed to disappear? And if they do, what remains of literature?

The situation we have described may sound familiar. In the latter part of the 1990s, Stanford literary sociologist Franco Moretti provoked humanities scholars by confronting them with the basic conundrum of the profession—how inevitably parochial we all are relative to the vast storehouse of world literature—and by proposing a new approach in stark contrast to the model of close reading that had served us well and ill. “What we really need,” wrote Moretti, “is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them. Distant reading: where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something.”⁸ Let us be clear about what Moretti is saying. The house of literature is being digitized. Its dimensions are staggering and incommensurate with our human abilities, even if one pretends to specialize. But thanks to digitization, vast regions can be surveyed and analyzed by remotely controlled probes, as it were. The process of distant reading not only attenuates the participation of the reader's subjective consciousness in interacting with textual material, it makes a gesture in the direction of an abandonment of subjectivity in the hopes of receiving in return a defamiliarized and objective experience of the house of literature. While we will almost certainly learn a great deal about the architecture of the house of literatures, the question is whether what we are inclined to call the machine of distant reading will be able to register the presence of ghosts.

For all their differences, the historically and formalistically informed close reading of Jane Brown and the distant reading of a new generation of IT-savvy literary scholars have something in common. Such commonality is immediately apparent upon reading the first sentence of Moretti's “Conjectures on World Literature,” a quote he takes from Goethe: “Nowadays, national literature doesn't mean much: the age of world literature is beginning, and everybody should contribute to hasten its advent” (54).⁹ The scope of Brown's work, her willingness to work outside the German canon and explore massive waves of thought and cultural production that sweep across the continent and time, clearly align

her work with such an undertaking. To be sure, Moretti is also responding to developments of the last decades during which literary studies have acknowledged a need to look beyond the Western canon (so often the primary focus of Brown's work) to consider literature as "a planetary system." For Brown, such a planetary system is limited in practical terms to the historical formations that shaped European thought from antiquity to the almost present. There is however nothing in the entirety of her work that countervails expanding the canon or encountering additional rooms in the house of literature. After all, Goethe's theater of the world, as she calls it, welcomes interventions from fields seemingly distant from the narrow confines of a national literature. Brown is also aware of Goethe's interest in novels from the Orient. Without such considerations, she could hardly declare the planetary reach of Goethe's theater. The house of literature would indeed be confined.

If we consider another similarity, productive and critical differences emerge beyond that of the robotic versus the sensitive reader. Both Brown and Moretti share a confidence, from up close and afar, that literary production presents a unified field. That is not to suggest that different traditions with equally diverse points of references are not constantly in play. Neither reader is so naïve as to suggest that localized ghosts do not interfere, nuance, or wholly transform the transmission of traces that arrive from elsewhere. For Brown it is the singular greatness of Goethe to know how to refashion and redesign literature's architecture according to the demands of the local terrain. The subject Goethe, as master of literature's house at a particularly critical moment in the Western tradition, emerges with a singular and distinct voice, resonant with the ghosts that preceded him, but singular in his reengagement, rearrangement, and even parodying of those voices. The local terrain, in other words, is decisively shaped by the unequaled talent with which he responds to—but also comes to signify—a critical juncture in the secularization of and the move toward interiority in the West.

Nothing could be further, it seems, from Moretti's model of distant reading and its rejection of the singular, to which we will return. Nonetheless, his mapping of a unified field is marked by its own ruptures, or what he calls asymmetry. Here, he draws on Itamar Even-Zohar's reflections on Hebrew literature: "There is no symmetry in literary interference. A target literature is, more often than not, interfered with by a source literature which completely ignores it" (56). Already, we can sense a vocabulary distinct from Brown's that prefers influence to interference and source literatures rather than a univocal dominant strain. Again, it is difficult to maintain that Moretti's plea for a new critical method to account for the voluminous production of texts that have been largely ignored by attention to national traditions is strictly at odds with Brown's imperative. But how are we to understand

the difference of each one's method with respect to the dominant metaphor of Moretti's essay: waves and trees?

To begin, it is necessary to restate that Moretti argues for new categories to address the "sheer enormity" of developing a world literature. The emphasis for him shifts from understanding world literature as an object to apprehending a problem that demands a new critical method—namely, distant reading. What this means is that literary history will become "a patchwork of other people's research, without a single direct textual reading. [. . .] [T]he ambition is now directly proportional *to the distance from the text*: the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be" (57). As a condition of knowledge, distance allows the focus to shift to units much smaller or larger than any text: "devices, themes, tropes or genres and systems" (57). Here again, the bald divergence from the close, sensitive readings offered by Brown is not so clean. Can we really claim that formalist criticism (e.g., allegory and its persistence in the West) is not itself a unit far greater than any text? Certainly, Brown is keenly focused on genres and systems. Are we then left with the unsatisfactory conclusion that Brown's method is historically attached to the problem of world literature in the Age of Goethe, whereas Moretti confronts the problem from the perspective of globalization? At the very least, such a distinction underscores the inherent flexibility of Brown's work—it invites the study of units from vastly different perspectives—as it too asks to be historicized, except that history for Brown is hardly the flat, broad swath proposed by Moretti, and is much more disjunctive and nonsimultaneous than Moretti's distance can espy. History for Brown, one might argue, is readable only through the confluence of such a broad spectrum of disjointed voices in key figures, Calderón, Goethe, or Wagner. For Moretti, it is nothing short of subjectless.

Such a characterization, of course, simplifies, even to an unfair extent, Moretti's project, the full scale of which is best grasped by returning to his metaphors of the tree and the wave. According to Moretti, historians interested in culture on a large scale have favored one or the other of these two metaphors. The tree, derived from Darwin, was the preferred metaphor of comparative philologists to describe language families branching off from one another. The wave's explanatory power derives from its ability to describe, for example, the study of "technological diffusion [. . .] or the 'wave of advance' that describes how agriculture spread from the Middle East to other parts of the world."¹⁰ Significant here for Moretti is that the two metaphors, while they are both viable, have nothing in common. "The tree describes the passage from unity to diversity. [. . .] The wave is the opposite: it observes uniformity engulfing an initial diversity. [. . .] Trees are what nation-states cling to; waves are what markets do" (67). He goes on to assert that world culture oscillates between the two. The modern novel is a wave that "runs into the

branches of local traditions” and is thereby transformed by these same traditions (67). The objection raised above that distant reading might well elide such local transformations is countered by Moretti’s insistence on a division of labor: “national literature, for people who see tree; world literature, for people who see waves” (68). For Moretti there is no compromise. Literary scholars either see waves or they see trees. This tension, he continues, is both necessary and productive, offering two distinct but equally productive means to study literature. The incompatibility of the two also means that comparative literature, which cleaves to the metaphor of the wave, is “a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures” (68). Despite the lack of any middle road, as he calls it, this offers an inviting compromise, preserving a benevolent tension between national literature departments and comparative or world literature departments. It is worth noting that Moretti’s plethora of metaphors (e.g., trees, waves, thorns) underscores the divergent registers of these two approaches. The unsavoriness of mixed metaphors attests to that.

Now, this division of labor is indeed the sticking point when we ask where Brown’s work fits into this scheme. As the essays in this volume confirm, the scholarship inspired by or in conversation with Brown has quite successfully negotiated a middle road, attending quite diligently to national trends and hemispheric, if not even global, trends. Moretti might dismiss the viability of such a road, not merely on the basis of his insistence that the tree and wave are incompatible metaphors, but rather on the surface observation that Brown’s middle road simply cannot but rely on too few works, which she is forced to designate as representative. Hence her penchant for canonical writers and their works. If we accept this charge as fair—and Brown would certainly be the first to assert that national literatures, a product of nineteenth-century nationalisms, cannot erect barriers that blind scholars to influences that have little patience with such constructions—then the proof of the efficacy of such a division of labor would be, to cite Engels, in the pudding.

Katie Trumpener, another prodigious reader, has taken the taste test. In an essay entitled “Paratext and Genre System: A Response to Franco Moretti,”¹¹ she considers what it really means to stop reading and to begin drawing computer-generated graphs, charts, and tables. Her primary focus is on Moretti’s cataloguing of British novels, particularly after 1830, in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* as well as in “Style, Inc.: Reflections on Seven Thousand Titles (British Novels, 1740–1850),”¹² with their severe emphasis on titles. Subtitles hold no interest for Moretti as they are too specific, crude, and unruly to merit attention.¹³ But it is not so much the method of programming massive amounts of information into a computer that concerns Trumpener (although such a concern certainly prompts her response), but rather the conclusions such an approach generates, which