

Late Style and Its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature and Music, edited by Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 270. £61 (hardcover).

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The idea of late style, a concept with a long discursive history, has seen a resurgence of critical popularity in recent years. Some of this is undoubtedly related to Edward Said's *On Late Style* (2006), a work that comes in for criticism in many of the essays collected in *Late Style and Its Discontents*. The editors of this collection are well placed to offer a critique of the development and application of theories of late style. Sam Smiles, an art historian, was the curator of an exhibition of Turner's last works at Tate Britain in 2014. Literary scholar Gordon McMullan is the author of *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing* (2007). Both are sceptical about the desire for universal and transhistorical notions of late style, preferring instead to situate late style as a discourse characterized by 'contingency, not transcendence' (7). The collection as a whole offers a valuable cross-disciplinary exploration of the history and enduring appeal of late style in music, art history, and literature.

Smiles' narrative of the development of the discourse of late style in art history, considering in particular George Simmel, Albert Brinckmann, and Theodor Adorno, provides a fitting opening to part one of the book as he seeks to prove the plasticity and contingency of the term and undermine "the credibility of late style as a coherent concept in aesthetics" (30). McMullen rehearses his work on Shakespeare's late style and analyses Peter Nicholls' study of the poet George Oppen to provide a similar argument about the critical construction of late style from romanticism and through modernism. The universalising and transcendent meanings of late style are, for McMullen and Smiles, a way of ignoring the historical contingency and critical construction of lateness, in both its epochal and biographical modes. As these opening essays make clear, scepticism about the usefulness of the concept of late style pervades the collection, but the very existence of this book points to the recognition that, in these disciplines at least, it cannot be ignored. Laura Tunbridge's chapter on

Schubert, for example, notes that the ‘late-style industry’ is evidence of both the influence of Adorno and “the persistence of a traditional mode of scholarship that aims, through music analysis and biographical reportage, to prove the genius of the composer” (120). Her analysis of the history of Schubert’s late style explores the ways in which this was constructed in order to bolster Schubert’s reputation, particularly in the face of the success of his contemporary, Beethoven. Robert Spencer’s re-examination of Adorno in the final essay in the collection returns us to the epochal as he seeks to prove that in Adorno’s work lateness is about capitalism and its failures, and not about aging, the life course, and claims to genius. This chapter critiques lateness but moves away from McMullan in insisting on the possibility of its recuperation and its value as a way of understanding our current world, in particular “the capacity [of contemporary works] to voice otherwise hidden conflicts and struggles and to dramatize a sense of crisis and reckoning” (233).

Tunbridge’s observation that Schubert’s late style is certainly not old-age style (he died in his early thirties) points to the tension between the terms ‘late style’ (*Spätstil*) and ‘old-age style’ (*Altersstil*), which are often used interchangeably by critics. Philip Gossett’s discussion of the early and late work of Rossini offers an intriguing problematization of the chronological approach to late style by arguing that, depending on the understanding of late style employed, it is possible to see either *Guillaume Tell* (composed when Rossini was in his thirties) as late work or Rossini’s final late-life compositions, composed after a hiatus of more than 25 years, in these terms. The introduction insists that late-life creativity is largely tangential to the focus of this collection, leaving this instead to humanistic or cultural gerontology. Nevertheless, the relationship between aging, old age and creative style is explored in different ways in this collection, bearing out Michael Bell’s point (in chapter eight) that the meaning of late style has “perhaps ... a teasing relation between a biological condition or life stage and the cumulative teleology of an acknowledged artifice, the completion of an *oeuvre*” (131). McMullan’s examination of Peter Nicholls’ monograph *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, for example, recognises the importance of Oppen’s aging and dementia as part of thinking about his late style. Part two

of *Late Style and Its Discontents*, in particular, focuses on the biographical and life course in thinking about late style. Despite the claims of the introduction, there is some engagement with humanistic or cultural gerontology here, particularly in Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon's discussion of the historicization of late style (using opera as the focus of analysis), where late style is read as a kind of ageism.

Disciplinary differences produce productive disjunctions in this collection. The issue of style itself is one of these. It becomes clear that what is meant by style differs markedly (see Hutcheon and Hutcheon 63–6). For a literary scholar like me, style is understood primarily in terms of language use. But for those working in musicology and art history, it is, as Bell notes, “an overall artistic effect” (132). Bell's superb essay sees these differences of understanding as part of what produces different ‘perceptions of lateness’. He reads Goethe, Nietzsche, Thomas Mann, and D.H. Lawrence “through each others’ eyes” (132) in order to follow Smiles and McMullan in identifying late style and lateness as contingent upon “different *oeuvres* and world views” (132).

The collection consistently points to the role of – or indeed, in McMullan's words, the “complicity” (46) of – the critic in the discourse of late style. Some of the essays also explore the role of the artist himself in self-consciously shaping a late style. Karen Leeder's discussion of poet and critic Michael Hamburger is an excellent analysis of the limitations of late style. Recognizing that Hamburger's poetry is work “of lateness in the fullest sense of the word” (187), she also explores how the case study of Hamburger, who self-consciously adopted a late style, points out the “political and aesthetic blind spots” (186) in Said's *Late Style*.

The reference to ‘the artist himself’ in the above paragraph may hint at my main disappointment with this book: its reiteration of a canon of late style, a canon that does not accommodate the woman artist. I came to review this book shortly after a thought-provoking conference discussion about the late style of Djuna Barnes, a woman whose work crossed decades and moved between writing and the visual arts. McMullan in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing* points out that “there is no clearer indication of the limitations and fundamental

context-boundedness of the discourse of lateness than its systematic exclusion of women” (17), a process that *Late Style and Its Discontents* notes, but seemingly cannot overcome. This volume contains a chapter in which this idea is explored in relation to Jane Austen. Every other chapter in this book is devoted primarily to (white) male artists, writers, and theorists. David Amigoni (chapter four) argues convincingly that the idea of lateness can be productively extended to scientific figures like Darwin. Only one of the authors could imagine how this might work in relation to women artists. If, as Hutchinson suggests in his afterword, this book may “point ... the way” to a “more nuanced conception of late style” (237) then it will certainly be a conception that remains resolutely male.

WORKS CITED

- McMullan, Gordon. *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Said, Edward W. *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006.