



THE YEAR OF LIVING SIMPLY
FRANCO MORETTI

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It's the hour before dawn, in the beautiful room full of windows of this fourth-floor flat that feels so strangely like home. It's still dark, as I zap mosquitos with the electric racket from the Chinese market; I hear the voices of the imams and the call of the roosters; in a few minutes, the crows will start cawing, and the day will begin – here in Dar es Salaam, where Teri, my wife, works in the Emergency Room of the big public hospital. Here, last August, I was telling a German doctor that I was about to spend a second year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. A *second* year? he asked. But that can be dangerous. What if it's worse?

It was better. Different, for sure. Mostly because of an 8-year-old boy named Kai, who was not born in 1999–2000, and spent almost half of the year alone with me, with Teri working in Dar. I woke him up every day at 6:15 for his accursed school bus; brought him breakfast in bed – at least *that* – and then we'd get down to wait, in icy darkness. The only

light, in the Villa Walther, would be in a dining room window across from our door; but one morning that too was dark, and Kai blurted out: Look: even *they* are still asleep!

Work was different, too. That other time, I had just started editing a 5,000-page collection entitled *Il romanzo* that was published in Italy between 2001 and 2003. All I did that year had to do with novels: Tuesday colloquium and bedtime reading, morning e-mails, lunch conversations, library research – everything. In 2012/13, I have been working on tragedy instead. Mostly, I have taken pages and pages of notes – the Greeks, Shakespeare, Lope, Calderón, Racine, Chikamatsu, Soyinka ... And the critics: Scherer, Szondi, Menéndez Pinal, Bradley, Vernant, Benjamin, Maravall ... Eventually, I will try to write a book on tragedy, and specifically on tragic conflict; but this year, I have just *read*, with no concern for the possible use of what I was doing. I chose to be a professor because I liked studying more than anything else; but with the passing years, studying has become so hard to do, with the mounting tide of bureaucracy posing as efficiency, that all one reads must immediately be harnessed to a concrete task and produce “results”, as the saying goes. Useful knowledge: the new Victorianism that stifles us all. But if knowledge is to lead in truly new directions, it needs also long periods of freedom – of uselessness. Thanks to the Wiko, I could feel once more the taste of this old truth.

As 2013 began moving towards spring, then summer, and the balance sheet for the year loomed larger and larger, the words of the title – “The year of living simply” – occurred to me right away. That’s what it felt like. I went out a few evenings, mostly to the Schaubühne, where I discovered how liberating a radical lack of taste can be for the intelligence: play after play, shamelessly reshaped into bold new understandings of the classics. But mostly, I divided myself between Kai and the Kolleg; once his school bus was gone, a long jog in the ghostly light of the snow at dawn; then intense mornings in Wallotstraße; afternoons at home; then maybe another Fellow to dinner. I understood the pleasure of biking (in San Francisco, where we live, it’s a torment); I saw new places, and recognized everywhere the plain, square houses of 1900–30 that I like so much. All was simple; all was pleasant. A *Biedermeier* shell, around those tragic stories of violence and death.

One thing that had not changed was the staff – the legendary staff of the Wissenschaftskolleg. In fifteen years, some of them had left, of course, but many were still there, and the atmosphere had also remained the same: that mix of efficiency and friendliness

that smooths all friction between the Fellows and everyday life. No wonder we are all so nice to each other! But we were also not bad, we of '13, with our little circles that overlapped in so many ways. There was the quintet that met as five perfect strangers on the first day of the *C-Gruppe* of the German language course and emerged from two stammering weeks bound together by unshakable complicity. The neighbors next door, a floor below, across the court; the windows that you slowly learned to recognize. The Real Scientists who gathered to discuss evolution and who taught me so many things about the world (and a few about Scientists, too). There were the endlessly varied configurations in the cafeteria, all good, and the reading groups – and the exclusive club of the ping-pong players. When we were all together, on Tuesday morning, or on those enchanted Diotima afternoons, seeing so many faces I liked and admired felt almost too much.

My previous time in Berlin, I left having written a slim essay – well below the average of those around me. But the mental freedom I had enjoyed had given me the idea for a brief series of lectures that took my work in an entirely new direction. This time, too, I co-authored a slim essay for the Literary Lab. But, once again, the unpredictable synergy of the Wiko sparked a series of research projects – on World Bank reports, negotiations about climate change, Supreme Court environmental rulings, the changing semantics of fitness, Swahili newspaper poetry – which might represent an even greater turning point for my work, making me step outside of literature and straight into the contemporary world. That had also been one of the hopes behind my last book, *The Bourgeois*, but one I had found myself incapable of pursuing, so much so that the introduction to the book acknowledged its being “an exclusively historical study, with no true link to the present” as a clear and bitter defeat. The next few years will be my revenge.

If the gods had understanding and wisdom where men are concerned, writes Euripides in one of his tragedies, those who were good would win a double youth as a sign of their virtue. I have serious doubts about my virtue, and the *Beirat* of the Wiko is not a gathering on Mount Olympus. But for this new year in Berlin, which has felt so magically like a second youth, the gods have indeed all my gratitude.