

Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Submissions of more than one thousand words are not considered. The journal omits titles before persons' names and discourages endnotes and works-cited lists in the Forum. Letters should be e-mailed to pmlaforum@mla.org or be printed double-spaced and mailed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

Ecocriticism's Growth and Diversity

TO THE EDITOR:

As an insider to the history of ecocriticism, I was familiar with most of the information reported by Cheryll Glotfelty in "The Formation of a Field: Ecocriticism in America" (127.3 [2012]: 607–16), Michelle Balaev's interview with her, but I appreciated its appearance in *PMLA*. A number of additions can be offered here to supplement Glotfelty's recollections, which, ironically, omit the role of the MLA in the natal phase of ecocriticism in the early 1990s. Her historic 1989 letter proposing the creation of a new discipline and our subsequent meeting in Chicago jolted me into a Monsieur Jourdain-like awareness that I had been unwittingly writing ecocriticism all along—and so had a lot of other people. As we hatched plans for the now canonical *Ecocriticism Reader* I got the idea to propose and chair an MLA convention session on the greening of literary study. My call for papers in 1990 brought many replies, from which I could have chosen a few outstanding panelists, but the proposed session got turned down. When the proposal was resubmitted, in 1991, the result was *Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies*, a landmark session at the 107th MLA convention, in San Francisco, which predated by a few months the Western Literature Association conference that Glotfelty alludes to as the genesis of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). Modestly requesting a meeting room with twenty-five seats, we were stunned by the more than one hundred attendees who forced us into a last-minute search for a larger space. After all the papers had been delivered, we passed around a sign-up sheet so that we could stay in touch with all the attendees.

My own earliest ecocritical essays, which found their way into the bibliography that led Glotfelty to write her famed form letter (reproduced in Balaev's interview), discussed air pollution's effect on body and brain

and had little, if anything, to do with nature writing, the originating genre of the ecocritical movement, now vastly expanded into multiple disciplines. Lurking under the surface of those early writings were intimations of Darwinian evolution, the force of the environment on the human body, and the nature of consciousness. Today a proliferation of fields, such as behavioral ecology, treats subjects like these. In June 2001 Joseph Carroll's talk at the ASLE conference at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, "Adaptation, Environment, and Literary Study," gathered up some of the ecocritical threads woven through his already influential book *Evolution and Literary Theory* and offered life-changing epiphanies for the humanities. What there began as a Darwinian ecology opened doors from the humanities into the sciences—most recently, into paleoanthropology and archaeology—and, in my case, into consciousness studies. This trajectory can be seen in my 2009 book *The Nature of Being Human: From Environmentalism to Consciousness*. After the book's final chapter, "My Life as a Robot," I pursued its theme—"eco" with a vengeance!—even further in my essay "Free As We Need to Be." Few readers of that overview will fail to notice the extent to which "[t]he old order changeth, yielding place to new." My article "How We Became So Beautiful and Bright: Deep History and Evolutionary Anthropology" entails still broader perspectives (see <http://hfromm.net/professional>). Most of these writings would not exist without the generative force of ecocriticism, extending well beyond the earlier social challenges of ecofeminism, environmental justice, capitalist critique, environmental law, and subaltern-cultures studies, among other disciplines.

Indeed, as I write this letter, *Science*, *Nature*, and the news media dependent on them are reporting on the trillions of microbes constituting a microbiome in our guts and on our skins. These almost invisible life-forms (our own personal Higgs bosons), like the more visible, biologically diverse animals from whom we derive, dissolve the traditional, humanist boundaries between an imperial "us" and a merely ancillary

"environment." Even a discipline as modest as ecocriticism, having expanded so greatly over the past twenty-five years, can be sure that infinite worlds remain for exploration.

Harold Fromm

Institute of the Environment
University of Arizona, Tucson

Reply:

I appreciate Harold Fromm's emphasis on the diverse approaches found in the ecocritical field and on the relevance of ecocriticism to the goals and activities of the MLA because this was the future envisioned by the early scholars. Ecocriticism is an expansive, interdisciplinary field of study that arose from a shared desire for a new literary theory and practice. This shared interest has made ecocriticism a robust field that continues to grow, as seen in the newest ecocriticism program in the United States: the literature-and-environment program that started in the fall of 2012 in the English department at the University of Idaho, spearheaded by Scott Slovic, Jennifer Ladino, Erin James, Janis Johnson, and Jodie Nicotra. The field is also becoming rooted as an academic discipline around the world, in countries such as China, India, Brazil, and Australia, to name only a few.

Although it may be enticing to try to pinpoint the exact second when ecocriticism was born, the formation of a discipline is never that clean. The field grew out of a community of scholars interested in the wide relations between peoples and places, society and nature, literature and the environment. The ecocritical field was building across conferences, disciplines, and institutions over several decades to gain a critical momentum in the early 1990s that led to the founding of ASLE in 1992.

In foraging in the ecocritical past to find stories of the field's origins, I chose to start with Cheryll Glotfelty, who initiated the idea for the first ecocritical anthology in the 1989 letter that she wrote as a graduate student. My longer project entails a series of interviews of the major ecocritical scholars who were active in

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the formative years of the field, which will accompany my interview with Glotfelty. Her letter and the ideas brought forth in it, along with the anthology she coedited with Fromm, helped catalyze the public recognition of a field. In this old, wrinkled letter (complete with handwriting in the margins), Glotfelty invites others to help develop ecocriticism as a discipline, collaborate with her on an ecocritical anthology, and circulate an ecocritical bibliography (she attached her own twenty-page bibliography). The collaborative spirit that pervades her letter is a characteristic element that defines not only the historical formation of ecocriticism in America but also the interdisciplinarity across traditionally separated fields that continues to define ecocriticism. In addition, Glotfelty's letter expresses a type of sustainable intellectual ethos that inquires how we as scholars can preserve and expand a critical practice, as well as how we might make our work matter in the world.

This latter concern has been contained by the term *social activism*, but it can also be understood as the extension of a literary criticism that connects the meanings inside and outside of texts. Glotfelty's question "How can one, as a literary critic and teacher, contribute to the ecological health of the planet?" is a pivotal concern that ties together the spheres of the personal and public, the individual and society (610). While ecocriticism places this concern at the forefront of its practice, the question of how academic scholarship relates to the wider world always underlies literary criticism.

The ability to cross traditional borders, innovate, diversify, and collaborate that characterizes ecocriticism also defines many principles of literary criticism today. Literary criticism is by nature theoretically and practically dependent on different systems of knowledge and types of interpretation that elucidate meaning, value, and form. To a certain degree, literary theory and criticism are necessarily invested in exploring the problem of the connection between the personal and political, the theoretical and practical. Perhaps the term *social activism* is a misnomer because literary theory and criticism

are anchored in the trade winds of language and experience that produce ethical dilemmas arising from the relation between ideas and actions.

The question remains for literary criticism as it does for society: "What is the connection between the text and world, ideas and actions?" In thinking of the relation between scholarship and activism that seems most urgent in ecocriticism, I am reminded of a poem by Adrienne Rich (1929–2012), entitled simply "18," that addresses this question of connection between inner and outer worlds. The poem's speaker explains:

The problem is
to connect, without hysteria, the pain
of any one's body with the pain of the body's
world

For it is the body's world
they are trying to destroy forever

(*Your Native Land, Your Life*;
New York: Norton, 1986; print; 100)

The full poem expresses a tragic view of existence that imagines the individual as disconnected from her own body, other individuals, society, and nature. Yet the speaker articulates the need to reconnect the broken ties between self and other, mind and body, and human beings and nature in order to fully inhabit one's life. The disparate self exists in the desire to return to the *other*—body, society, environment. This attempt to harmonize self and other can also be understood as the effort to interpret existence, which is a view traced back through the historical development of literary theory and criticism. As found in Rich's poem, the act of locating knowledge in the relations between two worlds of meaning, a gesture of connecting parts to the whole that ties the individual to society and to nature, speaks to the linking of diverse disciplinary worlds that accompanies literary analysis. One of the refreshing elements of ecocriticism that has allowed it to thrive in different parts of the world is its ability to situate the problem of interpretation in the relational dynamic between theory and social action.

Michelle Balaev
Wake Forest University

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Michelle Balaev
 Lake Forest University

Reply:

I am chagrined that I forgot to mention the 1991 MLA convention session that Harold Fromm organized and on which I presented. Fromm's idea of proposing a special session on ecocriticism at the convention to raise interest in the topic and perhaps to garner essays for the anthology bore fruit, and thanks to him *The Ecocriticism Reader* features essays by three of the panel's participants: Alison Byerly, Cynthia Deitering, and William Howarth, the respondent. (The third presenter was Sean O'Grady.) Now that my memory is jogged, I recall the madcap scramble for a bigger room and the impromptu collection of people's names and addresses. The resulting mailing list was used to announce the formation of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) less than a year later, at the 1992 Western Literature Association (WLA) conference in Reno.

I'm wondering if I may have forgotten the MLA's role in the natal phase of ecocriticism because I and many early ecocritics have tended to think of the MLA as an antagonist rather than an ally? To many of us the MLA looms as a large, intimidating, conservative association whose first answer is likely to be no, suggesting a code to crack, a wall to breach, a party to crash. Because the MLA is the major American professional organization for the study of language and literature, it is important for any new critical movement to try to be represented at the MLA convention and in *PMLA*. But the way is full of roadblocks, and acceptance comes only belatedly, well after a field is already established.

Recognizing the power and importance of the MLA, in the early 1990s I formally applied to add a discussion group on literature and environment. The answer was no. So, after ASLE was formed, Mike Branch and I began to pursue the possibility of ASLE's becoming an allied organization of the MLA. We learned that to be considered an allied organization—and thus have a voice at the annual convention—an organization must have been in existence for at least six years, have bylaws and scholarly publications, and have organized at least two prior special

sessions. In due course we applied, and ASLE finally became an allied organization, holding its first entitled MLA convention sessions in 1998.

The conservatism built into the MLA protects this prestigious association from the embarrassment of indulging in passing critical fads and entertaining offbeat political perspectives. But its insurance against risk is bought at the price of innovation. Since the exciting 1991 MLA special session, Fromm has proposed two other special sessions on emerging directions in literary studies, one on literary Darwinism, the other a few years later on enactive criticism. Both were turned down.

Given this history of rejection, I was surprised when Michelle Balaev informed me that she intended to submit our interview to *PMLA* and stunned to learn that the interview was accepted, slated to be published with a cluster of essays on sustainability, an essay on climate change, and another on waste. Some ecocritics will view the greening of the MLA with skepticism, reluctant to trade ecocriticism's radical edge for suspect respectability. However, I believe that the mainstreaming of environmental criticism will give scholar-activists leverage to teach green and to press for curricular and policy changes at the colleges and universities where they work.

Still, I hope that we can build on the changes instigated by *PMLA*'s recent editors and continue their effort to make the MLA and *PMLA* more receptive to new ideas. I would love to see *PMLA* be as cutting-edge in literary studies as *Science* and *Nature* are in the sciences. Wouldn't it be great for the media to report on new ways of thinking recently published in *PMLA*? Wouldn't it be refreshing if experimental, controversial, and even wild ideas were granted sessions at the MLA convention? A word of advice, however: schedule those sessions in big rooms. As the pace of change in the world accelerates, I would like to urge the MLA leadership to ask how the world's largest professional organization for the study of modern languages and literatures—and its annual convention and journal—can be made more avant-garde. The changes may have to be

structural, not just attitudinal. The MLA could follow the lead of the WLA, which is preparing a special issue of its journal, *Western American Literature*, devoted to the work of younger scholars.

Cheryll Glotfelty

University of Nevada, Reno

Auden and the Poetics of Flight

TO THE EDITOR:

Readers of Marit J. MacArthur's "One World? The Poetics of Passenger Flight and the Perception of the Global" (127.2 [2012]: 264–82) may be interested in W. H. Auden's poem "In Transit," written probably in 1950, which has something to say about every one of the issues that the essay explores. The abstract of the essay (424) could almost serve as a summary of the poem. "In Transit" may be found in any edition of Auden's *Collected Poems*; it was first published in his book *Nones* (1951) under the title "Air Port."

Edward Mendelson

Columbia University

Reply:

I am grateful to Edward Mendelson for drawing attention to W. H. Auden in connection with my essay. There is in cultural-literary history an inherent risk that, caught up in the larger stories we are trying to tell, we may overlook the subtle insights of individual works of literature. To my own work in this area, I also try to bring the strengths of author-centered close reading. In this regard, the expertise of scholars like Mendelson is invaluable.

While no single poem encompasses my entire argument about the poetics and ethics of flight, there is no doubt that Auden has insights to offer. Given the scope of my topic and the word limit for *PMLA*, for the final version of my essay I had to make extensive cuts. Among the most painful were a consideration of James Dickey's "Falling" and a section further discussing Auden, including "Journal of an Airman"

(1932), whose possibly fascist narrator suggests that "geography is just about a hundred thousand million times more important to [modern man] than history," and "On the Circuit" (1963), whose humorously cynical speaker is "an airborne instrument" (*The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939*; Ed. Edward Mendelson; New York: Random, 1977; print; 420; *The Collected Poems*; Ed. Mendelson; New York: Mod. Lib., 2007; print; 729). I might have mentioned "In Transit" as well.

However, the poem does not deal primarily with the jet passenger's aerial perspective, which was my chief interest in the essay. Rather, "In Transit" is located, if anywhere, in the "nowhere" of an anonymous airport—thus Auden's original title. It also dates from the immediate postwar era, not the period on which my essay focused: roughly 1965–80, when access to commercial passenger flight was becoming more widespread and was, as I put it, no longer thrilling and not yet tedious. (The transatlantic, well-traveled Auden, prescient about so many aspects of contemporary life, articulated the worldly sense of tedium before it became familiar to many. It probably helped that commercial airports were less welcoming in his time.) The traveler's malaise in the poem is postwar in its hopelessness about avoiding violence or challenging ancient, unjust power hierarchies and in its complicated nostalgia for and mistrust of a rooted, traditional existence, which the war had apparently destroyed in Europe. The poem takes to the air only in the last of six stanzas:

[A voice] calls me again to our plane and
soon we are floating above

A possessed congested surface, a world:
down there

Motives and natural processes are stirred by
spring

And wrongs and graves grow greenly;
slaves in quarries

Against their wills feel the will to live
renewed by the song

Of a loose bird, maculate cities are spared
Through the prayers of illiterate saints, and
an ancient