

# ENTERTEXT

Resisting Conformity in Philip Roth's Late Writing

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## Abstract

With many of America's literati entering old age, older characters have become increasingly common in literary fiction in recent years. This paper considers late writing as a distinct genre of contemporary writing and analyses Philip Roth's recent output as an example. Using Edward W. Said's posthumously published *On Late Style* (2006) and John Updike's article for *New York Times*, 'Late Works' (2006) to 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 'late' is applicable, i.e. writing produced during terminal illness at any time of life, this paper ties the term to senescence. Said's exploration, though largely concerned with composers, suggests that late works are not necessarily serene and transcendent but, rather, can be abrupt and contradictory. Updike uses Said's work 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 represents the essence of a writer's previous oeuvre. 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 Roth's late style to the characteristics set out by Said and Updike.

## Resisting Conformity in Philip Roth's Late Writing

Alex Hobbs

Late style is a creative period that has been considered largely in terms of older composers and artists rather than writers. However, as America's population and literati ages, and, perhaps as a consequence, older characters become more common in fiction, it seems to be to be an interesting time to explore late writing. Drawing on the work of Edward W. Said and John Updike, I will show that an analysis of late writing needs to include reception, style and issues of mortality. The case studies here are Philip Roth's recent novellas *Everyman* and *The Humbling*<sup>1</sup>, which have been chosen both because they were written in Roth's own late life and because they demonstrate late style features. Rather than conform to what is expected of late period masculinity – i.e. behaviour appropriate to mature adulthood and an acceptance of mortality – I argue that Roth writes older characters who continue in his phallogocentric approach to Jewish American masculinity. Late style, as Said and Updike define it and as Roth writes it, resists the conformity of what society assumes is acceptable in old age.

Late period refers to the creative output of the last few years of a person's life. It is a problematic term as, for most people, it can only be applied retrospectively. As a person may die at any age, this period can be affixed posthumously to an artist (author/painter/composer, etc) who died in middle-age or even earlier. Thus, it is arguably a term that has more worth for the consumer (reader/viewer/listener, etc) than the artist. For the consumer, this creative piece is the final output, but for that artist themselves, it may simply have been their current project before embarking upon the next; as Roth jokes, "I like to think of it as recent work."<sup>2</sup> For the term to have maximum worth, then, the artist should be aware that they are in this late period while alive. One example might be an artist with a terminal illness; yet perhaps the more likely scenario, and the one used for the purposes of this article, is that the late period of an artist's life refers to their senescence. Certainly, as Daniel J.

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. Said's posthumously published *On Late Style*, he explores the qualities late works might carry, calling it "a new idiom" distinct from other works.<sup>4</sup> Said stresses that "[l]ateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present."<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 style that is typified by "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" and "nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*."<sup>6</sup> He is interested in a lateness that has more in common with the rebellion of youthful artistic output: creativity that kicks against prescribed ideas of what lateness – and in this case, age – should be.

Fundamentally, Said's definition of late style is art that reflects a feeling of dislocation. Reflecting on Adorno's ground laying ideas, Said condenses his treatise on lateness as "the idea of surviving beyond what is acceptable and normal [...]. [L]ateness includes the idea that one cannot really go beyond lateness at all, cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness, but can only deepen the lateness."<sup>7</sup> Lateness, then, is a double state of not belonging: as too old/ill, the individual does not belong in life both by the fact they do not have long to live and according to social perception that they have little to contribute while they remain.

Unlike the other type of late style which recaptures and distils an artist's oeuvre, thus conforming to the past, Said's preferred kind offers a significant break. One way that this might manifest itself is in a return to a more stable or constant period, either of the artist's experience or of historical influence. An example Said considers is Strauss. His late work addressed not the turmoil of Nazi Germany that

surrounded him but looked back to the eighteenth century for ideas and comfort; yet, as Said stresses, while this route may have pleased the composer, it was not fashionable or well-received by avant-garde critics. Said also mentions Beethoven's less accessible late period in this context. In both cases, he highlights the perceived sense that the composer was betraying his previous great body of work by undercutting it with output that was judged somehow lesser.

The consumer will be tempted to insert biographical information into their reading of late style, but Said, while noting that such work does not ignore impending mortality, seeks to reassert the importance of the art as a standalone piece, or, "the rights of the aesthetic."<sup>8</sup> Despite a post-Bathes context, biographical readings of literature are still a common reflex whenever the protagonist shares some qualities with the author, and this seems magnified when both author and character share aged bodies, as will become evident in the later discussion of Roth.

While Said explicated late qualities largely in relation to composers' work, John Updike took similar features and noted their appearance in literature for his 2006 essay, "Late Works: Writers and Artists Confronting the End."<sup>9</sup> Taking his cue from both Said and Barbara Herrnstein Smith's term the "senile sublime," Updike considers a selection of canonical writers. Melville's "Billy Budd" proves to be a particularly fertile ground for such analysis. Published posthumously, it is the most studied of Melville's texts bar *Moby Dick*, and incredibly brief. Updike argues that if a late work is to be coherent and successful, it will most unlikely be "shed of 'obscuring puppy fat,' [and] tend to have a translucent thinness."<sup>10</sup>

If brevity is one commonality of late work so is the author's drive; as Updike describes Melville's text:

Melville's sentences, a little arthritic and desiccated decades after the headlong prose of his prime, and marked, the manuscript (at Harvard) reveals, by many hesitations and revisions, may sometimes grope, but his plot, the Christlike martyrdom of his 'fated boy,' moves unflinchingly.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the author's clarity of purpose is more focused with age not less so, and manifests itself as simple, fast moving plot, suggesting a sense of time that pervades the work. As Updike explains, "A geriatric ebb of energy is bound to affect late works, not necessarily to their detriment."<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.

What surrounds and affects expectations of these texts, Updike stresses, is the previous work of the author, especially if this was critically praised or well known; as he surmises, "[the author] is burdensomely conscious that he has been cast, unlike his ingénue self, as an author who writes in a certain way, with the inexorable consistency of his own handwriting."<sup>13</sup> There are, he suggests, two possible outcomes: firstly, like Hawthorne, a writer can cast about for a new form and style of writing; or secondly, like Melville, a writer can find "his way back to an earnest simplicity."<sup>14</sup> Either way, to be a late writer valued by Updike, the older author must confront or confound reader expectations rather than meet them.

Taking Said's and Updike's definitions in tandem, it seems that there are three areas on which to comment when considering late writing: the reception the work receives; its style; and its themes of mortality. This is a useful framework through which to analyse Roth's late work; it is in these elements that Roth proves both his and his characters' resistance to the assumptions of old age. By his very activity, Roth subverts the prejudice that senescence is a time to slow down. Roth has always been a prolific writer – he has never gone more than five years without releasing a work of fiction – but since the publication of *Everyman* in 2006, he has published a short novel every year. Of these short works, which have now been considered as a distinct period of his career and grouped (bar *Exit Ghost*, which is classed as a "Zuckerman Novel"<sup>15</sup>) as "Nemeses: The Short Novels" on his book jackets, attention will be paid to the ones in which ageing takes centre stage: *Everyman* and *The Humbling*.

These short novels, by their nature, have a fairly narrow focus and only a handful of characters surrounding the ageing protagonist. Due to their length – *Everyman* 182 pages and *The Humbling* 140 pages, and both with large type and plenty of space on the page – they are, as Updike identified, more direct and have a

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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 situates these short works within Roth's oeuvre, the character lists are more limited 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 he would prefer to begin writing a long book; one that would, in his words, "occupy me until my death."<sup>16</sup> In fact, Roth's decision to write shorter pieces, he asserts, has a reason quite other than age or ease. He has asserted that his admiration of Saul Bellow's short novels led him to wonder what he could achieve in a similar number of 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, he says, "The concentration, the focus, the solitude, the silence, all the things that are required for serious reading are not within people's reach anymore."<sup>17</sup> 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. Here, Roth's objectivity might be questioned; indeed, so dry is his humour that sarcasm is often difficult to pin down.

In a column that explored Roth's late creativity and pondered whether other literary luminaries might follow his example, Stuart Evers stated that the usual trajectory for authors is "an early establishing period, a peak in middle age, [and then] terminal decline."<sup>18</sup> Roth bucks this trend, publishing as frequently as he ever did, and this in itself confirms his engagement in the present. Cultural commentators

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. He is often asked questions on the theme of mortality, such as “How much do you brood about [death]?”<sup>20</sup> Roth is self-deprecating regarding his age:

I'm 76. That's a house number. That's not an age. And it's hard to adjust to this fact. The hard part is, of course, the proximity of death. The number has no meaning as long as you're fit and healthy. But you know that you only have so much time left and you don't know how much it is. It could be a very short time. And that's a bit of a wake up call.<sup>21</sup>

While he does not dismiss his age, he is quite firm that his worries are not obsessive: “I wouldn't say [I brood] daily, but I think weekly would be a true answer.”<sup>22</sup> He is, as Said would suggest, fully conscious of being near the end.

Roth's protestations notwithstanding, for the reader at least, there is the 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*, Mark Lawson commented at the outset, “I have to say, I expected you to be wheeled in for this interview with an IV drip. I was very worried about you.”<sup>23</sup> And reflecting on the plotlines of *Exit Ghost*, Roth himself noted, “I've been getting sympathetic looks from people who imagine that I've had prostate cancer.”<sup>24</sup> However, this reaction is perhaps forgivable for Roth readers; Roth has always written according to his rule that “if you know something well, you should mine that,” so his protagonists have consistently reflected his personal history.<sup>25</sup>

What might be a return to stable ground in late style is, for Roth, a constant setting. Roth utilises his own history for *Everyman* and *The Humbling*, both of which have central characters born in the same decade as the author and are set in the contemporary period so are the same age as Roth now. Moreover, the “Nemeses”

novels that do not focus on older men, *Indignation* and *Nemesis*, are set in the past, the 1950s and 1940s respectively, and so also draw upon the past of the author. While these novels have a national or international crisis as their backdrop – the Korean War in *Indignation* and the polio epidemic in *Nemesis* – the books with elderly protagonists centre on much more private crises. Nevertheless, all are united by a terror of mortality, whether as a result of old age or premature death brought about by disease or war.

This focus on death, while common in late writing, as Said states, is not necessarily popular. Readers tend to want to discern a positive conclusion or tone in late writing; as Edward Rothstein explains in his review of Said's book:

We want to be reassured that there really is something progressive about human understanding. We want to feel that in a final confrontation with morality, something profound takes place. When the end is near, we want there to be a sign of this in the work itself, some proof of accumulated insight.<sup>26</sup>

As work that does not offer such neat conclusions or uplifting prose, this might account for the relatively lukewarm reception of Roth's late work. The long novels that preceded the "Nemeses" short novels received all manner of praise and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for *American Pastora*<sup>27</sup>, the PEN/Faulkner Award for *The Human Stain*<sup>28</sup> and the James Fennimore Cooper Prize for Best Historical Fiction for *The Plot Against America*.<sup>29</sup> Recent accolades, however, have been for lifetime achievements, such as the Pen/Nabakov Award, the PEN/Saul Bellow Award and the Man Booker International Award, rather than individual titles. The critical reception of the "Nemeses" series has, for the most part, been less complimentary; the consensus seems to be that they are fine but they are not high Roth. By far the worst received was *The Humbling*; *The Guardian* and *New York Times* were particularly harsh, with Michiko Kakutani describing it as "a slight, disposable work" and many more commenting on the unbelievable and gratuitous sex scenes.<sup>30</sup> Reviewers have attempted to categorise the short novels, stating that they are novels about death, novels about the humiliation of old age. Whether reviews do



them a disservice in distilling them thus, this negative critical reception is reflective of Said's definition of late style.

Roth accepts that, while considered a comic writer earlier in his career, his latest books have a much darker tone. In fact, readers might consider this overriding theme of cataclysm and the consistently pared down style as showing some kind of cohesion of Roth's late oeuvre. Indeed, Roth concurs to some extent; he believes that his subject matter is influenced by his age; he has said, "[o]ld men write books about cataclysms... the intimacy with mortality makes your mind turn a certain direction."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps in some respects the novels do offer a sense of closure in that the ageing protagonist dies in each case. However, and importantly for Said's configuration of late style, the novels are not reconciled to the experience of ageing and old age; they depict angry men, who are not ready for what is happening to them. Moreover, in subverting the social conceptions of what is appropriate in old age, especially in sexual activity, they show the rebelliousness that Said so admired. Thus, the characters certainly display the dislocation and disengagement that Said identifies as accompanying old age, even if Roth himself does not display or admit to such sentiments.

In *Everyman*, the omniscient narrator reviews the life of the nameless everyman character, paying particular attention to his last years, and in doing so addresses universal fears of ageing. The aspects of age that are identified are wholly negative, viewing age as deterioration from a normal body and life, to a fragile body and eventual absence of life altogether. Health problems, body changes, depression, loss of friends and family members, and care-giving issues are all catalogued. As Roth commented in an interview with Lawson, it is a novel of illness: "[t]he narrative line would follow the history of a man's illness. Therefore, the moments when he's well and healthy, I pass over in a paragraph. I think I say, twenty-two years passed and he felt great. And I'm not interested in that."<sup>32</sup> However, there are moments when the protagonist's retirement has the potential to become a Third Age in which he could experience creativity. Having moved to the coast in retirement, he decides to keep himself busy by running art classes at the Starfish Beach retirement village in which he lives. At first the protagonist seems happy, describing his new home in

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 an artist's studio, and now, after taking his daily hour-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 yielded all the excitement he'd expected.<sup>33</sup>

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 – he's described as “a large, burly actor standing six feet four inches tall, with a big bald head and the strong hairy body of a brawler [...]”<sup>35</sup> – the novella presents age as a successive loss of identity. First, Axler loses his craft; the opening lines begin: “He'd lost his magic. The impulse was spent. He'd never failed in the theatre, everything he had done had been strong and successful, and then the terrible thing happened: he couldn't act. [...] His talent was dead.”<sup>36</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 and Wernick's assertion that ageing can result in a dislocation from identity: “the 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 within.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Axler's inability to act can be read as a metaphor for ageing: this 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

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 unconvincing: “[n]o doubt Roth’s own vanity, his celebrity writer’s sense of seigniorial privilege, has led him to over-associate the horror of dying with the loss of sexual vitality.”<sup>38</sup> These reviews expose the presumption that ageing is a heterogeneous experience as well as an asexual period of life; however, as sexual potency is such an integral facet of masculinity, both for the individual and the social perception of men, the charge of over-associating is unwarranted. Indeed, Roth’s fictional constructions of masculinity have been phallogentric from the beginning of his writing career, i.e. *Portnoy’s Complaint*<sup>39</sup>, so it is unsurprising that his older characters should also focus on their sexual identity. That there is a continuance of identity uniting Roth’s male characters regardless of age suggests a more heterogeneous perception of the male ageing experience than is widely assumed by society or popular media (though it does attest to Roth’s almost homogenous notion of masculinity as sexualised). The characters continue to pursue their sexual identity in defiance of social convention. Both protagonists begin affairs late in life: for the unnamed protagonist of *Everyman*, this is a series of affairs with much younger women he embarks upon around the age of fifty. These adventures, while destroying his marriage, give him a renewed vigour. His wife identifies the protagonist’s affairs as pursuits to find passion, but perhaps they are also proof of his virility; these acts are reaffirmations of his masculinity at a time in his life when society perceives it as diminishing.<sup>40</sup>

For Axler, too, sexual congress becomes his only form of self-expression. He had always attracted the attention of women but in his later years he attracts much younger women; first, Sybil Van Buren at the mental hospital, and then Pegeen, the daughter of old friends who is twenty years his junior and a lesbian. Once he begins a relationship with her, he feels his life may once again have some purpose: “He was here. She was here. Everyone’s possibilities had changed dramatically.”<sup>41</sup> If this age difference is not enough to prove the transgression of propriety, the sexual acts described are, even for Roth, explicit. There are, for example, scenes of anal sex, domination, and strap-on dildos. Through these various and adventurous sexual acts, Axler, perhaps like the reader, concludes, “I may be a twisted old man.”<sup>42</sup> What facet of the sexual content the critics objected to is unclear. Certainly, the sex

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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 Axler's confidence is misplaced, as shown in a conversation: "You really think you've fucked the lesbian out of me in ten months'? 'Are you telling me that you're still sleeping with women? [...] Are you, Pegeen?' With her free hand she held up two fingers."<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; as Said states: "Lateness therefore is a kind of self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable, coming after it, and surviving beyond it."<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:

He neither possessed the productive man's male allure nor was capable of 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 resume where he'd left off only a few years before. 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 relationship; as Parks comments, “[the novel’s] unhappy dénouements carry the stern and conservative warning – for whom if not the charismatic writer himself? – that it’s a path which can only lead to disaster.”<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:

A man’s way is laid with a multitude of traps, and Pegeen had been the last. He’d stepped hungrily into it and taken the bait like the most craven captive on earth. There was no other way for it to wind up, and yet he was the last to find out. Improbable? No, predictable. [...] [T]he process of collapse took less than five minutes, a collapse from a fall brought on himself and from which there was no recovery.<sup>48</sup>

Without any facet of his identity remaining, he commits suicide.

In *Everyman*, the protagonist ends his life in the Starfish Beach Retirement Village, estranged from his family. His funeral emphasises his isolation; his brother’s eulogy focuses upon childhood events and his daughter, Nancy, almost entirely leaves out her father, giving a history of the graveyard instead. This suggests there was little of worth in his adult life, again reinforcing his nameless unimportance; his funeral is described thus, “[u]p and down the state that day, there’d been five hundred funerals like his, routine, ordinary [...]. But then it’s the commonness that’s most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything.”<sup>49</sup> In all areas of his life, the protagonist echoes Öberg’s research as he views himself as less masculine in his increasing years: “[m]y God, he thought, the man I once was! The life that surrounded me! The force that was mine! No ‘otherness’ to be felt anywhere! Once upon a time I was a full human being.”<sup>50</sup> This proclamation distils much of what he feels throughout the novel: he believes himself a lesser man, that he has lost – and more importantly, cannot regain – all the facets of himself that gave him power in society.

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, a lesbian's thirteen-month mistake, it would take everything in him to get the job done.<sup>51</sup>

The novel ends with Axler's death but there is a final note of triumph and power: "He had brought it off, the well-established stage star, once so widely heralded for his force as an actor, whom in his heyday people would flock to the theatre to see."<sup>52</sup> 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* Roth suggests that there is nothing to be done; we're all going to die and death will come before we're ready because we can never prepare for it. *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*, "Old age isn't a battle; old age is a massacre" (156).

Roth's late work, read through the definitions given by Said and Updike, is as 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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then, can be considered a forerunner of the baby boomer generation, who are now remaining active into their senescence and forcing a social re-examination of how old age is culturally represented and perceived. Yet if lateness is a state out of which a writer cannot escape, Roth is either in his late period or has yet to start it; he cannot oscillate between the two and therefore he must be placed in his late period. Within the delineations made by Said and Updike, Roth writes the type of late fiction both admired: brief, certainly, but written with a stripped back energy and with characters who rage against their demise. By resisting conformist social perceptions of what is appropriate for male old age, Roth's late works display the "non harmonious, nonserene tension" of "going *against*" that Said praised.<sup>53</sup>

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Philip Roth, *Everyman* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006); Philip Roth, *The Humbling* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> Philip Roth in Mark Lawson, *Front Row* (BBC Radio 4, 27 June 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Levinson with Charlotte N. Darrow, Edward B. Klein, Maria H. Levinson and Braxton McKee, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978); Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick, eds., *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- <sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>9</sup> John Updike, "Late Works: Writers and Critics Confronting the End" (*The New Yorker*, 7 August, 2006). [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/07/060807crat\\_atlarge](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/08/07/060807crat_atlarge)
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 25 of 39.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 24 of 39.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 37 of 39.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 25 of 39.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Philip Roth, *Exit Ghost* (London: Jonathan Cape: 2007).
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