

# ENTERTEXT

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## Abstract

increasingly common in literary fiction in recent years. This paper considers late

output as an example.

*On Late*

*Style* (2006) and Joh

*New York Times*

create a definition of and criteria for late style, this paper considers the older writer representing the older character in their fiction. Although there are other times of life when the term

time of life, this paper ties the term to senescence.

concerned with composers, suggests that late works are not necessarily serene and transcendent but, rather, can be abrupt and contradictory.

as a springboard to consider literature more fully. Addressing canonical authors from both sides of the Atlantic, he suggests that a characteristic of late fiction is its brevity; it

From this starting point, I

compare the late work of a contemporary author. Now 77, Roth is as, if not perhaps more, prolific as he has ever been, producing a novel a year for the past five years.

Of his last four works, three centred on a protagonist in late life. Focusing on

*Everyman* (2006), *Exit Ghost* (2007), and *The Humbling* (2009), this paper compares



Levinson, and Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick amongst others have noted, old age is defined in different ways – medically, socially, personally, etc – and consequently can be seen to begin at different ages<sup>3</sup>; however, beyond seventy years old seems to be a reasonable average. Both *Everyman* and *The Humbling*, the Roth texts used here, were written once the author passed this threshold.

In Edward W.

*On Late Style*, he explores the

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also very (even pr <sup>5</sup> First and foremost, he disregards the notion that old age (or another form of late life) must be a time for closure or reconciliation, though he notes that this is one, albeit less interesting form of late style; this would constitute conformity rather than resistance to expectations. Uninterested in conformist work that is cathartic and complete, he focuses on a late



s more focused with age not less so, and manifests itself as simple, fast moving plot, suggesting a sense of time that pervades the work.

<sup>12</sup> In other words, the writer gives over his time and talent only to the most salient elements of the story, and leaves out the rest.

greater urgency in completing their narratives. The narratives focus only on the most salient relationships, which are with women, rather than exploring family or work dynamics. Clearly such authorial choices are made in any fictional text but if one and these characters themselves much more starkly represented than in the longer works.

There is a tendency for critics, and perhaps readers, to believe that shorter novels are easier to write, or presume that writers like Roth write a hundred pages or so because they feel their time is limited and they would be unwise to embark on more lengthy projects. However, in a couple of interviews now, Roth has stated that

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shorter pieces, he asserts, has a reason quite other than age or ease. He has asserted that his admiration of Saul

pages. So rather than these short novels representing less effort, a sort of semi-retirement for Roth, they could actually be considered to demonstrate even greater creativity than is realised. Indeed, Roth has suggested that his move to shorter fiction, rather than being something allied with late style and age, is representative of contemporary trends; speaking last year about the influence of various screens cinema, television, computer and Kindle and what he sees as the decline of the big novel, he believes he has met this new market that does not have, concentration, the focus, the solitude, the silence, all the things that are required for

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Thus, rather than becoming dislocated from the present, as Said stated those with those in their late period were, Roth could be seen as inhabiting the zeitgeist.

might be questioned; indeed, so dry is his humour that sarcasm is often difficult to pin down.

ether other

literary luminaries might follow his example, Stuart Evers stated that the usual

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Roth bucks this trend, publishing as frequently as he ever did, and this in itself confirms his engagement in the present. Cultural commentators

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such as Nicholas Delbanco have noted that Western society tends to be suspicious of people who remain creative and productive in old age.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps less stringently so than for rock and pop stars but this scepticism is present in literary circles too; there is certainly some surprise expressed in response to sustained literary activity, especially if the work is considered of a consistently good standard. Almost every interview with Roth makes some comment on his incredible creative surge in late life.

<sup>20</sup> Roth is self-deprecating regarding his age:

this fact. The hard part is, of course, the proximity of death. The number has

ch it is. It could be a very short

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While he does not dismiss his age, he is quite firm that his worries are not obsessive:

<sup>22</sup> He is, as

Said would suggest, fully conscious of being near the end.

temptation to conflate character and author, as Said noted is common for those writing in old age. When interviewing Roth soon after the publication of *Everyman*,

in for this interview with an IV drip.

<sup>23</sup> And reflecting on

the plotlines of *Exit Ghost*, Roth himself not

<sup>24</sup> However, this reaction is

perhaps forgivable for Roth readers; Roth has always written according to his rule

consistently reflected his personal history.<sup>25</sup>

What might be a return to stable ground in late style is, for ~~the~~





them a disservice in distilling them thus, this negative critical reception is reflective of

Roth accepts that, while considered a comic writer earlier in his career, his

terms akin to a holiday resort, with facilities and entertainment for the residents. He sets out with good intentions to keep his body and mind active:

As soon as he moved into the village, he turned the sunny living room of his three-room condo into a gym. Every day, after a long four-mile walk on the boardwalk, he spent most of the remainder of each day fulfilling a long-standing ambition by happily painting, a routine that

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Here, Roth allies mental and physical stimulation, suggesting that both are salient to the continuation of a youthful or positive outlook on life, an argument that Betty Friedan supports.<sup>34</sup> However, it does not take long before the place simply reminds him that he and all those around him are old, and he is overcome by depression and fears of mortality.

While Simon Axler begins *The Humbling* as a vital man, a large, burly actor standing six feet four inches tall, with a big bald head and the energy of a young man, the novella presents age as a successive loss of identity.

The impulse was spent. The energy was done had

<sup>35</sup> Though for a while he replaces the lost professional impulse with a sexual one, this too deserts him, until there is no Axler, no remaining identity, and he shoots himself. Having lost these two defining masculine identities, sexual and professional, he no longer knows himself. This reflects Featherstone

notion that for some the outer body and face can become a rigid alien structure of imprisonment which can mask forever the possibilities of expressing the self

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loss of selfhood and agency is an inability to perform as himself, which causes first madness (he commits himself to a mental hospital), and eventually a desire to die.

The sexual activity of the characters in *Everyman* and *The Humbling* marks them as rebellious or abnormal, as the criticism against *The Humbling* noted. This is

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similarly emphasised by Stephen Metcalf in his review of *Everyman*; he indicated that a focus on sex was unrealistic, that sex drive in a character of this age was

privilege, has led him to over-associate the horror of dying with the loss of sexual

<sup>38</sup> These reviews expose the presumption that ageing is a heterogeneous

scenes are extreme but they are similarly so in *Sabbath's Theater* and this was critically very well received.<sup>43</sup> However, perhaps a heterosexual man of whatever age attempting to alter the sexual orientation of a woman has misogynistic implications, and it is this that the critics address. This, though, is short-sighted as

With her free hand she held up

<sup>44</sup> Thus, when she leaves him, he is left not only alone but feels humiliated and foolish. With these caveats in place, it could be argued that it can only be the age of the protagonist and his sexual excess to which critics object. Thus, the objection of critics and their assertion that such writing is somehow inappropriate ties these novels to late style;

kind of self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable, coming after it, and

<sup>45</sup> By continuing to write so explicitly, Roth locates himself beyond what is acceptable and, therefore, in lateness.

The late flushes of sexual experimentation do not last for either protagonist. In *Everyman*, the protagonist asks a girl out on the beach but when he does not hear back from her, he has to accept that he has lost the sexual aspect of his masculinity. He may be attracted to others but they are not attracted to him; he recognises:

germinating the masculine joys, and he tried not to long for them too much. On his own he had felt for a while that the missing component would somehow return to make him inviolable once again and reaffirm his mastery, that the entitlement mistakenly severed would be restored and he could

But now it appeared that like any number of the elderly, he was becoming less and less and would have [to?] see his aimless days though to the end as no more than what he was the aimless days and the uncertain nights and the impotently putting up with the physical deterioration and the terminal sadness and the waiting and waiting for nothing.<sup>46</sup>

As the protagonist equates masculinity with physical and sexual prowess, he feels he has lost his masculine identity, and dies shortly thereafter.

Axler, too, must be disappointed in his hopes for a prolonged sexual  
stern and conservative warning for whom if not the charismatic writer himself?

<sup>47</sup> In the end, Pegeen leaves him for another woman. He realises that, he had just been delaying the inevitable, and the relationship was only a temporary distraction:

Similarly, Axler ends his life alone; he sits with the shotgun barrel in his mouth. However, although he kills himself, in this final act he goes some way towards regaining his identity. He is unable to pull the trigger until he has this thought:

[F]inally it occurred to him to pretend that he was committing suicide in a play. In a play by Chekhov. What could be more fitting? It would constitute his return to acting, and, preposterous, disgraced, feeble little being that he was, -month mistake, it would take everything in him to get the job done.<sup>51</sup>

had brought it off, the well-established stage star, once so widely heralded for his

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Nonetheless, that it is only death that can bring an end to his misery and loss of identity is in itself a strong indictment of ageing.

*Everyman* and *The Humbling* cover similar themes associated with death. In *Everyman* death w *The Humbling*, on the other hand, shows a man trying desperately but futilely to fight against old age with sex. However, in the end, such a goal is unattainable and Roth suggests any attempts are humiliating. Both focus on negative implications of ageing; as Roth writes in *Everyman* (156).

contrary as Roth himself. While readers and critics may come to these texts as examples of late style, noting their brevity and preoccupations with mortality, Roth attempts to eschew such compartmentalisation through complexities of character and plot, and his own resistance to be consigned to lateness before he is ready. Roth, it would seem, has a complicated understanding of late style, one which perhaps reflects the changing and more heterogeneous experience of ageing. Roth,

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- <sup>25</sup> Philip Roth in Mark Lawson, *Mark Lawson Talks to Philip Roth* (BBC4, 3 June, 2006).
- <sup>26</sup> Edward Roth *New York Times*, 16 July 2006), par. 2 of 16.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/16/books/review/16rothstein.html?pagewanted=print>
- <sup>27</sup> Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (London: Vintage, 1998).
- <sup>28</sup> Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2001).
- <sup>29</sup> Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (London: Vintage, 2005).
- <sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, 22 October 2009), par. 10  
of 14. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/23/books/23book.html?pagewanted=all>
- <sup>31</sup> *Reuters*, 5  
October 2010), par. 22 of 26. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/10/05/books-philiproth-idUSN0412606820101005>
- <sup>32</sup> Roth in *Lawson Talks to*.
- <sup>33</sup> Roth, *Everyman*, 64.
- <sup>34</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 124-5.
- <sup>35</sup> Roth, *Humbling*