

Franco Moretti

## Millimeter Autobahn Trees



Franco Moretti teaches English at Stanford, where he directs the Center for the Study of the Novel. Has written *Signs Taken for Wonders* (London, 1983), *The Way of the World* (London, 1987), *Modern Epic* (London, 1996), *Atlas of the European Novel* (London, 1998). – Address: English Department, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, USA.

Winter was best. October's leaves were lovely, and the light of spring, people smiling ... But winter was best. Cold dark rain, and you don't know Berlin, go out in the drizzle, can't see, catch a cold (two, three, four) ... And the shape of the city slowly forms itself in the rain ...

So ugly. But ugly makes it easy to love. (Milan ...) Houses like wooden blocks of childhood, full arches, triangles on top, round columns, colors, rectangular balconies, odd square-angled bow windows ... The same module everywhere (and you always feel at home, safe), but with a little park here, an oddly sliced corner there: so there's always the hope of a little surprise, a reason to take another turn, just one ...

Treptower Park, twilight, no one walking among Stalin's words ... then, returning, that insane little park below street level (Neukölln? Rixdorf?), and the toy train store near (of all things) a railyard, more cold Saturdays, Sundays, Friedrichshain, you wonder what life would be like here, Lichtenberg, Hoenerweg, tombstones right under your windows, what is it like at night, Allee der Kosmonauten and the Kino Sojus, Schönhausen, this Garbatella-am-See, Käthestraße, what is it like here in the fog ...

In May, an old friend visits, and you say: I wish I could live here. Forever.

*Incredible people work here. They see you every day, and never get tired of your petty narcissism, your commonplaces, your silly discoveries (which they hear every year) ... The aristocratic aplomb of C, the odd brilliance of G, the sunshine of A's smiles, and the irony of BN's grins, those fantastic morning chats with B (Barenboim and Brahms! Wie gemein!*

*Now, Mahler...), the gentle generosity of K. And you, intenserious E., Hello.*

*They, and more, worked for us: incredibly well. But this sounds bureaucratic. The greatest thing they did for us – for me, certainly – was to be the way they are. Amazing, unforgettable people.*

You get bolder, no more Bus 119, no Grunewald Bahnhof; a city map, the car; and, to avoid the Kudamm (which you hate), you take to the Autobahn. In this lucky corner of Berlin, where the two Autobahns meet. North and east.

North runs the Autobahn of Life. It takes you to Tegel, to park under the bellies of planes, pick up the people you love, on the way look at slim Siemensstadt, the pretty woman with the aviator's helmet on the sand-colored house (Berlinische Leben), on, to rote Wedding and easy-to-love Prenzlauer Berg, and the German adolescent cult movie you decide you must see, and end up with two hundred old ladies, understand very little (and still wonder, what were they doing there?)

And the Autobahn of Life also takes you to Sachsenhausen, where life was destroyed. On the last day of the century; but the camp is closed. Teri and you look in from the outside, return in the spring.

*Every human being begins by reflecting on life as a whole, but the more he reflects, the narrower he becomes. When he is fully mature, the person in front of you knows a specific square millimeter as well as two dozen people, at most, in the entire world, and he sees clearly that all other people who don't have the same knowledge are very stupid about his business, and yet he cannot change his place, because if he moves as much as a micro-millimeter, he too will be stupid.*

*Musil, The Man Without Qualities. Intelligent. Too much, if you are in a place that nudges you out of your micro-millimeter, and surrounds you with people who are several miles away. So, what happens? What happens, at eleven in the morning on Tuesday? Do we become a Parallellaktion of contemporary culture, inhabited by the ghost of Musil's Arnheim (whose real-life prototype was assassinated across the street)?*

*No, no Kakania. But the spirit of the times is not on our side. There are sparks, now and then, but we never catch fire. And the problem is not the division of intellectual labor, Weber's Spezialisierung and Scheuklappen – these are conditions of scientific work, not obstacles, A. and you agree in winter walks around the lake – and besides, you never feel excluded by a talk's "language". Maybe we try a little too hard to find a common denominator, and become a little too un-specialized in the end? After all, the Zeitgeist has outlawed the term "method". (When did you last hear it? Did you ever, this year?) And we are the (aging) children of our time.*

East runs the Autobahn of Art. Philharmonie, Vermeer, Tempelhof, and the Komische Oper, Neukölln, that fourth floor, the long narrow cafe over the passage ... Tickets at the last minute, tired, slump in the seat, not sure what's playing, then the music begins, you smile, *Ariadne* ...

Try to explain, one evening, the idea you're so proud of – Berlin as the City Where the Second-Rate is Great – and are suavely advised, try the first-rate sometime ... Really?! But what counts is what can be found in ten places, not one, found every day, in many forms, without genuflection, as if it were TV, not the mass ...

And Berlin gives you this present, the intelligent adolescence you never had, the keen messy hunger for culture, mixing levels, transfixed by Bach's cello suites and *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (you go twice in a week ...), enjoying silliness (that insane drive to that Köpenick school for *Frau Luna*, Berliner *Luft-Luft-Luft*, clapping, happy ...), the only adult at that show for schoolchildren an der Parkaue (*Frühlings Erwachen*, of all things), the last show of the old Schaubühne, the new ...

*You have not written essays in years, only talks and book chapters, have forgotten the challenge of the form. Presenting technicalities (narrative tempo, free indirect style, descriptions) as if they held the secret of life (you write about the ethos of seriousness, which you hold very dear). Alchemy. And at this, you are not bad. But then, the openness of the essay, radiating out, freely. Writing once in your life, just once, like Mahler: holding unrelatedness and contradictions in front of you, instead of suppressing them. Once. This year, you have the time.*

*You try. You fail. Cannot accept the independence of the pieces, cannot make sense of it. You feel lost; and in the name of clarity, cut the piece again and again. Better. More logical. Structured. And you will never, but never, write like Mahler.*

Write in the living room, beautiful, made of windows, grey morning afternoon sun rain night. Surrounded by trees: red, black, white, green. Berlin. Climb and stay there, Cosimo, baron in the trees. The horseman will come, "I am Prince Bolkonskij, farewell".