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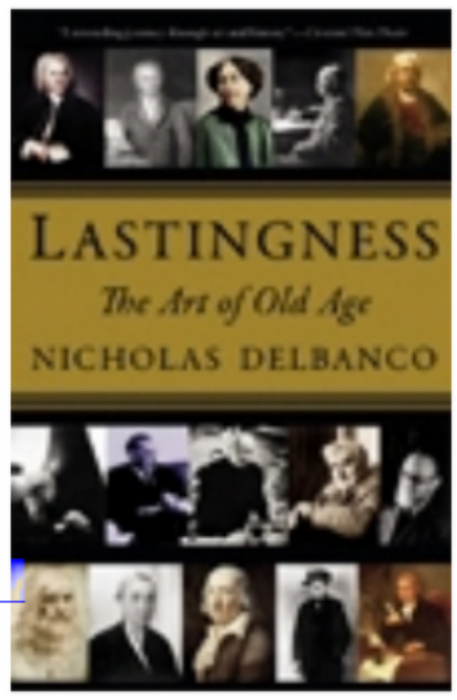

For my Granddaughters

Anna Delbanco Shalom
&
Penelope Aurora Stoller
&
Rosalie Delbanco Shalom

With My Lasting Love

In the course of these last years, several friends and colleagues have read and responded to portions of this—or the entire—work: Charles Baxter, William Bolcom, George Bornstein, Alan Cheuse, Daniel Herwitz, Laurence J. Kirshbaum, Elizabeth Kostova, James Landis, Suzanne Levine, Richard Miller, Robert Rosenberg, Douglas Trevor, and Jon Manchip White. Singly and together, they have provided me with expert advice, and I am grateful to each. My student Carolyn Dekker proved far more competent than I in the apparatus of scholarship, and I owe part of the research and all of the footnotes to her expert help. Andrea Beauchamp, the assistant director of the Hopwood Awards Program, helped me identify the photographs so central to the text; Sara Weiss of Grand Central Publishing helped me to procure them and was tireless in last-stage detail work; Bob Castillo oversaw this book's production with his usual exacting eye and welcome expertise. My agent Gail Hochman (Brandt & Hochman, Inc.) and editor Jamie Raab (Grand Central Publishing) were, as always, crucial to the enterprise and supportive from the start. The first and lasting witness, as well as closest reader, remains my wife, Elena. To all of you, deep thanks.

My father-in-law, Bernard Greenhouse, died at the age of 95 on May 13, 2011—months after the publication of this book. The present tense references to his condition are therefore, alas, inaccurate; he belongs now to the past.

Portions of this book have been published, in slightly different versions, in the following:

Chapter 1, *The Boston Review*, vol. 32, 2007
Chapter 2, *Conjunctions*, 51, 2008
Chapter 4, *Salmagundi*, nos. 160–161, Fall/Winter, 2008–09
Chapter 5, *Ninth Letter*, Spring/Summer, 2009
Chapter 6, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Summer, 2009
Chapter 7, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. XXVIII, Fall, 2008
Chapter 8, *Salmagundi*, nos. 166–167, Spring/Summer, 2010

INTRODUCTION

Grow old along with me.
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:

Robert Browning, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*

America grows older yet stays focused on its young. Whatever hill we try to climb, we're over it by fifty—and should that hill involve entertainment or athletics we're finished long before. There are exceptions to this rule, of course, but supermodels and newscasters, ingénues and football players all yield to the harsh tyranny of time. They turn on Fortune's wheel. Look what happens to the overnight sensation or pick of the week or fashion of the season or rookie of the year. First novels have a better chance of being noticed than a fourth or fifth. Although we're aging as a nation we don't do it willingly: The face-lift and the tummy-tuck are—against the law of gravity—on a commercial rise.

Still, we join the workforce older; we get married and have children older; we live, the actuaries tell us, longer than ever before. In Sun City or Las Vegas, the retired "golden codgers"—in William Butler Yeats's phrase—rule the commercial roost. And if younger is better it doesn't appear that youngest is best; we want our teachers, doctors, generals, and presidents to have reached a certain age. Our oldest elected chief executive, Ronald Reagan, famously quipped he wouldn't hold his opponent's youth against him. In context after context and contest after contest, we're more than a little conflicted about elders of the tribe; when is it right to honor them, and when to say "Step aside"?

This book is about tribal elders in the world of art. What interests me is lastingness: how it may be attained. For obvious reasons, this has become a personal matter; I published my first novel in 1966 and very much hope to continue. Too, such hope feels representative: a "generational" problem in both senses of the word. An ever-growing number of Americans are middle-aged or elderly; no natural catastrophe has thinned our swelling ranks. And the habit of creation does not die, so there are more who paint the sunset or take piano lessons or hunt the perfect end-rhyme at day's end. Our generation, like all others, yearns to produce some something that continues—and the generative impulse, when artistic, lingers on.

Yet it's a daunting proposition. To try to fashion work that might last more than a season is to recognize how hard it is to make a thing of beauty be "a joy forever"—that proud boast of a poet who died at twenty-five. John Keats tricked time; few can. (Mistakenly if modestly, he further claimed that his own epitaph should read: "Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.") There are pitfalls and pratfalls abounding; much can and does go wrong. Late style only rarely consists of advance, even when we're dealing, as one critic has described it, with "the senile sublime."[1]

So what does cause some artists just to fade away, and why is it that others soldier on? This introduction's epigraph comes at least partly tongue-in-cheek; "the last of life" is not routinely thought of as "the best." There are instances of quick success that lead to later failure—incandescent personalities who flare or gutter out. Some die too soon to confront diminution; others begin their work late. Still others remain at the easel or desk till exhaustion trumps exuberance and the whole system shuts down.

Issues of physical health and life expectancy enter in as well; what does it mean to be old in the twenty-first century as opposed to the sixteenth? (For those who suffer rapid

loss—a stroke, a debilitating illness—the problem is a very different one. Yet my intention is, as much as possible, to leave to one side the complicating factors of physical collapse.) Late-stage creative personalities no doubt confront the human condition in ways analogous to those who deal with it from the ninth tee or nursing homes, but their response takes form in the concert hall or on the canvas or page. They leave evidence behind of having grappled with mortality, and—once mortality has claimed them—the evidence remains.

In these pages I consider what's been left behind: testimonials we hear and see and read. When that act of witnessing is offered up as language, what wording do we have that best describes old age? The late self-portraits of Rembrandt and the final songs of Richard Strauss are manifestly not the same as those produced while young. Which challenges continue and which ones are new?

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All through the journey of this book, I weighed anchor in deepwater harbors. The metaphor feels strained but apt; "the journey of this book" has proved a task of navigation at least as much as destination. At project's start I thought that to advance one's art as time went on was seldom possible. The more I studied it, however, the more examples I unearthed of excellent work near or at career's end. This should not have been surprising; many of our culture's icons—from Sophocles to Michelangelo—lived for a very long time. And the trend will surely continue; as our population ages, its artists do the same.

Each time I picked a subject I felt a sense of loss. When writing of the painter Claude Monet, for instance, I found myself thinking: Why not such other elder artists as Arp? Bonnard? Chagall? Chardin? Degas? De Kooning? Kokoschka? Mantegna? Michelangelo? Renoir? Rouault? Tintoretto? Titian? Zurbarán? So the process of selection was a process of exclusion; this could be an omnibus volume yet remain a surface-scratch.

Further, the legion of old masters "elsewhere" is not within my ken. I don't doubt there are dancers in India, ceramists in Peru, woodworkers in Namibia whose work grows resplendent as they grow old. I do not doubt it but am unable to discuss it, and the artists and artificers of other crafts and cultures are—regretfully, respectfully—left out.

For a related reason, I focus on the dead. The verdict is not in on those whose work remains in progress; such judgment is provisional as well as incomplete.

But here is one such judgment. The stamp of personality is always case specific; what counts within the general rubric are individual markings. No fingerprint or snowflake is precisely like another, yet the category—*fingerprint, snowflake*—pertains. As these pages will attempt to show, when the category can be labeled *creative achievement in old age*, a pattern does emerge.

With very few exceptions the figures I here profile lived till seventy or older; most had known early success. All remained productive forces in their "sunset years." We're not talking about secret elixirs or monkey glands or Ponce de León's fabled quest; it's not as if they stumbled on youth's fountain or remained preternaturally agile. But there does seem some sort of common denominator, some stubborn refusal to retire or let well enough alone. The men and women I discuss therefore form a kind of cadre—whether they were working in the near or distant past. For reasons of economy I limit myself to literature, music, and the visual arts; somewhere in this haystack lies the needle, *lastingness*.

I hope to uncover it here.

CHAPTER ONE

Enemies of Promise

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,
"I feared it might injure the brain;
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again."

Lewis Carroll, "Father William"

Young people draw. They make up stories. They beat drums. Alive to the delights of clay and paper, children clap their hands and dance. That art starts as expressive play is widely understood by now; why some adults choose to continue with their lifelong playful gaming is less clear. Some call it "divine inspiration"; others are less flattering and urge artists to grow up. In *The Critic As Artist* (1891), Oscar Wilde proclaimed, "It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art and Art only that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence."[1] In the same year, and without the capital letter, he averred, "All art is quite useless."[2]

The creative impulse may well be strongest early on, before sex and getting and spending stake their own claims on attention. The child pressing down on a crayon or blowing through a tin kazoo will soon enough elect instead to play baseball or in bed. But there are those who cannot close the costume box or leave off telling stories or producing graven images and a joyful noise. These artists, if precocious, may flourish in their teenage years and make an original statement in their twenties; talent will be with them from the start.

And if there be a stereotype of the creative artist—particularly since the Romantic period—it tends to be of someone wild-haired, wide-eyed, *young*. John Keats died at twenty-five, Percy Bysshe Shelley at thirty, and George Gordon, Lord Byron made it to the ripe old age of thirty-six. In our present time the young performer—think of Kurt Cobain, James Dean, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin—is most adored when most at risk; the recklessness that wrecked them had always been part of the act. The common denominator here has to do with exuberance, an explosive energy that can become implosive; these youthful talents share a sense that there's no point in planning for tomorrow.

But for people in their seventies—not to mention their eighties and nineties—the future is a finite thing and what's extensive is tradition: the long reach of the past. It's not, I think, an accident that aging artists turn with invigorated interest to the work of predecessors or that they choose to revisit their own early work. "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" no longer creeps in "petty pace from day to day" but with a slow-motion rush. And to the extent that they manage their time, the elderly must "pace"

themselves in a different fashion than do the extravagant young. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "lastingness" can be defined as "the quality of being lasting; continuance; duration; permanence. Also: durability, constancy, perseverance." The marathon and the hundred-yard dash are very different things.

My title could pertain to both, since those who sprint may well establish records that endure. But the word's secondary meanings—"lastingness" as "durability, constancy, perseverance"—are increasingly at issue, since there are more creative personalities at work in what would once have seemed like great old age. White-haired Father William can stand on his head and yet sound better humored than the young man his son. The nonagenarian is no longer *extra*-ordinary, the centenarian no freak. The composer Elliott Carter celebrated his centenary in 2008 with a performance of new music. The artist-caricaturist Al Hirschfeld died at ninety-nine in 2003, the poet Stanley Kunitz in 2006 at one hundred; both were working near the end. To have been born in America in the twentieth century is to be part of a society longer lived than any previous; retirement now consists of decades and not years. And for those who don't choose to retire—who continue to wield pen or brush—a distant view is inescapable, no matter how close-watched the scene.

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Throughout this book, though sparingly, I'll use the first-person pronoun, for there's no point pretending my interest in the subject is impersonal. Rather, it feels close to home. When I was twenty (thirty, forty, even fifty) the downward arc of a career seemed a problem for others to solve. Now, predictably enough, what I have come to admire are skills of continuity, consistency, and power-in-reserve. The men and women with whom this study deals all seem to have considered "the quality of being lasting."

It isn't a matter of mere endurance; many things repeat themselves that we wish might end. It isn't a matter of shifting one's ground or starting over for novelty's sake. Rather, I find myself thinking of the painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir—so crippled by arthritis that he could not grasp the brush but had it wedged between his fingers—still poised above the canvas, squinting, jabbing at the image, adding color bit by bit. Or Arturo Toscanini, still ruthless in rehearsal, insisting that his orchestra play their *sostenuto* correctly and get intonation right. Or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe lying on his deathbed and asking for "More light…"

My father, Kurt Delbanco, kept Goethe's *Farbenlehre*—a study of chromatics—by his bedside in old age. Born in the city of Hamburg in 1909, my father fled from Hitler's Germany to England, and in the late 1940s came to America. A businessman by perceived necessity—my mother's expectations, and those of his three sons, were large—he had a lifelong interest in the visual arts. Both a collector and art dealer, he painted and made sculptures with a near obsessive passion; always I remember him with sketch pad and pencils, with tin-snips and hacksaw and easel and brush.

My father was a more than a Sunday painter; his oil portraits were acquired by such institutions as Harvard College, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Museum of the City of New York. He had one-man shows in Manhattan and elsewhere, but never attained full professional status, never quite broke out or through. This troubled him; he had dreams of being "discovered"—a kind of Grandpa Moses—in his tenth decade. At ninety-eight he continued to say, "A painting a day keeps the doctor away" and bend to his coloring book. The last time I saw him—on November 14, 2007—we talked about Francisco Goya, the artistic and commercial value of *Los Caprichos* and *Desastras de la Guerra;* he died two days thereafter, in his peaceful sleep.

My father-in-law, Bernard Greenhouse, is "only" ninety-four. World famous as a cellist—as soloist, chamber musician, and teacher—he owns the Countess of Stanlein ex-Paganini Stradivarius violoncello of 1707. I wrote a book about that instrument, as well as one on the Beaux Arts Trio, the chamber-music ensemble of which he was a founding member. So I have spent my married life observing a musician many thousands have applauded and still hear on recordings. Greenhouse was a student of Pablo Casals and like

his teacher must confront the loss of physical agility and a performer's competence. Nowadays his public appearances consist of master classes; he does not play in concert, for the cello is a demanding taskmistress; strength fades. Since his eyesight no longer permits him to read music, he relies on memory, and his repertoire cannot enlarge. Still, every morning in his bathrobe, he blows on his fingers and picks up bow and cello and practices a Bach suite or a passage from Schumann or Brahms. An old man when he walks or shaves, he seems much younger when he sits to play or teach; there's an energy engendered by the task at hand, and only when he stands once more does he display his age.

These paired examples feel, in the root sense, familial: familiar, close to home. The men and women I will focus on are someone else's relatives, but they seem to me exemplary of a related set of challenges. My father said, a short while before his final illness, "I am not dying yet. But I am more ready for death than for life." My father-in-law, six years younger, still hungers to make music and for the ensuing applause. Those who admire such hunger call it "a force of nature"; those who think it less than seemly would counsel withdrawal instead. But in either case the act itself—of painting or playing the cello—became a source of vitality and not a drain thereof; both men shed years while engaged in their craft. And I find myself, while listening or watching (or sitting down each dawn to write), aware of the yield of old habit: how inspiriting it is to keep to a routine. If nothing else it offers up the comforts of continuity: As Father William tells his son, *I do it again and again*.

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Lady Luck has much to do with this. Simply in terms of the number of throws, she blows on the old artist's dice. There's the luck of robust health or available medical treatment; Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Schubert would have lived longer today. There's the luck of time and place; Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen, killed in the First World War, might well have extended their poetry's reach. To take a random sampling of painters dead before the age of forty—Masaccio, Caravaggio, Giorgione, and Raphael in the Italian Renaissance; Seurat, Lautrec, and Van Gogh in nineteenth-century France—is to recognize how many of our masters died while young. This is a commonplace, nearly, of *la vie bohème* and brilliant youth; disease and poverty and war are part of the scenario, and for every name that's known there are no doubt a hundred who died in anonymity because their luck was bad.

In the *Greek Anthology*, a collection of fragments from classical Greece, an epitaph encapsulates this elegiac yearning and dream of longer life:[3]

> In my nineteenth year the darkness drew me down.
> And ah, the sweet sun!
>
> (tr. Dudley Fitts)

Imagine for a moment that Edgar Allan Poe was committed to a clinic and there detoxified; imagine Stephen Crane, Franz Kafka, Katherine Mansfield, and Robert Louis Stevenson cured of consumption or the list of those with syphilis restored by penicillin; imagine Jean-Michel Basquiat and Egon Schiele—dead at twenty-eight—or Théodore Géricault—dead at thirty-three—somehow painting through their seventies and you'll see how much art history depends on sheer good fortune. Had François Villon *not* been condemned to the gallows or Christopher Marlowe been murdered in a tavern or Hart Crane grown suicidal, much of the canon might change. It's fine to think of Ludwig von Beethoven with a hearing aid or Virginia Woolf on antidepressants or thousands of soon-to-be-slaughtered twenty-year-old soldiers redeemed by armistice; if fate had been a little kinder or the appointment in Samarra missed it's fine to imagine additional work—another triptych, symphony, or novel to revere. Had "brilliant youth" enlarged to age just think what could be added to our culture's treasure trove.

But all such speculation is, of course, beside the point; we cannot know. What we have is what they left. What they did is what we have. And quite possibly a longer life would not entail artistic growth; Beethoven with his hearing fixed or Woolf in an affable Zoloft haze might not have managed to produce their great wrenching and pain-suffused work. The chapters that follow deal with extended careers, not the romance of early achievement; this book considers what happens to artists who endure. The twenty-and thirty-and forty-year-olds deserve a separate hearing; whatever problems they encounter do not include those of old age.

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Of those who must prepare themselves for the second half of existence, Carl Jung observes:[4]

> Thoroughly unprepared we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve us as hitherto. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.

We cannot know what lasts or will outlast us; we nonetheless prepare our work for strangers—viewers, listeners, and readers we may never meet. If the work is good enough, some of those strangers inhabit the future and are now unborn. "Continuance, duration, permanence" in this regard have more to do with the response of others than the stimulus provided; it's the reception of the piece and not its production that counts. But to the aging writer, painter, or musician the process can signify more than result; it no longer seems as important that the work be sold. So "lastingness" implies a doubled meaning in and for an artist's legacy; it's what gets left behind.

This is a crucial doubling, and germane throughout this book. It may well be true that needlepoint and crossword puzzles forestall the aging process, but I'm not writing about the therapeutic value of art or its function in consciousness raising. With only a few exceptions, the work here discussed has proved of lasting value in the estimation of *others*—those readers, viewers, listeners who receive it later on.

Therefore I will focus on the artist faced each day—each morning in the mirror—with the physical fact of decline. And since prose fiction is the discipline with which I'm most familiar, I'll start with this specific instance of the more general trend. The novelist is not exempt from the vagaries of fashion, neither from the loss of talent nor the shifting ground of recognition. Here, too, the field is littered with once lucky men and women ripe for the plucking—writers who flourished early on and who (disabled by injuries, alcohol, drugs, bitterness, insanity, inertia, an excess of intelligence, an adleaven of stupidity, a wasting disease, great wealth, great poverty, too much renown, too little, self-doubt, self-confidence, you name it) failed to continue. There's no obvious reason why this should hold true—why writers can't improve with age—but it's the rule, not exception, that most of the important work transpires early on.

If your expertise is basketball or ballet you understand, I would imagine, how early success is crucial and the chances of improvement at, say, thirty or fifty are slim. If you've not made the major leagues of piano playing or tennis or, as some suggest, theoretical physics by the age of forty, you're consigned to the bush leagues for life. Yet this needn't be the case for writers of prose fiction—whose subject, after all, is the wide range of human endeavor and not merely childhood or youth. Why should it seem so difficult to substitute endurance for enthusiasm, to temper ambition with artistry; what are, in Cyril Connolly's fine phrase, the "enemies of promise" that keep us from achieving the best work at the end?

First, a distinction to draw. F. Scott Fitzgerald died believing himself a has-been, but the books he wrote near the close of his life—*Tender Is the Night* and the unfinished *Last*

Tycoon—easily outstrip, and today outsell, those almost-forgotten novels *(This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned)* that brought him early success. Herman Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo* established the career; his book about a whale was a commercial and critical disaster that now bestrides the narrow world of fiction like a Colossus. The work of Henry James is much more widely purchased at the present moment than to his disappointment held true for the texts while he lived. These are well-worn examples and familiar reversals. We've grown accustomed to "the cackle of the unborn about the grave,"[5] and the way a final verdict rarely upholds a first.

More appropriate to my discussion is that astonishing novella *Billy Budd*, written when Melville was old and ill and forgotten: a nearly perfect work of art produced, as it were, at the end. Thomas Mann did much the same, returning—decades after he'd first abandoned the project as unmanageable—to *Confessions of Felix Krull.* In our own time there are candidates. The novelists Penelope Fitzgerald and Harriet Doerr published no creative writing till their sixties; their fictions from the outset were mature. Peter Matthiessen in his eighties earned the National Book Award for revising a trilogy of novels he had published long before; in her ninth decade Doris Lessing received the Nobel Prize for Literature she continues to produce. The final novels of Wallace Stegner and recent books by Alice Munro, Philip Roth, and William Trevor are at least as prepossessing as their early texts.

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Every artist has been made a gift but the offer is provisional and can be retracted. All must be careful caretakers of and try not to squander that gift. Again, as Cyril Connolly puts it, "The best thing that can happen for a writer is to be taken up very late or very early, when either old enough to take its measure, or so young that when dropped by society he has all life before him."[6] Success breeds disillusionment as surely as does failure, and there are some temptations it's not easy to avoid.

Let me list a few.

First, the deep paralysis of repetition. If you've been rewarded for and accomplished at a certain kind of writing, it's hard to begin afresh; formula writers don't try to; indeed, it would shock their readership if the terms of engagement were changed. But many more serious artists play less to their weakness than strength, and sometimes this too can become formulaic: Think of the late Hemingway or Faulkner and the risks of repetition should come clear. The rhythms of the prose are constant, the syntax and character constructs and thematic concerns stay the same. But it's all habitual, a kind of shadowboxing enacted in slow motion; there's no creative challenge while they practice their old moves.

Nor is it always easy to find a new true subject. If what you're best at is, say, evoking the hallucinatory terrors of war, the likelihood you'll write persuasively about high school romance is slim; if you're fascinated by the interaction of members of a family, then your book about a hermit will likely fail to persuade. Any writer who's successful, young, will be so in part because of personal history and even, it may be, obsession; if there's an expectant audience established as a result of that obsession, the writer strays at risk. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle tried to kill off his creature Sherlock Holmes (in order to write something other than detective stories); a disappointed public, clamoring for further "adventures," forced Doyle to reverse himself and conjure up the return of Holmes.

A corollary here. Self-indulgence is hard to avoid, and particularly so when what you've done has been much rewarded; few friends or colleagues of the powerful will argue that a project had better be abandoned or a page be cut. There's a contract to sign and money to make or applause and a prize to receive; why should one cease producing what was praised before? This goes some distance, I think, to explaining the repetitive effusions of established authors when there's no one to simply say: *No.*

Second is the obverse of the first. For those writers who equate growth with change, the need to alter style and subject can itself be self-defeating. To write to your weakness and not to your strength is admirable, perhaps, but in its own way self-indulgent; it's why

a realist might try her hand at surrealism, a fabulist write science fiction, and so on and so forth. Look at the melodramatic fantasy of Graham Greene's *Doctor Fischer of Geneva* and you'll see the risks not of consistency but willed experiment. At the end of their careers, John Cheever and Bernard Malamud did shift their ground, with mixed results; they simply weren't up to innovation and *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* or *The People* are gestures at a new mode, ill-advised.

Let me stress that these writers are ones I admire; they aren't easy targets or simple to dismiss. And perhaps it's an instance of damned if you do, damned if you don't; as the years and wealth accrete it's harder to evoke impoverished youth. So we get the unedifying spectacle of someone like James Baldwin living in pasha-like luxury in southern France and writing with decreased authority about Harlem's lean mean streets. Or Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow in their eighties writing as though on automatic pilot about the erotic high jinks and adventures of young men. Again I repeat that these are artists of great caliber and daring, great ambition and attainment; why they run down, run out of steam—beyond the merely biological aspect of depletion—is, I think, a complex question, and best answered case by case.

But this is not the place for detailed particular assessments; I'm not offering a series of critical biographies and, I hope, not an autobiography either. I still tell myself (as no doubt did those other authors) that the work I'm working on is the one that counts. Each morning when I sit to write I persuade myself, or try to, that the blank page to be blackened will be masterful by morning's end; this holds as true for the unpublished student as for Pulitzer Prize recipients in their honored age. It's that "willing suspension of disbelief"[7] which Coleridge stipulates as a necessary condition for a reader or member of an audience; in this case suspended disbelief is what the *writer* needs. It's the necessary *pre*condition, really, for all members of the guild—whether they be an apprentice, journeyman laborer, or master in the craft.

All writers recognize the difference, or should, between aspiration and achievement —between their dream of deathless prose and the piece of more or less iridescent mediocrity which they have just produced. All writers need believe the best work lies ahead. It's the kind of disease we call health to think that what we're about to create is splendid and not second rate; else how and why continue?

To know, I mean truly *know*—as might a basketball player or ballerina—that the best is behind you is to turn to drink or dithering or to an oven or gun. A few modest and decorous authors—think of E. M. Forster or Eudora Welty—withdraw into silence and declare at a certain point in their career, Enough's enough. But most of us go on and on, unable or unwilling to break a lifetime's habit of wrangling with language, and happy to be allowed, even encouraged, to do so. Most of us, when asked which book has been our favorite, will answer (hopefully, wishfully, truthfully), "The next."

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In a celebrity culture, what matters is name recognition, and it might therefore seem that "lastingness" proves crucial in the arc of a career. Yet a specific aspect of the art scene favors youth. A new discovery is cost efficient to promote and requires less investment than the tried and true. Well-funded museums and dealers can acquire a Van Dyck or a Holbein, but if you plan to sponsor an artist it's smarter to do so while the "talent" is just starting out. In sheer financial terms it's hard to mount a gallery show or offer new work from "old masters"; these are rare and expensive to buy. So it's scarcely an accident that literary agents flock to creative writing programs or gallery owners visit studios in search of a beginner; the available Botticellis and Vermeers just aren't numerous enough, and most of their known paintings hang on institutional walls. When the "lost" Caravaggio was found some years ago in Dublin it made an enormous art-world splash, and no dealer of the present day could hope to have ten Gainsboroughs for sale.

This is less clearly the case for composers; the concert-going public tends to prefer recognizable programs from the near or distant past. But they're buying, of course, a performance, not the work of art itself; the investment here consists only of a ticket and an

evening's time. Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms are surefire attractions, whereas three unknowns whose last names start with B might play an empty room. "Classical music" announces itself by the yoked adjective and noun; the two form a linked pair. It's the bane of present-day composers that the world of concert halls and orchestras remains so retrospective, and the tastes of its audience tradition-steeped; modern compositions have a hard time being aired.

In the popular music scene, however, the present erases the past. Last season's OK Go is this year's Plain White T's; next year's sensation may still be in school. The names of bands and début groups are dizzying in their prolixity and rapid shift. Taylor Swift, Kelly Clarkson, and Pink remain, as of this writing, hot; Jewel, Dido, and Madonna are lukewarm at best. How long Lady Gaga and Katy Perry will flourish is, in 2010, anyone's guess, but the Backstreet Boys and the Spice Girls are "so over." The economy of management here resembles that of the collector and art dealer; newer is cheaper and the chance of profit therefore greater. It's the next and not the last new sound that makes public noise.

These are issues of commerce, not talent, but the former and the latter intertwine. And one major implication for the less-than-superstar artist is how difficult it grows just to stay in play. The "midlist" writer is an endangered species; so are the painters and sculptors who fail to sell in galleries, the composers who don't get to hear their work performed. The early splash becomes a ripple in the soon-to-be-stilled pond. There are few fates as melancholy as that of an overweight crooner belting out the song that made his or her career some thirty years before; to continue regaling an audience with "Over the Rainbow" or "American Pie" is to be caught in the time warp of early success. Innovation is at odds with repetition, and each artist must manage both. For a year or three or five the "overnight sensation" rides high on a wave, and then the crest flattens to trough.

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Edward Said, in a collection of essays posthumously titled *On Late Style*,[8] argues that a certain kind of artist flourishes in contrariety. What Dylan Thomas urged as "rage, rage against the dying of the light" is, in Said's analysis, a central attribute of the work of Richard Strauss and Luchino Visconti and, in his last plays, William Shakespeare. (It's worth remembering, perhaps, that Thomas died at thirty-nine, and the villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" was written to his father.) The critic's list includes Constantine Cavafy, Jean Genet, Glenn Gould, and in every case what he admires is oppositional intransigence. Not the ripeness or the readiness but the resistance is all.

Unsurprisingly, what engaged the dying Said's attention is these artists' refusal to accommodate to our somewhat easy formulation that with old age comes wisdom, the grace of resignation, the comforts of perspective, and so on and so forth. He doesn't quote, but might have, Yeats's fierce quatrain, "The Spur," which represents this stance:[9]

> You think it horrible that lust and rage
> Should dance attention upon my old age;
> They were not such a plague when I was young;
> What else have I to spur me into song?

David Galenson, in a recent book called *Old Masters and Young Geniuses*,[10] argues a different point. He draws a distinction between "experimental" artists—witness Leonardo or Cézanne, always dissatisfied with and constantly revising work—and "conceptual" ones—witness Raphael or Picasso, who made cartoons or studies for the compositions they then left unaltered. For the "experimental" artist there's a lifelong groping toward an unattainable ideal; for the latter "conceptual" group the important work will likely be conceived of and achieved whole cloth when young. Galenson is an economist and much of his book is devoted to graphs of what sells best and when, in the

And, as those who deal with Medicare and Medicaid and the Social Security Administration more and more urgently remind us, the fastest-growing segment of the American population is the elderly. Our aging populace constitutes a major shift of emphasis within the "body politic," and its effects are just beginning to come clear.

One need be neither a scientist, sociologist, nor politician to understand that changes must be made in our treatment of "senior citizens"; medical, fiscal, housing, retirement, and transportation policies all need to be adjusted as the nation's men and women grow older month by year. Teleologically speaking, and if we count back from the end point, it's almost as though we no longer need die; we gain in life expectancy for every year we live. It's a version of Xeno's paradox: We halve the distance to our "goal" yet never quite attain it—or only when the complex system of the body at length stops functioning. Too, a disproportionate amount of our medical costs and expenditures are incurred in the final six months.

These are not merely American problems. Countries as diverse as Finland and San Marino face the same issues acutely—and the longer-lived their populace the more urgent the problems become. The population of the planet is growing exponentially in part because of longer life: Pandemics are averted or controlled, childbearing years extend, and we do not die as rapidly once ill. When William Butler Yeats observed "That is no country for old men," he was referring to an Ireland that had become—comparatively speaking—comfortable, and where the old lived well.

Instead it's the youthful population that remains, worldwide, at risk. The infant mortality rate is a major factor in any statistical survey of how long we live. Indeed, it's the principal marker—whether we're discussing societies of 20,000, 2000, or 200 years ago. War, malnutrition, starvation, and the failure to inoculate against disease all take their lethal toll. Many of the countries with the lowest life expectancies (such as Botswana, Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) suffer from very high rates of HIV/AIDS infection, with adult prevalence rates ranging from 10 to 38 percent. Those who inhabit Swaziland will live an average of 32.23 years. Almost without exception, the men and women who contract HIV/AIDS in these impoverished nations will rapidly succumb.

For them, the Hobbesian description of life as "nasty, brutish and short" holds all too true. (Thomas Hobbes wrote *Leviathan* while in his sixties and lived till ninety-one.) Sex traffic, gang warfare, and child slavery each constitute a human scourge that also impacts age. The danger of conscription or forced manual labor—life in the army or the mines—further reduces the life span of those whom Frantz Fanon called "the wretched of the earth." I don't mean by this (it's neither statistically nor medically accurate) that human beings in old age are less susceptible to mortal shocks than men and women in life's prime, but only that they have the habit of survival and have escaped youth's risks.

For by whatever measure and plotted on whichever graph, it's clear we're getting older, and one crucial aspect of "lastingness" is how well we do so. According to *The World Factbook* for 2007, worldwide average life expectancy is now 65.86 years—men can expect to live to 63.89 and women an average 67.84 years. The longest-lived nationals inhabit Andorra, with a life span of 83.52 years; they are followed by the citizens of Macau at 82.27 and Japan at 82.02. The United States, for all its vaunted prosperity and medical expertise, ranks forty-fifth worldwide, with an average life expectancy hovering between the ages of 77 and 78. Its impoverished neighbor, Cuba, after decades of embargo, has a population that can expect the same.

Retirement communities may be a boon to real estate developers, and the well-heeled use motorized wheelchairs, but the poor in urban and rural America still suffer from very high rates of pre-term birth and infant mortality (which constitutes the reason we rank number forty-five). And youth itself means something new; we're far more precocious as well as later-starting than would have been the case two hundred years ago. We're both more independent and dependent than was the rule in previous times, both more connected to the world and protected from it. A cell phone permits us to travel yet stay in touch with home. A credit card enables both purchasing power and debt. The paradox attaching to our nation's young is everywhere made manifest; childbearing gets deferred

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Pictured on the front cover from left to right: (first row) Johann Sebastian Bach, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Georges Sand, Thomas Hardy, Rembrandt van Rijn; *(second row)* Henry Moore, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Pablo Picasso, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Henri Matisse; *(third row)* Leonardo da Vinci, Georgia O'Keeffe, Friedrich Holderlin, Giuseppe Verdi, Franz Joseph Haydn.

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