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

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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

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