EPILOGUE
The Sense of an Ending

One of the central concerns of this book is the nature of wisdom. This is a question that deeply interests me, in part because wisdom is so little valued in today’s technological society. Generally speaking, wisdom is confused with authoritarianism and dismissed as specious, rather than identified with the persuasiveness of right ideas, that is, authority (it is difficult even to rescue the word “authority” from contempt). In the Introduction I refer to Gregory Bateson’s definition of wisdom as he conceives it in Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind. There he writes of wisdom as the understanding of “the larger interactive system—that system which if disturbed, is likely to generate exponential curves of change.” For Bateson wisdom is an understanding of the pattern which connects a system. The metaphors he uses are derived from both ecology and information theory; in terms of a cultural system, he believes, wisdom is crucial to health and social stability (not stagnation). In some of the societies Bateson has studied, such an understanding of the pattern which connects a system—its interdependencies—is built into cultural practices unconsciously. But as any intelligent critic of contemporary industrial society knows, this is not the case in our culture. We are introducing change into our culture—and those of others—so rapidly that it cannot be absorbed; explosive curves of change are being generated which threaten to destroy the system itself. Given this crisis, what is necessary for our culture is a conscious, not unconscious, perspective on the whole which is actively learned. Although in the text I quoted above Bateson is speaking primarily about a cultural system, we can apply his ideas to the idea of an individual life as well. The problem can then be reformulated: What is the connection between the crisis in our culture and old
age? What is the relationship between action and a certain quality of thoughtfulness?

For me, wisdom is intuitively connected with age, hence this book. Why? Is there a necessary, although not sufficient, connection between wisdom and age? (I recognize, of course, that we can speak of a young man as wise and that by this, we generally mean he is balanced in his judgments; the wisdom of Stevens' Penelope, as I have shown, differs from this. When we refer to a man in his late seventies as youthful, I suspect we mean that he is still active in the conventional sense, while the wise old man is characterized by a certain stasis, a lack of overt movement. In our culture there is no question that we tend to value the former over the latter, as we value action over reflectiveness.) In the poems considered here, age does bring perspective, a vision of the whole which is possible only from a summit. The problematics of perspective—of the relationship between action and quietism, experience and meaning—pervades, as we have seen, much of the Four Quartets: Eliot was not sure whether he was indeed old or not. On the other hand, we find this constituting perspective transparently articulated in Stevens' last poems—a global view of his life before him, his poems a planet on his table. The old man must be poised in a tower, as Yeats also knew, nowhere else.

If this is so, the perspective is not to be identified with action. For action requires partisanship, an embodiment of a point of view within the system rather than a perspective on the whole of the system, even when one understands that others may have competing, equally valid claims (believing that a system is sustained by countervailing powers is not wise). Perhaps this is one reason why Stevens finally relinquished his hold on the idea of a supreme fiction. Action and wisdom are basically antithetical, although we surely can speak of a wise action or a wisdom that is not passive. If they are antithetical, we see how the wisdom of the aged plays its traditional role in a time which requires it more urgently than ever before: the image of the wise old man relieves the pressure to action, and, for the time being, it is my guess that the less we "do" in terms of introducing change into our system, the better.

But, as I have shown, the model of a wise relationship to the world
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is much more subtle than a self-conscious halt to action. The meditative mode, as it is exemplified by both Stevens’ Penelope and Santayana, represents an easy interpenetration between mind and world which is achieved by surrendering a large measure of self-consciousness; the unity between mind and nature in Stevens’ “World as Meditation” represents a system functioning harmoniously of its own accord.

How is such a perspective achieved? Again, I refer to Bateson, whose recent *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, published when he was seventy-five, further develops his theory of the ecological evolution of mind. The last sentence of his book poses a question which he originally addressed to the Regents of the University of California: “As teachers,” he asks, “are we wise?” To convey what he means by wisdom, Bateson evokes the image of the still point. “The still point is the setting of the turning world,” he writes in a discussion of the differences between “feedback” and “calibration,” two modes of attaining a connection one desires with the world. To illustrate the two processes, Bateson uses the examples of shooting a rifle and firing a shotgun, respectively. In the former, he notes, the marksman does not carry forward what he has learned from one shot to the next, whereas in the latter the opposite is true: success is based on learning from past experience. “The rifleman simply goes round his cybernetic circuit a number of separate times; the man with a shotgun must accumulate his skill, packing his successive experiences, like Chinese boxes, each within the context of information derived from all previous relevant experiences.”

This we can relate to the kind of learning achieved within the life span of an artist. Working with a problem over a long period of time—a particular form, a certain theme—an artist embodies the very process of calibration (this is not to be confused with simple experience or short-term problem solving; tackling one problem and then another and then another is not the same as persisting in a single-minded effort over a long period of time). In just this way, the achievement of these poets—all extraordinarily gifted men—has been the result of a long life in poetry, the fruit of the exacting demands of shaping language to fit their needs and visions. Working with a material, meeting its resis-
tances with one's own ideas, this is a learning process, a form of what Bateson calls calibration. It is also what we call mastering a discipline, combining rigor with imagination, and as such it does not come about spontaneously, magically, automatically. Whereas in these poems the model of correct thought—what I have called the meditative mode—presupposes a relaxing of the mind, an ecological balance between mind and world that is appropriate to the age of the poets and the requirements of our age, this possibility was prepared only by an active shaping of language, the raw material. This learning must be won, it is not merely granted. There is no contradiction here. One of the themes dramatized in these poems is that of creative readiness for the unexpected moment, a receptivity to experience, which has been prepared by a long process of learning about the relationship between the self and the world, the mind and the world. Without this, the condition of receptivity to experience could be too easily mistaken for passivity.

Moreover, certainly the poems themselves are products of thought, forms which have been made. Indeed the implied tension between the two poles—the condition of receptivity to experience and the active shaping of words—may be disturbing, for in some cases the tension is so great that the "next" poem, the possibility or even the necessity of the act of writing, threatens to collapse under the strain. Both Eliot and Stevens, I sense, moved toward not writing. Eliot, as we know, did indeed stop writing poetry. And for Stevens simply to be seems at times to be enough. As he wrote in 1950 in a moving letter, which I quoted earlier, "It is not always easy to tell the difference between thinking and looking out of the window." To write or not to write. As critics, we find the very question shocking. Why should it disturb us so? Stevens gives us an image of stillness, not stagnation. Perhaps the production of meaning itself is no longer necessary. To again quote Bateson: "To be still is the essence of calibration. The still point is the setting of the turning world."

To be still and yet moving: a symbol of wisdom. In all four of these poets, this paradox—the impetus of movement finding its source in stillness—is reflected in yet another way which is in itself an astonishing achievement. Their wisdom is revealed in their ability to incorporate change into the body of their poetry. In confronting the limit to
what the self can achieve—death (I except Eliot)—they understood wisdom to be a reaching beyond one’s strength. And in the process they found new strengths. Their poetry suggests that over time one’s art can be a self-correcting system, as I put it earlier. The act of writing is, as Wallace Stevens wrote so enigmatically and eloquently in “The Rock”,

... a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure
Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness.

For each poet, what had to be given up and what embraced are different, conditioned by private obsessions. It is as if they intuitively understood that they had work which could only be finished by an act of balancing. In the _Four Quartets_ Eliot did what he could to reach beyond the impersonality of the poet—one of his preoccupations—to present himself, the personal. Stevens had to silence the incessant meta-poetry of the mind, abandon the dream of the supreme fiction, and accept the thing itself; he desired “reconciliation with every-day reality.” “The trouble is that poetry,” he wrote, “is so largely a matter of transformation. To describe a cup of tea without changing it and without concerning oneself with some extreme aspect of it is not at all the easy thing that it seems to be.” In the _Pisan Cantos_ Pound moved beyond the elite sphere of “literary” history and into the world of outcast men, and magnificently united the two. And Williams made the most ambitious effort of the four. For Williams the natural object had always been both necessary and sufficient, but in the whole of _Paterson_ he abandoned imagism for allegory and abstraction, and in the fifth book he exchanged the industrial ground of the United States for the European tradition of art. He was wise to do this, although the radical difference between the two histories was too great for him to bridge.

The integration of the “new” or the “other” in these poems lends support to a developmental theory of psychology. Again, it is not the case that the poems and poets verify the theory or vice versa. Nor do I subscribe by temperament to the mystical metaphors we find in Jungian psychology or Neumann’s work. Furthermore, I think it is wise to heed Nisbet’s warning that we be suspicious of organic metaphors
which imply growth and progress, when in fact there may be only change. But Nisbet's insight is particularly useful only when it is applied to the development of society. Certainly we need to question the myth of progress and trace the intellectual roots of this mistaken analysis, but what is curious is that for centuries we should have obsessively applied the metaphor of growth to society—a nonorganic construct—and denied it to individuals. This is a perversity in our thinking, which perhaps the system has exacted from us for its own growth: industrial society required economic man who, when old, could be discarded because he was no longer useful. But it is not accurate to think about the development of a society and the development of an individual in the same terms. To do so is to make an error in what Bateson calls logical types (Eliot understood this).

And yet the resistance on the part of the intellectual community to developmental psychology is tenacious. Why is this so? I suggest the hostility masks a fear of growing old. We reject the very possibility of development for it requires that we accept change and ultimately death. The psychological mechanism at work is familiar: one denies value to that which one fears, thus keeping it at arm's length. But this is complicated. What we deny to others, we also partially accord to ourselves, not realizing that this involves us in a contradiction, a blindness to our own future. Our everyday experience of our own lives tells us that we grow wiser as we grow older. Most of us have a sense of personal growth, most of us would not wish to repeat our lives, most of us believe that we do accumulate experience. Yet we tend not to perceive this in others. Nor do we associate it with old age. Others are old, we are not. This fear of old age may be so deep that it is coeval with consciousness itself, rooted in awareness of our own mortality, which we steadfastly deny. As Simone de Beauvoir has written: "Whatever the context may be, the biological facts remain. For every individual age brings with it a dreaded decline.... Old age in others also causes an instant repulsion. This primitive reaction remains alive even when custom represses it; and in this we see the origin of a conflict that we shall find exemplified again and again." Thus the wisdom of these four poets inheres in their having recognized, and accepted, the "other," what was always the stranger to their work.
ghost, the image of themselves as old, mutability. They asserted a connection between age and wisdom. To quote Herbert Blau: "All is still at the still point of the turning wheel. The circular movement activates all the dark and light forces of human nature. Mutability and mortality."

Although the terms are different, this pattern of integrating different parts of the self to achieve balance, wisdom, is essentially the same as the Jungian model of individuation. We may object to the Jungian concept of the development of the self as the harmonization of the male and female principles (although it seems to me that these metaphors are also important for our culture), but basically the pattern of the two models is that of incorporating meaningful difference—terms which are related structurally to one another—into one's life.

This must be refined further, however, and in doing so, we expose one of the inadequacies of the Jungian model. The basic question is: Where does this element of "difference" come from? It is surely a mistake to think that the quality "wisdom" resides within the person, anymore than we are correct in saying that "such-and-such is cold" (it is cold only in relationship to something else). This insight reveals one of the fundamental difficulties in the Jungian model of individuation: the phenomenon of growth is presented as if it were automatically generated from within the psyche. It is not an accident that Jung uses the image of the philosophical tree to represent psychic growth, a metaphor that is misleading because it overemphasizes the automatic, programmed character of growth. And within the world of Jungian theory the role of art is to reveal the process which is working through it; art does not present the mind with new elements and problems to be dealt with. It is the degree of passivity that Jung's model implies that is inappropriate to a model of human growth and development.

In this regard, Erik Erikson's model of the unfolding stages of psychosocial development is superior, for it correctly emphasizes the give and take, the trial and error, which take place between the individual and society. (Parenthetically I should add that both theories are normative, which the intellectual community also objects to, and strenuously. This response too must be analyzed. We are understandably uncomfortable when we measure ourselves against stages of
growth and find ourselves lacking. Yet the resistance to models of authority is too shrill, I believe. But this I must leave aside.) Although Erikson's model stresses socializing roles (the role of the adolescent, the parent, the worker, and so on), I find his model more useful than Jung's in accounting for the development of what we call wisdom because it does deal with the notion of learning (calibration, as Bateson calls it) as a systematic exchange between organism and environment, which we could define as the materials of one's art, as well as one's social world. Difference, in other words, does not so much come from within (although one must meet it with both rigor and imagination, if one is to learn anything or achieve anything of value), as it does from without. For Bateson—and I think he is right—this is a definition of creative thought: "Creative thought must always contain a random component. The exploratory processes—the endless trial and error of mental progress—can achieve the new only by embarking upon pathways randomly presented, some of which when tried are somehow selected for something like survival."6

As the above suggests, I do not agree with the cynical Yeats who asserted darkly that wisdom is a property of the dead. Nor by wisdom do I mean the maxims which we find in "The Wisdom of Solomon," or the Ta Hio of Confucius, although they are by no means irrelevant. Indeed some of the sayings, like the following from "The Wisdom of Solomon," are just now being "proved" by social gerontologists statistically: "If you have not gathered wisdom in your youth, / How will you find it when you are old?" Instead, I mean something much more abstract both in terms of the lives and art of these individual poets and the role their poetry plays in the larger domain of cultural history.

In closing this book, I take pleasure in referring to Hannah Arendt's splendid book The Human Condition, which I have had occasion to return to recently. In that model of lucid thought, Arendt traces our alienation in the modern world to the historical development of Western culture, which has reversed the hierarchical order between the vita contemplativa and the vita activa. Worse, the contemplative life—once the supreme value in human life—has been rendered valueless. This, she argues, is a perversion, for the contemplative life represents the highest, perhaps the purest, activity of which we are capable.
The late poems of these poets embody that which is lacking in our culture. The pursuit of the eternal—which is indeed what Pound, Eliot, and Williams, and even Stevens were devoted to—cannot be submitted to the coarse test of pragmatism. Contemplation, Arendt insists, is not the same as thought and reasoning. Contemplation is absolute quiet. Contemplation has as its goal beholding the truth. Wisdom has its source in solitude, although to be in solitude is to be with one's self, a partner. The still point. "Every movement," she writes, "the movements of body and soul as well as of speech and reasoning, must cease before truth. Truth, be it the ancient truth of Being or the Christian truth of the Living God, can reveal itself only in complete human stillness." And these meditative poems testify to the nobility of the life of the mind as the quintessential human activity.
