in the Elder-Adelson paper—by what it says about the possibility of thinkers working together across cultures to explore subtle textual and ecological phenomena.

Obviously, C.P. Snow’s famous “two cultures” metaphor gained rapid traction in the mid-twentieth century as a means of describing the gap between the sciences and the arts and humanities (a gap that humanities disciplines such as our own have sought fitfully to close). However, as a scholar who frequently passes through distant lands (residing at the moment as an American with a few meager words of Mandarin amid the vast, diverse cultures of China), I am struck by the fact that human communities are actually a constellation of innumerable overlapping and competing cultures, not merely two. Modern China is famous for its vigorous efforts during the past century to achieve national oneness, despite gaps of language, ethnicity, and geography. During my initial conversations with graduate students at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, though, I have been struck by the fact that my students here—who’ve come from all over China—have a strong sense of their own regional dialects, landscapes, and cuisines, but they’ve learned to cooperate together (indeed, as many as six students live together in a single dorm room, without air conditioning in the tropical heat and humidity) in order to pursue their intellectual lives, conducting their lives in the shared language, the common language, of Mandarin.

Distance is a luxury. Separation is a luxury. The notion of “two cultures” of many distinct cultures—is a luxury. While celebrating diversity, as we do so routinely in North America, I believe it is a bracing and sobering experience to travel to distant parts of the world where evidence of cooperation and collaboration, where the practice of multilingualism, is so routine. It occurs to me that, in our collective effort to appreciate the world’s many “ecosystems of meanings,” both within and beyond the field of literary studies, we should avail ourselves of any opportunity to work together in cross-disciplinary, multicultural, and international teams. The world’s environmental and social problems will continue to frustrate the analytical efforts of individual thinkers, disciplines, and even nations. Teamwork (in the pedagogical, research, and creative arenas), as so many ISLE readers and contributors surely know, is crucial to any progress we might make in the future.

I find myself wondering what kinds of experiments in creative and scholarly teamwork we might be able to present in the pages of future issues of ISLE, building upon the inspiring examples in this and previous issues of the journal.

Scott Slovic
life-sciences. A number of ambitious works have recently appeared that aim to consolidate the connections between literature and ecology, to promote a more sophisticated understanding of science among the part of critics, and to integrate ecocriticism with established theoretical perspectives. The authors of this essay have profited from several of these, and we hope that the present reading of Robert Frost’s “Spring Pools” will contribute to the ongoing dialogue.¹

Ecocriticism is a term that describes scholarship “concerned with the environmental implications of literary texts, [...] a scholarly perspective attuned to the place of the more-than-human world in particular works of art” (Branch and Stivic xix-xv). We have chosen to convey our own view of how ecology may inform poetry by focusing on a single lyric, “Spring Pools,” from the 1928 volume West-Running Brook, and relating it specifically to our collaboration as teachers and our shared natural-history excursions over the past six years. Bringing two disparate academic backgrounds together allows us to “think twice” and arrive at a richer understanding of the poem. We reach some conclusions, such as the importance of invisibility in “Spring Pools,” that have gone unnoticed in the literature and, along the way, correct the occasional biological misunderstanding. We also hope to suggest, through this exploration, that the promise of ecocriticism might sometimes be most fully realized when it takes the form of a mutually respectful dialogue between readers with different educational backgrounds and expertise.

Given such a proposition, it seems appropriate to say a bit more, here at the outset, about the conversation of which this reading is the fruit. For the past fifteen years, while teaching Conservation Biology at Harvard, Glenn Adelson has developed a special interest in combining the study of systemsatics and ecology in the field with the study of poetry—as well as of history, philosophy, economics, and law. His literary affinities hark back to majors in English and studying the classics as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan before pursuing his Ph.D. in Biology. About six years ago, Glenn began inviting John Elder to meet with his Conservation Biology students when they took their winter field-trip to northern Vermont. While those sessions also touched on such writers as Wordsworth, Hopkins, Dickinson, Dillard, and Lopez, discussion of Frost’s poems consistently proved to be the most rewarding. It dawned on both teachers that, to find Frost’s equal as a poetic naturalist, one would have to go back to Shakespeare and John Clare. In both college and graduate school, John’s discipline was English. But through participation in the Environmental Studies Program at Middlebury College, where he has taught since 1973, he has increasingly concentrated on the intersections between literature and the natural world. In the summers, John teaches at the Bread Loaf School of English in the Green Mountains, and for the past couple of years he has invited Glenn up to offer workshops in field-ecology to classes on nature writing and Frost.

That’s by way of introducing ourselves and framing the history of this reading. But since it is in every way a joint project, we’ll now revert to the plural pronoun for the duration. We discovered that, in a large number of Frost’s works, the more closely we investigated the ecological references, the more vividly the details of the poetry answered to them. Our intention in this reading of “Spring Pools” is to bring out aspects of Frost’s elegant lyric that are also representative of other works by the poet. This first section of the essay thus gives a general interpretation that relates the one poem to a cluster of similar ones by Frost and that registers insights of some of the other critics who have discussed it. Having established that context, we will then turn to our own more specifically ecological understanding of “Spring Pools.”

These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
The total sky almost without defect.
And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
And yet not out by any brook or river,
But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
To darken nature and be summer woods—
Let them think twice before they use their powers
To blot out and drink up and sweep away
These flowery waters and these watery flowers
From now that melted only yesterday.

An inhabitant of northern New England enters “Spring Pools” with the sense of stepping into a familiar break in the woods, and in the circle of the year. Spring seems to be saying good-bye in this region from the moment it arrives—still chilled and shivering under a wind honed by winter, but with the foliage of summer threatening soon to block the light, suck up the water, and “sweep away” the flowers. On one level, this poem simply offers an impartial observation of the volatility of weather and landscape here. Yet the ephemeral nature of spring pools also offers an opportunity to reflect about larger patterns and connections in a world of change.

In “Spring Pools,” as in so many poems by Frost, the mutability of the season and the vulnerability of beauty’s “watery flowers” reinforces a sense that the writer’s own purchase in this exposed world is also
a precarious one. A reader hears the ominous rhymes "reflect" and "defect," "shiver" and "river," "powers" and "flowers." "[D]ark" and "darken" make this hinge between the seasons a dangerous one, while the intervening line's reference to "pent-up buds" suggests a coming cataclysm. The trees, in short, seem poised to overwhelm and erase the fragile beauty of spring pools. "To blot out and drink up and sweep away." In such a world, the interwoven lyricism of Frost's poems is an effort of compression that is finally not adequate to the alarming centrifugality of nature. The struggle to retain control seems amplified by the fact that over a third of the poems in the 1928 volume _West-Rising Brook_ contain either twelve (as in "Spring Pools") or sixteen lines. In scope, these are practically sonnets, but without the confident resolution of that highly familiar form. Similarly, at just about the center of this formally exigent poem (lines seven and eight) there is a single off-rhyme, between "buds" and "woods," that suggests a transformation sliding out from the writer's control. This impression is confirmed by a sudden change in scansion that overcomes lines nine, ten, and eleven—the consistent lambs of the first eight lines mutate wildly and beautifully into spondees (///) ("Let them think twice"). "The woods (///) ("To blot out and drink up")." "And amphiabeds (///) ("These flowery waters and these watery flowers")." "Spring Pools," like so many of Frost's lyrics, weeps anxiety about the adequacy of art and the stability of the writer's own frame of mind with an exquisite evocation of the natural moment. The rhythm of these three lines mirrors both the headlong velocity of spring's passing and the wavering beauty of wildflowers reflected on the surface of a wind-stirred pond.

While one of the most popular poets of the twentieth century, Frost is also one whose critical reputation has proven to be as volatile as the New England weather. Lawrence Thompson's iconoclastic biography, _Scarred Together_ so many damning facts and inferences that the most lucid of Frost's lyrics were sometimes discovered to be "designs of darkness to appall." Clearly, as that line from the sonnet "Design" exemplifies, there is ample darkness to work with in these poems—plenty of despair, weariness, and rage, scenes of suffering threatening to bring over into violence. Yet a reading that saw nothing but a longing for the end of life in a poem like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," for instance, would be a failure of proportion. While the line "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep" can reverberate with longing and unliftable heaviness, it must be set against the sheer loveliness of lines like "The only other sound's the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake." It must be balanced, in the reading as in the writing, by the clangor from a restive horse that breaks the meditative stillness: "He gives his harness bents a shake/To ask if there is some mistake." The purpose of literary criticism is not to substitute one reductive reading for another but rather to open up a richer and more nourishing complexity.

One way to appreciate the fuller context of Frost's darkness is to delve deeper into the physicality that everywhere grounds and stabilizes the psychological texture of his poems. It's true that Frost's life was hedged round by mental illness, from his violent and self-destructive father to his institutionalized sister and daughter and the son who took his own life. The poet's own mood-swings and unpredictability had their genetic context. But it's also true that, well into his eighties, Frost remained an active writer and speaker, producing hundreds of works that have delighted and enriched readers around the world. Joseph Brodsky in Russia, Seamus Heaney in Ireland, and Derek Walcott in the Caribbean all testify to their indebtedness to him. Let's forget somewhat about generational aspect of his work for the fact that one way he accomplished so much much amid the changing face of nature. As the speaker says in the final stanza of "Tree at My Window," also from _West-Rising Brook:_

That day she put our heads together,  
Fate had her imagination about her,  
Your head so much concerned with outer,  
Mine with inner, weather.

There's been much excellent discussion of Frost's interest in science, culminating in Robert B. Hass's recent study _Going by Contraries: Robert Frost and the Conflict with Science._ Hass sums up his analysis in this way: "The Jamesian pragmatist in Frost allowed him to propose valuable though limited truths that could help restore poetry's cultural value, while the Bergsonian vitalist in him allowed him to forge a clear distinction between physics and metaphysics, thus preserving the spiritual reality he yearned." Such a balance allowed him "to negotiate a tentative truce with science." (16). Our own primary focus here is not on the broader dialogue between science and religion in Frost, however, so much as it is on his keenness as an observer of the New England landscape and its seasons. As Thomas Bailey has written, "[In] our need to understand Frost as a thinker and craftsman, often we forget that he was a man who spent time outdoors, carefully observing natural phenomena and recording them as accurately as he could" (222). We have tried using our reading of "Spring Pools" to take into account the patterns a seasoned observer like Frost could discern in the seasonal cycles of the New England woods.

His systematic approach to nature was fostered by conversations with a scientifically inclined friend named Carl Burrell in 1889, while
Frost was still in high school. Seven years later—while on a belated honeymoon with Elinor at Allentown, New Hampshire—Frost would often accompany Burrell, who was living nearby, in studying the local botany. (Elinor, being seven months pregnant, did not always feel like accompanying the two friends on these expeditions.) Carl introduced Rob to many local wildflowers and ferns as well as to a Darwinian view of adaptation and natural selection. He also pointed him towards Mrs. W. S. Dana’s primer How to Know the Wild Flowers: A Guide to the Names, Haunts, and Habits of Our Common Wild Flowers, a volume that Frost prized for years (Thompson 216-20). For the next sixty-five years, the poet continued to observe flowers, trees, and ecological processes with the sharp eye of an accomplished naturalist. Frost’s keen insight into the cycles of change and continuity within nature seems to have brought him an urgently needed and stabilizing perspective.

As it had been for Thoreau, a practice of going out to inspect the developments of each new day (his “morning work”) was inseparable for Frost from the practice of poetry itself. The subject of lyrics poetry has always been on one important level the movement of the poet’s mind, and for Frost this movement was coordinated with, stimulated by, the seasonal changes of foliage, the movements of animals, and the sudden turns of a day’s weather. Nature’s gift to him is passed along to the reader in the freshness of observations that liberate the real seasons from our preconceptions of them, making the whole world fresh again.

In “Spring Pools,” Frost explores the tension between two phenomena belonging to high spring—the blossoming of the wildflowers and the unfolding of a forest’s leaves. As we point out in the next section, spring flowers usually precede the foliage for two reasons. The first, and more obvious one, is that they require more light than a full canopy will allow to reach the ground. The second is that groundwater has not yet been taken up by tree roots to feed their expanding leaves. Frost’s sensitivity to this apparent conflict between different phases of natural beauty can be related to his general sensitivity to edges. Not only the edges between seasons (“Spring Pools,” “The Quest of the Purple Fringed,” “Two Tramps in Maud Time,” and “Reluctance,” among others), but also the ones between an agricultural community and the woods that replace it (“Directive”) or to the gendered differences between perceptions of nature (“West-Running Brook”). Along such edges, Frost confronts unsettling emotions that are nonetheless grounded in concrete aspects of the changing year.

In “Spring Pools,” the advent of spring is felt with reluctance, trepidation, even regret. The “watery flowers” that open around a vernal pool will soon be blotted out and swept away—almost in the moment of their arising. Foreseeing this pattern, he addresses himself to the trees: “Let them think twice.” Yet to think twice is not to refrain from advancing the season and filling in the canopy. It is a pause, not a prohibition, a momentary reconsideration rather than a reversal of course. A similar bundle of emotions can be discovered in “Nothing Gold Can Stay”: “Then leaf subsides to leaf/So Eden sank to grief/So dawn goes down to day.” The subsiding leaf fulfills its genetic promise and produces food for the next season’s buds; in Eden comes the fortunate fall, whence arise new possibilities for intimacy between humanity and God, between Adam and Eve; as the pink of dawn recedes, the full day is realized. A combination of lingering regret with affirmation of the whole mortal cycle is one species of poetic meaning within Frost’s ecotone in “Spring Pools.” It migrates in, on one might say, from the pastoral literature bounding this poem on one side. An elegiac tone has long characterized the pastoral world, from the shadows that lengthen beneath high mountains at the end of Virgil’s first eclogue to the tocs in death in Pliny’s “Epistle to Titus in Arcadia Ego” and Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” Some of the most compelling critics of our day have written discerningly of the place of Frost’s poem in this melancholy lineage. For Frank Lentricchia, “Spring Pools” “is at once a lament for the transience of precarious things, and an evocation of the dominant destructive element in nature—seasonal process—which obliterates nature’s own momentary shows of beauty and peace” (91). Judith Wiser writes that to the casual observer might be a scene of tranquil and delicate beauty—spring pools reflecting sky and flowers—becomes in this poem a struggle without struggle, a devouring of the weak by the strong, the process and development of the mighty at the expense of the fragile” (139-40). And in John Hollander we read that “We are never told what sort of flowers these are, but they seem to be narcissi, recalling their Ovidian avatar, who, Spenser memorably says, “Was of himselfe the idle Pamumour. / Both love and lover, without hope of joy, / For only he fadeth to a watery flower” (128). Though each of these readers points to important elements in Frost’s poem, and Hollander identifies a telling echo, there is another aspect to its meaning that none of them registers. In fact, narcissi do not grow beside the vernal pools of northern New England (they are native to Europe, not North America). But there is nonetheless an immemorial cycle of rising and falling in the waters and vegetation of those woods, reverberant with the deepest mythologies of the Western tradition. Because Frost sees so deeply into the patterns of recurrence and persistence around him, he can both express his own regret at the passing of spring and affirm the existence of larger, never-interrupted structures of meaning in his
world. The poet’s unusually keen ecological insights lend vigor to his voice and amplify his imagery.

II. “up by roots”

“Spring Pools” is a beautifully brief poem about the beauty and brevity of spring. In New England, where Frost observed the seasons and articulated their passing, spring is particularly short, while summer, fall, and winter—especially winter—are long. Field naturalists have long focused on spring’s transition, calling the watery flowers of the poem’s haunting penultimate line “spring ephemerals” and the flowery waters “ephemeral pools.” And countless writers before Frost have commented on, or lamented, the quick departure of spring. He is, however, the first poet to write about it with a high degree of ecological sophistication. Frost’s perceptions and elaborations are subtle, though, and have nowhere been fully explicated. Specifically, at the heart of “Spring Pools” lies the poet’s recognition of three natural processes: the vertical movement of the water table, the perennation of wildflowers, and the preformation of tree buds. An awareness of these processes enriches the meaning of the poem, leading to an appreciation of the importance of visibility and invisibility in the natural cycles that Frost presents.

Moreover, by revealing Frost’s understanding of the perennial nature of flowers, water, and tree buds, we hope to show that more pessimistic and sometimes even violent readings of this poem are misplaced. Natural phenomena seem to be vanishing, and therefore one can speak of melancholy. The poet, however, has looked at the pools for many years, long-lasting, and “something for hope.” In this poem, Frost identifies himself with a larger cycle that is beyond him but to which he can nevertheless belong, insofar as he can affirm it emotionally and comprehend it intellectually. Reuben Brower has called “Spring Pools” “the form perhaps most perfect of any written by Frost, every accent of sense and meter and every touch in imagery does what it should do from beginning to end” (36-38). We want to argue that it is also one of Frost’s most perceptive poems about nature, and that in this combination of musical form and scientific insight it distills his resolute, hard-won vision.

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In central New Hampshire the marsh marigolds begin to bloom at the water’s edge in the middle of May. High above them, tiny green shoots poke out from the buds of the ashes, oaks, and basswoods. Within a few days the wet woodland fills with a yellow flush of marsh marigold flowers. At the same time, the buds of the trees open and reveal their elongating shoots and unfolding leaves. By the end of May, all that is visible of the marsh marigolds are a few diagnostic leaves and clusters of their brown, follicular fruits. The trees above, however, have now reached the fully leafed condition they will maintain uninterrupted until late October. The marsh marigolds are just one example of the spring ephemerals that can photosynthesize and flower for only that brief period of the Spring when water is abundant and the trees above bear no leaves to block their sunlight.

The visible processes of early spring are accompanied by invisible ones. The buds producing the leaves of the canopy contain fully formed leaf and shoot systems that developed during the summer of the preceding year. Their bursting out is a function of cellular expansion from the uptake of water by their roots. And the water visible as spring pools in fact represents the highest plane of a water table that saturates the permeable forest soil and rests on top of the underlying bedrock. This table rises and lowers as water is added to or taken from the system. Only when the water table is at its highest level does it appear as visible pools. It is still the meaning, however, at all other times of the year, lying at various distances below the surface. Similarly, the marsh marigold plant does not cease to exist when it disappears; it perennates, that is, it persists as a below-ground rhizome, unseen. Most, if not all, of the spring wildflowers that Frost would have seen surrounding the spring pools of New England are perennials.

The structure of “Spring Pools” reinforces the powerful, if sometimes overlooked, agency of time in an extended, but not a dozen, a fifteen-stanza, consisting of twelve lines in iambic pentameter with a discernable rhyme scheme. In essence it is a sonnet in which the last two lines are missing, or, to be more poetic about it, a sonnet in which the last two lines are invisible. Invisibility, or rather the tension between visibility and invisibility that occurs as the seasons cycle, is the poem’s controlling idea. But that tension becomes apparent only when the reader knows natural history as Frost himself knew it. The visibility/invisibility tension appears immediately in the opening couplet: the sky is in the process of moving from visible to invisible. Here the change from visibility to invisibility is not intrinsic to the sky; it is only an accidental characteristic of the positioning of a human observer, who happens to be standing beneath trees rather than in an open field. As the attention of the poet turns from the sky to the earth, the tension between the visible and the invisible intensifies. This tension is not only intrinsic to the natural history of Frost’s plants—the watery flowers and
before, on back to the "yesterday" that ends the poem. But the forward
movement of the poem offers a second, forward-looking, meaning, "not
yet over," as in the exclamation, "The flowers are still open," expressing
gratitude that such a beautiful state has not ended.

Moreover, because the reflection is "almost without defect," a third
meaning applies: "undisturbed," as in "still water," for any breeze that
would cause ripples on the surface of the water would likewise mar the
reflection. This meaning interacts in various ways with the rhyming
"chill" of the third line, which takes along with "shiver" contradicts
the stillness, and with the reference to the quasi-still life aspects of the
eleventh line, with the "flowery waters and watery flowers," invoking
a Monet-like waterscape. "Still" also can be read to mean "peaceful"
or "in balance," highlighting the disguised (invisible) nature of the
underlying changes that are in fact taking place incrementally and
continuously.

Perhaps most important, "still" has the meaning of "yet," as in "these
pools are in forests, yet they reflect the sky." How could this be? Because
the leaves have not yet come out. The leaves, which are in fact present,
are invisible, and it is their expansion to visibility that will cause the
now-visible water to become invisible. By so obviously highlighting the
concept of visibility in the first two lines, Frost sets up the more
biologically complex tensions between visibility and invisibility that
follow both in the poem and in the seasons.

In order to understand the processes that cause different aspects of
the forest ecosystem to be visible in some parts of the year and invis-
visible in others, it is necessary to understand the various contrivances
by which plants survive from year to year, and the particulars of the
manner in which water cycles through a forest ecosystem. During
the height of the summer, even after its leaves and fruits have fol-
lowed the flowers of the marsh marigold into oblivion, the plant is not
dead. An inch or two below the soil, it perennates, year after year, as
a knobby clump of rhizomes with long, fibrous roots emanating from
it. During the brief time in spring when leaves capture sunlight and
photosynthesize, the marsh marigold—the whole plant, not just the
flowering stalk, is the marsh marigold—allocates its yearly allotment of
carbohydrates between survival, that is, increasing the length of its
rhizome by one knob, and sexual reproduction, producing its flowers
and fruits. Marsh marigolds, then, are not ephemeral at all—they are
long-lived perennials. Only their visible, above-ground organs are
ephemeral. The same is true for almost all the pool's watery species,
which over-summer, over-fall, and over-winter as rhizomes, corms,
tubers, or bulbs. The flowers that Frost envisions in "Spring Pools"
are the wetland flowers of the great Eastern Deciduous Forest, which
extends from Maritime Canada west to Minnesota. (Frost actually wrote the poem while teaching at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor; there is very little difference between the species of trees and flowers one would find around spring pools in Southern Michigan and Southern New Hampshire, which he called home at the time.) In addition to the marsh marigold, these woodland ephemerals include spring cress, swamp buttercup, water buttercup, and a host of violets. Every one of these species is a perennial.

An annual is a plant that grows from a seed and lives through only one growth and reproductive cycle (for Frost’s purposes, the spring, summer, and fall of one year), during which it produces more seeds and then dies. For annuals, no functioning tissues or organs persist into the next growing cycle. A perennial is a plant that may grow initially from seed or may grow initially from a vegetative propagule (what gardeners know as a cutting or a bulb), and persists through at least two (rasberries, sometimes called biennials), and up to fifteen hundred (bristlecone pines) growing seasons. Perennials can be divided into two categories: those that perennate visibly, that is, woody plants, the trees with their pent-up buds and those that perennate underground, the watery flowers. Wildflowers perennate by keeping their living cells underground, where they are protected by the equable climate of the soil from the frost that would otherwise explode their cells. Trees, on the other hand, perennate by erecting elaborate structures of a once-living, now-dead material we know as wood. The living cells of the tree are protected in three different ways. The root cells are protected

the same way the entire plant of the wildflower is protected, by the comforting blanket of soil. The cambial cells that form a cylinder concentric to the outer cylinder of the tree are protected by the corky material of the bark. Finally, the ensuing year’s shoots and leaves are protected by the scales and hairs of the buds.

The forest canopy looks the same to a casual observer from the time of its full leafing-out in late May to the color-changes of September and October. But in the axil of every leaf, the crotch that forms where the leaf meets the stem, next year’s buds are forming: tiny but fully developed shoot systems covered with scales that protect them from the elements. Each bud is a preformed miniature shoot, packed with leaves, a stalk, and even the buds that will hold the leaves of the year after next, wrapped inside a protective envelope of scales, awaiting the change in season.

By the end of winter, when the snow melts to become the water that drains, under the force of gravity, through the soils to lift the water table, the leaves in the buds of the oaks and other deciduous trees are, with a few exceptions, already fully formed.

In the mid-1400s, François Villon wrote the ballad whose haunting refrain, “Ou sont les neiges d’antan?” (“Where are the snows of yesteryear?”), has been thought neither to have nor to need an answer. This query is universally interpreted as a lament, a rhetorical question conveying a statement of loss. But for any close observer, that same question could arise from a sense of wonder about nature, and it is, in fact, a scientific question, one that can prompt empirical investigation into the nature of the water cycle. Across the centuries, however, Frost has answered Villon in the final line of “Spring Pools”—“From snow that melted only yesterday.” The snows of yesteryear, as the observant naturalist and poet knows, are overhead, in the leaves of the trees.
III. "The total sky"

This collaborative reading of "Spring Pools" has been a preliminary foray by two college teachers, setting out together along an ecotone. We want to acknowledge, here in closing, that there is nothing definitive about our approach. Many scholars and critics are undertaking their own excursions into similar terrain now. This reflects a widely shared perception that the environmental crises of our day require a realignment of educational institutions and of habits of mind. The natural world is too precious and complex to be left to a single discipline, and the same holds true for the landscape of literature. The university as currently constituted—in its insistence that learning is, first and foremost, disciplinary—perpetuates a nineteenth-century assumption that, we believe, has been a major factor in the continuing degradation of the environment. We consider interdisciplinarity environmental studies to be the paradigm for education in the twenty-first century and offer this investigation as a contribution to it.

Few people yet possess the range of training that would allow for ecocritical scholarship that is at once fully interdisciplinary and scientifically rigorous; we certainly acknowledge that neither of us do. But through a sustained dialogue individuals can nevertheless reach beyond conventional disciplinary expertise while avoiding a merely impressionistic approach. There may be implications here for the future of scholarly organizations with an interdisciplinary bent. Joint meetings and publications by the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment and the Society for Conservation Biology, for instance, could do much to advance the thinking and pedagogy of both memberships.

We also want to suggest that it may initially prove more productive—upon entering this particular edge between disciplines—to linger over specific texts and natural phenomena rather than to speculate too quickly on the language and philosophy of ecology or on implications for literary theory. This is especially true because both of those broader academic systems are themselves in flux, with sometimes tendentious controversies swirling around them. We can recommend, from our own experience, the value of beginning with a practice of natural history that emphasizes field-work and identification and that is coordinated with an equally intent practice of close reading. Out of such a modest but concrete effort to "think twice" may emerge both ecological insight and enhanced appreciation of a poet like Frost. Ecocriticism will certainly continue to evolve, and this season, too, will soon give way to another. But to pause for a moment and appreciate the flowers, before drawing the spring pools up into an overarching canopy of theory and pedagogy, will not be amiss.

Notes


2. See Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Derek Walcott, Home to Robert Frost.

3. As an aside, it is interesting to note that until recently many wetland scientists did not accept the idea that spring pools are, in fact, reflections of the groundwater table. The general dogma had been that they were ephemeral, perched water bodies formed from runoff and snowmelt, and that the groundwater did not contribute to them. But a growing body of literature has now clearly documented the groundwater–surface water connection. Experimental scientists have thus caught up with insights long available to any field naturalist who, like Frost, spends time in the woods and observes the rapid drop in water levels in parallel with the trees leafing out. Personal communication,
April, 2006, from Elizabeth Colburn, author of Vernal Pools: Natural History and Conservation.

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293  The Post-Southern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction, by Marty Bono. (Lisa Shum)


296  Montana Surrond, by Phil Condon. (O. Alan Wetzien)


298  Silently on the Tide, by Pete Hay. (Robert Zeller)

299  American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World, by Susan Scott Parrish. (Michael Ziser)

Annotated List of Recent Books

Contributors

EDITOR’S NOTE

I normally sit down to write my editor’s note for each issue of ISLE with the issue’s contents sitting in a box by my side, and I try twice a year to reflect on the points of coherence, the subtle (and usually accidental) motifs, that I discern in the scholarship and creative prose and poetry that have made their way into the pages of the journal.

Today, though, I am sitting in a small, dark apartment in the “foreign experts” residence at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in Guangzhou, China. I arrived in China a few days ago in order to teach a one-month “intensive course” on environmental literature and ecocriticism, and I have with me only one of the many exciting pieces that will appear in the Summer 2006 issue of ISLE, so I will not be able to offer my usual brief reflections on each of the contributions.

What I did bring with me to China is a copy of the unique collaboration between a literary critic and a biologist in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the “ecosystem of meanings” in Robert Frost’s poem “Spring Pools.” John Elder (well known to many ISLE readers as a former president of ASLE-US and as a teacher and scholar of literature and environmental studies at Middlebury College for more than three decades) has joined forces with his occasional teaching partner, Glenn Adelson of the Harvard University Herbaria, to offer a braided meditation that operates at the ecotone between language and place, between literature and science. They introduce their essay by expressing their “wish to escape from the compartmentalization of the two cultures,” building upon the desire of literary critics (especially ecocritics) to “enter into more substantial exchanges with colleagues in the sciences.” It has become commonplace for critics of our field to point out that ecocriticism is not “scientific.” While I would argue that, in most cases, ecocriticism (like the environmental humanities in general) does not pretend to be a natural or social science and, in fact, seeks a different kind of understanding than what the sciences can offer, I do find myself inspired and heartened by the collaborative effort demonstrated...
in the Elder-Adelson paper—by what it says about the possibility of thinkers working together across cultures to explore subtle textual and ecological phenomena.

Obviously, C.P. Snow's famous "two cultures" metaphor gained rapid traction in the mid-twentieth century as a means of describing the gap between the sciences and the arts and humanities (a gap that humanities disciplines such as our own have sought to fitfully to close). However, as a scholar who frequently passes through distant lands (residing at the moment as an American with a few meager words of Mandarin amid the vast, diverse cultures of China), I am struck by the fact that human communities are actually a constellation of innumerable overlapping and competing cultures, not merely two. Modern China is famous for its vigorous efforts during the past century to achieve national oneness, despite gaps of language, ethnicity, and geography. During my initial conversations with graduate students at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, though, I have been struck by the fact that my students here—who've come from all over China—have a strong sense of their own regional dialects, landscapes, and cuisines, but they've learned to cooperate together (indeed, as many as six students live together in a single dorm room, without air conditioning in the tropical heat and humidity) in order to pursue their intellectual lives, conducting their lives in the shared language, the common language, of Mandarin.

Distance is a luxury. Separation is a luxury. The notion of "two cultures"—of many distinct cultures—is a luxury. While celebrating diversity, as we do so routinely in North America, I believe it is a bracing and sobering experience to travel to distant parts of the world where evidence of cooperation and collaboration, where the practice of multilingualism, is so routine. It occurs to me that, in our collective effort to appreciate the world's many "ecosystems of meanings," both within and beyond the field of literary studies, we should avail ourselves of any opportunity to work together in cross-disciplinary, multicultural, and international teams. The world's environmental and social problems will continue to frustrate the analytical efforts of individual thinkers, disciplines, and even nations. Teamwork (in the pedagogical, research, and creative arenas), as so many ISLE readers and contributors surely know, is crucial to any progress we might make in the future.

I find myself wondering what kinds of experiments in creative and scholarly teamwork we might be able to present in the pages of future issues of ISLE, building upon the inspiring examples in this and previous issues of the journal.

Scott Slovic