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.

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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."

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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

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900121807 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Feud re-opens with the debacle of a river.
(*The Collected Poems* 540)

One of many observations we could make about "In Transit" is that it links flight with an understandable pessimism about human nature and fantasies of improving it. This sentiment is familiar from earlier, better-known poems such as "Musée des Beaux Arts," which dates from 1938, the same year Auden coined the word *apolitical*, as I mentioned in briefly reviewing the poetry of aerial bombing. It is also significant that the bleak outlook of "In Transit" arises primarily through meditation on the scene of an airport, a place that often inspires feelings of dislocation and unease as well as a certain pleasant sense of anonymity.

To be sure, airports are central to the culture of flight; David Pascoe discusses "In Transit" in his seminal *Airspaces* (2001). However, the now ubiquitous experience of passenger flight and the aerial perspective it provides have inspired a distinct genre of poetry, one that is continuous with the Romantic tradition of landscape meditation and that holds my critical interest more than most writing about airports. Readers familiar with the entire poem may notice that the tone of "In Transit," dominated by the airport's vague sense of ennui, gets something of a lift in the final stanza—literally, as the plane ascends, and figuratively, as the world's intractable problems are depicted as entangled with its vast, cyclical natural beauty. Often in poetry of passenger flight, the lyric impulse arises in response to the aerial perspective even as that perspective—with the supreme freedom from earthly obligations that it implies and enacts—involves the thoughtful passenger in the ethical conundrums of globalization.

In an early version of my essay, the following passage from Auden's essay "American Poetry" (1956) served as an epigraph:

> It is an unforgettable experience for anyone born on the other side of the Atlantic to take a plane journey by night across the United States. Looking down he will see the lights of some town like a last outpost in a darkness stretching for hours ahead, and realize that, even if there is no longer an actual frontier, this is still a continent only partially settled and developed, where human activity seems a tiny thing in comparison to the magnitude of the earth, and the equality of men not some dogma of politics or jurisprudence but a self-evident fact.
>
> (*"The Dyer's Hand" and Other Essays*; New York: Vintage, 1968; print; 358)

In some respects, the guarded idealism of this meditation, published five years before the first human being was sent into space (Yuri Gagarin), anticipates astronauts' reflections on first seeing the earth from space. It is typical of what the geographer Denis Cosgrove calls "whole-earth discourse," emphasizing the essential unity and fragility of the globe (*Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination*; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001; print; 262). As he did in respect to so many contemporary concerns, Auden got there first. His imaginative and ethical responses to what we now call globalization are still instructive, and his work is largely free of the ugly prejudices of many of his contemporaries. It is heartening to see recent work on the poet—most obviously Aidan Wasley's *The Age of Auden* (2011)—register anew his deep influence on a generation of American and other English-language poets and his central importance to the study of twentieth-century poetry.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900121807 Published online by Cambridge University Press