

Emily Apter

Literary World-Systems Across Disciplines

Franco Moretti's magisterial compendium of essays on the world history of the novel, published in Spring 2006, provided both pretext and impetus for some reflections on the cross-disciplinary concept of literary world-systems. Weighing in at close to 3,000 pages (the Princeton University Press English edition is an abridged version of a much longer five-volume Italian edition), this multi-authored work, organized chronologically and encyclopedically to emphasize the novel as a "planetary form" at one remove from chaos, conjoins "History, Geography and Culture" and "Forms and Themes" as "convex and concave in a Borromini façade." *The Novel* illustrates this Borrominean architecture of narrative

form by stressing the continuous folds of space and time, art and commodity, classical unities and polyvocality, ekphrasis and plot, *Bildung* and character-minorization, mimetic social realism and mesmeric phantasmagoria. Long essays are devoted to the evolution of narrative morphologies, translation markets, the novel's instrumental role in defining "modernity," and its foregrounding in nation-formation and colonial pedagogy. These pieces are complemented by readings of texts representative of important subgenres and global lexical entries, the latter intended to limn a "wider ecosystem, focusing, for instance, on how the semantic field of "narrative" took shape around keywords such as *midrash*, *monogatari*, *xiaoshuo*, *qissa* – and, why not, *romance*." Moretti's adoption of the term "ecosystem" from the natural and environmental sciences stood out, alerting me to my central problematic: What is the status of

“system,” eco or otherwise, in literary
history and theory today?

ⁱ Franco Moretti, preface to *The Novel* Vol. II *Forms and Themes* ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. x.