

**Katsma, Holst. 2024. *Morfologia del romanzo*.
Edited and translated by Tiziano De Marino,
afterword by Franco Moretti.
Milano: nottetempo.**

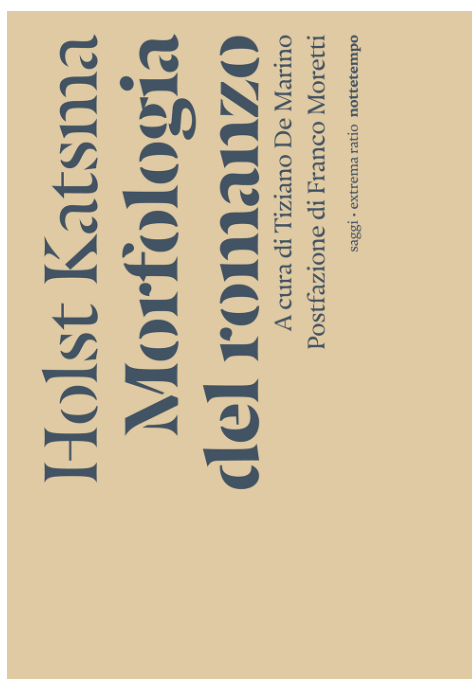
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HOLST KATSMAS WORK, published in the excellent Italian translation by Tiziano De Marino and with an afterword by Franco Moretti, adds a brilliant chapter to the development of distant reading. Translated from Katsma's PhD dissertation, *Morphology of the Novel*, the title immediately recalls Vladimir Propp's analysis of the fairytale. However, Katsma quickly clarifies that he takes morphology in the literal sense: his book studies the visible, spatial form of the novel's page, as it evolved in England between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. This period of highly increased production led to introduce new organisational signs, what he calls "notazioni extralinguistiche" (2024, 42).¹ Katsma thus focuses on numbered chapters, paragraphs with indentations, quotation marks and indented dashes: he aims to show their takeover in the period under investigation, their effect on the novel's language and, most importantly, their imaginative benefits. His main proposition is that the new forms acted not upon a social but a cognitive necessity, "trasformando la nostra capacità di immaginare le voci e lo scorrere del tempo; andando a plasmare, di volta in volta, le nostre stesse teorie su avvenimenti, pensieri e persone" (45).²

While Katsma got his MA and PhD at Harvard, his first apprenticeship was at Stanford, where he participated in the quantitative analyses of the Literary Lab. His BA thesis, which developed a way to determine the "loudness" of novelistic dialogue, was adapted into the Lab's seventh pamphlet (Katsma 2014). In fact, the phenomenal character of imagined sound and dialogue remains one of the main objects of study of *Morfologia*, this time investigated not through grammar, but through non-linguistic spatial organisation.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, Katsma shows the evolution of different types of chapter appearing since the eighteenth century, charting a path from the undivided novel to the eventual hegemony of the untitled chapter around 1800. His quantitative analysis, involving hundreds of English novels, is clearly and elegantly visualised in a diagram. Katsma then moves to paragraphs, showing a parallel proliferation through various close-reading comparisons: first between chapters with similar themes in Edward Kimber's *Joe Thompson* and Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, then from two larger pools of bestsellers published either around 1750 or 1850.

The second part starts from a quantitative analysis of the "notazioni vocali" (142),³ mainly quotation marks, once again charted in their numerous variations until the predominance of the modern format. Katsma then embarks on an inquiry on their effects upon the readers' acoustic imagination. He proposes that such new notations fundamentally enhanced the vivacity of the dialogues, reshaping the novel's oral foundations. He backs up his theory by showing the dependence of older samples on oral models of reported speech, through an ingenious close reading of

¹ "[E]xtralinguistic notations" (Katsma 2021, 5). Since, as mentioned, the book was translated into Italian directly from Katsma's doctoral thesis, I am providing the English original. I thank the author for sharing it with me. An abstract is available at <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/37370198>.

² "[C]hanging our ability to imagine voices and the passing of time; shaping, in turn, our very theories about events, thoughts, and persons" (Katsma 2021, 6).

³ "[V]ocal notations" (Katsma 2021, 68).

seventeenth-century novels and trial transcripts of witness testimonies (reported word for word since 1730, thanks to stenography: 183, n.39). The new notations are then related to an increase in the complexity of the quotatives (i.e., he said, she said, and the like), of which Katsma underlines the emotional and moral value. They are also posed as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the rise of free indirect style.

Summarising the previous findings, the third part proposes five theses on the novel as a genre, arguing, among other things, that extralinguistic notations can offer a surer standing for a genre typology than linguistic elements, and that they allow one to consider the Western novel as a translinguistic structure able to influence literature on a world scale, *independently* from language. After comparing his work to Reviel Netz's investigation of formal elements in Greek mathematics, Katsma concludes with a reaffirmation of the epistemic value of spatial form.

On the whole, Katsma's research is solid and decisive, and the data he collects is presented with great clarity. A few charts and fewer parameters suffice to show the spatial renewal of the English novel in the course of a century and a half of increased productivity. It is a path of initially wide experimentation with the new forms, leading to a formal stability that continues today. Once established in their historical development, these elements reveal their importance for the novel as a genre. Quantitative data provides the grounds for a comparative close reading of a few selected texts, based chiefly on Bakhtin's and, as a close second, Moretti's theories of the novel.

Such pairing of the two methods provides a possible answer to Moretti's recent claim against a real collaboration of hermeneutics and quantification. The latter, Moretti proposes, is bound to strict formal analysis and thus aims at revealing a closed network of relations, an atlas of literature; the former, instead, looks at form as a force acting on history, an object to be reworked and transformed during an interpretation that must ultimately cross the textual boundaries and reach the world (Moretti 2022, 17-38). The conceptual difference between hermeneutics and quantification makes for two parallel tracks with but fleeting crossings. However, Katsma directly relates spatial form and mental structuring, in search for categories that, although developing historically, reflect a more profound, a-historical character of human cognition. This deeper connection between the two methodologies, independently from the actual results, shows a promising path for future research.

Equally promising is Katsma's definition of the novel in its relations with other genres. This includes the already discussed pairing of novelistic vocal notations and trial transcripts in the second part. In another moment, at the end of the first part, he looks at chapters in epistolary novels with the help of samples from letter-writing manuals. This comparative approach highlights how the spatial forms under scrutiny seem to pertain more strictly to the novel, while allowing Katsma to show how the novel distinguished itself from other genres through their introduction. Indeed, he is not the first to adopt a similar (inter)genre analysis – he mentions some cases (2024, 286-92) – yet his personal mix of distant and close reading, along with his Bakhtin-inspired take on genres as epistemic modes, makes this work rather productive.

Given the complexity and extent of its ramifications, Katsma's study of literary imagination presents important strengths as well as a few weaknesses. Katsma focuses on the effect of the notations on the writers' and (especially) the readers' minds: novels are chiefly considered as producers of cognitive experiences. This somewhat phenomenological approach leads him to manipulate texts like laboratory samples, to help readers appreciate the particular mental effects textual materials generate. For instance, he argues that paragraphs, once applied extensively, engender a new rhythm that lengthens the chapters and produces a proprioceptive variation in tune with narrative emotions. In a very ingenious move, he drives his point home by proposing a passage from *David Copperfield*, first deprived of paragraphs, then in its original form (92-95).

At times, however, the focus on emotions and their ethical evaluation limits the picture. For example, Katsma is convincing in saying that quotatives became more complex only after the introduction of new vocal notations, thus making novelistic conversation more psychologically nuanced. Yet, he prioritises the moral upshot of such quotatives, drawing on Martha Nussbaum's ethical reflections on the novel. This seems too selective a consequence, and leads him to some subjective overstatements about the genre, like that “[p]rima del XIX secolo, i romanzieri non offrono particolari contributi alla filosofia morale (tantomeno gli scrittori di altri generi)” (220).⁴

Moreover, and notably, in the second part Katsma directly opposes visual and auditory imagery, arguing against the role of the former. He sees reading as “un’attività che non è principalmente visiva ma si radica invece in un immaginario proprio-cettivo e acustico delle parole” (164).⁵ Mental vision and sound seem incompatible: according to the author, even the complexified quotatives, oftentimes delineating facial expressions or gestures, reflect “un mondo celato alla vista e che scoraggia chiunque tenti di farsene un’immagine” (209).⁶ His ideas are explicitly aligned with the aesthetic theories of Edmund Burke, Nikolay Chernyshevsky, Jean-Paul Sartre, William Empson and I.A. Richards, that is of a specific strand of philosophers and critics arguing against visual imagery. Yet, Katsma almost completely overlooks the opposite side of the debate, whether older and purely aesthetic (e.g., Romantic theories) or contemporary and more empirically oriented, like the multifaceted area of cognitive literary studies. He only briefly approaches Elaine Scarry's *Dreaming by the Book*, yet passes over it proposing that the novel's evolution seems to point towards a greater ease for human beings to imagine sounds (160-61, n. 14) – a statement which would require a larger sample of analysis, both chronologically and geographically. In light of recent empirical research pointing towards the multisensory nature of mental imagery – one cannot fail to name G. Gabrielle Starr (2013) – it could be easily put that, rather than opposing the viscosity of narrative experience, an increased ability to imagine oral conversations could enhance it.

⁴ “Novelists before the nineteenth century are not making these particular contributions to moral philosophy (nor are writers in other genres)” (Katsma 2021, 119).

⁵ “[A]n activity that is not primarily visual but is instead rooted in the proprioceptive and acoustic imagining of words” (Katsma 2021, 83).

⁶ “[A] world that can never be visualized and a world that discourages visualization” (Katsma 2021, 112).

This takes nothing away from the constructive part of Katsma's theory of novelistic auditory imagery, which is innovative and much needed in a field oftentimes too focused on visuality. Rather, future research could improve it by delving deeper into the possible synergy of vision, proprioception and voice. This is but one of the many questions sparked by Katsma's work, joining others such as: what are the origins of chapters and paragraphs, and what part do they play? Are there relations and mutual influences between the new notations and contemporarily arising market practices, such as instalment publishing? And if spatial notations are translinguistic, how do they fit into writing systems different from the horizontal, left-to-right Roman alphabet? On this note, Katsma works, inevitably, with the data available to him (that is, English novels in a limited period), yet also provides fruitful comparisons with similar research in other areas, such as Vivienne Mylne's on French and English punctuation (Katsma 2024, 153-57), or Oleg Sobchuk's on the Russian novel (275-76). Given what stands to be gained, more work is needed, for a longer time span and a larger area. The recent book by Nicholas Dames, *The Chapter* (2023), is already a very promising step forward in this sense.

To conclude, Katsma's work constitutes a valuable addition for everyone working on English or comparative literature, literary imagination, or book materiality. His assertive arguments resound – no more appropriate word – in his reader's mind with many challenges. They sometimes reach for the stars, yet are all based on the data collected by the author. One could either propose a different interpretation or, as he often suggests, integrate the evidence with new data. Yet, and this is the sign of a great work, one could not afford to simply ignore Katsma's findings and move along. In this sense, Katsma's tentative joining of close and distant reading points at a positive way for humanists to build on each other's work.

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Nicola Giansiracusa was recently awarded a PhD in Comparative Studies at Universidade de Lisboa, with a dissertation entitled *Imagining Worlds in Literature and Science: Works by Paul Valéry, Virginia Woolf, and Carlo Emilio Gadda*. His work focuses on the relations between literary and scientific imagination, with the help of the framework of Possible Worlds Theory. He also holds a BA in Humanities from the University of Pavia and an MA in Italian studies from the University of Bologna. He has published articles on Primo Levi's science fiction and Paul Valéry's interpretation of scientific imagination.

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