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LITERARY LIFE CYCLES:
THE CAREERS OF MODERN AMERICAN POETS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the careers of eleven leading American poets of the past century. Using the frequency with which poems are reprinted in anthologies as a measure of their importance, quantitative analysis reveals that among these poets there were two distinctly different life cycles: one group produced their most important work early in their careers, in their 20s and 30s, while the other group produced their most important work considerably later, in their 40s, 50s, and even 60s. These different career patterns appear to reflect differences in the nature of their poetry. The conceptual poets, including E. E. Cummings, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, arrived early and suddenly at a technically sophisticated poetry based on imagination and study of literary history, whereas Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, William Carlos Williams and the other experimental poets arrived later and more gradually at a poetry rooted in real speech and observation.

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The Best American Poets and Poems

Each year since 1988, a different American poet has served as guest editor for a series of books titled *The Best American Poetry*. For the 2000 edition, the series editor asked each of the past guest editors to prepare a list of what they considered the best 15 American poems of the 20th century as a whole.¹ Ten of the guest editors submitted such lists, and these were published, together with a similar list chosen by the series editor.

Table 1 uses these lists to rank the most important poets, by tabulating the total number of appearances of their work. Table 2 does the same for individual poems. Comparing the tables poses an interesting puzzle. *The Waste Land* stands alone at the top of Table 2, for its appearance on fully 5 of the 11 lists, in spite of the fact that T. S. Eliot ranks only in a tie for fifth place in Table 1. In contrast, Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and Wallace Stevens, each of whom ranks ahead of Eliot in Table 1, all fail even to be represented in Table 2, since no single poem by any of the three appears on more than 2 of the 11 lists.

This puzzle did not escape the attention of the series editor, David Lehman, who observed that “the greatness of Frost and Bishop and Stevens may be widely recognized, but little agreement exists as to which of their individual poems is paramount.” Rather than pursuing the causes of this puzzle, however, Lehman immediately retreated from his brief excursion into generalization with the assertion that “the individual lists ... are more interesting and more useful than any composite we might forge.”² I disagree.

Although the amount of evidence underlying them is limited, the contrast between Tables 1 and 2 is suggestive. It is striking not only that works by Frost, Bishop, and Stevens fail to appear in Table 2, but also that a single poem accounts for more than half of all the votes cast for

Eliot. Both of these facts are reminiscent of a phenomenon that was recently investigated in another artistic discipline. Specifically, an analysis of textbooks of modern art revealed that some of the most important painters failed to make the most important individual paintings. Thus a study of French modern artists produced the surprising result that Georges Seurat and Marcel Duchamp both executed individual paintings that were reproduced far more often than any works by Paul Cézanne or Edgar Degas, despite the fact that Cézanne and Degas were represented by many more illustrations overall than Seurat and Duchamp. Investigation of the cause of this puzzle led to the discovery that it stemmed from a basic difference in approach: Cézanne and Degas were both experimental painters, who arrived at their major innovations gradually, and late in their careers, in the course of producing many paintings, whereas Seurat and Duchamp were conceptual artists, whose principal innovations arrived suddenly, at early ages, and were embodied in important individual works that have become widely recognized as masterpieces, and dominate these artists' oeuvres. Thus not only did the working methods of Cézanne and Degas differ from those of Seurat and Duchamp, but so did the nature of their innovations, and the timing of their most important contributions over the life cycle.³

The comparison of Tables 1 and 2 suggests the possibility that poets' innovations, and perhaps life cycles, might differ in the same ways as those of the painters. Thus perhaps Eliot arrived suddenly, and early, at conceptual innovations, while Frost, Bishop, and Stevens arrived more gradually, and later, at experimental innovations. This paper will systematically evaluate this intriguing possibility.

The Poets and the Evidence

The goal in choosing the poets to be studied here was to select important twentieth-

century American poets. Recent poets were excluded because of the relatively short spans of their careers that could be examined. The eleven poets listed in Table 3 were born in the US between 1870 and 1940, and were all represented in each of nine leading anthologies.⁴ While many other poets could have been included, this is a sufficiently large sample for this study, and all of its members were clearly among the most important American poets of their generations.

Anthologies also serve as the source of the quantitative evidence analyzed in this study. This was drawn from 47 anthologies, published since 1980, that provide surveys of at least the entire period under consideration here.⁵ Thus no poet in the sample, or any part of their work, was excluded from any of the anthologies analyzed due to their stated coverage of time, place, or subject. The data set for this study was created by listing every poem reprinted in these anthologies by all of the 11 poets in the sample. The importance of these poets was such that this procedure yielded an impressive total of 2,816 entries in the 47 anthologies.

Counting the poems contained in these 47 anthologies effectively allows us to draw on the judgments of dozens of literary scholars and poets concerning which poets, and poems, are considered most important. This approach is analogous to a citation study, in which the importance of a book or article is measured by the number of citations it receives in a specified set of journals. Yet using reprinted poems as the unit of analysis has the advantage that these are considerably more costly than written references, because of the much greater space they occupy. This implies that editors will tend to be more selective in their choice of poems, and that these may consequently provide a better indication than citations of what a scholar considers genuinely important.

The significance of anthologies is clearly recognized in the literary world. So for

example the poet James Dickey observed that poets pay considerable attention to them:

Anthologies are perhaps the most important harbingers of lastingness that a writer's work may know during his lifetime; thus they have come to seem a kind of trial immortality for good poems. In them, poets look for their names and their best or most typical poems, or their atypical, one-shot successes with fear, pride, satisfaction, and awe.⁶

Similarly, scholars are aware that anthologies collectively provide an indication of consensus in their profession. So for example when the scholar Helen Vendler recently proposed to consider "The Colossus" as Sylvia Plath's first mature poem, she immediately added in support of her judgment that the poem "is still the earliest poem that most anthologists of Plath include."⁷

The only significant deficiency of anthologized poems as a unit of measurement is a consequence of the effective differences in the cost of reprinting poems of different lengths. Thus anthologists may often give preference to shorter poems. Even if present to some degree, however, this bias is not likely to pose serious problems for the measurements to be reported here except in the case of the very longest poems. And even here the difficulties will not generally be severe. Many of the poets considered here never wrote extremely long poems. And those who did usually originally published them in parts, that can stand alone and be reprinted separately; prominent examples are Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Williams' *Paterson*. The one poem that does create a clear problem is *The Waste Land*, for it is both long and not easily excerpted. Once this is recognized, however, its relative neglect by the anthologies can easily be allowed for in analyzing Eliot's career.

Rankings: Poets and Poems

Table 4 presents the ranking of poets by total anthology entries. Frost's great popular appeal is clearly reflected in his dominant position at the top of the ranking, with an impressive

average of more than 10 poems per anthology. The ranking of Table 4 bears one interesting resemblance to that of Table 1, as Frost, Williams, and Stevens hold the top positions, all far above Eliot in total anthology entries.

Table 5 ranks individual poems by the same measure of total entries in the anthologies. Although *The Waste Land* appears in only 13 anthologies and fails to make this list, another Eliot poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” ties for first place, appearing in nearly two-thirds of all the anthologies. Interestingly, this is Eliot’s only entry in Table 5. In contrast, Wallace Stevens has a total of no less than five poems in the ranking of Table 5, nearly a quarter of the 21 poems in the table, but his highest-ranked poem stands only in a tie for ninth place, appearing in less than half of the anthologies. Only two other poets have more than two entries in Table 5, as Frost and Williams have three apiece.

A comparison of Tables 4 and 5 poses essentially the same puzzles observed earlier in the comparison of Tables 1 and 2. Here Eliot ranks near the bottom of Table 4, with just one third as many total anthology entries as Frost, and less than half as many as either Williams or Stevens, but a single poem by Eliot nonetheless appears in more anthologies than any one poem by these other three poets. That single Eliot poem also dominates his oeuvre from the vantage point of the anthologies, for it is his only entry in Table 5. In contrast, Frost, Williams, and Stevens each have three or more poems in Table 5, and in no case does any one poem by any of these poets clearly dominate his other entries in the table by the measure of frequency of reprinting.

Another interesting difference appears in the ages at which these poets wrote their entries in Table 5. Thus whereas Eliot was just 23 when he wrote “Prufrock,” Stevens wrote his five

entries at a mean age of 43, and Frost and Williams each wrote their three entries at the mean ages of 43 and 50, respectively. Of these three poets' total of 11 entries in Table 5, none was written when the author was younger than 36, and Williams wrote two of his entries, and Stevens one of his, after the age of 50.

That a poem Eliot wrote at just 23 stands at the top of Table 5, and that no other poem by Eliot appears in the table, could both be understood as consequences of the conceptual nature of Eliot's poetry. Similarly, the lack of dominant individual poems by Frost, Stevens, and Williams, and the considerably more advanced ages at which they produced their most anthologized works, could both be consequences of their experimental approaches to poetry. After defining the differences between these two approaches in this context, this paper will provide both quantitative and qualitative evidence to demonstrate their relevance to understanding the poetry, and lives, of these and the other poets identified earlier.

Conceptual and Experimental Poets

No poet can have failed to recognize how often a detail, a propos
or remark, in respect to painting, applies also to poetry.
Wallace Stevens⁸

The differences between conceptual and experimental poets appear to be similar to those that separate painters of the two types. Thus whereas conceptual poetry often involves introspection, experimental poetry typically involves observation. Conceptual poetry often grows out of a study of earlier poetry, whereas experimental poetry more often comes from study of the external world; conceptual poets may find their raw material in libraries, but experimental poets are more likely to find it by traveling or working at other professions. Conceptual poetry is often concerned primarily with technique, whereas experimental poetry tends to emphasize

subject matter. Conceptual poetry is more often abstract, and aimed at universality, while experimental poetry is generally concrete, and concerned with specifics. The language of conceptual poetry is more likely to be formal or artificial, while that of experimental poetry may be informal and vernacular. Conceptual poetry is more often based on imagination, experimental poetry on the author's perception of reality.

Modern poets have devoted considerable attention to technical experimentation. As a result, modern poets can choose from a wide array of available poetic forms, from revivals of traditional modes to more recent inventions: the available forms include sestina, villanelle, haiku, cinquain, free verse, and a host of others. Whereas some poets have worked in a large number of different forms, others have worked for long periods, even entire careers, in a single form. Conceptual poets can feel that they have solved specific problems, leaving them free to move on to others, and they have consequently tended to be the versatile practitioners in many forms. In contrast, experimental poets are more likely to be unsure of their achievements, or dissatisfied with them, and therefore to persist in using a single form, as they gradually strive to develop or perfect their art within that single framework.

In an essay published in 1946, the English poet Stephen Spender made a distinction that may correspond to the division made here:

Different poets concentrate in different ways. In my own mind I make a sharp distinction between two types of concentration: one is immediate and complete, the other is plodding and only completed by stages. Some poets write immediately works which, when they are written, scarcely need revision. Others write their poems by stages, feeling their way from rough draft to rough draft, until finally, after many revisions, they have produced a result which may seem to have very little connection with their early sketches.

While it does not appear that systematic comparative study has been devoted to poets' methods of composition, Spender's emphasis on the tentative and indirect methods of the second type of poet is clearly reminiscent of the experimental painters who proceed tentatively by a process of trial and error: in contrast to conceptual artists for whom the value of the work lies in the finished product, experimental artists are seekers for whom the process of making the work is the essence of creativity, and who often believe that their works can never be definitively completed. Spender also hints at the difference in time required by the two types of poet, as he notes that whereas "one type ... is able to plunge the greatest depths of his own experience by the tremendous effort of a moment, the other ... must dig deeper and deeper into his consciousness, layer by layer." Thus the second type may require more time to produce a poem, and perhaps equally more time in the course of a career to arrive at a great poem: "A poet may be divinely gifted with a lucid and intense and purposive intellect; he may be clumsy and slow; that does not matter," for "genius, unlike virtuosity, is judged by greatness of results, not by brilliance of performance."⁹

If the differences among poets are in fact analogous to those among painters, the prediction for their life cycles would be that conceptual poets should arrive at artistic maturity earlier in their careers, and more precipitously, than their experimental peers, but that they should also cease to produce important innovations earlier than experimental poets. The data set constructed for this study can be used to examine this prediction.

Quantitative Evidence

A quantitative overview of the poets' careers is provided by Table 6, which presents a distribution of each poet's anthology entries according to the age at which they were produced.

Some clear differences among these distributions begin to provide the basis for a division between conceptual and experimental innovators. Thus three poets - Cummings, Pound, and Wilbur - produced their poems that were most often reprinted while just in their 20s. And for five poets - Bishop, Frost, Lowell, Stevens, and Williams - their best single decade was their 40s. The contrasts in the age distributions can be dramatic. Thus whereas nearly half of Pound's total anthology entries are poems he wrote during his 20s, not a single poem that Frost, Stevens, or Williams wrote in their 20s appears in the anthologies. More than 90% of Frost's total entries are poems he wrote after the age of 40, as are more than 75% of Lowell's, Stevens' and Williams' entries, compared to just 15% for Pound, and less than 30% for Eliot.

A basis for more disaggregated examination of these poets' contributions is provided by Table 7. Poets' major contributions typically are not made steadily or continuously over time, but often occur discretely; in many cases they appear when the poet publishes an important book. In recognition of the potentially discontinuous nature of this process, Table 7 identifies each poet's five most important individual years, defined as the ages from which their poems were most often reprinted. All five of Frost's best years occurred after the age of 40, as did four of Bishop's, Lowell's, and Stevens'. In contrast, all five of Pound's best years occurred before the age of 40, as did four of Eliot's and Cummings'.

Table 8 presents the mean age of each poet in the five best years identified for each in Table 7. The resulting ordering neatly reflects what I believe to be their categorization as experimental or conceptual. Thus in Table 8 six of the poets had mean ages above 40 in the years of their most important contributions, as Moore joins Frost, Bishop, Williams, Stevens, and Lowell as experimental innovators.¹⁰ The remaining five poets all had mean ages of 36 or below

in their five best years, as Eliot and Plath join Wilbur, Cummings, and Pound as conceptual innovators. The range in Table 8 is very large, as the mean ages for both Eliot and Pound are more than 20 years below that for Frost, and 10 years or more below those for Bishop, Williams, and Stevens.

The early death of an artist might appear to pose a problem for categorization in this analysis: we obviously cannot know whether Sylvia Plath would have gone on to produce even more important work over a long period had she not died at just 31.¹¹ Yet by 31 Plath was able to produce poems that appear a total of 205 times in the sample of anthologies. In contrast, although Robert Frost had a total of 503 entries in the anthologies, and Wallace Stevens a total of 361, Table 9 shows that none of these had been produced by the age of 31; the earliest of Frost's poems reprinted was written at 38, and the earliest of Stevens' at 36. The greatness these poets later attained has resulted in an intense interest in the development of their art. So for example the anthologies include four poems Frost wrote at 88, and four poems Stevens wrote at 75, in both cases the year before the author's death. In spite of this interest, however, none of the 47 anthologies judged worthy of inclusion any poem either Frost or Stevens wrote prior to their mid-30s. Thus had Frost or Stevens died as prematurely as Plath, not only would we today not recognize them as great poets, we would probably not know them at all. And the same is true of William Carlos Williams, who has just two entries in Table 9. That this is not true of Plath is a direct consequence of the conceptual nature of her poetry, and her dramatic early arrival at artistic maturity.

Based on the evidence of Tables 5-9, my hypothesis is that Cummings, Eliot, Plath, Pound, and Wilbur were conceptual poets, and that Bishop, Frost, Lowell, Moore, Stevens, and

Williams were experimental. The remainder of this section will consider additional quantitative evidence that will explore the implications of this categorization. The next section of the paper will then examine a variety of qualitative evidence about each of these poets' achievements, to see whether the testimony of experts supports the categorization based on quantitative evidence. In each case, the issue of interest will be to understand what made the poet's work conceptual or experimental, and how their careers reflected that fact.

Beyond differences in central tendency, the analysis predicts that conceptual innovators should enter the most innovative period of their careers younger than experimental innovators, and should also conclude these peak periods at younger ages. If we take a poet's five best years to span his most innovative period, Tables 10 and 11 show that these predictions are strongly borne out by the evidence of the anthologies. Thus Table 10 shows that the five conceptual poets all had the earliest of their best five years between the ages of 23 and 27, whereas the five experimental poets all had theirs at older ages, at 29 and above. At the extremes, Eliot's first major year was at just 23, when he wrote "Prufrock," whereas Frost's first major year did not occur until he was 42.

Table 11 shows that four of the five conceptual poets had the latest of their five best years by the age of 47, whereas five of the six experimental poets had their latest of these best years at 55 or older. Whereas by this measure Pound had completed his best period by 36, Williams did not complete his until 59, Bishop until 65, and Frost until 68.

A different measure that focuses even more narrowly on the timing of a poet's major contributions is when he produced his most important individual poems. Table 12 presents the poets' ages when they wrote their five most often reprinted poems. Five of the experimental

poets have the highest mean ages, of 40 and higher, while four conceptual poets have the lowest mean ages, of 34 and below. Whereas Pound had produced all of his five entries in Table 12 by the age of 35, and Eliot by 39, Moore, Stevens, and Williams all have one or more entries from their 50s, and Bishop and Frost one or more from their 60s.

Tables 13 and 14 examine production at the extremes of the age distribution, listing all poems by sample members that appear in at least five anthologies that were written very early - by age 25 - and very late - from age 65 on - respectively. Just four poems are listed in Table 13, three of them by conceptual poets. Thus just one of the six experimental poets in the sample - Bishop - produced significant work by 25, compared to three of the five conceptual poets. All 15 of the poems listed in Table 14 were written by experimental poets. Although four of the five conceptual poets in the sample lived past 65, none produced significant work beyond that age. In contrast, four of the five experimental poets who lived past 65 are included in Table 14. Frost and Stevens each have five poems listed, while Williams has four. Bishop matches her single entry in Table 13 with one in Table 14, giving her the distinction of having produced significant individual poems over a span of 40 years. Remarkably, 10 of the 15 entries in Table 14 were written by poets who had passed the age of 70.

Overall, the quantitative evidence suggests that the important conceptual poets considered here produced their greatest work at considerably younger ages than the important experimental poets examined. All the stages of their careers occurred earlier: thus the clear consensus of the scholars who produced the anthologies analyzed here is that the conceptual poets' work reached maturity earlier, peaked in quality earlier, and declined in quality earlier than that of their experimental counterparts. This quantitative evidence thus provides support for

the existence of distinct life cycles for the two types of innovator. What remains for this investigation is to examine the contributions of each of the poets, to understand why their work was conceptual or experimental.

Young Geniuses and Old Masters

T. S. Eliot and his friend Ezra Pound are both known for their precocity as poets, and specifically for the erudition and technical excellence of their early work. Eliot wrote “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which ties for first place in Table 5, at the age of just 23, when he was still a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard. The breakthrough that allowed Eliot to produce this early masterpiece was the immediate result of his introduction to the work of a 19th-century French poet, Jules Laforgue. Eliot later observed that his maturation as a poet had occurred abruptly after he first read Laforgue, as he recalled that he had “changed, metamorphosed almost, within a few weeks even, from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person.”¹² Although other landmark works would follow, many consider “Prufrock” not only “the basic Eliot poem,” but also “perhaps the most famous [poem] ever written by an American.”¹³ Noting the technical mastery and sophisticated tone of Eliot’s early work, one scholar commented that he “seems never to have been a young man.”¹⁴

At the age of 34 Eliot published *The Waste Land*. He recognized its quality, as soon after its completion he wrote to a friend “I think it is the best I have ever done.”¹⁵ *The Waste Land*’s impact on American poetry was immediate and enormous; William Carlos Williams later remarked that when it was first published, “It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust.”¹⁶ Williams’ objection to Eliot’s poetry was that it privileged form over substance: “we can admire Eliot’s

distinguished use of sentences and words and the tenor of his mind, but as for substance - he is for us a cipher.”¹⁷ The experimental Williams therefore regretted the great impact of the academic and conceptual Eliot on younger poets, for with *The Waste Land* “critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just when we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself - rooted in the locality which should give it fruit.”¹⁸ The critic Edmund Wilson succinctly characterized the scholarly range of *The Waste Land*: “in a poem of only four hundred and three lines ... [Eliot] manages to include quotations from, allusions to, or imitations of, at least thirty-five different writers ... as well as several popular songs; and to introduce passages in six foreign languages, including Sanskrit.” Wilson then added drily: “One would be inclined *a priori* to assume that all this load of erudition and literature would be enough to sink any writer.”¹⁹ The poet Conrad Aiken complained that in his great work Eliot had made poetry, and its past, his real subject:

[I]n *The Waste Land*, Mr. Eliot’s sense of the literary past has become so overmastering as almost to constitute the motive of the work. It is as if, in conjunction with the Mr. Pound of the *Cantos*, he wanted to make a “literature of literature” - a poetry actuated not more by life itself than by poetry ... This involves a kind of idolatry of literature with which it is a little difficult to sympathize.²⁰

Although Eliot would produce other significant works later in his career, the judgments of scholars confirm the evidence of the anthologies that his most influential work was that of his 20s and 30s, which gave younger poets a new model for technical sophistication. The poet Malcolm Cowley, a decade younger than Eliot, later recalled that

To American writers of my own age ... the author who seemed nearest to themselves was T. S. Eliot. Essentially the picture he presented was that of the local-boy-makes-good ... His achievement was the writing of perfect poems, poems in which we

could not find a line that betrayed immaturity, awkwardness, provincialism or platitude.²¹

In this vein, one recent history of modern poetry declared that “by the end of the 1920s [Eliot’s] poetry was an inescapable influence on younger poets,” and that “Twenty years later *The Waste Land* was still widely regarded as the most radical and brilliant development of Modernist poetry.” The nature of Eliot’s work clearly marks him as a conceptual poet, as the same history describes the objections of Eliot’s detractors to his influence for disseminating “a formalism, a cosmopolitanism, and an academicism from which American poetry recovered only in the 1950s and 1960s.”²² Also consistent with Eliot’s conceptual nature was his versatility, as Cowley observed that “His poems, from the first, were admirably constructed. He seemed to regard them, moreover, as intellectual problems - having solved one problem, he devoted himself to another.”²³

Ezra Pound published five volumes of poems by the age of 30, and this early output was marked by “an astonishing display of variety and versatility,” with “poems in a wide range of styles and modes.”²⁴ His achievement was primarily in technique: “Pound is more interested in the technical elements of the poem than its subject. His poetry of this period is a learned poetry rather than one that grows from personal experience.”²⁵ Pound famously edited *The Waste Land*, cutting more than half of Eliot’s original version of more than 1,000 lines to create a sharper and more forceful poem. In gratitude, Eliot later dedicated the poem to Pound with the tribute “il miglior fabbro” - the better craftsman - explaining that he wished “to honor the technical mastery and critical ability manifest in [Pound’s] own work, which had also done so much to turn *The Waste Land* from a jumble of good and bad passages into a poem.”²⁶ Yet even Eliot, whose affection and admiration for Pound were great, admitted that his interest in Pound’s work was

almost exclusively in its form: thus in 1928 Eliot wrote that “I confess that I am seldom interested in what Pound ... is saying, but only in the way he says it.”²⁷

Pound was the originator of a type of poetry he called Imagism. Consistent with Pound’s conceptual approach, he proposed a set of formal rules for this new poetry.²⁸ The purpose of the movement was clearly conceptual, for its basis lay in thought rather than observation: as the critic Hugh Kenner explained, “The imagist ... is not concerned with getting down the general look of the thing ... The imagist’s fulcrum ... is the process of cognition itself.”²⁹

Pound’s erudition helped make him an extremely influential poet and critic early in his career. But the use he made of his erudition was sometimes faulted. As early as 1922, Edmund Wilson remarked on Pound’s “peculiar deficiencies of experience and feeling,” and his tendency always to return to literary history: “everything in life only serves to remind him of something in literature.”³⁰ A few years later Conrad Aiken made a similar criticism, noting that Pound’s work was “curiously without a center”: “he has nothing to say of his own day and age; he prefers to try on, one after another, the styles of the ancients... Can one not - he says in effect - make a poetry of poetry, a literature of literature?”³¹ Experimental poets deplored the nature and impact of Pound’s influence, as for example William Carlos Williams described Pound, and Eliot, as little more than scholarly plagiarists:

Eliot’s more exquisite work is rehash, repetition in another way of Verlaine, Baudelaire, Maeterlinck - conscious or unconscious - just as there were Pound’s early paraphrases from Yeats and his constant later cribbing from the Renaissance, Provence and the modern French: Men content with the connotations of their masters.³²

William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound had become friends when both were students at the University of Pennsylvania, but their poetry - and careers - differed greatly. Williams’

poetry developed more slowly, “his radical and distinctly American style emerging more and more assuredly with each successive book.”³³ Williams lacked the technical facility and clarity of purpose of Eliot and Pound: “if ability to handle abstractions is taken as *the* mark of intelligence, then he was also very much less ‘intelligent’ than ... Eliot or Pound ... He could never resolve in his mind what he was trying to do as a poet.”³⁴ Williams’ enterprise differed sharply from those of Eliot and Pound: “It was his lifelong desire to invent a poetry rooted in American speech and experience, to convey a sense of felt life in his work by bringing poetry down from the pedestal of high art and locating it firmly in the familiar terrain of the poet’s immediate environment.”³⁵ Williams rejected the abstraction and universality of the poetry of Eliot and Pound, declaring instead “That is the poet’s business. Not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal.”³⁶

The metaphor was not casually chosen, for Williams spent nearly his entire adult life as a doctor in a small town in New Jersey. Rather than believing that his medical practice interfered with his poetry, he considered the two complementary: “as a writer I have never felt that medicine interfered with me but rather that it was my very food and drink, the very thing which made it possible for me to write. Was I not interested in man? There the thing was, right in front of me. I could touch it, smell it.”³⁷

Critics have consistently agreed that Williams’ poetry was based on concreteness and observation. The poet Randall Jarrell observed that “the first thing one notices about Williams’s poetry is how radically sensational and perceptual it is: ‘Say it! No ideas but in things’.”³⁸ Similarly, the poet James Dickey wrote that “If a man will attend Williams closely he will be

taught to see.”³⁹ Wallace Stevens emphasized the connection between vision and Williams’ persistent and incremental method: “Williams is a writer to whom writing is the grinding of a glass, the polishing of a lens by means of which he hopes to be able to see clearly. His delineations are trials. They are rubbings of reality.”⁴⁰ The primacy of vision and description mark Williams clearly as an experimental poet. Thus Jarrell grouped him with two other experimentalists: “Williams shares with Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens a feeling that almost nothing is more important, more of a true delight, than the way things look.”⁴¹ Robert Lowell placed Williams with yet another experimental poet, concluding in a review of the first section of *Paterson*, published when Williams was 63, that “for experience and observation, it has, along with a few poems of Frost’s, a richness that makes almost all other contemporary poetry look a little secondhand.”⁴²

Robert Frost made the people of New England his subject, as his carefully metered rhythms transformed their conversational language and diction into poetry. One scholar observed that “no poet of the twentieth century, with the exception of William Carlos Williams, has placed so much emphasis on the spoken language as a source of poetry.”⁴³ Although never entirely dedicated to farming, Frost did run a chicken farm in New Hampshire early in his career. Robert Lowell believed that this experience allowed Frost to find his true subject and compared Frost to two great novelists whose work was equally based on careful observation: “these fifteen years or so of farming were as valuable to him as Melville’s whaling or Faulkner’s Mississippi.” After Frost’s death, Lowell recalled that “what I liked about Frost’s poems when I read them thirty years ago was their description of the New England country... I used to wonder if I knew anything about the country that wasn’t in Frost.”⁴⁴ Randall Jarrell wrote of Frost in 1963 that

“No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men,” and commented on his “many, many poems in which there are real people with their real speech and real thought and real emotions.”⁴⁵ Frost himself declared that “I would never use a word or combination of words that I hadn’t *heard* used in running speech.”⁴⁶

Frost believed that poems should not be carefully planned or rehearsed, but that their composition should be a process of immediacy and discovery. Thus he stated his belief that

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the
writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in
the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew.⁴⁷

Frost’s poetry matured slowly. Lowell attributed this to his experimental method: “Step by step, he had tested his observation of places and people until his best poems had the human and seen richness of great novels.”⁴⁸ Frost believed strongly that the wisdom that came from experience was more valuable than the more intense but less sustained brilliance of youth. So for example he wrote in 1937, at the age of 63, that:

Young people have insight. They have a flash here and a flash
there... It is later in the dark of life that you see forms,
constellations. And it is the constellations that are philosophy.⁴⁹

Like Williams and Frost, Wallace Stevens was an experimental poet, but unlike theirs his poetry was not about ordinary people, nor did it use ordinary speech. Stevens’ elegant and complex poetry drew heavily on his imagination. Yet he emphasized that his poems nonetheless grew out of real experiences, as for example he once wrote to a friend that “While, of course, my imagination is a most important factor, nevertheless I wonder whether, if you were to suggest any particular poem, I could not find an actual background for you. I have been going to Florida for twenty years, and all of the Florida poems have actual backgrounds. The real world seen by

an imaginative man may very well seem like an imaginative construction.”⁵⁰ In fact, Stevens considered this a matter of principle, writing in one essay that “The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real,” and declaring elsewhere that “Poetry has to be something more than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature.”⁵¹

Stevens disliked the idea of following rules in producing poetry. Thus he wrote to a critic that “The last thing in the world that I should want to do would be to formulate a system.”⁵² He did not make plans or outlines for his poems, but improvised as he wrote.⁵³ One scholar has compared Stevens’ “automatic” method of finding a poetic subject to the automatism practiced by such experimental painters as Joan Miró and Robert Motherwell, who believed in finding the subjects of their paintings in the process of making them:

The artistic process is the same in both cases: The artist manipulates the artistic medium - colors and form in the case of Motherwell; sounds and images in the case of Stevens - intensely scrutinizing his own emotional responses, until suddenly, automatically, the desired subject manifests itself ... Like Motherwell’s method of painting, Stevens’ poetic process is close in spirit to the automatism of the absolute surrealist Miró.⁵⁴

Describing how his poems developed, Stevens once explained that “I start with a concrete thing, and it tends to become so generalized that it isn’t any longer a local place.”⁵⁵ After examining manuscript variations of two of Stevens’ poems, a scholar commented on the poet’s method of composition:

Stevens here struggles with the problem of concluding both poems... But the movement from the obvious mediocrity of the alternates to the final versions reveals the sure hand of the artist advancing through trial and error to the most forceful result.⁵⁶

Interestingly, Stevens proposed a division of modern poetry that has strong parallels to the analysis proposed in this study. Thus he wrote:

[L]et me divide modern poetry into two classes, one that is modern in respect to what it says, the other that is modern in respect to form. The first kind is not interested primarily in form. The second is.

Stevens explained that the justification of the first class

is that in expressing thought or feeling in poetry the purpose of the poet must be to subordinate the mode of expression, that, while the value of the poem as a poem depends on expression, it depends primarily on what is expressed.

The concern of poets of the second type was very different:

One sees a good deal of poetry ... in which the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capital, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations. These have nothing to do with being alive.⁵⁷

Although discretion prevented Stevens from naming contemporary poets, he left no doubt that he placed himself in the first group. Thus he once wrote to a critic that “I have never felt that form matters enough to allow myself to be controlled by it.”⁵⁸

Stevens arrived at maturity as a poet late, and many critics have observed that his work continued to develop throughout his career. On the occasion of Stevens’ 75th birthday, William Carlos Williams described the strengths of Stevens’ poetry, then noted:

This power did not come to Stevens at once. Looking at the poems he wrote thirty years ago... Stevens reveals himself not the man he has become in such a book as *The Auroras of Autumn* [published at age 71] where his stature as a major poet has reached the full. It is a mark of genius when an accomplished man can go on continually developing, continually improving his techniques as Stevens shows by his recent work. Many long hours of application to the page have gone into this... Patiently the artist has evolved until we feel that should he live to be a hundred it would be as with Hokusai a perspective of always increasing power over his materials until the last breath.⁵⁹

Similarly, Randall Jarrell observed that “Stevens did what no other American poet has ever done,

what few poets have ever done: wrote some of his best and newest and strangest poems during the last year or two of a very long life.”⁶⁰ Steven’s himself revealed an experimentalist’s understanding of the process of development when, at the age of 63, he observed that “the poems in my last book are no doubt more important than those in my first book, more important because, as one grows older, one’s objectives become clearer.”⁶¹

E. E. Cummings wrote lyric poems in a wide variety of traditional forms: “he often retained the diction, voice, themes, and forms of sixteenth - and seventeenth-century lyric poetry.”⁶² His innovations were formal:

he experimented with the ellipsis, distortion, fragmentation, and a grammatical juxtaposition that make some of his poetry difficult. He dismembered words into syllables and syllables into letters, and though this fragmentation activated rhymes and puns, the reasons for it were also typographical - the look of the poem on the page.⁶³

In view of his preoccupation with form, it is not surprising that Cummings’ trademark contributions were conceptual and appeared early in his career. As a historian recently observed, “Critics complained that Cummings’ poetry did not develop, and he was infuriated. Yet, on the whole, the critics were right... [A]ll his volumes contained the same types of poems and expressed similar attitudes.”⁶⁴ Thus a reviewer of a new book by Cummings published in 1944, when the poet was 50, remarked that “Cummings is still the experimentalist of one experiment... The fascinating thing about Cummings is that he is always talking about growth, and always remains the same.”⁶⁵ Another critic, reviewing a published selection of Cummings’ letters after the poet’s death, declared that he now understood why Cummings’ poetry had not developed: “Cummings himself never developed. His character, his basic tone was formed at a remarkably early age and remained essentially unchanged throughout his life.”⁶⁶ Nor was this perception

restricted to Cummings' detractors. Reviewing a new book published by Cummings at the age of 65, James Dickey stated that "I think that Cummings is a daringly original poet, with more virility and more sheer, uncompromising talent than any other living American writer." Yet Dickey opened the review by declaring that

When you review one of E. E. Cummings's books, you have to review them all... His books are all exactly alike, and one is faced with evaluating Cummings as a poet, using the current text simply as a hitherto unavailable source of quotations.⁶⁷

Marianne Moore studied biology in college, and when an interviewer later asked her if her early training in science had influenced her poetry, she responded that it had: "Precision, economy of statement, logic employed to ends that are disinterested, drawing and identifying, liberate - at least have some bearing on - the imagination."⁶⁸ Critics have often commented that her poetry was based on observation: "Her careful mosaics of fragments gleaned from a lifetime's close observation are among the era's major exhibits of art embodying the simultaneous seeing and saying of perceived experience."⁶⁹ Randall Jarrell wrote in 1963 that "Marianne Moore has as careful and acute an eye as anybody alive... Her poems are notable for their wit and particularity and observation," while poet Josephine Jacobsen called Moore "the empress of observation."⁷⁰ T. S. Eliot used a scientific metaphor, writing that Moore "succeeds at once in startling us into an unusual awareness of visual patterns, with something like the fascination of a high-powered microscope."⁷¹ The visual basis of Moore's poetry clearly identifies her approach as experimental, and consistent with this, James Dickey observed that her work evolved gradually: "she is not the kind of writer who goes through phases, but rather deepens down into what she already was: a poet of surprising particulars that also happen to be true."⁷² Randall Jarrell wrote of her *Collected Poems* in 1952 that "the change in Miss Moore's

work, between her earliest and latest poems, is an attractive and favorable change... [W]hen one is struck by the poet's seriousness and directness and lack of manner... it is usually in one of the poems written during the thirties and forties," i.e. when Moore was in her forties and fifties.⁷³

Elizabeth Bishop was a friend of Marianne Moore, and was influenced by her. Thus a recent history notes that Bishop was "famous for close, particular, and witty descriptions of objects."⁷⁴ Randall Jarrell wrote that "all her poems have written underneath, *I have seen it*," and Bishop herself told a critic "the settings, or descriptions, of my poems are almost invariably just plain facts - or as close to the facts as I can write them."⁷⁵ Another friend of Bishop's, Robert Lowell, compared her in a poem to the experimental American painter Albert Ryder: "His painting was repainting, his tiniest work weighs heavy in the hand." Ryder's endless repainting of his works, which left his paintings heavy from the accumulated layers of paint, is Lowell's analogy for Bishop's patient search for the right word to complete her poems: "ten years unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps or empties for the unimaginable phrase."⁷⁶

As with Moore, the visual basis of Bishop's poetry identifies her as experimental, and her work equally appears to have evolved gradually over the course of her career. So for example in reviewing a collection of her poems published when Bishop was 58, the poet John Ashbery observed that Bishop's work had recently grown to new maturity:

Perhaps some of the urgency of the *North & South* poems [published at age 35] has gone, but this is more than compensated by the calm control she now commands. Where she sometimes seemed nervous ... she now is easy in a way that increased knowledge and stature allow.⁷⁷

Robert Lowell's methods readily identify him as an experimental seeker. In his mature

work, “the poet, it seems, no longer begins with a predetermined structure for his material, but instead tries to discover structure of a kind, and immutability, in the actual process of remembering and articulating.” Lowell continually revised his old poems, for “what he was after was not so much a poem as a poetic process - something that denied coherence, in the traditional sense, and closure.”⁷⁸ Like many experimental painters, when Lowell ceased revising a particular work it did not necessarily mean he believed it was finished: much as the Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman remarked that “I think the idea of a ‘finished’ picture is a fiction,” Lowell told an interviewer, “In a way a poem is never finished. It simply reaches a point where it isn’t worth any more alteration.”⁷⁹

Lowell’s major contribution, *Life Studies*, published when he was 42, was quickly recognized as an important achievement for its introduction of what became known as confessional poetry. Its significance is reflected in the ranking of “Skunk Hour,” its concluding poem, in a tie for first place in Table 5. *Life Studies* involved a loosening of formal structure as well as a shift to more personal subject matter, as Lowell worked to give priority to substance rather than form. Its achievement was the product of a long struggle that resulted from Lowell’s dissatisfaction with the restrictions and constraints of existing poetic forms: for 18 months before its execution Lowell wrote exclusively in prose, to allow himself to concentrate on “*what* is being said” rather than how it was expressed.⁸⁰ As a critic recently observed, “Unlike so many contemporary poets, Lowell never wrote poetry about poetry.”⁸¹ The improvisational quality of *Life Studies* reinforced its message, for it was “indicative of an individual seeking coherence and significance in a disordered, troubled life,” and Lowell’s persistent irresolution contributed to its achievement, as “one of the real triumphs of *Life Studies* is exactly in its creative inscription of

doubt and uncertainty.”⁸² Lowell later explained, “in *Life Studies*, I wanted to see how much of my personal stories and memories I could get into poetry. To a large extent it was a technical problem... But it was also something of a cause: to extend the poem to include, without compromise, what I felt and knew.”⁸³ Yet although *Life Studies* won the National Book Award, true to his experimental nature Lowell remained uncertain of his achievement: “When I finished *Life Studies* I was left hanging on a question mark... I don’t know whether it is a death-rope or a life-line.”⁸⁴

The growth over time of Lowell’s poetry has often been remarked by critics. Randall Jarrell observed in 1963, when Lowell was 46, that “He is a poet of great originality and power who has, extraordinarily, developed instead of repeating himself.”⁸⁵ The poet Donald Hall similarly noted that “Lowell was not the first poet to undertake great change in mid-career, but he was the *best* poet to change so *much*.”⁸⁶

Lowell’s introspective writing about his own troubled life inspired many younger poets to create autobiographical works. Sylvia Plath was prominent among these, as she wrote that *Life Studies* excited her with “this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience.”⁸⁷ She followed Lowell in writing vividly and painfully about her personal life. Yet her innovations lay not in subject matter but in language, with “her use of metaphors so strong that they displace what they set out to define and qualify.”⁸⁸ The power of her work lay in imagination: “Plath was strikingly original and fertile in imaginative invention, in metaphors and fables, and her lyrics, brief though they are, set many metaphors going at once.”⁸⁹ Stephen Spender observed that Plath’s poems presented the reader with a “dark and ominous landscape. The landscape is an entirely interior, mental one in which external objects

have become converted into symbols of hysterical vision.”⁹⁰ Several reviewers of Plath’s late work explicitly contrasted it with Lowell’s. One commented on “her narrower range of technical resource and objective awareness than Lowell’s, and ... her absolute, almost demonically intense commitment by the end to the confessional mode,” while another less delicately declared that “Nothing could be healthier than Lowell’s poetry ... and likewise it is no good pretending that Sylvia Plath’s is not sick verse.”⁹¹ In a forward to *Ariel*, a posthumous collection of her last poems, Lowell himself commented that “Everything in these poems is personal, confessional, felt, but the manner of feeling is controlled hallucination, the autobiography of a fever.”⁹²

As the nature of her contribution suggests, Plath was a conceptual poet, noted for her expression of extreme emotion rather than careful observation. Her most celebrated poems date from the final two years of her life, before her suicide at the age of 31; 70% of her anthology entries date from just these two years. Unlike Lowell’s extended and gradual growth into his mature style, Plath’s arrival at her greatest work occurred abruptly. Thus her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, later wrote that in these final two years Plath “underwent a poetic development that has hardly any equal on record, for suddenness and completeness.”⁹³ She did not share Lowell’s reluctance to finish poems, as during this time she wrote “at top speed, as one might write an urgent letter,” and she frequently began and completed a poem in a single day.⁹⁴ Nor did she suffer from uncertainty about her achievement: four months before her death, she wrote to her mother that “I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name.”⁹⁵ Plath’s prediction proved correct, for two poems from these final months, “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” are listed in Table 5 among the most anthologized poems of the century. It is unlikely, however, that even Plath could have foreseen just how widely this

work would make her name, for *Ariel* would eventually sell more than a half-million copies, a rare level of popular success for poetry.⁹⁶ The conceptual nature of Plath's art made it possible for her to make a significant contribution in spite of the extreme brevity of her career, and life.

Richard Wilbur is praised for being "witty, versatile, good-humored, intelligent, and technically dazzling," and for writing "elegant, exquisitely regular, jewel-like verse."⁹⁷ His poetry is concerned with form rather than substance: "the subject of the poem need not be in any sense great; the death of a toad would do nicely... This was art, not life."⁹⁸ In view of the obviously conceptual character of his poetry, it is not surprising that Wilbur's early work is his most highly regarded, and that there is a critical consensus that "Wilbur has changed or developed very little in his eight collections of verse," or more bluntly that "the later Wilbur ... never really emerged."⁹⁹ As James Dickey reflected in 1962, when Wilbur was 41, "Up to now...there has been no *development*, or even change, in Wilbur's work, and there is something vaguely disturbing in this."¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

There is a widespread belief that the production of great poetry is the domain of the young. The psychologist Harvey Lehman concluded that "the golden decade for the writing of secular poetry occurs not later than the twenties," and the psychologist Howard Gardner later wrote:

[P]oetry in general, and lyric (personal) poetry in particular, is a craft in which artists tend to make their contributions at a young age. Most of the great poets of recent centuries created their defining work in their twenties or thirties, and many either died, stopped writing poetry in the succeeding decades, or continued to write in the same vein, without appreciable growth or change. Poets who achieve breakthroughs in middle age or later, like William Butler Yeats or Robert Penn Warren, are more

exceptional than their peers in novel writing, musical composition, or visual art. As the novelist Marcia Davenport recently expressed it: “All the great poets died young. Fiction is the art of middle age. And essays are the art of old age.”¹⁰¹

In a lecture on Yeats, T. S. Eliot offered a more balanced theoretical statement on the poetic life cycle:

[I]n theory, there is no reason why a poet’s inspiration or material should fail, in middle age or at any time before senility. For a man who is capable of experience finds himself in a different world in every decade of his life; as he sees it with different eyes, the material of his art is continually renewed.

Yet Eliot then offered an empirical judgment: “But in fact, very few poets have shown this capacity of adaptation to the years.”¹⁰²

In part, this belief in the domination of lyric poetry by the young is the result of the celebrated examples of great poets who died young. Burns, Keats, Byron, Leopardi, and Rimbaud were all dead before the age of 40, and in the twentieth century their tragic tradition was continued by Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, and Sylvia Plath. These dramatic brief lives create a powerful impression that, as Josephine Jacobsen observed, “old age is a period alien, if not fatal, to poetry. The Shelley-Keats image, the youthful figure of the runner fame never outran, lingers.”¹⁰³ But although these cases clearly establish that longevity is not essential for greatness in poetry, they cannot exclude the possibility that greatness can also be achieved at older ages.

This study provides conclusive evidence that poets can achieve greatness beyond the age of 40. In a sample of 11 important American poets of the twentieth century, selected systematically on the basis of the appearance of their poetry in designated anthologies, five appear to have made their major contributions after 40. In contrast to the rapid early maturation of Cummings, Eliot, Plath, Pound, and Wilbur, a clear alternative pattern emerges, in which the

art of Bishop, Frost, Lowell, Moore, Stevens, and Williams grew more slowly and over a much longer period.

Contrary to Lehman, the evidence of the anthologies emphatically rejects the view that the 20s were a golden decade for the production of poetry during the 20th century. Nor were the 20s and 30s together the dominant decades, as Gardner would have it. Thus even if we restrict our view to Table 5, which displays the most-often anthologized individual poems of the 11 poets considered here, only 3 of the total of 21 poems were written by authors in their 20s - the same number as were produced by poets in their 50s. The major decades were the 30s and 40s, both of which are represented by one-third of the total entries in the table. And it should not be ignored that “One Art,” one of Elizabeth Bishop’s two entries in the table, was written when she was 65 years old.

As I have argued in this paper, I believe that the two different patterns of these poets’ careers can be traced to differences in the nature of their poetry. Thus whereas the poets in the sample whose contributions were conceptual tended to mature, and decline, early, those who worked experimentally, and who based their poetry on observation, tended to arrive later at their principal contributions, and to continue to improve to considerably older ages.

When T. S. Eliot delivered the lecture quoted earlier in this conclusion, he was 52 years old. After giving his judgment that few poets had been able to overcome the challenge of improving their art as they aged, he offered an explanation: “Most men either cling to the experiences of youth, so that their writing becomes an insincere mimicry of their earlier work, or they leave their passion behind, and write only from the head, with a hollow and wasted virtuosity.”¹⁰⁴ After completing the *Four Quartets* in 1942, Eliot showed little interest in writing

poetry during the more than two decades that remained to him, and it is possible that these pessimistic words from his 1940 lecture are a generalization derived from introspection. When he gave that lecture, Eliot may have been unaware of the progress of his contemporaries Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams, or perhaps the conceptual Eliot was simply unable to appreciate the achievements of these experimental poets who lacked his precocity and brilliance.¹⁰⁵ Whatever the case, Eliot's account may apply to many conceptual poets, who rise quickly to a high level of achievement, but are often unable later to surpass or even match that early peak, rather than to great experimental poets, whose ability to maintain their passion and intellectual curiosity allows them to improve their art over the course of long periods, as they gain in wisdom and craftsmanship.

The difference in these two paths is not solely a matter of professional commitment and achievement. When Eliot finished the *Four Quartets* at the age of 54, he told a friend that "I have reached the end of something," and in later years poetry did not help him face the adversity that remained in his life; a biographer observed that it was "as though the Eliot of the great poems was no longer there."¹⁰⁶ In contrast, ten years after the suicide of her lover, in "One Art" the 65-year-old Elizabeth Bishop used poetry to express both the enormity of her loss and her belief that her need to write about it was the greatest source of her ability to bear that loss.¹⁰⁷ Thus the difference between the conceptual and experimental approaches is not a matter of choice, but appears to stem from basic traits of personality. Studies like this one may help us to gain a more precise understanding of these differing traits, and may eventually help us gain a better understanding of human creativity wherever it occurs.

Endnotes

I thank Peter Northup for research assistance, and the National Science Foundation for financial support.

1. Dove 2000, 269-85.
2. Lehman 2000, 43.
3. Galenson 2002a.
4. See the appendix.
5. These are listed in the appendix.
6. Dickey 1968, 5.
7. Vendler 2003, 117.
8. Stevens 1965, 160.
9. Spender 1955, 48-49. The poet Seamus Heaney mentioned a similar dichotomy of poets' working methods:
 Years ago Michael Longley wrote an essay on poets from Northern Ireland in which he made a distinction between igneous and sedimentary modes of poetic composition. In geology, igneous rocks are derived from magma or lava solidified below the earth's surface, whereas sedimentary ones are formed by the deposit and accumulation of mineral and organic materials worked on, broken down, and reconstituted by the action of water, ice, wind. The very sound of the words is suggestive of what is entailed in each case. Igneous is irruptive, unlooked-for and peremptory; sedimentary is steady-keeled, dwelt-upon, graduated.
 Heaney 2002, 220. Yet Heaney did not pursue or develop this distinction.
10. The mean age of 33 for Eliot in Table 8 would not be changed if age 34, at which he wrote *The Waste Land*, were included as one of his best years.
11. Since Plath was born October 27, 1932, and died February 11, 1963, she was actually 30 at the time of her death. As is commonly done in quantitative studies, however, age is here calculated as the difference in the years of birth and death, without regard to the specific month and day. The resulting inaccuracy here has no effect on any significant result.
12. Gordon 1998, 42.
13. Stauffer 1974, 267; Shucard, et. al., 1989, 99.

14. Stauffer 1974, 266.
15. Eliot 1988, 530.
16. Williams 1951, 174.
17. Williams 1954, 103.
18. Williams 1951, 174.
19. Wilson 1984, 110.
20. Aiken 1958, 177.
21. Cowley 1951, 110-11.
22. Perkins 1987, 3-5.
23. Cowley 1951, 111.
24. Stauffer 1974, 259.
25. Shucard, et. al., 1989, 124.
26. Carpenter 1988, 405-16.
27. Gordon 1998, 101.
28. Perkins 1976, 333.
29. Kenner 1985, 73.
30. Wilson 1952, 46-47.
31. Aiken 1958, 324.
32. Williams 1954, 21.
33. Shucard, et. al., 1989, 139.
34. Waggoner 1984, 371.
35. Shucard , et. al. 1989, 139.
36. Williams 1951, 391.
37. Williams 1951, 357.

38. Jarrell 1999, 77.
39. Dickey 1968, 192.
40. Stevens 1997, 815.
41. Jarrell 1999, 77.
42. Lowell 1990, 33.
43. Stauffer 1974, 231-32.
44. Lowell 1990, 9.
45. Jarrell 1999, 233.
46. Perkins 1976, 235.
47. Barry 1973, 126.
48. Lowell 1990, 10.
49. Thompson 1961, 133.
50. Stevens 1972, 289.
51. Stevens 1965, 6; Stevens 1966, 164.
52. Stevens 1972, 864.
53. Lensing 1986, 125, 140.
54. MacLeod 1993, 131. On Miró and Motherwell as experimental painters, see Galenson 2001, 107-08, 118-21.
55. Lensing 1986, 146.
56. Lensing 1986, 138.
57. Stevens 1965, 167-68.
58. Stevens 1972, 817. Also see Perloff 1985, 8, 14.
59. Doyle 1985, 393.
60. Jarrell 1999, 237.

61. Stevens 1997, 807-08.
62. Shucard, et. al. 1989, 201.
63. Perkins 1987, 42.
64. Perkins 1987, 45.
65. Rotella 1984, 77.
66. Rotella 1984, 98.
67. Dickey 1968, 100.
68. Tomlinson 1969, 23.
69. Ruland and Bradbury 1991, 291.
70. Jarrell 1999, 24; Jacobsen 1997, 30.
71. Tomlinson 1969, 62.
72. Dickey 1968, 162.
73. Jarrell 1999, 131.
74. Perkins 1987, 374.
75. Schwartz and Estess 1983, 181; Bishop 1994, 621.
76. Schwartz and Estess 1983, 207; Goldensohn 1992, 176. On Ryder see Galenson 2002b.
77. Schwartz and Estess 1983, 204-05.
78. Gray 1990, 253-55. Similarly, a critic recently remarked that “Revising for him wasn’t just an afterthought but an essential part of the creative process, and in a sense none of his poems were ever truly finished;” McGrath 2003, 54.
79. Galenson 2001, 121; Kunitz 1975, 159.
80. Hamilton 1982, 232.
81. McGrath 2003, 55.
82. Roberts 2001, 489.
83. Kunitz 1975, 154.

84. Hamilton 1982, 277.
85. Jarrell 1999, 253.
86. Hall 1982, 195.
87. Gray 1990, 261.
88. Schmidt 1999, 829.
89. Perkins 1987, 593.
90. Wagner 1988, 71.
91. Wagner 1988, 60, 73.
92. Plath 1975a, xiii.
93. Hughes 1994, 162.
94. Bercovitch 1996, 249; Alexander 1991, 6-7.
95. Plath 1975b, 468.
96. Alexander 1991, 344.
97. Stauffer 1974, 385; Bercovitch 1996, 256.
98. Bercovitch 1996, 58.
99. Stauffer 1974, 58; Bercovitch 1996, 57; Gray 1990, 223.
100. Dickey 1968, 171.
101. Lehman 1953, 249; Gardner 1993, 248. Also see Simonton 1988, 72-73.
102. Eliot 1975, 252.
103. Jacobsen 1997, 75.
104. Eliot 1975, 253.
105. E.g. see Eliot's earlier condescension to Frost; Meyers 1996, 199.
106. Gordon 1998, 519-20.
107. Schwartz and Estess 1983, 150-51.

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Appendix: The 47 books surveyed for this study are listed here. The nine books used to select the poets for the study are indicated by asterisks.

1. Haas, Robert; John Hollander; Carolyn Kizer; Nathaniel Macke, and Marjorie Perloff, editors, *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Vols. 1 and 2*, (The Library of America, 2000).
2. Pinsky, Robert and Maggie Dietz, editors, *American's Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology*, First edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).
3. *Parini, Jay, editor, *The Columbia Anthology of American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
4. *Roberts, Michael, editor, *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, Fourth edition, revised by Peter Porter (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).
5. Nims, John Frederick, editor, *The Harper Anthology of Poetry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).
6. Schmidt, Michael, editor, *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English*, First edition (London: The Harvill Press, 1999).
7. DeRoche, Joseph, editor, *The Heath Introduction to Poetry*, Fourth edition (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1992).
8. *Kennedy, X. J., editor, *An Introduction to Poetry*, Sixth edition (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986).
9. Strand, Mark and Eavan Boland, editors, *The Making of a Poem: The Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, First edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).
10. Baym, Nina, editor, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vols. 1 and 2*, Second edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).
11. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Fifth edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).
12. Beaty, Jerome and J. Paul Hunter, editors, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, Seventh edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).
13. *Hunter, Paul, editor, *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*, Fourth edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).
14. *Ellman, Richard and Robert O'Clair, editors, *The Norton Anthology of Modern*

- Literature*, Second edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).
15. *Ferguson, Margaret; Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, editors, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Fourth edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).
 16. Paschen, Elise and Rebekah Presson Mosby, *Poetry Speaks* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2001).
 17. Miller, Ruth and Robert A. Greenberg, editors, *Poetry: An Introduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).
 18. Rothenberg, Jerome and Pierre Joris, editors, *Poetry for the Millenium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
 19. Rosenthal, M. L., editor, *Poetry in English: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
 20. Vendler, Helen, editor, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (Bedford Books, 1996).
 21. Watson, Roy W., editor, *Poetry Worth Remembering: An Anthology of Poetry* (Brunswick, 1986).
 22. Heaney, Seamus and Ted Hughes, editors, *The Rattle Bag: An Anthology of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).
 23. *Perrine, Laurence and Thomas R. Arp, editors, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, Eighth edition (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).
 24. Head, Joseph H., editor, *Treasury of Favorite Poems* (Gramercy Books, 2000).
 25. *Hall, Donald, editor, *To Read a Poem*, Second edition (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).
 26. *Nims, John Frederick, editor, *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry*, Third edition (New York: Random House, 1992).
 27. Gesner, George, editor, *Anthology of American Poetry* (Avenel Books, 1983).
 28. Roche, Joseph de, editor, *The Heath Introduction to Literature*, Fourth edition (D. C. Heath and Company, 1992).

29. Simpson, Louis, editor, *An Introduction to Poetry*, Third edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
30. Allison, Alexander W., et. al., editors, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Third edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983).
31. Amis, Kingsley, editor, *The Pleasure of Poetry from His Daily Mirror Column* (London: Cassell Publishers, 1990).
32. Lewis, Leslie, editor, *Poems by Favorite Poets in Large Print* (G. K. Hall and Company, 1992).
33. Baumgartner, Jill P., editor, *Poetry* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990).
34. Frye, Northrup; Sheridan Baker, and George Perkins, *The Practical Imagination: An Introduction to Poetry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).
35. Mayes, Francis, editor, *The Discovery of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).
36. Kennedy, X. J. And Dana Gioia, editors, *An Introduction to Poetry*, Eighth edition (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1994).
37. Mandel, Oscar, editor, *Fundamentals of the Art of Poetry* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
38. Koch, Kenneth, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* (Scribner, 1998).
39. Kirkland, James W. And F. David Sanders, *Poetry: Sight and Insight* (New York: Random House, 1982).
40. Frieber, Stuart and David Young, editors, *The Longman Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, Second edition (Longman, 1989).
41. DiYanni, Robert, *Modern American Poets: Their Voices and Visions*, Second edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1994).
42. Poulin, Jr., A., editor, *Contemporary American Poetry*, Second edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).
43. Nelson, Cary, editor, *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

44. Paine, Jeffrey, editor, *The Poetry of Our World* (New York : Harper Collins, 2000).
45. Washburn, Katharine; John S. Major, and Clifton Fadiman, editors *World Poetry: An Anthology of Verse From Antiquity to Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).
46. Harmon, William, editor, *The Classic Hundred Poems: All Time Favorites*, Second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
47. Ellman, Richard and Robert O'Clair, editors, *Modern Poems: A Norton Introduction*, Second edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

Table 1: Ranking of Leading Poets by Total Entries in “The Best American Poetry of the Twentieth Century”

Poet	Total entries listed	Number of different poems listed
1. William Carlos Williams	12	7
2. Robert Frost	11	9
3t. Elizabeth Bishop	10	9
3t. Wallace Stevens	10	8
5t. Hart Crane	9	5
5t. T. S. Eliot	9	4
7. Marianne Moore	8	6
8. W. H. Auden	7	4

Note: All poems listed were included in this tabulation, including those identified as runners-up or alternates. Richard Howard’s list, which consisted of books rather than poems, was excluded.

Source: Rita Dove, ed., *The Best American Poetry 2000* (New York: Scribner, 2000), pp. 271-84.

Table 2: Ranking of Leading Poems by Total Entries

Author, poem	N
1. T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land"	5
2t. W. H. Auden, "In Praise of Limestone"	4
2t. John Berryman, <i>77 Dream Songs</i>	4
2t. Hart Crane, "Voyages"	4
2t. James Merrill, "The Book of Ephraim"	4
2t. William Carlos Williams, "Spring and All"	4
7t. Hart Crane, "The Bridge"	3
7t. William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"	3

Source: see Table 1.

Table 3: Poets Included in this Study

Poet	Year of birth	Year of death
Bishop, Elizabeth	1911	1979
Cummings, E. E.	1894	1962
Eliot, T. S.	1888	1965
Frost, Robert	1874	1963
Lowell, Robert	1917	1977
Moore, Marianne	1887	1972
Plath, Sylvia	1932	1963
Pound, Ezra	1885	1972
Stevens, Wallace	1879	1955
Wilbur, Richard	1921	--
Williams, William Carlos	1883	1963

Source: see text.

Table 4: Ranking of Poets by Total Anthology Entries

Poet	Entries
Frost	503
Williams	371
Stevens	361
Pound	237
Lowell	221
Cummings	209
Plath	205
Bishop	203
Moore	187
Eliot	166
Wilbur	153

Source: This and all subsequent tables are based on the data set constructed for this study. See the text and appendix for a description.

Table 5: Ranking of Leading Poems by Anthology Entries

Poet, poem	Date	Age	Entries
1. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"	1911	23	31
1. Lowell, "Skunk Hour"	1958	41	31
3. Frost, "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening"	1922	48	29
4. Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow"	1923	40	28
5. Bishop, "The Fish"	1940	29	25
5. Pound, "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"	1915	30	25
7. Plath, "Daddy"	1962	30	24
7. Pound, "In a Station of the Metro"	1913	28	24
9. Williams, "The Dance"	1942	59	23
9. Frost, "Mending Wall"	1912	38	23
9. Stevens, "The Snow Man"	1921	42	23
12. Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"	1922	43	22
12. Stevens, "Sunday Morning"	1915	36	22
12. Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West"	1934	55	22
12. Williams, "This is Just to Say"	1934	51	22
16. Moore, "Poetry"	1919	32	21
16. Frost, "The Road Not Taken"	1916	42	21
18. Lowell, "For the Union Dead"	1959	42	20
18. Plath, "Lady Lazarus"	1962	30	20
20. Bishop, "One Art"	1976	65	19
20. Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"	1917	38	19

Table 6: Percentage Distributions of Anthology Entries, by Poet's Age

Poet	Age:	20-9	30-9	40-9	50-9	60-9	70-9	80-9	Total
Bishop		25	15	29	4	27	--	--	100
Cummings		31	28	25	6	10	--	--	100
Eliot		33	40	17	10	0	0	--	100
Frost		0	8	50	8	29	4	1	100
Lowell		17	2	56	19	6	--	--	100
Moore		11	49	18	19	1	2	0	100
Plath		30	70	--	--	--	--	--	100
Pound		48	37	2	5	4	4	0	100
Stevens		0	22	29	18	16	15	--	100
Wilbur		38	31	13	12	6	0	0	100
Williams		0	23	33	23	7	14	0	100

Table 7: Ages of Poets in Five Best Years, by Total Anthology Entries

Poet	1	2	3	4	5
Bishop	29	45	60	65	46
Cummings	46	26	37	28	32
Eliot	23	39	30	27, 47	--
Frost	42	62	68	49	54
Lowell	41	42	29	47	52
Moore	37	32, 45	--	34, 56	--
Plath	30	31	28	29	25
Pound	28	27, 30	--	35	36
Stevens	36	43	42	55	40
Wilbur	27	34	55	26, 29, 47	--
Williams	40	51	38	59	33

Note: multiple entries indicate ties.

Table 8: Mean and Median Ages of Poets in Their Five Best Years

Poet	Mean	Median
Frost	55	54
Bishop	49	46
Williams	44	40
Stevens	43	42
Lowell	42	42
Moore	41	37
Wilbur	36	29
Cummings	34	28
Eliot	33	30
Pound	31	30
Plath	29	29

Table 9: Total Anthology Entries, by Poet, of Poems Written through the Age of 31

Poet	Entries
Plath	205
Pound	145
Cummings	75
Eliot	72
Wilbur	57
Bishop	52
Lowell	35
Moore	34
Williams	2
Frost	0
Stevens	0

Table 10: Poets' Ages in the Earliest of Their Best Five Years

Poet	Age
Frost	42
Stevens	36
Williams	33
Moore	32
Bishop	29
Lowell	29
Pound	27
Cummings	26
Wilbur	26
Plath	25
Eliot	23

Table 11: Poets' Ages in the Latest of Their Best Five Years

Poet	Age
Frost	68
Bishop	65
Williams	59
Moore	56
Stevens	55
Wilbur	55
Lowell	52
Eliot	47
Cummings	46
Pound	36
Plath	31

Table 12: Poets' Ages When They Wrote Their Five Most Often Reprinted Poems

Poet	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Median
Bishop	29	65	60	45	46	49	46
Frost	48	38	42	42	49, 62	47	45
Williams	40	59	51	40	38	46	40
Stevens	42	36, 43, 55	--	--	38	43	42
Moore	32	34	45	31	56	40	34
Cummings	26	46	26	37	46	36	37
Lowell	41	42	29	29	41	36	41
Wilbur	34	27	29, 29, 55	--	--	34	29
Eliot	23	39	30	34	32	32	32
Plath	30	30	29	30	28, 30	30	30
Pound	30	28	35	27	27, 28	29	28

Note: multiple entries indicate ties.

Table 13: Poems Written at Age 25 or Earlier that Appear in Five or More Anthologies

Author, poem	Age	Anthologies
1. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"	23	31
2. Bishop, "The Man-Moth"	25	7
3. Cummings, "All in green went my love riding"	22	7
4. Plath, "Black Rook in Rainy Weather"	25	6

Table 14: Poems Written at Age 65 or Later that Appear in Five or More Anthologies

Author, poem	Age	Anthologies
1. Bishop, "One Art"	65	19
2. Frost, "The Gift Outright"	68	14
3t. Frost, "Never Again Would Birds' Song be the Same"	68	12
3t. Frost, "The Silken Tent"	68	12
5. Frost, "Directive"	73	9
6. Williams, "Pictures from Brueghel II: Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"	77	8
7. Stevens, "The Plain Sense of Things"	73	7
8t. Frost, "The Draft Horse"	73	6
8t. Stevens, "The House was Quiet and the World was Calm"	67	6
8t. Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"	72	6
8t. Stevens, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself"	75	6
12t. Stevens, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"	73	5
12t. Williams, "Descent"	71	5
12t. Williams, "The Ivy Crown"	71	5
12t. Williams, "The Sparrow"	72	5