

Late Style(s): The Ageism of the Singular

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THE DISCOURSE OF AESTHETIC LATENESS, as it has developed over the past several centuries and is shared across all the art forms, has waxed and waned in both the academy and the public's interest, but it was revived in recent years with the 2006 publication of Edward W. Said's *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain*.¹ This is a posthumously published collection of his thoughts—written as he himself faced death—on the effects of age and mortality upon creative artists and their works. As everyone who knew him noticed, it was a very personal take on the subject, but the palpable passion and the acknowledged debt to Theodor Adorno's influential theory of late style immediately made it *the* text to turn to for a new generation of critics.²

"Late style," as the term is used in English, is actually a combination of the German *Spätstil* (late style) and *Altersstil* (individual old-age style). This problematic conjunction has meant that, in English, the designation "late style" has become an extremely vague term—used, nonetheless, with considerable authority—to describe the last works of artists, no matter the age at which they died. Despite this vagueness, "late style" has functioned in a distinctly universalizing manner to make late work appear to be a "phenomenon that transcends boundaries of culture, loca-

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¹ New York: Pantheon, 2006.

² For instance, many, indeed most, of the papers presented at the conference "Rethinking Late Style: Art, Literature, Music, Film" at King's College, London, in November 2007 cited or alluded to Said's then newly published book. Said admits his attraction to Adorno's idea of late style as "a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it" (*On Late Style*, 78).



tion and chronology, manifesting itself in remarkably similar ways at different times and in different places.”³

Our main focus here will be on music, and opera in particular, but since the theorizing of late style has gone on in all the art forms (resulting in considerable cross-pollination), we will draw on the wider discourses of lateness as well. To illustrate the complexity of the idea of late style, we begin by asking what it actually means, in aesthetic terms, that Mozart died at thirty-five and Richard Strauss at eighty-five. The lengths of the lives of these two men were as different as was their music,⁴ and so one might well ask what their comparative age at death has to do with anything aesthetic.

It is obvious that each deceased composer, like each writer or painter, has last works, and that these can be usefully interpreted and assessed in light of the entire oeuvre that preceded them. That is not the issue: once we know a work is the last, we cannot help but see it differently, often reading it as a definitive final statement. Because of this, *individual* late-style discussions become an inevitable part of the reception process. The real question is: can any meaningful *generalizations*—that is, concerning *all* elderly artists’ work in all genres and in all times and places—be made in the name of this combined idea of a late/old-age style?⁵ There is, of course, a long history of attempts to do precisely that, from the Renaissance Italy of Giorgio Vasari to the idealist Germany of Goethe to the modern America of Said. A variety of supra-individual generalizations about artists and their late style have been proposed, but they frequently, as we shall see, center on a constellation of similar attributes: with age are said to come serenity and withdrawal, as well as a consolidation of themes and techniques. However, totally opposite theories also exist: the time before death is seen as one of rage and resistance, of innovation and experiment. Sufficiently vague, these contradictory universalizing theories can be made to apply to many cases, but what can they really tell us about the work of even an individual aging artist, much less about older artists in general?⁶ And, more significantly, why would we even *want* to generalize about late style?

Generalizing about creative artists would appear to be difficult, to say the least. Some are child prodigies; others are slow to get going and start late. By the age of seventy, these might be at very different creative stages. Some composers produce much, others little. Gioachino Rossini stopped creating relatively early in his career, while centenarian Elliott Carter continues on and

³ Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 26–27. An example of such generalization can be found in Amir Cohen-Shalev, *Both Worlds at Once: Art in Old Age* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 2: “In old age musicians, writers, and artists often want to develop a new form that allows them to present ambivalence. The older artists shy away from too much closure; they seek to open up to the ineffable, the spiritual in some cases.”

⁴ The paucity of work on female composers, themselves relatively few in number, conditions the masculine noun in what follows. Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) composed six operas between 1892 and 1925, the best known of which is *The Wreckers* (1902–4), but wrote little music in her later years because of deafness. Pauline Viardot (1821–1910), after an illustrious career as a singer, turned to composing occasional music for theater, salon operas, and operettas. Were we writing a decade or two from now, there might well be more older women composers of opera to discuss, since many women have been active in this field in recent years. We realize that, sadly, this lack feeds the gerontological bias toward male studies. For more on gender issues, see Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, eds., *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

⁵ Our discussion here will focus on older artists, and while we too will continue to use the commonly accepted English term “late style,” it should be understood to include old-age style.

⁶ This question is asked from time to time but usually without any definitive answer: witness the special issue of *Art Journal* 46, no. 2 (1987), and the 1985 College Art Association of America meeting it recorded, which aimed to determine whether old-age style was individual (*sui generis*) or a manifestation of a larger phenomenon.

on. Some live through times of political and social unrest that either hinder or spur their creativity; others have personal lives that impede (or promote) their work. Some are healthy as they age; others are disabled or chronically ill, as was Delius. Some have great difficulty coping with physical challenges, while others do not: poet and physician William Carlos Williams, after suffering a stroke at the age of sixty-nine and a severe depression, gave up medicine for full-time poetry writing and won a Pulitzer Prize for his late work.⁷ Why do we seem to think that we can usefully generalize about the style of the creative work done at any moment in the varied and diverse creative lives of composers or other artists—much less their last?

As we have already noted, the designation of individual elderly artists' last works as having a particular late style seems inescapable: once they have died, the term becomes "invested in works as part of their reception, and thus becomes part of their historical baggage."⁸ Sometimes this is a sentimentalizing act: we are intended to witness the great truths and insights imparted in the final works. Sometimes it is a debunking move: we are shown how the artist "lost it" at the end, and thus why these final works can simply be ignored or dismissed. Either way, late style is always a retrospective *critical* construct with its own aesthetic and ideological agenda and, most importantly, its own view of both aging and creativity.

Our purpose here is to analyze this critical construct called "late style," specifically in its transhistorical usages, in terms of its underlying generalizations about creativity in the later years. Assumptions about "the extraordinary flowering of artistic genius in old age"⁹ are as potentially ageist as those about generalized creative decline and dissolution with advancing age. As Philip Sohm puts it, exceptionalism and gerontophobia are "masked" twins.¹⁰ We wish to show how the universalized (rather than individualized) deployment of the term—whether positively or negatively—has led not only to falsifications, to elisions of distinctions and differences, but also to explicit or implicit denigrations of later-life creativity that are, in fact, ageist. One of the major myths about the elderly is that they are all pretty much the same.¹¹ To relegate the elderly—whether ascending to sublimity or descending to senility—to a category of the generic and generalizable is an all-too-familiar form of ageism.

In biography, periodization appears almost inevitable: lives obviously have beginnings, middles, and ends. Critical discourses therefore frequently divide artists' creative lives into periods: early, middle, late. When the overarching term "early style" is used across the board (i.e., once again, to describe the work, not of an individual artist, but *all* artists), it can have both negative connotations (of derivativeness, imitation, underdeveloped technique) and positive ones (of freshness, precocious inventiveness, impetuosity, and energy). But early style is something artists are said to grow out of: it climaxes in their middle works—designated as "mature." Rarely are theorists rash enough to generalize about "mature" works.¹² But with age comes late style,

⁷ See Gene D. Cohen, foreword to *Aging in the Twenty-First Century: A Developmental Perspective*, ed. Len Sperry and Harry Prosen (New York: Garland, 1996), xiii.

⁸ Kenneth Clark, *The Artist Grows Old: The Rede Lecture, 1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 207.

⁹ Thomas Dormandy, *Old Masters: Great Artists in Old Age* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000), 181.

¹⁰ Philip Sohm, *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy, 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 19–26.

¹¹ See Len Sperry, preface to Sperry and Prosen, *Aging in the Twenty-First Century*, 6.

¹² Elliott Jaques did posit the idea of a midlife crisis, defined as the response to the fact that the individual "has stopped growing up, and has begun to grow old," but it is the specter of old age that drives it. See his "Death and the Mid-life Crisis," in *Is It Too Late? Key Papers on Psychoanalysis and Ageing*, ed. Gabriele Junkers (London: Karnac, 2006), 10–11.

which one does *not* grow out of but rather dies into. For individual artists, it can stick as a final evaluative as well as a descriptive label and will often condition or even determine their actual posthumous reputation. Yet no generalized late-style discourse can encompass all the variety of individual artists' careers, creative work, and reception. These could be unified only by a critical agenda that ignores diversity and complexity in the name of ideology or aesthetics.

Most theorists agree that the history of late style as a critical concept, while first articulated in the classical and Renaissance periods,¹³ actually emerged in its current forms early in the twentieth century, but as conceptualized through the work of a series of earlier German idealist and romantic thinkers.¹⁴ Theorists make the important connection to specifically eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biological thought and the developmental theories about both cultures and individuals that derived from it.¹⁵ However, as Anthony Edward Barone explores, two opposing narratives of creativity quickly came into being: one was an organicist teleological narrative of peak and decline, from the dynamism of youth to the inevitable obsolescence of age.¹⁶ Thanks to the influence of Goethe, this vied with an aesthetic and metaphysical redemptivist narrative of apotheosis and transcendence in the last years of an artist's life. In these differing narratives lies the paradox of late-style discourse from its earliest development.

It is this paradoxical start that allowed Goethe's positive, transcendent aesthetic and spiritualized vision of older-age creativity to sit historically side by side with the negative biological concept of inevitable decay of Arthur Schopenhauer, among others.¹⁷ This latter narrative of physical and creative decline influenced Richard Wagner (and Wagnerian reception), argues Barone: in the face of his declining health with age, the composer became obsessed with degeneration—both personal (physical and creative) and social (as recorded in his infamous “regeneration” essays).¹⁸ But it was the former, more positive Goethean view, as Gordon McMullan's extensive study has shown, that has usually determined how Shakespeare's late plays have been seen: as works of genius that were the apotheosis of a brilliant career.

Barone has also analyzed how—in the sedimentation over time of ideas from art history, literature, biology, philosophy, psychology, and theology—two models of later-age style (one of continuity and one of rupture) emerged,¹⁹ but interestingly each of these has come to have both a positive and a negative evaluation. Sometimes a final work is seen as marking a rupture (in either style or content) in an artist's oeuvre. For instance, the great operatic tragedian Giuseppe

¹³ See Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series 71 (New York: Pantheon Books, [1961]), 329c; Cicero, *Cato maior de senectute*, trans. W. Falconer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 9.28; Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston Du C. de Vere (London: Macmillan, 1912); Roger de Piles, *Abrégé de la vie des peintres* (Paris: François Muguet, 1699).

¹⁴ Especially Goethe (see Hans Joachim Schrimpf, *Goethe: Spätzeit, Altersstil, Zeitkritik* [Pfullingen: Neske, 1966]; Georg Simmel, *Goethe* [Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1913]) but also Schelling and Fichte (see McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 138).

¹⁵ On cultural and historical lateness and belatedness, theorists usually cite Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1756–62) as influential, along with the Vico-Goethe-Hegel line of thinking about world history. Darwinian thought is clearly in the background, as is Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798).

¹⁶ Anthony Edward Barone, “Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and the Hermeneutics of Late Style” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1996), 132.

¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, “On the Different Periods of Life,” in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1:483.

¹⁸ Barone, “Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and the Hermeneutics of Late Style,” 80–81.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–11.

Verdi premiered his only comedy,²⁰ *Falstaff*, when he was almost eighty years old. This break from his past practice was interpreted as a sign of liberating personal renewal, one that might, in fact, stand outside his own time and thus point the way to the future of the entire art form. But it was also cited as proof that the artist was clearly past his prime.²¹

On the other hand, when a late work continues in the manner of all the others that preceded it, it is interpretable either as the height of technical or spiritual mastery—and thus the summation of a career and proof of a constant aesthetic—or as a sign that the artist was incapable of innovation at this late stage of life: Richard Strauss's metamusical, recapitulative late works (at least those preceding the "Vier letzte Lieder") have certainly been read in both ways.²² The late artist is seen either as being in the fullness of his powers or else as becoming set in his ways and simply repeating himself.²³ Sometimes, however, the paradox of an individual late style is that it can be *both* a "logical extension and development of the career and a supplementary breaking out into a new style."²⁴ How, then, to generalize about *all* artists?

What is clear is that it is the aesthetic values of the *critic* that in the end determine what is deemed positive or negative in the last works of an artist. Therefore, if you are a Georg Simmel, you appreciate wholeness, coherence, synthesis; older age becomes a time of reappraisal, summary, consolidation. But if you are a modernist (and Marxist-inflected) Adorno or a Said, you treasure fragmentation, dissonance, lack (or impossibility) of reconciliation. In McMullan's cogent terms, the discourse of lateness 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."²⁵ In other words, what we call late style is less a manifestation of artistic creativity than what, in the visual arts, has been called a "discursive product of art history"²⁶ and, we would add, of art history at a certain time and place: staying in the realm of the pictorial, at the time of the death of J. M. W. Turner, his last works were seen as "excentricities," as "his dotages and lees," but with the passing of years, they were reassessed in the light of the modernism he was seen to presage.²⁷ The same is true of Michelangelo's unfinished Rondanini *Pietà* and

²⁰ Aside from the early failure of *Un giorno di regno*, composed over a period (1838–40) that saw the death of his wife and children.

²¹ Respectively, see Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. 3, *From "Don Carlos" to "Falstaff"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 295; and Renato Barilli, *Il paese del melodrama* (Lanciano: Carabba, 1930), as cited in James Hepokoski, *Giuseppe Verdi: "Falstaff"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 142.

²² An example of the positive reading of this looking-backward is that of Said, *On Late Style*, 25–47; for the negative, see Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on His Life and Works*, vol. 2 (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1969), 199, 225.

²³ Picasso, in particular, has been accused of being "past his peak" in his later years; see Hugo Munsterberg, *The Crown of Life: Artistic Creativity in Old Age* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 183. But it must be said that others disagree: the volume *Le dernier Picasso, 1953–1973*, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, and David Sylvester (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1988), presents an image of vitality and dynamism in the artist's last years, leading to creative apotheosis.

²⁴ McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 143; see also Barone, "Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* and the Hermeneutics of Late Style," 318.

²⁵ McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 5.

²⁶ Stephen Katz and Erin Campbell, "Creativity across the Life Course? Titian, Michelangelo, and Older Artist Narratives," in *Cultural Aging: Life Course, Lifestyle and Senior Worlds*, by Stephen Katz (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2005), 108.

²⁷ Sam Smiles, *J. M. W. Turner: The Making of a Modern Artist* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 74, 199.

Goya's late "*pinturas negras*" and El Greco's late "Expressionist" works—all of which are more consonant with modern(ist) tastes.

How, then, can we universalize and generalize about late style or elderly artists in any meaningful way? And, more importantly, why bother? Individual life circumstances (health, lifestyle, background, economics, public reception), as well as historical and social conditions (and role changes), are bound to impinge upon and upset any universalizing efforts. For instance, Aaron Copland died at ninety, but the onset of Alzheimer's disease stopped his composing much earlier: "It was exactly as if someone had simply turned off a faucet," he explained.²⁸ Leoš Janáček, on the other hand, remained in sturdy cognitive and physical health as he aged, and his last decade was an unparalleled productive and creative period. Yet transcultural, transhistorical generalizations about lateness occur constantly and are asserted on many grounds. The following three sections address the most frequent of these—namely, universalizing statements about changes with age (1) in the artists' psychological state as the years pass and as death approaches, (2) in their degree of productivity, usually seen as a marker of creativity, and (3) in what is often vaguely referred to as the "style" of their works.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OLDER AGE

How old is old? Conceptions of old age vary with the time and place, the person, and the society. If, for humans, biological decline is inevitable and cognitive alterations are likely, the question is: what impact do these have on both artists' creativity and their sense of themselves as artists? Kenneth Clark, in his 1970 Rede Lecture, argued that across all the arts, in all ages and cultures, old-age creativity is always characterized by "a sense of isolation, a feeling of holy rage, developing into . . . transcendental pessimism; a mistrust of reason, a belief in instinct."²⁹ If you find yourself immediately thinking of exceptions to this "rule" of intransigent elder rage and depression, you are not alone.³⁰ The contrasting image of the serenity, resignation, contemplation, enhanced powers of intellect and understanding, and the play of accumulated knowledge and experience that are also said to come with age appears almost as frequently in the critical literature across the art forms.³¹

To add to the confusion, both of these contradictory images of the elderly artist are said to be, in part, the result of the knowledge of the imminence of death. However, even young artists—Schubert, Mozart—die, and they may or may not be aware that they will do so at a young age. Where Clark, like Said, could see only the impatience that comes with older artists' "feeling of im-

²⁸ Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 416.

²⁹ Clark, *The Artist Grows Old*, 21.

³⁰ The rage theory (as either positive or negative) is espoused by, among others, Said; see Leon Edel, "Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man," in *Aging, Death, and the Completion of Being*, ed. David D. Van Tassel (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 212–13. The depressive theory, often linked to passivity, isolation, and alienation, is also argued by many, such as Amir Cohen-Shalev, "Old Age Style: Developmental Changes in Creative Production from a Life-Span Perspective," *Journal of Aging Studies* 3, no. 1 (1989): 33. Gerontological theories of disengagement and Jungian concepts such as the Wise Old Man often fuel the latter. See Kathleen Woodward, *The Late Poems of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 17.

³¹ See, e.g., Albert Erich Brinckmann, *Spätwerke grosser Meister* (Frankfurt: Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, 1925), 17; Dean Keith Simonton, *Genius and Creativity: Selected Papers* (Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997), 227–29; David Rosand, "Editor's Statement: Style and the Aging Artist," *Art Journal* 46, no. 2 (1987): 92; Rudolf Arnheim, "On the Late Style of Life and Art," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 17, no. 2 (1978): 149–50.

minent departure,”³² Goethe saw instead a catalyst for creativity, the opportunity for epiphany and metaphysical transcendence. For still others, the approach of death is seen as adding a new restlessness and urgency, a sense of unfinished business, because time is no longer “an inexhaustible commodity.”³³ But the disagreements do not end there. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir considered an awareness of the impending end to have a purely negative effect on creativity, reducing strength and deadening emotion.³⁴ Yet what has been called the “swan-song phenomenon” is seen to be what makes some composers concentrate on producing masterworks that will act as their final aesthetic legacies and that also serve as a means of coping with death.³⁵ Still others argue, on the contrary, that artists at the end of their lives, freed from public responsibility and expectations, actually work only for themselves, as both Verdi and Rossini repeatedly claimed.

Social roles obviously also change with age, and psychological responses to those changes are probably inevitable. But again theories vary about the impact of these shifts, and familiar contradictions reappear. For some, late artists are no longer judged by their artistic peers and so they have less influence. However, they are also less influenced, and therefore less prey to the fashion of the day. Hence they become more solitary, isolated, and introspective—for good or ill.³⁶ However, financial security, success, freedom from professional demands, and better support systems are also possible reasons for a creative shift inward, and with that could come expressive freedom.³⁷ The contrary to this insularity argument is that the elderly become the teachers of the young; their pedagogical task is to conserve, pass on, and perhaps even lead forward. Even if their aim in doing so is to define and create their *own* legacy, this “generativity”³⁸ is always also a commitment to the next generation.

The internalization of societal attitudes toward aging presents challenges to artists, as it does to everyone who ages. The theory, propagated by the gerontological thinking of the 1950s, of social disengagement, passivity, and lack of agency as the fate of the elderly has continuing power to this day. The crisis of confidence that aging artists might experience is likely related to the internalization of this stigmatizing “script of decline,” inactivity, and helplessness.³⁹ The “postmodern” alternative—of the active (read: consuming) senior—may be no less inhibiting.⁴⁰

³² Clark, *The Artist Grows Old*, 19.

³³ Dormandy, *Old Masters*, 217.

³⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 400–403.

³⁵ Simonton, *Genius and Creativity*, 227.

³⁶ See Klaus Wolfgang Niemöller, “Spätstilaspekte,” in *Festschrift Arno Forchert zum 60. Geburtstag am 29. Dezember 1985*, ed. Gerhard Allroggen and Detlef Altenburg (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1986), 183; G. Révész, *Introduction to the Psychology of Music*, trans. G. I. C. de Courcy (London: Longmans, Green, 1953), 183.

³⁷ Cohen-Shalev, *Both Worlds at Once*, 11; Dormandy, *Old Masters*, 197.

³⁸ A term used for the middle period by Erik Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: Norton, 1997), 63. For the aged, he uses the term “grand-generative function.” See also Dan P. McAdams, “Explorations in Generativity in Later Years,” in Sperry and Prosen, *Aging in the Twenty-First Century*, 37.

³⁹ See Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), *passim*.

⁴⁰ See Simon Biggs, *The Mature Imagination: Dynamics of Identity in Midlife and Beyond* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), *passim*.

PRODUCTIVITY VERSUS CREATIVITY

Generalizations about changes in productivity with age are as frequent as are these conflicting theories of personality and role shifts in aging artists. An influential school of gerontological thought—starting in the nineteenth century with George Baird and Adolphe Quételet and followed up in 1953 by Harvey Lehman in his influential book *Age and Achievement*—argues (often from numerical data) that the last years of an artist’s life are the least productive and the least innovative, and therefore the least creative.⁴¹ Opera composers’ peak productive years, for example, are said to be their forties, with a severe decline in later years.⁴² Most of the arguments against this position have been made in the name of proving that older people can be and are, in fact, productive, rather than of questioning the necessary correlation between creativity and productivity. After all, it is only since the Industrial Revolution that we have come to value individuals based on their productivity.⁴³

If artists can still bring to their creative work the powers of invention, inquiry, openness, spontaneity, and formal command—in short, the things we currently associate with creativity (for these change over time)—should the *quantity* of the works produced matter at all?⁴⁴ For instance, Benjamin Britten certainly composed fewer and shorter works than usual for him in his last years, after the disabling stroke he suffered during heart valve surgery, but the critics are unanimous in seeing, to use Arnold Whittall’s words, “no sudden change of direction, . . . no sudden drying up of his own intensely personal reserves of invention and imagination.”⁴⁵ In fact, what Britten did was to adapt to these challenges by engaging in what has, rather awkwardly, been called “selective optimization with compensation.”⁴⁶ For Britten, this involved the selection of a smaller number and smaller scale of works; the optimization consisted of conserving his limited physical and mental energies for composition; and the compensation for his stroke impairment included composing for the harp instead of the piano he could no longer play. Illness and disability can clearly impact an artist’s productivity, but creativity may not be compromised.

DEFINING “STYLE”

The third set of generalizing theories—those that claim a change of “style” in the artist’s work with the advancing years—are more complex to sort out, given not only the variety of different,

⁴¹ Harvey Lehman, *Age and Achievement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 324. See also G. M. Beard, *Legal Responsibility in Old Age* (New York: Russell, 1987); Adolphe Quételet, *A Treatise on Man and the Development of His Faculties* (Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, 1842).

⁴² Wayne Dennis, “Creative Productivity between the Ages of 20 and 80 Years,” *Journal of Gerontology* 21 (1966): 1–8.

⁴³ Joseph Esposito, *The Obsolete Self: Philosophical Dimensions of Aging* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 56.

⁴⁴ There have obviously been different ideas of what constitutes creativity and what weight should be given to what elements (e.g., novelty, technical quality, appropriateness), as many theorists of creativity have argued. For a historical view of the “gerontology of creativity” that addresses the issue of productivity, see Katz and Campbell, “Creativity across the Life Course?”

⁴⁵ Arnold Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 309. Whittall also claims that “in the works which Britten was able to complete during his years of severe illness the need to avoid disintegration into total achromaticism remained as strong as ever. His music continued to face its most challenging ambiguities with strength and resolution” (*ibid.*, 263).

⁴⁶ P. B. Baltes and M. M. Baltes, “Psychological Perspectives on Successful Aging: The Model of Selective Optimization with Compensation,” in *Successful Aging: Perspectives from the Behavioral Sciences*, ed. P. B. Baltes and M. M. Baltes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1–34.

indeed conflicting, assertions made but also the confusion over what is meant by the word “style.”⁴⁷ André Malraux’s “style of death” (le style de la mort) for instance, would seem to describe the personality of the late artist more than the style of the late work: rapture plus transcendence, clairvoyance despite decline.⁴⁸ But herein lies the problem for universalizing late-style discourse: even general definitions (and famous ones, with the exception of Adorno’s⁴⁹) of the style of a work that appear to be formal leave ample room for the biographical—and thus, we would argue, the resolutely individual. From the famous definition of Leonard B. Meyer⁵⁰ to that of Seymour Chatman,⁵¹ the style of a work is tied in this tight way to its individual maker, so where do we begin to generalize about style in general, late or otherwise?

We do generalize, however, and the reason is that the same word, “style,” has also come to mean the shared norms and conventions of everything from a whole culture or epoch to a nation or movement. Similarities are grouped together to define this kind of style. So too, when universalizing generalizations about late style are made, it is this grouping-of-similars impulse that is being exercised. But there is a curious circularity that occurs: “The norms of a particular style can only be discovered through careful study of individual works. But the criteria for significance employed in the study of individual works are likely to rest in some measure on a prior definition of the style to which the work is thought to belong.”⁵² Critics find, in short, what they seek to find.

Style, then, has come to mean everything from the personal traits of an artist to a shared lingua franca, from individual deviations from a norm to a common set of recurrent formal features.⁵³ Late style is no different. When used to describe the last works of individual artists, it focuses on the personal, the distinctive; yet when used in a transhistorical and supra-individual way, it obliterates the individual and the distinctive in the name of a few generalized qualities, all rooted in one single aspect of the complex biography of the artists involved: their advanced years.

Among the most repeated of universalized stylistic traits mentioned in these discussions are the following:

1. *Compositional looseness versus enhanced integration.* Here, one side argues that late style involves formal dissolution—a renunciation of governing compositional schemes—resulting in a certain looseness of the late work’s fabric.⁵⁴ This is then evaluated either

⁴⁷ For more (from a different angle) on these complexities, see also Michael Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven’s Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 16–43. Analyzing how ambiguous and shifting Adorno’s definitions of late style are, he writes: “Lateness is everywhere and nowhere” as a technical category in his works (ibid., 62).

⁴⁸ André Malraux, *Psychologie de l’art*, vol. 2 (Geneva: Skira, 1948), 212.

⁴⁹ Adorno is adamant that late style involves only the work, not the psychology, of an artist. See his “Late Style in Beethoven,” *Raritan* 13, no. 1 (1993): 103.

⁵⁰ “Style is a replication of patterning . . . that results from a series of choices made within some set of constraints.” Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 3, emphasis his.

⁵¹ Style is “the manner or way in which something . . . is done,” but it is also the “trace that the artist’s way of working leaves in his artifact.” Seymour Chatman, “The Styles of Narrative Codes,” in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 169.

⁵² Bruce Gustafson, “Style,” in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Randel (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 812.

⁵³ See Lang, *The Concept of Style*, a set of interdisciplinary essays that give a sense of the range of theories and definitions of style as both an individual and a general phenomenon.

⁵⁴ See Cohen-Shalev, “Old Age Style,” 33; Arnheim, “On the Late Style of Life and Art,” 153; Rosand, “Editor’s Statement,” 91–93.

(positively) as technical freedom or (negatively) as loss of control or dexterity. The other side contradicts, and along with Goethe, argues for enhanced integration in the final works of artists.⁵⁵

2. *Clarity versus obscurity.* Again the opposing sides face off. Some see an increased concentration and focus, a kind of aesthetic austerity, leading to a new clarity or bareness—one very much in tune with modernist tastes, not surprisingly.⁵⁶ But this view flies in the face of Theodor Adorno’s famous theory of a work’s late style as “dissonance, conflict and disorder” or Said’s related one of “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction.”⁵⁷
3. *Proleptic versus archaizing.* Can late style really be both anticipatory, pointing to the future of an art form, and anachronistic, or even recapitulatory, self-reflexively echoing composers’ own and others’ works?⁵⁸

Obviously it can, but how useful is this entire unstable concept of late style when it can be defined in such contradictory fashion by different critics with different ideas about style, as well as about aging and creativity?

And the confusion continues beyond even these difficulties, since as a generalization late style is also used to cover an even wider range of phenomena. Sometimes what is meant is simply a tone or mood—one usually expressed as “autumnal.” Yet for every somber “Vier letzte Lieder” there is a *Falstaff*. At other times the designation of late style includes thematic concerns and subject matter, especially in the case of texted music such as opera or song: death, aging, memory, acceptance of the follies of humankind, a broader view of life in the face of mortality, introspection leading to self-reflexivity.⁵⁹ While this describes Britten’s *Death in Venice*, Michael Tippett’s last opera, *New Year*, is in the end resolutely positive and affirmative about the future.

3

Why, then, do we feel this need to generalize about late style? Why do we give in to the urge to use an unstable and contradictory critical construct that, in effect, collapses distinctions about older artists’ work? For distinct they are. It makes sense to argue, for example, that the last works of Olivier Messiaen can be seen as the culmination of a lifetime of technical development and a paean to his strong religious beliefs. The composer himself certainly saw them as such. But when

⁵⁵ See Simmel, *Goethe*, passim.

⁵⁶ See McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 9; Clark, *The Artist Grows Old*, 27–28.

⁵⁷ Respectively, in Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (London: Routledge, 1998), 53; and Said, *On Late Style*, 7.

⁵⁸ For the former, see, e.g., Margaret Notley, *Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Hermann Broch, “The Style of the Mythic Age,” in *On the Iliad*, by Rachel Besspaloff, trans. Mary McCarthy (Washington, DC: Pantheon, 1947), 12. For the latter, see, e.g., Theodor Adorno, “On the Score of ‘Parsifal,’” trans. Anthony Edward Barone, in Barone, “Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* and the Hermeneutics of Late Style,” 366; Karen Painter, “On Creativity and Lateness,” in *Late Thoughts: Reflections on Artists and Composers at Work*, ed. Karen Painter and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 8.

⁵⁹ See Clark, *The Artist Grows Old*, 21–22; Brinckmann, *Spätwerke grosser Meister*, 18; David Grene, *Reality and the Heroic Pattern: Last Plays of Ibsen, Shakespeare, and Sophocles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), vii.

we realize how different his “*opus ultimum*” is from that of even his contemporaries, like Stravinsky or Britten, we start to see the problem with trying to generalize about late style.⁶⁰

Every artist who is lucky enough to do so ages. But while physical and cognitive functions change with age, they do not do so at the same rate or to the same extent in every body and every mind. In part, this is because these artists have led different lives in the past and differ in their genetic makeup. Illness obviously enters into the equation here—everything from heart disease (Mahler, Britten, Wagner) to tertiary neurosyphilis (Donizetti, Delius, Schumann)—affecting longevity and, potentially, creativity. Research reveals a wide individual disparity in physical, cognitive, and psychological responses to aging: old age begins at different times for different people, and its definition changes with the definer.

So how to generalize? And again, why?

Why seek to deny these manifest differences represented by older-age creativity, and substitute for it what McMullan calls a “myth of synchrony” of a transcendent late style that is the same for all artists at all times?⁶¹ If we acknowledge the fact that cultural and social attitudes toward aging and death change with the time and place (and our own age at the time of acknowledging), then transhistorical and transcultural definitions of late style seem both risky and reductive. When we also consider that the discourse of lateness has typically been a male-gendered one, it becomes clearer that women artists’ possibly very different later careers and creativity have been elided by the generalizing impulse behind late-style theory. And when that generalizing itself is fraught with contradictions and, in the end, itself is as individual as the expectations about creativity and age of the theorist doing the generalizing, of what use is a single discourse of late style, whether used to celebrate or to dismiss final works?

Or, put differently, what harm can this rejection of the individuality of both creativity and aging do? A lot is at stake here: an artist’s entire posthumous reputation. In practice, late style is an evaluative as well as a descriptive discourse, after all. Even if aging is a universal phenomenon (for the fortunate), its configuration is not. Robert Kastenbaum has taken the strong stand that “late style is essentially an illusion that has been propagated on a sentimental basis and which ignores the variety of processes and contexts in which creative works are produced late in life.”⁶² Many have come to agree, though few have asked why the generalizations proliferate, nonetheless. Sentimental or not, positively or negatively considered, a generalizing concept of late style (in the singular) is inevitably ageist. There are as many late styles as there are late artists. A

⁶⁰ Indeed, scholars working on individual artists’ late style have often come to the same conclusion. Notley writes that late style is a “meaningful category” for Brahms, but that “a coherent or universally valid theory of late style” is “surely impossible” (*Lateness and Brahms*, 38).

⁶¹ McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 9.

⁶² Program of the 38th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, reported in *Gerontologist* 25 (October 1985): 252. See also Barone, “Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* and the Hermeneutics of Late Style,” 16: “There has . . . never actually been nor is likely to be an explanatory model of late style that accounts for consistency or variance among a fixed set of parameters for any given group of aesthetic phenomena.” Lydia Goehr agrees: “late style is . . . about to lose its meaning altogether, the more it is used to signify everything and anything . . . one does toward the end of one’s life as a writer” (review of *Meaning as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven’s Late Style*, by Michael Spitzer, *Notes* 64, no. 1 [2007]: 68). Karen Painter too claims: “The very process of generalization reveals fissures in any theory of late style, with contradictions rather than variation abounding” (“On Creativity and Lateness,” 7). Why then do generalizations continue to exist?