Lateness and Lessness

Abstract: The work of Don DeLillo and Philip Roth has been characterized by a turn to writing novels about lateness in a style both authors name as a style tending towards “less and less.” In doing so their work manifests a relationship between lateness and style that departs from both canonical accounts of late style and from Adorno and Said’s theories of late style as ironic anachronism. By manifesting in prose style the relative decline and contingent reduction that for Roth and DeLillo defines lateness as a temporality, their novels find in lessness a motivated style for lateness. Furthermore, by reproducing in style the characteristics of a particular historical temporality, their work suggests as method for reading the historicity of temporality through literary style.

I am Lauren. But less and less.

Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist*

But now it appeared that like any number of the elderly, he was in the process of becoming less and less. . .

Philip Roth, *Everyman*

Late in life, Michel Foucault (1998: 449) warned against the habit of thinking about one’s present as being “in history, a present of rupture, or high point, or of completion, or of a returning dawn, and so on.” “The solemnity with which everyone who engages in philosophical discourse reflects on his own time,” Foucault continued, “strikes me as a flaw’’. The recent consolidation of “the contemporary” as a privileged concept for theorizing the present and for designating an object of scholarly specialization appears to have paid little heed to Foucault’s warning (Hungerford 2008; Chihaya, Kotin, and Nishikawa 2016; Eburne and Elias 2016). When used as a periodizing concept to name what succeeds postmodernism, “the contemporary” is used to very solemnly name a period of unprecedented rupture and change. A representative assertion is that while “it may be the case that commentators and critics in the West have been claiming to see moments of unprecedented crisis virtually every year since 1945…perhaps things really have changed in the twenty-first century” (Adiseshiah and Hildyard 2013: 3). Furthermore, concepts frequently used to explain this change – neoliberalism, the Anthropocene, digitalization – define the contemporary as a break[[1]](#footnote-1) with anything that has come before, cutting us off from the past, and a break without precedent, impairing our ability to predict the future. This is what distinguishes the contemporary from the modern as a theory of historical novelty. The novelties of the modern erupt as part of progress towards a known future horizon. The novelties of the contemporary are all the more unsettling because they are the edge of that horizon.

In spite of these pervasive claims that we live in an era that is unprecedented and new, the novel in English is currently displaying a striking preoccupation with coming after what is known and old, with things coming to an end, and with the slow extinction of possibilities: a preoccupation with lateness. Peter Boxall (2013: 30) has traced a concern with lateness in the fiction of Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, J. M. Coetzee, Marilynne Robinson, J. G. Ballard, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Julian Barnes, “a group of late stylists who register a kind of untimeliness, and who produce forms with which to explore a disjunction between newly passing time and the expired narratives with which we have made time readable.” The sense of living within a late culture is hardly unique to contemporary writers. Individual and cultural lateness was a dominant key in Romanticism, modulating into a dissonant presence in modernism’s quest to make it new. The second half of the twentieth century spawned a range of “post” concepts, from postcolonialism and *posthistoire* to postmodernism and even post-postmodernism. If postmodernism, according to Fredric Jameson (2003), was defined by the “end of temporality,” more recent fiction’s preoccupation with lateness suggests that temporality has re-emerged as central to the novel’s attempt to understand and represent the present. Lateness is not the only temporality receiving renewed attention in studies of contemporary fiction: other critics have documented concerns with futurity, non-contemporaneity, or the ubiquity of present tense narration (Bronstein 2018; Edwards 2019; Avanessian and Henning 2015). However, as Boxall writes, in literary practice lateness is not only a mode of time: it also names a long-theorized category of style. Recent fiction’s turn to lateness thus involves a turn to the question of late style. What relationship exists between lateness as a temporality and the style of fiction?

Among these recent explorations of lateness, Don DeLillo and Philip Roth stand out for their sustained writing of fictions of lateness in a style both describe as tending towards “less and less” (DeLillo 2001: 117; Roth 2013: 87). In DeLillo’s novels since *Underworld* (1997), and Roth’s *Nemeses* quartet (2006–2010), stories of individual and cultural lateness are characterized by a reduction in length of narrative and sentence; syntactical and grammatical simplicity; lexical restriction; muteness and monotony of tone; linearity of plot; and an overall attenuation of the range of linguistic expression. Lateness may be associated with decline and lessening in the works of other writers, but this does not come to characterize their prose in a sustained and programmatic manner across a series of novels. Their concern with lateness has been widely noted in reviews: ever since *Underworld*, DeLillo has been “very much about lateness” (Ladsun 2010); Roth has been called a “laureate of lateness” (Abell 2009) with “a flowering of late form barely seen since Yeats” (Leith 2009). The reception of these novels as “about lateness” has been prompted by thematic concerns with aging – lateness at the level of the individual life – and with the geopolitical decline of the United States – lateness as the level of national history. This latter aspect of their reception has been enabled by the fact that both novelists – along with a few rare contemporaries like Toni Morrison or John Updike – have been canonized as novelists who have narrated postwar US national history, albeit inflected by of the particular experiences of American Catholics and Jews. But it has also been prompted by both novelists’ explicit engagement with aesthetic models of late style. In DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* (2001), the performance artist Lauren Hartke transforms her style in the aftermath of loss; in Roth’s *The Humbling* (2009), the actor Simon Axler invokes Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, one of the canonical late works in literary history. So while DeLillo and Roth are representative of a broader thematic concern with lateness in recent fiction, their style of lessness is distinctive. With this shared turn towards a thematic concern with lateness, and a self-reflexive exploration of a style of lessness and the idea of late style, DeLillo and Roth’s novels invite an assessment of the relationship between lateness as a temporality a style that tends towards “less and less.”

In positing a motivated connection between lateness as a temporality and a prose style of lessness, Roth and DeLillo go against the grain of the theories of late style developed by Theodor Adorno and Edward Said, who argued that late style can only be the anachronistic and ironic use of past styles and conventions. They also go against the grain of historicizing critiques of late style that follow Said’s work in striving to “debunk the universalizing myth of late style” (Hutchinson 2016b: 235). These avoid canonizing a limited number of artists and writers, but without defining what “more nuanced conception of late style as historically contingent and technically adventitious” might look like (239). I argue that lateness in Roth and DeLillo is neither a transhistorical property of certain works of art, nor a universal structure of time, but rather a structuring temporality concerned with processes of relative decline like living after death, aging, and national decline that lack a known endpoint. Lateness is a state that never ends and that can therefore never produce the moments of rupture, completion, or new beginning that, as Foucault implies, stem from a desire to transform an experience of decline into the source of new and unique possibilities. Their style of lessness expresses this mode of lateness as a relative and contingent form of reduction rather than as minimalism’s absolute reduction. Both authors posit relativity and contingency as the key properties motivating a relationship between their constructions of lateness and their style of “less and less”. Precisely because their style emphasizes its historical relativity, it also emphasizes the historicity of lateness.

There is also larger significance to these authors’ use of style to expresses a mode of temporality. The relativity of lessness expresses in more concentrated form what is characteristic of all styles, and of the concept of style itself: a style only identifies relative to a context and hence is always historically contingent. Thus, as well as articulating a relationship between lateness and style at odds with many influential accounts, DeLillo’s and Roth’s work relies neither on identifying explicit discussions of time as a theme, as in Paul Ricoeur’s (1985) discussion of the *Zeitroman*, nor on what Catherine Gallagher (2000) identifies as narratology’s reduction of temporal form to static structures. Literary style, Roth’s and DeLillo’s novels demonstrate, can identify some of the qualities of different orderings of time – their tempos and textures, conditions and consequences – but only in the context of an author’s oeuvre and in the longer history of prose style. Reading styles for time cannot presume the unprecedented novelty of the present required by the contemporary as a field-orienting concept for literary study. But it can use style as a means for analyzing the historicity and plurality of our current experiences and figurations of time.

Late Works Without Late Style

While reflections on the relationship between lateness and style can be found as early as the writings of Pliny the Elder, the concepts of lateness and late style that have become influential within art history, musicology, and the philosophy of history have a more recent provenance in the legacy of German Romanticism. Karin Leeder (2015: 2) has emphasized that the concepts of lateness and late style need to be analyzed separately in order to better understand their interaction: “lateness is more than old age or late style…to understand lateness aright, it has to be viewed in its full sense and embedded within the context of philosophies of time and history.” These differences tend to be elided in Said’s *On Late Style* (2006), whose discussions of Adorno, Beethoven, and Richard Strauss triggered a wave of interest in the English-speaking world in this largely German tradition of thought. For example, when Said writes that Lampedusa, Cavafy, and Nietzsche share the “aesthetic of minds that refuse connection with their own time while spinning out a semiresistant artwork of considerable power nonetheless” so that “the words *late* or *belated* seem appropriate for such figures,” “late” designates both a relationship to historical time and an aesthetic style (136). Said’s focus is less on lateness as a temporality than on late style as a feature of art, and this emphasis has persisted in much of the work that has taken *On Late Style* as a starting point for critique and revision.

For Said, late style is the idiom acquired by “great artists…near the end of their life” (6). This is “artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction,” producing a “late style that involves a nonharmonius, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*” (7). This style expresses the author’s experience of time: “a self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable, coming after it, and surviving beyond it” (16). However, in Said’s analyses of Beethoven, Strauss, Visconti, and Adorno, late style is actually anachronism: the self-conscious use of archaic styles towards the end of a career. The classical Hollywood style of Visconti’s *The Leopard* (1963); the eighteenth-century “idioms and forms” (21) in Strauss’s *Rosenkavalier* (1910) and *Capriccio* (1941); Adorno’s essays: these are all stylistic anachronisms that signal their creator’s “anachronistic lateness” with respect to their historical present (107). For Said, an anachronism of style expresses anachronism in history. But the creation and perception of stylistic anachronism requires that styles originally belong to earlier historical periods: this belief provides the jolt when they appear in the wrong time. Anachronism ironizes style: it treats styles of the past as mere conventions. Creation becomes a choice that could have been made differently of one style among many. Its motivation is negative: to be late is to lack a non-ironic relationship to style that previously was possible. Lateness is expressed not by features of the style itself, but by the act of turning back to one of many past styles.

In equating late style with anachronism, Said follows Adorno’s account of late style in his unfinished writings on Beethoven. Indeed, for Said, Adorno is “lateness itself” (92). In “Late Style in Beethoven” (1937) Adorno attacked the belief that Beethoven’s late works are products of an “uninhibited subjectivity” breaking through existing stylistic conventions (2002b: 563). Instead, he argued that “[t]he relationship of the conventions to the subjectivity itself must be seen as constituting the formal law from which the content of the late works emerges” (566). As Michael Spitzer (2006: 59) writes “the essence of Adorno’s critique thus concerns ‘the role of conventions’.” According to Adorno, in late Beethoven, “[e]verywhere in his formal language…one finds formulas and phrases of convention scattered about…trill sequences, cadences, and *fiorituras*” (565). These conventions stand out because they are anachronistic, a point made clear in Adorno’s essay on the *Missa Solemnis*: its “inner composition…is itself archaic” (574). Late style as the use of conventions marks the alienation between subject and object, the object in this case being the musical material that in Adorno’s sense includes the history and techniques of the medium the composer works in. Thus as Rolf Tiedemann (2002a, 138) succinctly writes, Adorno provides an account of “late work without late style” (Adorno 2002a: 138). For both Said and Adorno late style is the anachronistic and ironic use of past conventions, so that style can only have a negative relationship to its subject matter: typical of Adorno’s negative dialectic, it presents two elements, style and subject, which cannot be reconciled. Late style critiques the present by showing that a non-ironic use of style is no longer possible. But it has the consequence that works can only express lateness by creating anachronisms: not by using the expressive features of style itself.

Adorno’s work has not been the only source for theories of late style. Gordon McMullan (2007: 5) has shown that a distinct conception of late style developed “in anglophone culture quite specifically by way both of critical accounts of Shakespeare’s later career and of the tendency of subsequent writers to self-consciously look to Shakespeare for precedents for their own work.” This tradition has produced a set of binaries for describing late works: serene, childlike, archaic, on the one hand, or irascible, difficult, proleptic, on the other. McMullan argues that late style is the product of “a *discourse of lateness* – that is, a construct, ideological, rhetorical, and heuristic, a function not of life or of art but of the practice of reading or appreciating certain texts within a set of predetermined parameters” (45). Such “critical iconoclasm” (11) has been the approach of other recent critiques of universal and evaluative constructs of late style, which have argued that late style is “a matter of *critical reception* above all” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 2016: 52, italics original). This focus on critical discourses and reception history has left unanswered – although certainly not rejected – what a less evaluative and more historically contingent analysis of late style might produce. Furthermore, while lateness as a temporal concept is obviously related to late style as an evaluative judgment and critical construct, they are not the same. The analysis of literary engagements with lateness as a temporality needs to be distinguished from the analysis and evaluation of an author’s late style, even and especially when they overlap. Critiques of discourses about late style give little account of how literary style might express changing understandings of lateness as a historical temporality: a structure of time mediating a relationship to history. These critics are distant in spirit and method from Adorno and Said, but for reasons more to do with scholarship’s oscilliation between critique and construction, their work produces a strikingly similar result: we are left with late works without late style.

So much, it seems, for late style: nothing more than ironic anachronisms or a construct to be critiqued. But what of the concept of lateness? Ben Hutchinson’s illuminating study of lateness in modern French and German literature approaches lateness “not so much a critical as a creative construct, understood not (only) as the late style of the individual, but in a broader, epochal sense as the ways in which modern literature understands itself as belated” (2016a: 12). This is lateness as an “essentially hermeneutic concept” (7), an “expression of the modern’s continuing quest for legitimacy” (5). As Hutchinson emphasises, “the epistemology of lateness emerges as related, but not identical, to the ontology of late style” (13). This epistemology generates a negative affect, embarrassment; other critics have seen it causing melancholy, nostalgia, or shame (Moser 1999; Bewes 2010). These recent studies have extended the meaning of lateness so it encompasses an epistemology, hermeneutic, or affect, but in doing so they have given less attention to the nature of the temporal experience from which they originate. So what is lateness as a temporality? This is a different question from tracing, as Hutchinson does, the historical semantics of lateness across different languages. It is a theoretical question: what is lateness in terms of time such that it can be the origin for a hermeneutic, an epistemology, an affect – and indeed a style?

Lateness is to not a static condition – of being subsequent, of coming after, or being belated – but a dynamic temporality. In Reinhart Koselleck’s terms (1985: 3), a temporality is a way in which “in a given present…the temporal dimensions of past and future [are] related.” Koselleck’s studies of the semantics of historical time traced the development in Europe between 1500 and 1800 of “a temporalization [*Verzeitlichung*] of history, at the end of which there is the peculiar form of acceleration which characterizes modernity” (11). This produced the modern concept of History as a dynamic ordering of time rather than a mere accumulation of occurrences. As Koselleck emphasized, this was always only one temporalization of history, and only one of many temporalities structuring individual and collective experience. The argument that there are different temporalities defined by differently weighted relationships between past, present, and future has been used to illuminate temporalities outside of Europe by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) and François Hartog (2015: xv), who developed the concept of a “regime of historicity”: a “linking together [of] past, present, and future, or mixing the three categories.” While Hartog cautiously treats a regime of historicity as a heuristic tool, his work amply shows there are different orderings of past, present, and future are in different cultures, contexts, and practices. These and other theorists of what Christopher Clark (2019: 4) has called history’s “temporal turn” have brought renewed attention to the reciprocal and complex relationships between the temporalization of history and the historicity of temporality.

Lateness as a temporality can be defined a structured relationship of past, present, and future; a particular weighting in the balance between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. Even if the past predominates over the present, there remains a sense of futurity: a future that is exhausted, a future which includes an imagined ending, or one that prepares for a new birth, are still futures of a kind. Lateness also always co-exists with other temporalities which give it definition by contrast: thus as Hutchinson (2016b: 330) says, “lateness is necessarily *contingent*… [and] lateness must always be a relative concept.” In what manner, then, are past, present and future related in the novels of Roth and DeLillo such that they become a temporality called lateness? And what can a style of lessness tell us about that temporality? For all that these novels manifest a very different relationship between lateness and style than Adorno proposed, there is one aspect in which what follows agrees with his method, if not his conclusions. The “only way to arrive at a revision of the [dominant] view of late style,” Adorno writes (2002b: 565), “would be by means of technical analysis of the works under consideration.” What can close reading tell us about the relationship between lateness and style?

Lateness in DeLillo and Roth

DeLillo’s novels since *Underworld* (1997) also suggest that close reading of styles can enable different perceptions of time. While *Underworld* attempts an encyclopedic “single narrative sweep” (DeLillo 1997: 8) of post-1945 US history, almost every discussion of DeLillo’s subsequent novels has noted a shift to a distinctively diminished style and a concern with modes of time other than those provided by historical narrative (Boxall 2012; Shipe 2016). But while *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), and *Zero K* (2016) explore the abstract time of capital, the repetitive temporality of trauma, and the speculative time of cryogenics, only in *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010) does lateness acquire the style of lessness. David Cowart (2012: 32) has emphasized the importance of remaining open to “the rich suggestiveness of the DeLillo style” in the novels after *Underworld.* For Peter Boxall (2017: 526) this style is characterized by “a particular diminishment, a starving to nothing, which yields an expansion, an odd experience of surfeit won from deficit that is a feature…of the tautology.” Yet the expansion often discussed in *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* is never realized in the novels’ style. DeLillo (quoted in Boxall 2017: 545–46) described *Zero K* (2016) as “a leap out of the bare-skinned narratives of *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist*,” and indeed it narrates the escape from the limits of biology in an eclectic fashion, using different registers across different sections, and shifting into the genre of speculative science fiction. The “bare-skinned” lessness of *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* is more radical as an expression of human and historical finitude.

In *Point Omega*, lateness is historical time after 9/11; in *The Body Artist* it is Lauren Hartke’s experience of living after the suicide of her husband. These slender novels about living after loss turn away from the homogeneous time of historical narration; instead, they feature characters who glimpse a temporality outside linear narrative by paying close attention to style. When Lauren Hartke “examine[s] so closely” the telegraphic language of Mr Tuttle, she discovers that Tuttle “lived in a time that had no narrative quality” (DeLillo 2001: 48; 65). *Point Omega* opens with an unnamed narrator’s meditation on Douglas Gordon’s *24-Hour Psycho*, a video installation which slows down Hitchcock’s film to a silent loop running for exactly twenty-four hours. The installation “seemed” to provide access to “pure time” because slowness is experienced as a form of reduction: “[t]he less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw” (DeLillo 2010: 7). For the observer “[t]his was the point” of the installation: “It is only the closest watching that yielded this perception” (6). Close attention to a style of lessness, and in Lauren’s case the creation of one, provides access to an order of time outside the linear and homogeneous time of narrative. But the fact that in both novels this style is provided by non-literary artworks casts into doubt fiction’s ability to provide access to this different order of time.

“Time seems to pass” (7). From its opening sentence, *The Body Artist* signals its concern with different experiences of time, for to say that time “seems” to pass is to perceive a gap between the experience of time and what it might be in itself. Mr. Tuttle is the embodiment of Lauren’s loss, her state of living after the death of her husband, a belatedness expressed in his repetition of fragments of her husband’s conversations. Everything about Tuttle is focalized through Lauren, hence shadowed by the same gap between seeming and being that the novel ascribes to time. After closely listening to Tuttle’s speech, Lauren comes to believe that “he lived in a time without narrative quality.” She believes that “time is supposed to pass” but “maybe he is living in another state” (77). She imagines that there is “nothing he can do to imagine time existing in reassuring sequence, passing, flowing, happening…His future is unnamed. It is simultaneous, somehow, with the present” (77). Tuttle “does not feel a sense of future direction” (83) because he believes “I am with the moment” (74). Lauren imagines he experiences time as a dilated present, filled up with fragments of the past but lacking any sense of movement towards a future. This, for Lauren, is the temporality of lateness. Ultimately she rejects Tuttle’s experience of time: “But it can’t be true that he drifts from one reality to another, independent of the logic of time. This is not possible. You are made out of time” (91-2). But her rejection is shadowed by the sense that he is not independent of time, but that “he laps and seeps, somehow, into other reaches of being, other time-lives” (92). Lauren rejects Tuttle’s imagined order of time because: “Time is the only narrative that matters. It stretches events and makes it possible for us to suffer and come out of it and see death happen and come out of it. But not for him. He is in another structure, another culture, where time is something like itself, sheer and bare, empty of shelter” (92). Again, her rejection is ambiguous. Narrativised time is the only time that matters, but this is not to say Tuttle is beyond time: he just might experience it differently.

While Lauren crafts one narrative about narrative to complete her mourning, her preparation for a new performance tells another: “She had emery boards and files, many kinds of scissors, clippers and creams that activated the verbs of abridgment and excision” (76). She shaves and files her body to become “a blankness, a body slate erased of even past resemblance” (84). It becomes “necessary to alter the visible form” of her body by reduction, excision, and lessening (98). The motivations for this transformation, and the performance it produces, are only revealed second-hand: through a piece of art criticism which cites Lauren as saying that the aim of the piece “is to think of time differently…Stop time, or stretch it out, or open it up…Doesn’t time slow down or seem to stop? What’s left? Who’s left?” (107). The piece itself, called *Body Time*, although never described in the novel, adopts a style of lessening in order to explore a kind of non-narrative time. It explores in art what is refused in life. But since the performance is never described, *The Body Artist* as a novel is structured around a negative ekphrasis, a missing description of an artwork of lessness. This absence echoes the question posed by the gap between the time of Lauren’s life and the time of Lauren’s art. Are there orders of time that fiction cannot represent because it is fundamentally bound to narrative time? Or is this simply a story about fiction and time we tell ourselves so that novels can enable our desire to remain whole in the face of suffering?

In *The Body Artist* stylistic lessness is always somewhere else: in Lauren’s performance, in Tuttle’s speech. Before Tuttle’s appearance the novel’s style presents everyday moments as rich with potential for description: “She noticed how water from the tap turned opaque in seconds. It ran silvery and clear and then in seconds turned opaque and how curious it seemed that in all these months and all these times in which she’d run water from the kitchen tap she’d never noticed how the water ran clear at first and then went not murky exactly but opaque, or maybe it hadn’t happened before, or she’d noticed and forgotten” (8). Sentences expand to capture “all the shadow dappled stuff of an unavoidable moment on a normal morning” (24). Tuttle’s speech, which hints at a different experience of time, is lesser is every sense: “‘The trees are some of them,’ he said. ‘Bending. Swaying in the wind. Those are birches. The white ones. Those are called paper birches” (44). Just as Lauren refuses to countenance Tuttle’s experience of time, the novel hold backs from an exclusive style of lessness: these opening passages, and the concluding article, keep other styles and experiences of time in view. The lessness of *The Body Artist* lies not so much in the micro-nuances of style than in its status as form unable to represent the temporalities of Tuttle’s consciousness and the *Body Time* performance.

*Point Omega* is also structured around a non-literary artwork, Gordon’s *24-Hour Psycho*, that provides access to a different temporality. The installation itself, as well as the slowness of the film, is perceived as form of reduction: “The bare setting, and the darkness, and the chill air…[and] the guard purified the occasion, made it finer and rarer” (128). The installation is also viewed by the protagonists of the main plot, Jim Finley and Richard Elster. Elster interprets the installation as revealing the temporality of cosmological lateness; it is like “watching the universe die over a period of seven billion years…the contraction of the universe…the heat death of the universe” (59-60). This is in line with his view of the US invasion of Iraq: “We’re all played out. Matter wants to lose its self-consciousness…Time to close it all down” (64). For Elster, post-9/11 US history is at the end of “deep time, epochal time” (91), experiencing a “dream of extinction” (45). He dismisses the narratives provided by contemporary “folk tales of the end” (64): climate change, asteroid strikes, epidemics, famine. Instead he believes in the theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, according to which the exhaustion of matter will lead to the “omega point”: a “leap out of our biology” into a new form of collective consciousness (67).

Elster has retreated to the desert in search of an experience of time that will prepare him for the omega point: “Paroxysm. Either a sublime transformation of mind or some worldly convulsion” (91). In the desert, as at the advent of the omega point, “Time slows down when I’m here. Time becomes blind” (30). This is a release from the “minute-to-minute reckoning” of chronology, the “dimwit time, inferior time” of urban civilization that is a tool of surveillance and control (56). Slowing down time brings him face to face with the terror of time’s nature, a terror that “literature was meant to cure” (57). His trip to the desert is an ascetic exercise intended to hasten the leap from chronology into a new experience of temporal plenitude: “It’s different here, time is enormous, that’s what I feel here, palpably” (56). But when his daughter Jessica disappears without explanation, he stops making prophetic pronouncements that lateness is a prelude to a rebirth. He physically shrinks: “He’d be shivered down to a hundred pounds if we were to stay” (121), becoming “a man drawn down to sparest outline, weightless” (122). To Jim: “All the man’s grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not” (124). Elster ends the novel confronted with all that Teilhard de Chardin’s theology aimed to deny. The slowing of time, exhaustion of possibility, and dilation of the present at the expense of the future are not the prelude for anything else: lateness is nothing more than an experience of lessness.

*Point Omega* corrects the delusory theology that envisions a new plenitude arising from concentrating attention on reduced means. Syntax length throughout is curtailed, with sentences failing to develop through use of subordinate clauses, parallelism, or accretion, as in the description of the culmination of Jim’s search for Elster’s daughter:

I took the water bottle out of my back pocket. I tried again to call the ranger. I wanted him to tell me where I was. I wanted to know where he was, with precise directions this time…Could I forget my name in this silence? I took my hand off the wall and put it to my face. I was sweating heavily and licked the moist stink off my fingers. I opened my eyes. I was still here in the outside world. (117-8)

Throughout the novel, monotonous syntactical rhythms and simplistic verbal constructions enact in style the experience Elster seeks to avoid: a reduction in the economy of means failing to lead to new plenitudes of insight, clarity, or time. Lateness in both novels expands the present at the expense of the future, without yielding either a present of expanded plenitude nor the omega point launching a new future. It remains, quite simply, something less.

In the final volume of the Library of America edition of his works, Philip Roth grouped four previous published novels together as *Nemeses* – *Everyman* (2006), *Indignation* (2008), *The Humbling* (2009), and *Nemesis* (2010). This bibliographic construction of a distinctive late phase continued what had long been characteristic of Roth’s career: his often more overtly metafictional engagement with the critical categories – biography, ethnic identity, authenticity – that he expected critics to use to appraise his fiction. For while the discourse of lateness has proved inviting for criticism on Roth’s career (Nadel 2013; Shipe 2009), its effects are less positive within his novels: it cripples Simon Axler’s ability to act in *The Humbling*; it causes the protagonist of *Everyman* to embark on a late career in painting that ends in embarrassment Roth’s *Nemeses* solicit their reception as late works, but the late works they feature are failures of talent and objects of shame.

Lateness in *Nemeses* is the state of living on the verge of death, not only the death of old age, as in *Everyman* and *The Humbling*, but also the death of a life cut short, as in *Indignation* and *Nemesis.* To Everyman aging is a “process of becoming less and less,” of living after “superabundant past,” and of realizing, as an imagined chorus of lovers and family tell him, that it is “Too late!” (Roth 2013: 87; 72; 90) For Simon Axler aging is a process of decline so that plays, like *The Tempest*, make “less and less sense” (230). Axler also is told that it is “Too late, too late” (272), in his case by Louise, his rival in desire for Pegeen. To be “too late” means that an opportunity has irrevocably passed, and it can only truly be passed if time is conceptualized as something that comes to an end. Time in these novels is a limited quantity because the only time is the time of life: as Marcus Messner observes from beyond the grave in *Indignation:* “It’s not memory that is obliviated here – it’s time” (131). In death time can no longer “go forward; all that exists is the recollected past, not recovered, mind you, not relived in the immediacy of the realm of sensation, but merely replayed” (131). Time is not recovered and defeated, as in Proust; instead it just replays again and again in one direction, “around the clock in a clockless world” (131). The reduction of time to the time of life governs the narrative span of *Everyman, Indignation*, and *The Humbling*: they begin with the intimation their protagonist will die, and end with the moment of that death. If the only time is the time of life, then there is also only the time of the body, as Everyman makes clear: “No hocus-pocus about death and God or obsolete fantasies of heaven for him. There was only our bodies, born to die on terms decided by the bodies that died before us” (31). An obsession with the male body in sickness and in health runs throughout these novels, such that they all could bear the subtitle of Everyman’s imagined autobiography: “*The Life and Death of a Male Body”* (31).

They might more accurately be subtitled *The Life and Death of a Secular Male Body,* since Everyman’s rejection of God is shared by the other novels’ protagonists. The lateness of these novels is the lateness of secularity, but it is troubled by the contingency resulting from the rejection of God. The consequences are clearest in *Nemesis*. The spread of polio among Jewish children in Newark in 1944 initially causes Bucky Cantor to reject belief in a God that could have allowed their deaths to happen. But after Bucky discovers he carries the virus and may have infected some children, his belief in God returns. He needs to believe in a God in order to have something to blame: “Somebody had to make this place” (438). “He has,” Roth’s narrator perceives, “to find a necessity for what happens…That it is pointless, contingent, preposterous, and tragic will not satisfy him” (439). Bucky would rather believe he is being punished than believe that “any biography is chance, and, beginning at conception, chance – the tyranny of contingency – is everything” (427). As the narrator declares: “Chance is what I believed Mr. Cantor meant when he was decrying what he called God” (427). The “incomprehensible way one’s most banal, incidental, even comical choices achieve the most disproportionate result” is the lesson Marcus Messner fails to learn in *Indignation* (222)*.* The actor Simon Axler ends his life, leaving a suicide note quoting Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, Axler’s first successful play, and adverting “to the source of every unforeseeable contingency” that followed (298). Each protagonist in the *Nemeses* series refuses to believe in a God who created time and who by that act implied some purpose to what occurs within that time; yet each rails against the tyranny of secular contingency that is the result of that refusal. Their belief that they live in a state of lateness because the time of their life – the only time there is – is coming to an end bears another trace of the theology they reject. Frank Kermode (1967) argued that all senses of an ending inherit the Judeo-Christian eschatological concept of history. In figuring lateness as an order of time when the future is limited because time will end, Roth’s novels pose the question of whether lateness as a means of ordering time into beginning and ends might be a theological inheritance in an ostensibly secular age.

In a review of *Nemesis*, J. M. Coetzee (2010) made an observation about its narrator that applies to the *Nemeses* novels as a whole: “Though this being now and again lets fall a *mot juste*…he is certainly not the Philip Roth we know, either in style or in expressive power or in intellect.” These novels are “composed in the minor key,” their diminished style making them “lesser additions to the Roth canon.” Writing about *Everyman* and *Exit Ghost*, James Wood (2007) also contrasts the style of “late Roth,” a “spare, pragmatic prose, apparently unconcerned with literary effects, focused only on its subject,” with the “Flaubertian precision” of earlier novels like *The Anatomy Lesson*. One means of spotlighting this stylistic shift is to compare the opening of *Sabbath’s Theater* (1995) with that from any *Nemeses* novel; *The Humbling*, for example, for its similarity of theme.

Either forswear fucking others or the affair is over.

This was the ultimatum, the maddeningly improbably, wholly unforeseen ultimatum, that the mistress of fifty-two delivered in tears to her lover of sixty-four on the anniversary of an attachment that had persisted with an amazing licentiousness – and that, no less amazingly had stayed their secret – for thirteen years. But now with hormonal infusions ebbing, with the prostate enlarging, with probably no more than another few years of semi-dependable potency still his –with perhaps not that much more life remaining – here at the approach of the end of everything, he was being charged, on pain of losing her, to turn himself inside out. (Roth 1995: 3)

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. Going on stage became agony. Instead of the certainty that he was going to be wonderful, he knew he was going to fail. It happened three times in a row, and by the last time nobody was interested, nobody came. He couldn’t get over to the audience. His talent was dead (227).

*Everyman, Indignation,* and *Nemesis* similarlybegin with dry, factual introductions – a funeral in a cemetery, college during the Korean War, a polio outbreak in 1944. These openings exhibit simple syntax, neutral tone, limited lexical range, and a tendency to drift into short and summative monoclausal sentences. Typical from *Everyman* is a description of Everyman’s parents:

It has never been difficult to know what to make of either his mother or his father. They were a mother and a father. They were imbued with few other desires. But the space taken up by their bodies was now vacant. Their lifelong substantiality was gone. (32)

A similar style governs Simon Axler’s confession of the loss of his ability to act in *The Humbling*

I am now incapable of acting. Something fundamental has vanished. Maybe it had to. Things go. Don’t think that my career’s been cut short. Think of how long I lasted. When I started out in college I was just fooling around, you know. Acting was a chance to meet girls. Then I took my first theatrical breath. Suddenly I was alive on the stage and breathing like an actor. I started young. I was twenty-two and came to New York for an audition. And I got the part. I began to take classes. Sense-memory exercises. Practice making things real. Before your performance crated a reality for yourself to step into (245)

Lateness in these novels is living on the verge of death, and aging is the process of becoming less and less. For Roth’s style, as for the lives of his characters, something fundamental has vanished, and it will not return this side of belief in an abandoned God.

Lessness and the Style of a Time

While both novelists convey these stories about lateness in a style of lessness, this style can only be called lesser in the context of their own oeuvre. Relative to a contemporary like Lydia Davis, their lessness is loquacious; relative to a historical predecessor like Gertrude Stein, their syntactical reductions are tame. They are also not the first writers to associate a style of reduction with either late style or lateness: as Sandro Zanetti (2012) has shown lateness has been as associated with styles of reduction as with those of expansion and verbosity. Yet styles of reduction can take many forms – fragmentation, incompletion, abstraction, to name but a few. The historical significance of DeLillo and Roth’s stylistic lessness does not lie in its achievement of new extremes of reduction in the history of prose style. Rather it comes from their construction of lessness as dependent upon a plenitude it doesn’t aim to supplant. This is what enables lessness as a particular literary style to reproduce the characteristics of lateness as a particular historical temporality in the twenty-first century. They create a style for lateness and in doing so they revise the assumption that lateness can only be expressed by anachronism and irony. The expressive capacities of their styles of lessness are, of course, historically contingent and relative to their own work and positions within the literary field. But far from compromising lessness as style, this is central to its significance as a style for lateness.

The relativity of lessness becomes clear when contrasted with a better-known style of reduction: minimalism. If lessening is a process of decrease, the minimum is the point where a process ceases to decrease. The idea of the minimum as a foundation gave its name to a movement in 1960s visual arts because the artists involved pursued reduction in search of foundational structures of composition and perception. This search for foundations prompted influential critical reflections on the ontology of art, and central to these reflections was the relationship of minimalism to time. According to Michael Fried (1998: 116), the repeated basic units of minimalist sculpture produced the sense of “the endlessness not just of objecthood but of time.” Minimalist works draw out of their reduction to foundations experiences of the plenitude of time. One of the best analyses of this effect is J. M. Coetzee’s discussion of Samuel Beckett’s “Sans,” a short story whose translated title is “Lessness.” The first half of “Sans” contains 166 words which are recombined in a second half, a procedure that would in theory allow the story “to extend its length almost infinitely without drawing on new items” (Coetzee 1973: 195). “Sans” explores a paradox of the minimal: how a limit can generate infinity. It offers “the solace of the game, the killing of time” (198). The minimal offers the consolation of a limit that results in liberation from the passing of time, the very experience named in the story’s ironic titles. When one has reached the minimum, one is no longer without (“sans”), one no longer experiences the temporal reduction of “lessness.” For all that Roth and DeLillo are aware of Beckett’s reduction of prose to infinite combinations of minimal elements, their lessness offers no escape from time. It is, rather, a temporal movement from more to less that does not specify the extent of that reduction. Hence, it can never provide a literary counterpart for Richard Elster’s omega point or the infinite knowledge of Bucky Cantor’s God; nor does it lead to anachronism or ironic quotation of previous styles. It is merely reduction without knowledge of an end.

The relativity of lessness as a style points to a feature of style that twentieth-century theorists have repeatedly noted: a style is only distinctive relative to a context. For Meyer Schapiro (1953), Michael Riffaterre (1959), and Seymour Chatman (1966), a style was a description that enabled identification. Thus for Susan Sontag, Stanley Cavell, or Nelson Goodman, style was a signature. As Carlo Ginzburg (2001: 110) has written, “style is a means of delimiting, demarcating, and cutting out.” However, as Roland Barthes (1989: 94) wrote “style is a distance, a difference: but in relation to what?.” Nelson Goodman (1975: 807) candidly answered: the context chosen by the critic. “Style is metaphorically a signature” only relative to a circumscribed field. This was the problem with style for Svetlana Alpers (1989): if “style is what you make it” – *merely* what you make it – then its identifications are only relative to the investments of the critic. The dependency of a signature on its context was a recurrent preoccupation of Jacques Derrida (1988), who problematized the notion of style as a signature possessed by a work or author. For Jacques Rancière (2011), the concept of style as signature is relative for a different reason: historically relative, only emerging out of the collapse of the system of genres. Buffon was wrong to say that style is not the man, for it is nothing in itself. It is always dependent, relative, and contingent.

While all styles are relative, lessness is a style about that relativity. The relativity of its reductions and its dependence upon other modes of time are not only expressions, for Roth and DeLillo, of lateness as a temporality in the twenty-first century. They also encapsulate the limitations of style as a vehicle for the analysis of temporality in literary form. A style may reproduce the characteristics of a particular temporality, but the recognition of that alignment is historically relative to the overall literary field. New styles in the future – or the rediscovery of writers from the past – will change the perception of the expressive capacities of a style. The qualities of a style that identify it with a temporality will lose that capacity for identification as the context of history changes. Jeff Dolven (2017: 374) has written that since “style, after all, is history—in the felt sense of history as experience of other times and places,” then “style tells time, tells where our time comes from, perhaps where it is going; above all, it works things in, and tells what time it is now.” Or rather, what times there are now, since the historicity of a style makes whatever temporality it expresses merely one among many: not just diachronically across history, but synchronically within the periodizing fiction we call the present. Providing a style for lateness undermines the claim that the contemporary as a historicist period is characterized by a single temporality of unprecedented novelty. It also foregrounds a paradox long recognized in reflections on history and temporality, from Martin Heidegger’s 1924 lectures published in English as *The Concept of Time* down through that of Koselleck and Chakrabarty. If history is not an empty container, but a temporal process in its own right, how can other temporalities be historicized without reducing them to effects of a single process? Fernand Braudel (2009), for one, admitted it wasn’t possible. Although reading style for time cannot solve this theoretical paradox, it suggests that to the extent that the historicity of style can express the historicity of temporality, it can play a role in mediating the plurality of times there are now. Roth’s and DeLillo’s novels refuse to present lateness leading to artistic rebirth or an omega point in human evolution, but in giving it a style of lessness they provide one way to read the historicity and plurality of our times.

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1. For their comments on earlier drafts of this essay, I would like to thank Peter Middleton, Laura Marcus, and Peter Boxall. I also wish to thank Linda Hutcheon and Marshall Brown for their helpful suggestion in the reviewing process. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)