Faraway, So Close

Robert Piercey, University of Regina

_____

I'd like to thank Maxim Demin and Alexei Kouprianov for their probing study of *Kanonbildung* in 19ᵗʰ century Germany. As I understand it, the study has two goals. The first is substantive: to gather and present facts about how a particular philosophical canon emerged in 19ᵗʰ century Germany. The other is methodological: "to develop formalised methods of studying *Kanonbildung* as a process," methods which "may turn out to be useful beyond the original scope of our project, in a wide range of possible studies in intellectual history and mechanics of cultural memory formation" (113).

It's this second goal that I find particularly interesting. So in what follows, I won't quarrel with the substantive conclusions Demin and Kouprianov draw about the formation of the 19ᵗʰ century German philosophical canon—in part because their conclusions strike me as plausible, and in part because I lack the expertise to challenge their findings. Instead, I'd like to reflect broadly on the methods they use to study *Kanonbildung*, especially the notion of *distant reading* which they borrow from Franco Moretti (113). More specifically, I'd like to raise some questions about whether, how, and to what extent their strategy of distant reading must be supplemented by a form of close reading: namely, a form that treats histories of philosophy as literary artifacts whose contents are to be studied by many of the same techniques brought to bear on fictional narratives.

I raise these questions as a philosopher interested in the philosophy of history and in the intersections between philosophy and literature. To be clear, I don't reject the methods developed by Demin and Kouprianov. On the contrary, I suspect that distant reading has an important role to play in the history of philosophy in general, and in the study of canon formation in particular. But I'd like to suggest that this method becomes more useful when it is supplemented by others—as well as to raise some questions about what this supplementing might look like.

Canon: An Institution of Thought

Let me start by highlighting what I take to be the key points of Demin's and Kouprianov's analysis. They describe themselves as contributing to an *institutional history of philosophy*: that is, a history that downplays the "conceptual reconstruction" of past views in favour of a "study of practices" (113). The practices that interest them most are the "*implicit* rules and patterns" (113, emphasis added) that shape philosophers' understandings of what their activity is and how it should proceed—practices typically not noticed by philosophers themselves. And the epoch that interests them is the 19ᵗʰ century, since it was during this period "that the history of philosophy began its transformation from a generalised body of knowledge into an academic discipline" (112).

A crucial part of this transformation is the development of philosophical canons. Demin and Kouprianov say relatively little about what they think canons are. Very roughly, I take them to be groups of thinkers who are seen as representing the highest and most important achievements of philosophy as a practice, thinkers with whom one should be familiar if one wishes to understand or contribute to philosophy at all.

Furthermore, a canon consists of not just a list of thinkers, but some sort of ranking, some sense—perhaps not fully explicit—of each thinker's relative importance. In the canon Demin and Kouprianov study, for instance, philosophers are variously described as "primary," "secondary," or "tertiary" (116). Understood in this way, canons perform several important functions. They perform sociological functions of "indoctrination and identity formation" (113). By the end of the 19th century in Germany, a familiarity with Kant, Hegel, and others had come to shape philosophers' understandings of their enterprise to such an extent that it was probably a necessary condition of being considered a philosopher at all.

Canons presumably perform other functions as well—for instance, inspiring philosophers by providing "mountains peaks to look up towards," in Richard Rorty's phrase.[1] Canons can change dramatically over time. So if one wants to understand a particular period in the history of philosophy well, it is important to know not just which figures it considered canonical, but how and when its particular canon was formed. That is what Demin and Kouprianov set out to discover about 19th century Germany.

What Is Distant Reading?

As mentioned above, the methods they use to do so go by the name of distant reading. This term was coined by Franco Moretti to designate a particular way of studying literary texts. It is to be opposed to close reading, which privileges the contents of particular texts and engages in "the analysis of ideas and the reconstruction of conceptual schemata" (113). Distant reading focuses instead on the practices "standing behind" these texts, using "formal analytic methods" to uncover "objective characteristics of large amounts of digitised texts" (113).

I take it that the authors see distant reading not as intrinsically superior to all other approaches, but as a way of correcting an imbalance. Their suggestion seems to be that the study of the history of philosophy heretofore has been so dominated by close reading that it has overlooked "implicit rules and patterns" (113). Distant reading nudges the pendulum in the other direction by encouraging historians to pay "*closer* attention" (113, emphasis added) to previously overlooked practices.

With this goal in mind, Demin and Kouprianov examine a large number of 19th century German works in the history of philosophy, constructing a data set that reveals how often particular philosophers were mentioned and at what length they were discussed. Examining "845 [table of contents] entries for 151 philosophers' names," they compile data about the "number of pages devoted to each philosopher" in these works, the "share of the 19th century section devoted to him," and the "start and end pages of the paragraph and those of the 19th century section" (114).

---

[1] Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, Jerome Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 23.

The result is a very precise snapshot of how much discussion was devoted to certain philosophers at various points in the 19th century—one that allows us to trace the ways in which interest in these figures increased, peaked, and in some cases declined as the century unfolded. It lets us see precisely how and when certain figures came to be seen as more canonical than others.

This approach bears several sorts of fruit. One—in keeping with the authors' second, methodological goal—is that it spurs the invention of new concepts helpful for making sense of the data. The undertheorized concept of a "philosophical bestseller" (115), for instance, announces itself as important, and can be defined quite precisely as a work published three times or more. Likewise, their approach allows Demin and Kouprianov to develop precise markers of the perceived greatness of philosophers, in terms of "the frequency that a particular name appears across tables of contents" (117). A primary thinker, for instance, can be defined as one "mentioned in more than 80% of treatises" (117).

Other gains are substantive. We learn that the reputations of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were cemented between 1831 and 1855, as the rate at which they were mentioned outpaced that of other thinkers. And we learn that a common view of Schopenhauer—that he was underappreciated in his lifetime and scorned by the philosophical establishment—is false, "with his views being included in three textbooks by 1855" (118). These are important discoveries, and they demonstrate the value of the authors' strategy of distant reading.

Shifting Fortunes of Fame

Of course, as Demin and Kouprianov acknowledge, "presence in the canonic history does not tell us much about the part a philosopher played within it" (119). In order to bring this dimension into view, they use several additional techniques. The one I find most intriguing is their examination of *where* certain philosophers appear in various histories of philosophy, and more specifically, their study of how often various philosophers appear at the *end* of a history.

The authors focus on three philosophers—Herbart, Schleiermacher, and Fries—who are often discussed in conjunction with Hegel. Then they see how often the figures in question are discussed before Hegel, and how often they are discussed after. "This relative position," they explain, "is an indirect but a most meaningful criterion which allows to assess the degree of perceived recency and relevancy of a given philosopher. The closer a philosopher stays to the end of the list, the more 'recent' and 'relevant' to the current debate he is" (123).

This view seems plausible, and in the authors' hands, it sheds important new light on how these four thinkers were viewed at various points in the 19th century. But we should note that it makes a crucial assumption. In order to move from the premise that a history discusses a given philosopher last to the conclusion that it sees him as most relevant to current debates, we must assume that it tells a particular kind of story: roughly speaking, a *progressive* story.

We must assume that the historian has organized her data in a very particular way, with the episodes of her story becoming more and more germane to contemporary readers' concerns as they get closer and closer to them in time. No doubt many, if not most, histories of philosophy actually are stories of this kind. But is a philosopher's position in a given history a good *general* clue to her perceived relevance? Is it such a reliable indicator of perceived importance that it should be built into a method intended for use "in a wide range of possible studies in intellectual history" (113)?

Philosophy as a Tradition

I linger over this matter because it raises an important issue in the history of philosophy: the issue of *genre*. Histories of philosophy, I take it, are narratives, and every narrative belongs to some genre or other.[2] Narratives in different genres may describe the same events in the same order, but assign them different meanings by shaping these events into different sorts of plots. The philosopher who has contributed most to our understanding of this process is Hayden White. In his seminal essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," White asks us to consider several different ways in which a single series of events might be emplotted. We can imagine a pure chronicle in which the series is "simply recorded in which the events originally occurred" (93); it might be represented in the following way:

(1) *a, b, c, d, e, ..., n*[3]

But this series "can be emplotted in a number of different ways and thereby endowed with different meanings without violating the imperatives of the chronological arrangement at all" (92). The following series are all equally possible:

(2) *A, b, c, d, e, ..., n*

(3) *a, B, c, d, e, ..., n*

(4) *a, b, C, d, e, ..., n*

(5) *a, b, c, D, e, ..., n*[4]

In each of these series, one event is symbolized with a capital letter to indicate that it is being assigned "explanatory force,"[5] or some other special significance, with respect to the others. Privileging one event rather than another yields stories in different genres. Series (2) would be a "deterministic" history which endows a "putatively original event (a) with the status of a

---

[2] Not everyone agrees that all histories are narratives, but space does not permit me to broach this issue here. For an important recent discussion of it, see Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), especially Chapter 5.

[3] Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 92.

[4] White, 92.

[5] White, 92.

decisive factor (A) in the structuration of the whole series of events following after it."[6] Were we to privilege the last event in the series, we would have a story in the genre of "eschatological or apocalyptical histories" such as "St. Augustine's *City of God*" and "Hegel's *Philosophy of History*."[7]

Many other permutations, and thus many other genres, are possible. In some genres, it is plausible to suppose that the last figure discussed is seen by the author as most relevant to current concerns. But in other genres, this assumption cannot be made. In a history of decline or forgetting, the last figure discussed might well be seen by the author as the *least* relevant to these concerns. Consider a Heideggerian history of philosophy, in which the last figure discussed is Nietzsche, but the figure most relevant to the contemporary situation is one or another pre-Socratic thinker.

The point is that knowing that a philosopher appears last in a given history—even in a large number of histories—does not tell us much about how the author understood his significance for current concerns. To draw conclusions about significance, we must know the genre (or genres) of the history (or histories) in question. And that is something we can discover only through careful attention to a history's "literary" features—precisely the features identified through traditional close readings. So while the data Demin and Kouprianov uncover, and the methods they use to do so, are indispensable, I suspect they do not give a full picture of *Kanonbildung* on their own. They will be most useful when pursued in tandem with certain types of close reading.

Merging Historical Paths

I have no reason to think that Demin and Kouprianov would deny any of this. But I would like to know more about whether, and how, they think it complicates their project. What is the relation between distant reading and close reading? Do these types of analysis simply complement each other, or are they also in tension? I've already speculated that the authors see distant reading as a way of correcting an imbalance—that "formal analytic methods" directed at the "objective characteristics... of digitised texts" (113) are called for *today* because a longstanding bias toward close reading has left historians oblivious to implicit rules and patterns.

If that is the case, is there a danger that performing close reading in conjunction with distant reading will overshadow the distinctive value of the latter? I don't know the answers to these questions, but I suspect that it will be important to answer them if the methods of this study are to be extended to other areas.

I hasten to add that I am not "for" close reading or "against" distant reading. Distant reading, as the authors describe it, is clearly an important tool. But I would like to know more about how it relates to the other tools at the disposal of historians of philosophy.

---

[6] White, 93.
[7] White, 93.

Whatever their view of this matter, I'd like to thank Demin and Kouprianov again for making a promising new contribution to our conceptual toolbox.

Contact details: robert.piercey@uregina.ca

References

Demin, Maxim, and Alexei Kouprianov, "Studying Kanonbildung: An Exercise in a Distant Reading of Contemporary Self-descriptions of the 19th Century German Philosophy." *Social Epistemology*, 32, no. 2: 112-127.

Kuukkanen, Jouni-Matti. *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Rorty, Richard "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres," in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, Jerome Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

White, Hayden. "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.