“The Spectacles”
Korf* reads avidly and fast. Therefore he detests the vast bombast of the repetitious, twelfold needless, injudicious. Most affairs are settled straight just in seven words or eight; in as many tapeworm phrases one can prattle on like blazes. Hence he lets his mind invent a corrective instrument: Spectacles whose focal strength shortens texts of any length. Thus, a poem such as this, so beglassed one would just—miss. Thirty-three of them will spark nothing but a question mark.

—Christian Morgenstern

*Korf is the kind of reader for which some text-mining tools are intended: someone who would surely approve of text-summarization technology, for example—the sort of thing that tells you what a newspaper article is about, so you don’t have to go through the tiresome and ink-stained exercise of actually reading it.

In the Mellon-funded MONK* project, we have tried to use text-mining techniques as a provocation for reading, as well as to cast the net for that provocation much more broadly than one could do without computers.

In other words, although users may end up reading, even reading closely, they begin by not reading, or by doing what Franco Moretti calls distant reading, pointing out that when we begin by reading, we can only take into account “a minimal fraction of the literary field . . . a canon of two hundred novels, for instance, sounds very large for nineteenth-century Britain . . . but is still less than one percent of the novels that were actually published: twenty thousand, thirty, more, no one really knows—and close reading won’t help here, a novel a day every day of the year would take a century or so.”

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