“It must be believed,” wrote Emerson in an essay entitled “Old Age,” “that there is a proportion between the designs of a man and the length of his life: there is a calendar of his years, so of his performances.” Emerson’s theory is characteristically optimistic: he proposes a model of the relationship between creation and the life cycle, which he finds fruitful for reasons of both personal and cultural health. In our age, we are for the most part skeptical, however. But what doubt we have about Emerson’s theory of a just measure between performance and age, we must limit to specific cases. Our minds move to examples to test the theory: Wordsworth (the received wisdom of literary history instructs us) lived much too long, Anne Sexton too tragically brief a time. In this book I am concerned with four of our greatest Modern American poets of the twentieth century. I focus on four meditative poems—T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1943), Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* (1948), “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” from Wallace Stevens’ *The Rock* (1954), and the fifth book of *Paterson* (1958) by William Carlos Williams—considering each in the general context of the poet’s poetry and prose, and in particular, his social thought. My purpose is not so much to test the theory as to point to our culture’s need for the possibility it offers. For these poets, did aging and old age bring poetic fulfillment? Do these poets offer us insight into the experience of aging and its satisfactions?

The appropriate place to begin is with T. S. Eliot, whose work, reviewed briefly, can provide us with the historical *poetic* context in which to place these late Modern American poems. In 1915 Eliot introduced the world to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and in that portrait of a middle-aged man whose life is one of endless
indecision, Eliot anticipated the uncertainty and debilitation engendered by World War I. Prufrock was bored and exhausted, so worn out in fact that by 1920 he had aged to become Gerontion, a shrunken man living in a rented house with nothing but his own tired thoughts to keep him company. Thirty-two years old at the time of the publication of "Gerontion," Eliot describes him as a little old man whose physical decrepitude is matched by the sterility of his meditations, "a dull head among windy spaces" who, having lost his "sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch," is capable only of "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season." Then, as if it were not enough to personify the times in these portraits of Prufrock and Gerontion, two years later Eliot created a new poetic model, "The Waste Land," which itself expressed the fragmentation and sterility of the modern secular world, a culture that had no informing symbols, only a "heap of broken images." Together these three central poems—"Prufrock," "Gerontion," and "The Waste Land"—launched what has come to be known as the Age of Eliot.

But if the Age of Eliot began in exhaustion, it ended in affirmation. Eliot, and with him, Pound, Stevens, and Williams, confronted the collapse of order, and in their late poems, sought to discover, or generate, a new order, a new ground of authority. It is thus nonsense to conclude, as does a critic of Wallace Stevens, that "American poets have not, in general, aged well, because they have been unable to live their agedness with any fulness of being." On the contrary, while most of the English Romantics, for example, burnt themselves out when they were young, these American poets reached into old age with intellectual vigor and poetic force. Pound was sixty-three when the *Pisan Cantos* were published, and both Stevens and Williams were seventy-five when their last books appeared. Eliot is an exception. His seventies were not poetically fertile; the *Four Quartets* was published when he was only in his fifties, but its voice and theme are definitely that of an older man. In these poems one impulse dominates individual variations: we do not find odes of dejection or the dusty thoughts of a Gerontion but poetic energy sustained by deep thought. These poets are our ancestors, men of exceptional intelligence and creativity who lived a long time, and as poets they must be lived with for a long time. And we owe it to ourselves to listen openly, for, as Eliot wrote, "you
don't really criticize any author to whom you have never surrendered
yourself.'

In the *Four Quartets*, Eliot proposes a poetic point of unity, reestab­
lishes the principle of authority on religious and literary grounds, and
in so doing opens what we could call Late Modernism, that span of
fifteen years dating from the publication of the *Four Quartets* in 1943
to the appearance of *Paterson V* in 1958. During these years American
Modern poetry returns to the tradition of Romanticism (had it ever
really left it?). Edwin Arlington Robinson's pronouncement of the
death of great American poetry was much too premature: before the
nineteenth century had even come to an end, he lamented that "the
master songs are ended," because Whitman's poetry was "too power­
fully pure/too lovingly triumphant, and too large" for a new age. But
in the late work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams, we have
master songs of the twentieth century, and they are superb achieve­
ments, large, certainly, if not triumphantly expansive.

But the books are bound together by more than an affirmative vi­sion. Again it could be said that Eliot takes the lead and provides a
model. The *Four Quartets* differs from "The Waste Land" not only in
its final effort at resolution, but also in its personalism, meditative
mode, and more pronounced lyric clarity. And in general, these
characteristics also appear in the late work of the other poets. We no
longer encounter the careful impersonality of the poet that was the
hallmark of much early American Modernism. Nor do we find the
irony that imposes distance. Instead there is a new closeness, a more
open dialogue between the poet and himself and between the poet and
the reader. The Modern poet is no longer invisible. He shows us
himself. The *Four Quartets*, the *Pisan Cantos*, *The Rock*, *Paterson
V*—all represent the culmination of long poetic careers (although
Pound did continue to write for many years), and all strive for tran­
scendence of historical time, seeing history, as Eliot does in "Little
Gidding," as "a pattern/Of timeless moments." In these poems the
confusion of the urban collage of "The Waste Land" is resolved, if
only tentatively, in the central image of the sanctuary, partly religious,
partly ironic, partly paradoxical, of a small enclosed space.

These poems are marked by a solitude of the self. The first four
books of Williams’ ambitious epic are dominated by the landscape of an industrial New Jersey city, with its polluted rivers and jammed elevators. The last book, written after the stroke that compelled him to abandon his medical practice, is pervaded by the religious quiet of the Cloisters in New York. Age forced a kind of disengagement upon Williams that was totally new for him, and the remedy he sought was equally unparalleled in his past life—the acceptance of the European tradition, the shelter of the museum. For Pound, the humiliating, stifling U.S. prison camp in Pisa, Italy, where he was incarcerated in his sixties, yielded, paradoxically, a kind of grace. In Stevens’ “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” the broad expanse of the West contracts to the silence of a small convent room. And in the last of Eliot’s Quartets, “the light fails/... in a secluded chapel” in Little Gidding.

The quality of this silence is not empty and hollow, as is the Postmodern silence of Krapp’s sputtering last tape in Samuel Beckett’s play. It is orphic and sacramental, the source of language, the kind of silence that lets in symbolism, as the raucous neoromantic Norman O. Brown has put it. Or as Eliot wrote in his moving essay on Goethe, “The wisdom of a human being resides as much in silence as in speech.” With the lessening of mobility imposed by age, space in these poems shrinks and disengagement from the social sphere takes place. But through the imagination, memory, and the meditative mode, this solitude brings new insights.

Each poet moved in his own way toward a kind of closure to his life in poetry. The poems are of course very different from one another. But as a group, they are characterized by (1) the central image of “the still point”; (2) a method of reflection, a new meditative mode, that denies the longheld Cartesian view of the act of the mind as conscious, voluntary, Promethean, and dominating, and stresses instead an easy penetration of mind and world, an ecology of mind; (3) a new hero, the wise old man, in a society that worships youth; and (4) a dedication to tradition and the creative act as a stay against chaos, and the life review. Thus, considered together, these four late works reveal a new development in lyric poetry that marks the last phase of American Modernism.
I. THE STILL POINT

In these late poems the past and tradition are not rejected but are recreated, and from what Eliot had called the wasteland emerges a new image that is potent and integrative, or at least signals the desire for such a symbol, a belief in its possibility. In “Burnt Norton,” it is the “still point”:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

The desire is for wholeness, for a reconciliation of opposites (“Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards”), for a state of being that is balanced at the source of change but not touched by it, for a moment of pure present-ness that can counteract the tyranny of biological and historical time without degenerating into stagnation (“do not call it fixity”).

That point of stillness is the origin of meaningful creation, individual and cultural (“Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance”). It is a point of unity and deep peace, the point of eternal return, which is described as:

The inner freedom from the practical desire, The release from action and suffering, release from the inner And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving, Erhebung without motion, concentration Without elimination, both a new world
8  *At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing*

And the old made explicit, understood
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
The resolution of its partial horror.

"Burnt Norton"

The still point is an image of a state of "grace," "still and moving."
Released from the demands of the world and inner pressures, one
stands outside of time and gains the perspective of wisdom ("both a
new world / And the old made explicit"). Thus it represents the ultimate
goal of a person’s life: enhanced spirituality, increased consciousness,
and the inner peace that comes from an acceptance of the
"partial ecstasy" and "partial horror" of one’s life and culture. The
hope, as Eliot puts it in the concluding lines of "Little Gidding," the
last of the *Four Quartets,* is that

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

One’s life is a journey whose end has the power to illuminate one’s
beginnings. One’s end is a threshold where ideally ‘‘past and future are
gathered.’’

Eliot’s still point is an ideal, a model of wholeness that was offered,
we might say, to Pound, Stevens, and Williams. The still point: its
equilibrium represents the simplest and most complete structure a sys-
tem can assume under given conditions. It is a term that has entered
the vocabulary of the educated and can be sighted in such different fields
as ballet and the study of Zen. It calls up the English Romantics who
were also preoccupied with the notion of the reconciliation of oppo-
sites. It is analogous to the ‘‘point suprême’’ of which Breton speaks.
And it is described by Octavio Paz as the center of the Poem:

It is not impossible that, after this first and deceptive contact, the
reader may reach the center of the poem. Let us imagine that encounter.
In the flux and reflux of our passions and occupations (always divided,
always I and my double and the double of my other self), there is a
moment when everything comes to terms. The opposites do not disap-
ppear, but are fused for an instant. It is a little like suspended animation:
time has no importance. The Upanishads teach that this reconciliation is _ananda_ or bliss with the One. Of course, few are capable of reaching this state. But all of us, at some time, even for a fraction of a second, have glimpsed something similar. One does not have to be a mystic in order to know this truth.\(^\text{13}\)

But above all, the still point refers to a means of articulating the relationship of the self to the world. For these four poets it is both different and the same. For Ezra Pound in the _Pisan Cantos_ the still point is (among other things) the intersection of history and myth, the city "in the mind indestructible."\(^\text{14}\) It may surprise us that a man who devoted so much of his energy to preserving objects and fragments of objects—a few lines of Sappho and the stone mermaids of Santa Maria Dei Miracoli—should understand the still point as a state of mind rather than the reconciliation of opposites embedded in artifact.

The reverse is true of William Carlos Williams. For him, in the fifth book of _Paterson_, the still point is to be found in the triumph of art over time and mortality. It is the museum made real, and here the still point refers not so much to a union of the self with the world as a strategy for escaping the world:

\begin{quote}
It is the imagination
which cannot be fathomed.
It is through this hole
we escape. \(^\text{15}\)
\end{quote}

In the work of Wallace Stevens, on the other hand, the still point is not embodied, given body. It is neither sought in the medieval tapestries of the Cloisters, as it is in Williams, nor in a psychological/mystical state, as it is in Pound. For Stevens the still point is eternally elusive, a fiction ultimately abstract and metapoetic, the form to which concrete texts aspire. It is, as he puts it, the primitive like an orb, "the essential poem" that is found "at the centre of things." As he writes, wistfully, in "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract":

\begin{quote}
It would be enough
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,
\end{quote}
At Last, the Real Distinguished Thing

Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
Completely, because at the middle, if only in sense,
And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy. 16

And for Eliot, who wished always to see the world through the filter of consciousness, who always was concerned with historical context, with growth, change, and decay, the still point is identified with knowledge and the redemption knowledge can bring, but is ultimately unattainable.

II. A NEW MEDITATIVE MODE

Late Modernism witnessed developments not only in poetry but also in the fields of anthropology and psychology which reveal an interest in wholeness and integration. As the intellectual historian Merle Curti observes, “In the later 1940s and throughout the 1950s the age-old quest for absolutes was pursued with fresh zest,” and the answer given, he says, was essentially a religious or humanist one. 17 Thus on the one hand, Erich Neumann and Erik Erikson (the former a Jungian and the latter a neo-Freudian) proposed theories of psychological development and maturation that offer models for what Jung has called “centroversion,” the achievement of psychic wholeness in the last phase of life. And on the other hand, the anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Victor Turner looked at the West from both within and without and concluded that we must adopt an ecological theory of mind, a systemic view of social change. What this suggests is that the common concerns of these psychologists and social scientists over the last thirty years have been anticipated, or paralleled, by the poets.

For Gregory Bateson, a work of art is fundamentally a quest for grace. 18 Although he writes about “primitive” visual art, we can apply his observations to the self-conscious poetry of the twentieth-century West as well. Certainly the connotations of the word “grace”—religious favor, prayer, compassion, good fortune, the unerring beauty of poise, the Greek goddesses, moral virtue—capture some of the concerns and qualities of these late poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams. But for Bateson grace is ultimately something more abstract. It is essentially a problem of integrating the diverse parts of
the mind, and this integration exists on not just an individual level but a cultural level as well. Every culture, he concludes, has a characteristic species of grace toward which it is striving, and this can be read in its art. The terms that he uses to describe this integration are essentially Jungian: art delivers "a message about the interface between conscious and unconscious."\(^9\) Rather than holding to the Freudian notion of art as symptom, Bateson believes that art speaks a hidden truth; it does not hide a truth.

Taken together, these American poems share a conclusive distrust of the conscious, muscular, Promethean act of the mind. They signal a return to tradition, to metaphor, and to a reliance on the creative readiness that can yield the epiphanic moment. In this way the history of American Modernism fulfills Bateson's notion of the more specific role art has to play today if we are to extricate ourselves from the nightmare of our technological civilization. For art, he believes, calls attention to an ecological view of life which compensates for our too-purposive Western view of life. This is the wisdom that art can impart. "Wisdom," he writes, "I take to be the knowledge of the larger interactive system—that system which if disturbed, is likely to generate exponential curves of change."\(^{20}\) Humility is a part of this wisdom, the knowledge that man is only part of a larger system and that the part can never ultimately control the whole. This is the humility that the American Moderns call for, either explicitly or implicitly.

Perhaps more importantly, this humility is also dramatized by the mode of these meditative poems. It is possible, Bateson believes, that the cure for the excesses of conscious purpose lies first with the individual rather than with the wholesale reform of institutions. In art, dreams, and religion the whole person is involved and "must necessarily relax that arrogance [of the conscious mind] in favor of a creative experience in which his conscious mind plays only a small part." He concludes that "in creative art man must experience himself—his total self—as a cybernetic model."\(^{21}\) At its best, in other words, the meditative mode of these late poems operates on a new principle of selecting "information." It provides us with a model of correct thought, just as the nineteenth-century Romantic landscape poem did in its time. The meditative mode is thus a way of uniting the self and the world through
the agency of the mind, but we must not make the mistake of understanding mind as being limited to only conscious mind.

Here the model of mind described by Bateson converges with that of the psychologist Erik Erikson. The wisdom of the meditative mode parallels the strength of what Erikson calls the eighth and final stage of psychosocial development of the life cycle. The decisive choice in this stage of old age, Erikson hypothesizes, is between the attitudes of integrity and despair:

Wisdom, then is detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself. It maintains and conveys the integrity of experience. . . . If vigor of mind combines with the gift of responsible renunciation, some old people can envisage human problems in their entirety (which is what "integrity" means) and can represent to the coming generation a living example of the "closure" of a style of life. Only such integrity can balance the despair of the knowledge that a limited life is coming to a conscious conclusion.  

Strength thus inheres in being able to continue with dignity, to be, while facing the reality of not being.

Erikson’s phrase "detached concern" provides us with a key to understanding the process of achieving this state of mind, this state of grace: the meditative mode requires not so much an act of the mind as a state of receptivity to experience. In this final stage of life, unity is not discovered by the arduous, formulaic Jesuitical meditation Loyola recommended: composition, discourse, and colloquy. The kind of thinking involved is not category-making and abstraction. The goal is to discover rather than to impose or to reason.

How is the meditative mode described by the poets? It occurs, Eliot wrote, "at rare moments of inattention and detachment, drowsing in sunlight." The illumination of the "unexpected moment" appears when one is not consciously, purposively, looking for it. The meditative mode of these poems of old age is Heideggerian. It is characterized by a quiet openness to the primal realities of human experience which allows them simply to be, to disclose themselves before the gaze of the whole mind. Here we might speculate, as scholars in other disciplines are doing, to what extent this kind of "thinking" characterizes, either totally or partially, a last stage of life—senectitude. With the contrac-
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tion of space, the imposition of physical immobility, and the condition of solitude, perhaps a new mode of cognition develops that is satisfying and non-Promethean.25

III. THE WISE OLD MAN AS HERO

In these poems a new image of nobility and authority appears: the figure of the wise old man as hero. This is significant because so much has been said about the adolescent hero in our literature and the frenetic cult of youth in America. But it is a corrective we needed and still need. The tradition of the new, still rampant, requires its opposite, the wisdom of the tradition of the old made new. If we can read the shape of history from literature, then in the forties and fifties we desired a new form of heroism, or at least, a new sense of tradition and continuity to counter a throw-away culture. For the abundance of America can no longer be thought of in terms of increasing consumer indexes. The people of a once-expanding land of plenty must reconceive space in interior terms. It is clearly no longer appropriate, nor correct, to apostrophize the United States, as Whitman did, as the greatest poem.

But the compensation could be this: in these four Moderns we see that the American Adam has grown up, and more importantly, he has grown old with grace and dignity. Whereas "Gerontion" is a "dull head among windy spaces," in these poems the supreme humanist symbol is transformed from the primitive orb of the poem (a fiction) into the wise old man (a reality) in search of what will suffice. Eliot had written prophetically in "East Coker" that "Old men ought to be explorers." And, in fact, in these late poems it is often the very presence of a teacher, an embodiment of tradition and continuity, that is sought. Stevens' Santayana and Eliot's composite figure of his literary ancestors (the ghost), Pound's Confucius and Williams' Toulouse-Lautrec, to whom he dedicates Paterson V—all represent not only tradition but are also doppelgängers, secret selves.

For at its best a literary symbol, in addition to its historical context, has a personal dimension that acts to transform the self. Thus we understand how important these master figures are for the poets and, in turn, how important for us are these aging poets: they have given us images of balance achieved only after a long life of reflection and
creative work. As Theodore Roszak writes in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, "A true symbol must be *lived into*, that is how its meaning is found." Our culture must absorb these poems into the body politic and thereby take the words to heart.

We can also look at this from a slightly different point of view. "Achieving the impossible," Robert Nisbet writes, "is what metaphor is all about. From it springs religions, prophecies, and dogmas." If the image of the still point, which unites these poems of maturity and old age, is indeed the *root metaphor* of American Modern poetry (and the wasteland is not), and if a root metaphor expresses what cannot yet be expressed as conscious thought, poetry is indeed prophecy or at least the voicing of need, of desire. In what sense, then, are these poets our prophets? What is their legacy?

As Erikson has said, "A civilization can be measured by the meaning which it gives to the full cycle of life, for such meaning, or the lack of it, cannot fail to reach into the beginnings of the next generation, and thus into the chances of others to meet ultimate questions with some clarity and strength." In the West, the aged are devalued in direct proportion to their loss of power, which is measured in economic terms. This view of the aged signals disaster for our civilization, for human dignity is denied, continuity broken, the cohesion of community destroyed. Simone de Beauvoir makes the same point. In *La Vieillesse*, which her American publisher issued under the misleading and euphemistic title *The Coming of Age*, she writes, in words that recall those of Erikson, "the meaning or lack of meaning that old age takes on in any given society puts that whole society to the test, since it is this that reveals the meaning or lack of meaning of the entirety of life leading to that old age." She urges us to concentrate our efforts on the most oppressed of our elderly. But we must look also at those who provide models of the fullest possibility. This would involve us in the relationship between creativity and old age, an area that up until now has been largely ignored.

The figure of the heroic wise old man we must not overly idealize however. Serenity is not undisturbed; balance is not easily won or preserved. In the *Pisan Cantos*, for example, Pound is cranky as well as benevolently wise. Eliot's voice is wise, but his vision of old age is
basically grim. Williams exhorts Paterson (himself) to ‘‘keep your pecker up / whatever the detail!’’ (V,iii).

And the tone of The Rock, although ever well-measured, is alternately one of a balanced tranquility, delight, and a weary sadness; in taking stock of his life and his work, Stevens acknowledges a sense of failure as well as newfound pleasures and ways of being. On the whole, then, for these four poets, the condition of integrity, to use Erikson’s term, achieved in, or imagined for, old age is no simple state of being. Above all, perhaps, it is characterized by humility (and this returns us to the meditative mode) that contradicts the Western way of thinking about mankind in the world—imperialism over nature and other peoples. Old age brings an end to domination. Man stripped of such physical, perhaps overbearing, strength is what Stevens imagines in “Lebensweisheitspielerei,”’ which I quote here in full:

Weaker and weaker, the sunlight falls
In the afternoon. The proud and the strong
Have departed.

Those that are left are the unaccomplished,
The finally human,
Natives of a dwindled sphere.
Their indigence is an indigence
That is an indigence of the light,
A stellar pallor that hangs on the threads.
Little by little, the poverty
Of autumnal space becomes
A look, a few words spoken.

Each person completely touches us
With what he is and as he is,
In the stale grandeur of annihilation.

It is “the finally human” which “touches us,” a deepening of the human spirit made possible in and by old age.

IV. TRADITION, CREATION, AND THE LIFE REVIEW

Of the four poets Pound was submitted to the most severe physical, psychological, and social pressure in his old age, both in the Italian
prison camp and later in Washington at St. Elizabeth's. He had to start again, to find not only what could "suffice," in Wallace Stevens' cool term, but what he could live on. After all he was branded a traitor (understandably since he had spoken in favor of the enemy), his betrayal a result of believing in the wrong values at the wrong time in the wrong place. His solution would be a return to the past, not a projection into the future.

What he could live on was, in part, the memory of both people and places, art works and historical events and monuments. Robert Butler has suggested that the predominance of the shades of memory in the elderly is not necessarily a sign of senility or psychological imbalance, but may very well be a functional mechanism by which man comes to terms with his past life. Certainly this is the case for Pound. He asserts "Senesco sed amo" (LXXX), which is both a personal revelation and a declaration as to how to live. He literally plots the curve of his own past, just as Eliot provides us in the *Four Quartets* with a model for that plot:

... the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

But we must remark that Pound's "past" extends beyond his own life to the troubadours of the twelfth century, the literature of Greece and Rome, and African myth.

Perhaps just as significant (and this is a kind of lesson in the politics of the elderly), one of the primary catalysts in transforming his life in prison into magical moments of paradise, is his acknowledging brotherhood with other prisoners—criminals—of the camp. Paradoxically the forced space and forced time provided him, although against his will, the freedom for a life review. Thus in the *Pisan Cantos* Pound moves beyond the elite sphere of history, literature, and myth and into the world of outcast men. He magnificently unites the two, learning much, remaking himself, and creating one of his finest poems.

The work of the anthropologist Victor Turner can help us understand, I think, both how Pound was "made new" and how the elderly today form a key sector along the frontier of cultural adaptation. In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, Turner discusses our fundamental
need for what he calls "communitas," a condition of social unity (community) characterized by undifferentiated social status (what Martin Buber has termed the "I-Thou" relationship of the self to the other) and a time that is not socio-historical time but sacred time. Above all, communitas is not merely metaphorical; it is a relationship between concrete individuals (the pilgrimage is an excellent example of communitas).

To communitas Turner opposes "structure," by which he means the hierarchal, stratified, bureaucratic structure we encounter in the institutions of the family, the orthodox church, the corporation, and so on. The dialectic of the two poles of communitas and structure, Turner argues, is a useful conceptual tool for understanding the process of social change, that includes the revitalization of institutions, the replacement of one institution by another, and so on. It is communitas that is the condition "for the production of root metaphors, conceptual archetypes, paradigms, models" and that thus provides the impetus for significant social change. Of the four poets, it is only Pound who succeeds in clearly dramatizing this need for community and suggesting what power the condition of communitas has. In the prison camp of Pisa, he and the other prisoners are divested of all status, as are the elderly in our society, and from their mutual bondage, a close social bond is formed.

If an image of this social bond among marginals was not possible for Eliot, or Stevens, or Williams, certainly for all of them (although here we might question Stevens), the gift of history and tradition is a partial answer to the anguish of old age and death. In these poems, the past is recovered and placed in the present, itself renewed, a renewing force. The thrust is a conservative one. To conserve and preserve one’s origins, one’s heritage, to expand one’s cultural past so as to create new possibilities for the present and the future—that is the goal. The question is a political as well as a literary one, and of the four, Stevens is the only one who does not offer a solution, however small it might be, to the dehumanization and fragmentation of the Western industrial world.

In his essay on "Art and Time," the depth psychologist Erich Neumann uses the word "transcendent" to describe the quality that is
found in the work of great artists in old age. In a creative solitude, such artists move beyond the limitation of their age, in both senses of the word. Neumann cites the self-portraits of the aged Rembrandt, the late paintings of Titian, the late plays of Shakespeare, and the late quartets of Beethoven. In these works, he says, we find "a strange figuration, a breakthrough into the realm of essences." I quote Neumann at some length:

In these works of man a numinous world is manifested in which the polarity of outward and inward—nature and art—seems to be resolved. Their secret alchemy achieves a synthesis of the numinosum at the heart of nature and psyche.

These aged masters seem to have attained the image and likeness of a primal creative force, prior to the world and outside the world, which, though split from the very beginning into the polarity of nature and psyche, is in essence one divided whole.

This art no longer relates either consciously or unconsciously to any historical time; the solitary monologue of these "extreme" works is spoken, as it were, into the void. And one cannot quite tell whether it is a monologue or a dialogue between man and the ultimate.

But in the rare instances when the phenomenon of transcendence occurs, the transpersonal seems, even though it has passed through the medium of the human, to have achieved its own objectivity—to speak, one might say, with itself. It is no longer oriented toward the world or man, the ego or the collective, security or insecurity; instead, the creative act which mysteriously creates form and life in nature as in the human psyche seems to have perceived itself and to shine forth with its own incandescence. The creative impulse seems to have liberated itself. United on the plane of artistic-creation, the self which man experiences within him and the world-creative self which is manifested outwardly achieve the transparency of symbolic reality.

Although I am not sure in what way historical realities are ever transcended in a work of art, I do understand, and accept, what Neumann points to. The poems of Stevens, Eliot, Pound, and Williams do possess an orphic quality, a timeless dimension, which links them with what can only be called the age-old wisdom of humanity.

For Neumann, man is not a one-dimensional political or economic
animal. Rather Neumann calls for a "mystical anthropology"; he is concerned with *homo mysticus*, with mysticism not limited to the experience of God but understood as a fundamental, broadly based category of human experience. Following Jung's model of individuation (the striving of the individual toward psychic wholeness), Neumann argues that different forms of mysticism accompany the three major stages of psychological development: we find source mysticism in the uroboros stage where the unconscious is dominant, hero mysticism in the second phase where the ego is dominant, and mature mysticism in the final stage where the self emerges: opposites are reconciled, and harmony is achieved between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind.

More specifically, the final stage of Old Age Neumann identifies with the mysticism of the Egyptian god Osiris and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. In this stage the self becomes transparent, he says; the world becomes transparent, and the mystical experience is a conscious one. The possibility of the symbolic life is revealed, and life in the world becomes possible, even in the face of death. Thus Neumann explores the archetype of the Wise Old Man through its manifestations in texts drawn from both literature and the visual arts, which are themselves the creations of men in old age. Literature, he finds, reveals the achievement of wisdom in our time and records the potentialities of human experience.

Jung's description of the archetype of the Wise Old Man not only accords with Neumann's findings (this is not surprising) but also corresponds to Erikson's notion of the final stage of a person's development in old age:

In the encounter with life and the world there are experiences that are capable of moving us to long and thorough reflection, from which, in time, insights and convictions grow up—a process depicted by the alchemists as the philosophical tree. The unfolding of these experiences is regulated, as it were, by two archetypes: the anima, who expresses *life*, and the "Wise Old Man," who personifies *meaning*. . . . This aptly describes the character of that spirit or thinking which you do not, like an intellectual operation, perform yourself, as the "little god of this world," but which happens to you as though it came from another, and greater, perhaps the great spirit of the world. . . .
The involuntary character of the archetype fits the description that the poets give of the meditative mode and the symbols that emerge from this state of being.

Perhaps the long life of the imagination compensates for the losses of the social world. Perhaps some form of mystical experience is possible. If so, it does not result from an "intellectual operation" that one performs like a "god." It simply happens, and happens as the result of a long life of writing, a long life of working with images. All of this is metaphor for the creative process. Neumann describes it this way:

It is characteristic of the creative process that in it the ego cannot cling to its position of consciousness, but must expose itself to encounter with the nonego. In so doing, the ego renounces conscious reality in which the world is experienced as contradiction, and an encounter occurs between ego and nonego in which the contradictions of the world, ego, and self are suspended. This encounter, wherever it may occur, we designate as mystical.39

This is the still point, with the reconciliation of opposites being described in psychoanalytical terms. The mature phase of old age can be understood as a new synthesis between the conscious ego and the nonego, an integration of the personality with the self, not the ego, at the center.

What these depth psychologists describe as an archetypal process, what Erikson and Neumann have to say about the final stage in man's development, is clearly pertinent to the study of the late poems of these American poets. This will be offensive to many who find these notions soft, romantic, and mushy-minded. I agree we must be careful. And this brings me to the theme with which I opened this chapter—Emerson's theory of a just proportion between age and creation. For the truth value of the constructions of developmental psychology is not at stake here. Nor would I argue that these poems are expressions of universal values and thus transcend their culture. Although theories of the evolution of personal consciousness play a backstage part in reading the late poems of these Modern poets, it is not the case that the theory predicts the poems or that the poems verify the theory. Nor is this the sheltered circularity of an argument that can only reproduce itself, a flat tautology.
One does not, in other words, have to apply psychological analysis to poetry. Nor should one. When a paradigm pervades an age, it offers models of thinking that are explicit in scientific thought but remain implicit in poetic practice. For the imagination does not argue, as James Hillman has said, it imagines.⁴⁰ And thus what we read in the poets and psychologists is an expression of the collective imagination of the Modern American Age. Both reflect the needs and beliefs of a cultural period. The work of the poets corroborates the findings of these developmental psychologists. And in turn, the work of the latter illuminates the visions of the Modern poets. They each give assent to the other. And they do so precisely because they hold the same all-pervading assumptions about the possibility of holistic integrations of individual lives for the survival of men and mankind. Thus, the two modes of inquiry—that of the poet and that of the psychologist—reinforce each other and in so doing help us understand the spirit and values of an age. Basically, both the humanistic psychology of Erikson and Neumann, Jung and Schachtel,⁴¹ and the poems of these four poets propose a model of growth that applies to personal and cultural development (there are exceptions, of course, as we will see). It is this assumption that gives body to their theories and generates their poems, a romantic belief that embodies the hope of the Modern age, a belief that must both be taken seriously and questioned.

In general, then, these are the common grounds that invite comparison of the *Four Quartets*, the *Pisan Cantos*, *The Rock*, and *Paterson V*. But to the literary mind, differences are more important than similarities, and each of these books offers a unique solution (if I may use that word) to a particular problem. Thus each book, and each poet, demands its own approach. Although in the four essays that follow comparison is the chief rationale for bringing these poems together and remains the central method for judging them (I assume that the readers are familiar with these poems and thus make comparisons among the poets and their poems within the chapters), the convergence of models—both among the models themselves and with the poems—cannot, should not, blind us to the individualities of each. This was the criterion to which I eventually submitted my work. In spite of likenesses, would the differences survive critical attention? I hope so, for
significant information is difference that makes a difference, and these books present four converging but separate visions of aging, old age, and an aging Modernism.

6. These Modern meditative poems resemble what M. H. Abrams has called “the greater romantic lyric” (“Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom [New York: Oxford University Press, 1965], pp. 527-58.) In an admirable essay, Abrams describes the genre to which such poems as Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” and “Dejection: An Ode,” and Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” belong: “Some of the poems are called odes, while the others approach the ode in having lyric magnitude and a serious subject, feeling fully mediated. They present a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation.” There are three major differences between what I am calling the Modern meditative poem and the nineteenth-century Romantic lyric, however. First, Abrams notes a similarity between the meditative structure of the greater Romantic lyric and that of the seventeenth-century devotional poem as it has been described by Louis Martz in his splendid study *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954); I stress the dissimilarity between the meditative mode of the late Modern American poem and that of St. Ignatius of Loyola, and enlarge upon this question later in this chapter. Second, Abrams points out that the greater Romantic lyric often is characterized by a mood of dejection and profound sadness; the American poem, on the contrary, although concerned with crisis, is basically characterized by a
sense of resolution. And third, the Romantic lyric displays an interest in landscape that is not shared (with the exception of Pound's *Pisan Cantos*) by its descendant.

7. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943). All references will be to this edition and will be identified by the name of the Quartet only.

8. I use the word "disengagement" advisedly. Social gerontology has long been dominated by two competing theories of successful aging—the activity theory and the disengagement theory. In its classic form, the disengagement theory argues that the withdrawal of the individual from active social roles is a mutually satisfying process for both the individual and the society. Functionalist in approach, the theory maintains that through disengagement, society prepares for the disruption in the social fabric that death inevitably brings, and the individual readies himself for the personal crisis of death. Disengagement, it is hypothesized, is a universal phenomenon, not a practice cultivated only by certain cultures. Accordingly, the theory of disengagement proposes that old age is a distinct phase in the psychosocial development of the individual and that the process promotes the health of a culture as well as the spiritual realization of the individual (see Elaine Cumming and William Henry, *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement* [New York: Basic Books, 1961]). Disengagement from the social world need not of course entail disengagement from the imaginative world of writing. In the late poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams, however, it should be noted that social disengagement, whether chosen or forced, offers satisfactions as well as pain. On the whole, disengagement from an active social world is not negative. I realize, of course, that writing is also a social activity, particularly in the case of four esteemed, indeed lionized, poets. But nonetheless, the image presented of the solitary poet is, on balance, positive.


12. André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), pp. 123-24: "Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point."


14. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 430. All references will be to this edition and will be identified by the number of the Canto only.

All references will be to this edition and will be identified by the title or number of the book and the section within that book only.


23. See Louis Martz, The Poem of the Mind: Essays on Poetry/English and American (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) and The Poetry of Meditation for the opposite point of view. On the other hand, in The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), Roy Harvey Pearce has pointed out that for American poets the appropriate meditative model is Puritan, not jesuitical: "For the Puritan (particularly the New England Puritan, who was much more conservative than his English peer) meditation, then, was a matter not of disciplining one's self into knowledge of God (which was impossible) but of being lucky enough to catch a sudden glimpse of that knowledge as God might make manifest" (p. 43).

24. T. S. Eliot, "John Marston," in Elizabethan Essays (New York: Haskell House, 1964), p. 194. Attracted to the description of the creative moment as occurring in the blurred locus of the worlds of sleep and consciousness, Eliot includes in After Strange Gods (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 45, a passage from Yeats' essay on "The Symbolism of Poetry," which refers to this state of mind: "The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both awake and asleep, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by its variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols." Although Eliot comments that "there is a good deal of truth in this theory," but not enough (p. 45), he challenges not so much the poetic process as the overly fanciful, artificial symbols themselves (the dreamlike world of Fergus, and so forth) of Yeats' imagination.


28. Stephen C. Pepper calls the kind of metaphor that underlies and dominates an age (an example might be the seventeenth-century idea of society, man, and the universe as machinelike) a "root metaphor." See his *World Hypotheses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942).


31. See, for example, the pioneer issue of the *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 6(1973), which is devoted to "Psychoanalytic Concepts of Creativity and Aging."


35. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, p. 38. Turner associates communitas with "liminality," a term he borrows from Van Gennep; liminality, referring to a threshold situation, a gap between one ordered world and another, is an excellent metaphor for these late poems.


