Gertrude Stein's last words were cast in the wry and questioning style of Postmodernism. "What is the answer?" she asked, and receiving only an empty silence, pressed further: "What is the question?" But this book takes as its title not the last words of Stein, which throw us off balance, but those of the great Modern writer Henry James. "At last," he is quoted as saying, "the real distinguished thing." The sober tone, the sense of final achievement and discovery, the poise of authoritative endings, the judiciousness and breadth of perspective—these are the qualities that interest me.

In recent years, my research and teaching has been concerned with the distinctions between Modernism and Postmodernism in American literature and the problems of aging and the elderly in our century's industrial culture. The latter takes many people by surprise. I am often asked how I became interested in doing research on old age with the materials and methods of the humanities. There are, of course, many answers to this question, all of which have personal dimensions and some of which are no doubt reflected in this book, although I must confess that I realize this only in retrospect. For the conception of this book evolved over a long period of time. I did not in fact set out consciously to write a book on aging and poetry, although this is just what has emerged.

The process began simply enough. Some seven years ago, while reading the poetry of Wallace Stevens, I found myself drawn to his last poems, preferring them to the early poems of Harmonium and subsequent volumes at a time when his last poems had received comparatively little critical attention and the early poems were canonized. I decided to study them in the context of the entire body of Stevens'
work to discover if I could account for a development over time. I also was concerned to understand the place of these poems—an old man’s poems—in our cultural history. Did they, I wondered, offer our culture a model for the satisfactions which I felt? And were Stevens’ achievements paralleled elsewhere? I turned to William Carlos Williams, whose major last work was published about the same time. *Paterson V* is critical to the comprehension of Williams’ development as a poet; it extends his most ambitious poem while at the same time departing significantly from it, testifying to a poetic and personal crisis which involved both Williams’ loss of power in old age and issues of tradition and authority. Was the coincidence of *The Rock* and *Paterson V*, so similar in many respects, an accident? If not, what did this reveal not just about individual poetic development or about the needs of our culture at a particular point in time, but also about the development of American Modernism in poetry? As the questions proliferated, I turned to Pound, choosing to focus on what I consider his most beautiful, integrated, and wise Cantos—the *Pisan Cantos*—which came late in his life and which, like Williams’ *Paterson V*, were written at a time of intense crisis. And lastly, I turned to Eliot and his *Four Quartets*, his last poem, which seemed to me to share many of the qualities of these other long meditative poems. What did it mean that Eliot’s poem came first? Did it in any way provide a model for the others? Or for Eliot himself?

The resulting book is not a systematic study of all the late poems of these poets. Rather I have chosen to concentrate in each case on one long poem, placing it in the context of earlier work. It is my hope that this book casts light on both an aging Modernism and the poetry of age (here I use the term “age” instead of “old age” for several reasons, one of which is simply that as I grew older in the course of this research, my notion of what is “old” changed, receding further into the future).

I have rehearsed at some length the path I took in choosing the poets included here because I want to emphasize that I did not begin my work with questions about the “images” of poets in their old age. If I had, I might have begun with Yeats, whose late poems are splendid and basically different in tone, as Daniel Albright shows in his book on
Yeats's poetry in old age: 1 like Dylan Thomas, Yeats rages against age, whereas, for the most part (this must be strictly qualified), these four American poets do not. And if I had, I might have written a book dominated by images of aging that would have sought, consciously, to champion the rights of the elderly as a dispossessed group, much as books have been written on behalf of women and their literature, blacks and their literature. I share that concern but it was not my initial purpose. As I have said, among other things, I was interested in understanding just what constitutes the style of the late poems of American Modernism, and thus this book invites further research along this line. To my mind, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams are our central Modern poets. But what about the late poems of Marianne Moore? Do they resemble the poems of these poets? And what of the poets who came after? Theodore Roethke's long meditative poems of the fifties? 2 Robert Duncan's poetry? Or Allen Ginsberg's recent poetry concerned with old age? I hope others will pursue these questions.

Nor did I undertake my research with a clear hypothesis about aging and the life cycle in mind, although in the process of research and writing, this book has no doubt acquired a polemical character. Generally speaking, there is nothing wrong with adopting a position on matters involving cultural choices, values, and practices; indeed, there is everything right in doing so, and this all too rarely happens in academic research. But in this case—research in the relatively new field of aging (especially new in literary studies)—there is a particular pitfall to be avoided, if possible.

The problem, or weakness, of research on aging and the elderly is that it tends to fall too easily into one of two overly simplified categories: either aging and old age are romanticized or they are presented as tragic twentieth-century injustices that can be alleviated, perhaps even rectified, through medical research and political and social reform. The literature of gerontology is characterized by bipolarity: unfortunately it tends to be either flatly optimistic or pessimistic. If Simone de Beauvoir's The Coming of Age and Robert Butler's Why Survive: Being Old in America tend toward the latter, my book tends toward the former. It does so, however, with the understanding basic to the humanities that I am concerned with the unique—in this case,
with gifted writers—not a carefully selected cross-section of the popu-
lation. This book, in other words, does not deal directly with the
relationship between social problems and the literary mind, although it
does imply that there are subtle connections between the larger needs
of a culture and the artistic imagination. The focus is not on our
stereotyped images of aging, which can indeed be uncovered through
the study of literary texts, informing us about our blunt, often unseen
cultural prejudices: I would hope my approach is more delicate than
that.

If there is one discipline outside of literature that comes close to the
approach of this book, it is developmental psychology, not social
gerontology. One of the central conclusions of this book, for example,
is that a new way of thinking (and thus being in the world), a new
mode of cognition, may emerge in old age. Other areas of fruitful
research in developmental psychology, not explored in this book, are
suggested by its findings. I will cite just one example. David Levin-
son’s research on adult development reveals that a mentor—an older
person who represents authority, a teacher, a sponsor, or a guide—is
crucial to the years of early adulthood; the role of the mentor is to aid in
the realization of one’s dreams in life, which ultimately will require the
rejection of the mentor. In the poems which I have studied closely—
poems concerned with aging and old age instead of young
adulthood—a wise figure also appears, but there is no implication that
he must be discarded. Is this a developmental phenomenon? I would
like to see research done on this question by developmental psycholo-
gists as well as scholars in the humanities.

Finally I should add that this book goes against the grain of much
contemporary literary criticism, which is preoccupied with beginnings,
the continual invention of the self, and the denial of origins. Edward
Said, in his book Beginnings, writes that “paradoxically, an interest in
beginnings is often the corollary of not believing that any beginning
can be located.” This is not the case with endings. They can be
located, tragically so, in a life, in a civilization. And they are too often
denied. It may be characteristically American to see things in terms of
beginnings, but I think it wise to shift our gaze to endings. Certainly
it is sobering. For as Stevens wrote, so perfectly, in “Waving Adieu,
Adieu, Adieu," "In a world without heaven to follow, the stops/
Would be endings, more poignant than partings, profounder...."
And if a history of American poetics could be written in terms of our
changing sense of beginnings, as Joseph Riddel proposes,5 we must
also begin to think of that history as having endings, and write that
history as well.

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1. See Daniel Albright, The Myth against Myth: A Study of Yeats’s Imagination in
Old Age (London: Oxford University Press, 1972). His work shares many of the
concerns of my own.

2. Ralph J. Mills, Jr., has done work on the late poems of Roethke. See his essay in
Cry of the Human: Essays in Contemporary American Poetry (Urbana: University of

3. David Levinson et al., The Seasons of a Man’s Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,
1978).

1975), p. 5.

5. Joseph Riddel, The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William
Carlos Williams (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p. 44.
at last,

The Real Distinguished Thing