

*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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Since Edward Said's posthumously published volume of essays on "late style" appeared in 2006, there has been a proliferation of books and essays on the topic. One of the authors in this edited volume of readings on late style has referred to this as "the late-style industry" (Tunbridge 120). Given this ever expanding interest, the volume under review offers a particularly broad up-to-date and generally critical exploration of the idea of late style. The focus of the book is both on late style as a generic concept across the arts and its specific application to the work of composers (Beethoven, Ravel, Rossini, and Schubert), painters (Monet, Picasso), and writers (Austin, Goethe, Hamburger, Lawrence, Mann, Nietzsche, and Oppen). There is even an attempt to explore the idea of late style applied to scientific writing, subjecting Charles Darwin's late work on worms to the late-style lens (Amigoni 75–78). Fronting these various essays, the two editors provide a very useful introduction, distinguishing between "late style," "late works," and "old-age style" while stressing the need for caution not to essentialize any one idea of what might constitute "lateness."

The book is divided into five sections, the first four addressing lateness in its historical context, in relation to the life course, in relation to constructions of lateness, and in relation to time and chronology. A final section revisits the topic through a re-reading of Adorno's seminal essay on Beethoven's late style. In the first section, the editors each contribute a chapter, placing the concept in its historical context. McMullan notes the very modern idea of a late style, which he associates with the writing of Theodor Adorno, Herman Broch, and Erich Neumann. Smiles takes a slightly different tack, approaching the term less through the idea of lateness than through the very concept of style as an indicator of not what is distinctive about an individual artist, composer or writer, but which reflects a distinct "supra-individual" quality that betokens an era or genre in a particular field. This focus upon the supra-individual qualities

of style makes it possible to construct a history of art "without names" (Smiles 18). Lateness, in this sense, is defined by features that transcend the work of individual "genius," reflecting a particular discursive field that seeks to place individual late works in the context of changing times. There can be no lateness without that context.

These two essays help set the main parameters by which to assess the subsequent essays. One treats the idea of late style as a supra-individual quality identifiable in the late works of a number of artists, writers, and composers while the other treats the idea of late style as indicative of lateness in the sense of the late life of creative workers. This is what Karen Leeder, in her chapter, calls their "personal biographical lateness" (Leeder 186). This latter framing coincides with the sense of lateness itself – whether expressive of the era (living in late times) or the limitations and tensions imposed by time running out (creativity under the pressure of late times, however understood).

These two parameters interact in each of the chapters differently. Some focus upon the stylistic consequences of a long creative life (in Lewison's chapter on Picasso, for example), others on the construction of a late style or old-age persona (Kelly's account of Ravel's consciousness of his "artistic aging" and Leeder's chapter on Michael Hamburger and his use of lateness "as a deliberate aesthetic strategy" (Leeder 174). Others focus upon the idea of lateness as responses to the encroachment not so much of age, but of illness, infirmity, and death (Murphy on Austen's late/last work, the unfinished novel now known as *Sanditon*; Tunbridge on Schubert's last compositions written when facing "the prospect of insanity and death" (Tunbridge 122).

McMullan poses the problem nicely in his essay on the American poet, George Oppen. He argues for a more "sensitive engagement with late work – one that recognises that the experience of growing old and the experience of being at the end of life differs over time and as cultures develop and change" (47). The contingency of lives and works is nowhere more evident than in relation to age, that seems at once so universal and so inevitable. That a composer's last works, or the themes taken up by a writer in his or her old age, or the confrontations facing an artist aging with impairments should manifest

universal, stylistic features is surely too much to ask. But that does not mean that the issues encompassed by late style lack substance or significance, for both students of the arts and students of aging. Each individual's later or last works present a challenge to our understanding of the role of time, age, and experience in realizing the art of performing humanity. That late life can be creative is worth stressing, of course, but that is perhaps little more than the taken-for-granted position of most gerontologists. Going beyond this platitude means exploring also what it means to be late, in the sense of running out of time, of finding oneself at risk of being eclipsed by time.

While most of these essays concentrate upon the achievements embodied in the late works of artists and composers such as Beethoven and Picasso, Titian and Rossini, there is one that stands out by considering the problematic association between late style and dementia. This topic is approached by McMullan, in his consideration of the late writing of the American poet, George Oppen, albeit "with a certain level of misgiving" (46). Such misgivings arise, since he feels it risks writing "as if all experience of old age can be condensed into and expressed through the ... experience of dementia" (46). What constitute artistic or creative developments attributed to the individual's later life and what constitute developments attributed to impairments, which nonetheless constitute artistic production? McMullan offers no answer but at least he raises and pursues the question. The task of exploring the darker side of aging and the lacunae that emerge in lateness remains no less important than the more optimistic one of positively contextualizing lateness. While the last compositions of the relatively young but terminally ill seem to convey something quite different from those made in conditions of age-associated infirmity, there remains the possibility, drawing upon Samuel Beckett's ideas, of what Karen Leeder calls "a kind of concentrated if fragmentary aesthetic" (178) – something that agedness alone might bring to the table.

This is a book rich in ideas, covering much ground and addressing a wide range of creative practices. In the final section, the book turns back to Adorno's foundational statement about late style, where Michael Spitzer suggests that "buying into Adorno's critique of Beethoven's late style requires us to submit

to a virtuous hermeneutic circularity” (207). He clearly considers this worthwhile, despite acknowledging Adorno’s difficult, “gnomic” style, as does Robert Spencer in the book’s penultimate chapter. Spencer takes a different position, however, being concerned less with art “firing the finite world” (207) than with reading Adorno as a social commentator on capitalism and modernity in their epochal lateness, each “a blockage in history” (229). Lateness, for him, is about surviving into lateness, but not “too lateness,” viewing the post-modern world through the idea that modernity has failed, to “denounce a society that only impersonates modernity” (231).

This reading of lateness takes us away from both biographical interpretation and the anthropomorphizing of society (writing in late times as in the context of an aging/senescent society); instead, Spencer claims Adorno is concerned with how art responds “to the ongoing crisis of an entire system” (add page) (i.e., capitalism and its modernity). This made me turn to the original Adorno essay, written in 1934 (which I confess I had not before read closely). Rather than feeling I could now see this interpretation, however, I found myself stumbling with what Spitzer called Adorno’s “gnomic” writing. Gnostic means “difficult to understand because enigmatic or ambiguous”; it conveys very well the style of Adorno’s writings on aesthetics, and nowhere more applicable than in this short essay. While Spencer makes a case for his epochal reading of lateness (lateness and not agedness), I must admit that I still could not reach that viewpoint from re-reading the essay. Lateness may well have discursive value, as he suggests, but it is surely also quite gnostic.

In the afterword, Ben Hutchison quite rightly resists any temptation to conclude “the essence of a collective argument” (235). He poses the question of whether lateness can only ever be attributed *ex post facto*, as “a purely posthumous honour” (add page) granted to creative workers through the prism of our living in late times. Perhaps, but surely this is the case whatever term is being employed to define the style of artists, composers, and writers. Their work and their times are constantly open to revision, no less than their biographies. For gerontologists and other students of aging, lateness is still very much a topic on the periphery, compared with their more central concerns with the bio-

medical, economic, and social aspects of longer, later lives. Reading the essays in this book I hope might serve as a stimulus to further consideration of lateness, not only as a way of writing about style, but as a state of mind and as a sociological condition, even if it is no more than just another riff on post-modernity and the post-modern self.