



# **UNCERTAINTY AND LOSTNESS: PROLEGOMENA TO A THEORY OF THE MIDCAREER**

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I'd like to begin by quoting in its entirety a very short but highly pointed and extremely prescient review, written by the then-twenty-five or twenty-six-year-old artist Mel Bochner in 1966 and published in *Arts Magazine* in its May 1966 issue. It's a response to Frank Stella's show that year at the Castelli Gallery:

*In an era of intense pressure on the artist to adopt a "corporate image," this past year has witnessed a number of attempts on the part of established (imaged) artists to recast their positions. But the changes seem to have been culturally motivated rather than aesthetically inspired. A persistent residue of nineteenth-century Romanticism demands that an artist's maturation be directly proportioned to his change. (This implies that although the moment makes the man, the man makes the style.) The logic and stringency of Frank Stella's earlier work directly opposed growth. The completeness was his insistency. In his latest pictures, since the possibilities of sequential development were excluded, he had to choose to be "somewhere else." The choice appears unfortunate. He counters all his previous virtues: symmetry with awkwardness, refinement with raucousness, strictness with arbitrariness. By trying to "do something with Stella" he appears to have joined his imitators and variationists.<sup>1</sup>*

For every discourse there is a problem with how to begin—how the silence that surrounds us is to be broken or fulfilled by the word that frames and is framed by it. This is undoubtedly why, as Edward Said once remarked, "Literature is full of the lore of beginnings despite the tyranny of starting a work *in media res*, a convention that burdens the beginning with a pretense that it is not one."<sup>2</sup> I've opted to begin, as you'll have noticed, by giving Bochner the first word, in order to maintain my own pretense of merely entering my response to an already ongoing discourse.

As a critic who explicitly thematized questions of

of temporality, Said is an exemplary precursor for my inquiry here. His career as a major figure in American intellectual life began, it might be argued, with a book programmatically titled *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Said's subject in that book was not the beginning of an artistic or, in his case, intellectual career, but the beginning of a work or project—the same methodological subject that Roland Barthes had treated five years before in a famous essay titled "Where to Begin?": "an operative uneasiness, a simple difficulty, which is that of any initiation: *where to begin?*"<sup>3</sup> But a life or career is a work of a sort and there are many parallels. Perhaps one will never find a way to begin. And yet, on the other hand, the work may have already begun. And if so, having begun, how to go on? For Said, Barthes' structuralism mutes the true force of the beginning—Said speaks of the structuralists' recourse to merely "token beginnings," since their attachment to systems and synchronicity ensures that they must see the historicity of beginnings as "an embarrassment for systematic thought." Though in those days, as Said put, "The structuralists themselves speak like men who stand at the beginning of a new era and at the twilight...of an old one,"<sup>4</sup> structuralist thought is always stranded in *media res*, in midcareer.

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Beginning, one comes to realize that the beginning has already taken place. Tellingly, I think, Said's book, which was published in 1975, was not his first but his second, following on from a book on the "afflicted existence"<sup>5</sup> and artistic travails of Joseph Conrad, a book published in 1966 that was derived from his Harvard University dissertation: There is always a beginning before the

beginning. This means that while for any endeavor a beginning is necessary, it is always also a kind of fiction. What counts as the beginning is something the artist would like to subject to his own will, though the extent to which this will can really be imposed is questionable.

Said quotes a story told by Conrad's wife Jessie: "On one of his naughty days he said that the *Black Mate* was his first work, and when I said 'No, *Almayer's Folly* was the first thing you ever did,' he burst out: 'If I like to say *The Black Mate* was my first work, I shall say so.'"<sup>6</sup>

If beginnings are one species of necessary fiction, endings, conclusions are another. It might seem that, in comparison with the beginnings of their careers, artists and writers have less opportunity to shape their ends, for most often it is the only imprecisely foreseeable full stop of death that determines where and with what work one ends. Even a suicide is often as unforeseeable and almost arbitrary or random an occurrence as any accident. A more deliberate conclusion may be identified when an artist or author lives on after bidding an early and explicit farewell to art, when there is a determined renunciation, as in the cases of the poets Arthur Rimbaud or Laura Riding; in the plastic arts one immediately thinks of Marcel Duchamp, who first abandoned what he liked to call "retinal art" and then, after declaring his *Large Glass* "definitively unfinished" in 1923 and becoming convinced, or so he claimed, that "chess is much purer than art in its social position,"<sup>7</sup> abandoned art altogether. Of course now we know that this abandonment of art was a fiction—perhaps the kind I've referred to as a necessary one—and that for twenty years he was secretly working on his final opus, presumably his testament, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage* or *Given: 1 The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*.

As for Said, having begun his career with a meditation on beginnings, he also showed how its ending may be consciously prepared and fashioned and indirectly articulated. Said lived the last twelve years of his life with leukemia and therefore had all too much opportunity to

meditate on last things. He could not know when his disease would end his life but we can hardly read his last collection of essays, left unfinished at his death in 2003 and posthumously published three years later, without considering how its subject was overdetermined by the author's illness—and this despite the fact that *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* grows out of ideas that had been brewing much earlier, while he was still well. In her Foreword to the book his widow Miriam Said recalls "that this idea—writers', musicians', and other artists' 'late work,' 'late style,' 'Adorno and lateness,' etc.—became part of Edward's conversation sometime at the end of the 1980s" and that he thereupon

*began to include examples of late works in many of his articles on music and literature. He even wrote specific essays on the late works of some writers and composers. He also gave a series of lectures on "late style," first at Columbia and then elsewhere, and in the early 1990s he taught a class on the topic. Finally he decided to write a book and had a contract in hand.*<sup>8</sup>

Although Said was therefore only in middle age when he began working on the topic of lateness and indeed when he was struck by the illness that would eventually kill him, the topic can only have taken on added weight as he began to consider that this could well be his last work. "The body, its health, its care, composition, functioning, and flourishing, its illnesses and demise, belong to the order of nature," as he lucidly summarized, but

*what we understand of that nature, however, how we see it and live it in our consciousness, how we create a sense of our life individually and collectively, subjectively as well as socially, how we divide into periods, belongs roughly to speaking to the order of*

Again, I want to underline Said's emphasis on the self-conscious shaping of what might appear to be a naturally given process or experience. In an artistic career, "lateness" is not so much a product of age or of ill health as of a reflective awareness of these conditions. Some artists take on an encounter with age and with the sense of lateness at a surprisingly early age and maintain it and work with it for a very long time. T.S. Eliot, for example, wrote "Gerontion" in 1920, the year he turned thirty-two; this is the poem that begins, "Here I am, an old man in a dry month," and warns

*History has many cunning passages, contrived  
corridors  
And issues, deceives us with whispering ambitions,  
Guided by vanities.*

It might be said that Eliot spent the next forty-five years of his life as a literary elder.

But if Said began his career as a writer on beginnings and ended it as a writer on lateness, he did not occupy his middle years with reflections on—on what? While we easily turn the adjective "early" into the substantive "earliness" and transmute "late" into "lateness," our language has apparently never found a need to identify a quality of "middleness." What happens in the middle of an artistic career really has never been given much specific consideration. F. Scott Fitzgerald is supposed to have said that there are no second acts in American lives, meaning, I suppose, that they have beginnings and endings but no middles; and as far as artistic careers have been examined as such one might imagine the same to be true. And yet most artists do, for better or worse, live through what's come to be known as their midcareer. It's just that they don't often do so with ease. Dante Alighieri might have been speaking for all with the famous opening lines of his Comedy:

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura  
ché la diritta via era smarrita.*

*(In the middle of the journey we call life  
I found myself in a dark forest  
Where the right path was lost.)*

Here I only want to point out the curious paradox that it was when the right way was lost that the poet found himself. One who never loses his way may never really find it.

The middle of the journey sometimes seems to be all about losing the way. In what as far as I can tell is Said's only sustained discussion of middle age or the midcareer as a phenomenon—a 1987 music review from *The Nation* headed "Middle Age and Performers," subsequently reprinted in the collection *Music at the Limits*—he begins with the distinctly dour observation that "middle age, like everything that stands between more clearly defined times or things, is not an especially rewarding period." (Keep in mind that Said himself was fifty-one years old at the time.) "One is no longer a promising young person and not yet a venerable old one," Said continues. "Middle age is uncertainty and some lostness, physical failings and hypochondria, anxiety and nostalgia; or most people it is also the time that afford the first substantial look at death."<sup>10</sup> This view, which may sound a bit exaggerated but also somehow realistic, is miles away from what a purely biological view of the human career would call for, which Rudolf Arnheim, in an important essay "On the Late Style," pictured as "an arch rising from the weakness of the child to the unfolded powers of the mature person and then descending toward the infirmity of old age."<sup>11</sup>

If this commonsense viewpoint captured the reality of artists' careers, one would expect that the best and easiest period for artists would be during the prime of life, what the French call *la force de l'age*, when one is still vigorous yet already experienced. But it seems that for the artist mere maturity does not count for as much as one might have thought or hoped. It even seems that maturity might be the problem, and only when that is transcended does

one become free of the problem. As Arnheim says, “The curiosity of our modern theorists and historians about the particular character of late works is often coupled with the expectation of finding the highest achievements, the purest examples, the deepest insights in the final products of a life of search and labor,”<sup>12</sup> which seems to imply that the late works are really in some sense the works that come *too* late, and that they are valued for just this reason —that they somehow become as raw and full of questioning as the energetic and risky works of the very young, of the emerging artist who has not yet found his or her formula. Arnheim cites the example of Titian, whose late works such as the *Flaying of Marsyas* are so revered today, though Vasari considered that he should never have dared to present such paintings to the public, as they could only harm the great reputation he had gained with the works of his maturity, that is, of his midcareer. And thus as Said says this phase of life calls for “finding your way again...adjusting your failing animal energies to the new realities...learning from your past without repeating or (alas, more likely) betraying it” —without, as Bochner put it, becoming one’s own imitator or mere variationist. “As with all clichés,” Said continues, “there is some truth to the boring or frumpy or faded quality that one associates with middle age.”<sup>13</sup>

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No wonder theoretically oriented critics have been so much more fascinated by late works and late styles, knowing that the owl of wisdom takes wing at dusk, while market-oriented collectors are so beguiled by emerging art, with its seemingly unlimited potential and promise for future development. Artists, perhaps to their dismay, know that there is no way to avoid a midcareer short of early death or just giving up. The problem is always—as

the title of a very funny 1961 essay by Frank O’Hara and Larry Rivers would have it—“How to Proceed in the Arts.” “Youth wants to burn the museums,” they write. “We are in them—now what?”<sup>14</sup> Good question. In his review, Said goes on to examine the performances of a number of middle-aged classical pianists, noting Maurizio Pollini’s tendency to overreach in contrast to Alfred Brendel’s illusion that he can merely consolidate his past accomplishments, lacking imagination and with “too much dutiful or fussy exposition and precious emphasis.”<sup>15</sup> But it is Vladimir Ashkenazy who, according to Said, “now seems to embody the quandary of middle age in its rawest, least successfully resolved form,” exhibiting “inexperience and insecurity”<sup>16</sup> in attempting new things, a boring professionalism in what’s familiar. Even just “to go on doing what you’ve always done, and to do it as well as before”<sup>17</sup> will not avail, since the artist’s public is already familiar with all that and must necessarily draw diminishing returns from more of the same. The only solution for the midcareer artist, Said concludes, is somehow to take the very conditions that make middle age so artistically perilous, “its groundless effort and its groping for definition,” and make of them a vivid “statement about the process of interpretation itself, which is what all performance is finally about”<sup>18</sup> —or as we can amend Said’s phrasing to take into account not only interpretive artists such as classical pianists but artists in general: a statement about the process of artmaking itself, which is what all art is finally about.

To say that art is about the process of artmaking, which is to say about the relation between artist and materials and audience, and not merely at a given moment but across a lifetime of effort, means to assume a view of art that only became possible in the early nineteenth century, in the wake of Romanticism. Before this, as Svetlana Boym says, what was valued in an author (or an artist) was “their ability to reveal universal laws of human and divine nature rather than personal and

and idiosyncratic ones.”<sup>19</sup> Said speaks of “that dialectic between self and other, between performer and work, whose purpose is to reveal something about both as they undergo change in time.”<sup>20</sup> Insofar as the plastic arts go, the onset of the midcareer is no less problematic than in music or another art. I recently read an interview with Eric Fischl, an artist who after very interesting beginnings has followed a much more questionable path, in my view, through a midcareer that he is presumably now starting to see beginning to metamorphose into old age as he moves into his late sixties. Asked what advice he would pass on to younger artists, his thought was precisely that they should prepare to face up to the rigors of their midcareer. Speaking in terms of first and second acts à la Fitzgerald, he suggested that while

*they shouldn't abandon their first thing until they are tired of it...they must know that their life is not going to just be that first act. There is a second act coming and they should prepare for it. That's where the real test is. It's not as big a leap in terms of finding your voice, finding a gallery, getting people interested in what you do. That's all huge. The second act is subtler, but it can erase you or land you as a major artist.*<sup>21</sup>

That's a pretty scary dichotomy—either the dustbin of history or the walls of the Met. How do you deal with that? Said bluntly asserts that “at its worst, middle-aged performing is scarcely to be endured,”<sup>22</sup> and one can only wonder at his willingness to put up with so much of it. The reason must lie in the never-ending hope that the “rare grace”<sup>23</sup> of an unexpectedly remarkable and revealing negotiation of those perils will provide an inspiration that redeems the time and thought and feeling wasted on all the rest. Likewise, we have probably all felt that another show by this or that once-promising artist would be unendurable. And yet we should endure them, since even an artist's most unproductive wallowing in the quandaries of the

midcareer represents a wager on the redemptive potential of art with which it best to keep faith.

Since I've already mentioned him, I can use Fischl as an example. He has not simply indulged in repetition of his first successes, but has tried to develop his work and keep challenging himself. Yet I can't help feeling that the developments are always in the wrong direction—I mean wrong for him, for his talents and sensibility, not for some grand march of history. To put it in terms of an amateur psychoanalysis: His early paintings, the ones I like best, suggest that he must be someone who early in his life became very aware of, very sensitive to the perversities of everyday middle class life. And out of that awareness he made a “dirty realism”<sup>24</sup> that was surprising and felt true. Aware, perhaps, that if he kept on in this way he would become his own imitator, gradually substituting shock effects for the surprising truth, he changed course. The alternative he chose, was to become a sort of cleaner realist, a “good painter” in a way that to me seems rather banal and academic. I can't help feeling that he did so because he wanted to put more distance between himself and that sense of perversity that had threatened to envelope him. It's not that he wanted to get away from it as subject matter, but he wanted to find a style that would insulate him from it. And he succeeded, thereby making his paintings rather boring. And yet, like Said sweating out yet another recital by Ashkenazy, I keep on going to his midcareer shows despite everything. Because the middle is not necessarily the conclusion, and you can never predict when or where or how or why an artist might undergo a startling renewal—just as we should admit that we can never predict in advance when he or she might hit a dead end. The name of this uncertainty is “midcareer.”

## Endnotes

- 1 M.B. [Mel Bochner], "Reviews: In the Galleries," *Arts Magazine* XL 7 (May 1966), p. 61.
  - 2 Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 43.
  - 3 Roland Barthes, *New Critical Essays*, tr. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 80.
  - 4 Said, *Beginnings*, p. 320.
  - 5 Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 3.
  - 6 Said, *Conrad*, p. 11.
  - 7 Duchamp in *Time* magazine, March 10, 1952, quoted in Robert Andrews, *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 135.
  - 8 Miriam Said, Foreword to Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), p. vii-viii.
  - 9 Said, *Late Style*, p. 3.
  - 10 Edward W. Said, *Music at the Limits* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 52.
  - 11 Rudolf Arnheim, *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p. 285.
  - 12 Arnheim, *New Essays*, p. 286.
  - 13 Said, *Limits*, p. 52.
  - 14 Frank O'Hara, *Art Chronicles 1954-1966* (New York: George Braziller, 1975) p. 94.
  - 15 Said, *Limits*, p. 54.
  - 16 Said, *Limits*, p. 55.
  - 17 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
  - 18 Said, *Limits*, p.56.
  - 19 Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 4.
  - 20 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
  - 21 Noelle Bodick, "'80s Art Star Eric Fischl on How Artists Can Find Their Second Act," *Artspace*, July 5, 2014, [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/eric-fischl-interview](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/eric-fischl-interview).
  - 22 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
  - 23 Said, *Limits*, p. 56.
- 24 *Granta 8: Dirty Realism* (Summer 1983), <http://www.granta.com/Archive/8>; but see also Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).