Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology

Julia Twigg, Wendy Martin

‘Late style’ and late-life creativity

Publication details
David Amigoni, Gordon McMullan
Published online on: 25 Jun 2015


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT
‘Late style’ and late-life creativity

David Amigoni and Gordon McMullan

From the early formation of the discipline of gerontology, scholars and practitioners in the field have expressed interest in, and curiosity about, the distinctive qualities of creative art—writing, painting, sculpture, photography, music—completed in later life. The psychologist G. Stanley Hall, in his Senescence: The Last Half of Life (1922) provides an early example of gerontological research into the status of late-life creativity. Hall described ‘senescence’ as a life stage that ‘has its own feelings, thoughts, and wills, as well as its own physiology’ (Hall 1922: 100). His work is instructive because it was an early foundational handbook of gerontological science: while the central chapter focuses, unsurprisingly, on ‘Biology and Physiology’ (VI), the book also includes a lengthy section on ‘Literature by and on the Aged’ (III), which provides a selective but valuable survey of the burgeoning transatlantic demand for writings on later life between the 1870s and the 1920s as older people became culturally and politically more visible than they had been in earlier centuries (Thane 2000).

Often, these self-help writings were written by authors who had themselves reached later life; they drew on the nineteenth-century genre of exemplary biography to dwell on the wisdom bestowed by longevity while offering advice on lifestyle and diet. At the end of his chapter, Hall identifies selected works by poets (Matthew Arnold’s ‘Growing Old’, and Walt Whitman’s ‘Thanks in Old Age’ [Hall 1922: 147–8]) that he felt were founded on an ‘auto-biographic impulse’ that became more philosophically reflective in later life. This ‘resource’, he felt, creatively illuminates the experience of ‘normal senectitude’, which includes, in particular, reminiscence—the process of looking back over, and reviewing, earlier life. Hall observed that the ‘world owes much and, as it grows old, will owe ever more’ to poets and writers who leave a record of such creativity (Hall 1922: 146–7).

Through this claim, Hall’s gerontology identified a variant of the idea that has become known to literary critics, art historians and historical musicologists as ‘late style’. This idea emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and developed throughout the twentieth century. While art history and musicology have informed the construction of this idea—the work of the music critic and philosopher Theodor Adorno on Beethoven (Adorno 2002: 564–9) has been especially important to some of the most recent influential work (Said 2006)—this chapter focuses critically on the formation of the idea of ‘late style’ in the equally influential field of literary history, a critical
manoeuvre that enables us to reflect on the role of creativity in relation to the challenges posed by the place of ageing in our own society.

The idea of late style in literary and cultural history

Romanticism—the driving force of nineteenth-century critical engagements with creativity—effected a profound shift of critical focus from genre to creative artist, establishing an understanding of the artistic work as the expression of the internal operations of the mind rather than as an imitation of creation performed on the basis of inherited, authoritative generic models—which (to speak very broadly) was how art had been understood since the Greeks and Romans. Modernism, the great innovative artistic movement of the early twentieth century, can be seen as a culminating point in Romanticism’s long, complex and revolutionary engagement with ideas of authorship, expression and style—offering a way to understand creativity that continues to influence popular thinking on the subject to the present.

Romantic philosophy and Modernist aesthetics together shaped the idea that the careers of certain writers, artists and composers have included ‘late periods’ or ‘late phases’—periods of a few years at the end of their careers in which their artistic output tangibly changes from their prior work and which can be argued to share certain features with the work of other ‘late’ artists. Celebratory accounts of the ‘late work’ of certain creative artists form a significant element in the larger picture of the value of creative ‘genius’ in Western culture.

Yet ‘late work’—from the critical construction of the idea of ‘late Shakespeare’ to Thomas Hardy’s fashioning of his own ‘testamentary acts’ at the end of his life—is arguably more of a cultural invention than a natural phenomenon, and its limitations as a concept serve not so much to underpin as to undermine attempts by both critics and cultural gerontologists to understand the nature of late-life creativity, substituting an overly simplistic Romantic myth of genius that springs from an unknowable inner source for the social and cultural complexities of writing, art and musical composition in later life. Indeed, this raises the question of what the term ‘later life’ in ‘late style’ has to embrace: does it mean creativity in old age, or creativity in the proximity of death?—concepts which are by no means identical, though they are frequently treated by critics as if they were. For instance, the relationship between *Altersstil* and *Spätstil*—terms from German thought that have become important to the field of late-style studies and that translate respectively as ‘old-age style’ and ‘late style’—is decidedly insecure.

‘Late’ Shakespeare

It is important to note that Shakespeare—who, along with Rembrandt, Beethoven and Turner, is a key instance of a creative artist to whom a distinct ‘late style’ has been attributed—could himself have had no conception of ‘late style’ or ‘late work’, since these are ideas first established in the mid-nineteenth century, mediated by critics working with the newly articulated ideas that had entered the Anglophone world by way of the Romantic philosophies of Hegel and other German philosopher-writers.

To underline the profundity of this shift of emphasis, it is perhaps worth noting that it was not until 1790—174 years after Shakespeare’s death—that any editor or critic of his works felt the need to determine the order in which those works had been written. The compilers of the Shakespeare First Folio in 1623 organized the plays not into chronological order but according to generic categories (tragedy, history, comedy); for them, the plays were not the manifestation of the innermost thoughts of their former colleague but rather instances of a genre-driven professional repertory that had profitably responded to audience desire for decades—expressions of
collective endeavour within received generic forms, in other words, not the self-expression of an individual author. This historical distinction is absolutely fundamental to the emergence of ideas of ‘lateness’.

The early modern period (c. 1500–1700) was important for both enshrining and extending classical thinking about old age. We know from a famous passage in one of Shakespeare’s own works that the early modern English were not overly optimistic about the creative potential of old age. The melancholy Jaques in *As You Like It* famously outlines the ‘seven ages of man’, running through infancy, childhood, youth, early adulthood and middle age before reaching the last, depressing phases of life:

[T]he sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.  
(Shakespeare 2006: 2.7.158–67)

There is nothing here to promise a positive, creative old age; rather, the end of life signals inevitable decline with no earthly redemption (that, if it is to happen, must come after death). The speech, though it adapts the classical tradition it inherits so as to be gloomier than it need be (Jaques characteristically omits the usual fourth age, the age of seriousness and control, and divides old age into two phases, grim and grimmer), essentially echoes the views of the Greeks and Romans. In fact there were several alternative schemas available at this time with four-, six-, ten- or twelve-phase variants. What they all share is the assumption most recently expressed, and given graphic form, by the humanistic gerontologist Dean Keith Simonton that creative life normally follows what he calls ‘a curvilinear inverted backward-J age function’—that is, that ‘creative output rises fairly rapidly to a single peak, after which a gradual decline sets in’ (Simonton 1997: 217).

How did this narrative of decline turn into a redemptive story of ageing? The elements were arguably in place in Shakespeare’s day, though it would take two more centuries before the idea became fully articulated. Shakespeare’s contemporary, the essayist Michel de Montaigne, reflecting on his approaching old age, cited Horace’s prayer to Apollo: ‘Grant [..] that I may enjoy what I possess in good health [..] and with full mental vigour, and I may have an old age that is not lacking in dignity or bereft of music’ (Horace 2004: 80–1 [lines 17–20]). He hoped to have the chance to make the most of the years left to him: ‘[N]ow, when I see my span so short, I want to give it more ballast; I want to arrest the swiftness of its passing by the swiftness of my capture. […] The shorter my lease of it, the deeper and fuller I must make it’ (Montaigne 1991: 1263). It is this sense that the very imminence of the sixth and seventh ages—from ‘shrunk shank’ to ‘sans everything’—might, somewhat against the odds, provoke a surge of energy towards the end, a burst of renewed creative endeavour before our powers fade, that Romanticism began belatedly to develop and refine into the idea of ‘late style’. Simonton—restating the basic Romantic narrative—calls this the ‘swan-song phenomenon’, the idea that creative artists ‘in their final years […] concentrate on producing masterworks that will permanently establish
their reputation, doing so by creating works of a concise directness, as revealed by the brevity and melodic simplicity of their concluding pieces’, from which he concludes that ‘[t]he swan song is perhaps more an expression of resignation, even contentment, than despair or tragedy’ (Simonton 1997: 227). This is a redemptive story, one which converts the final period from a time of depression and imminent death to an uplifting tale of the resurgence of the human spirit against the forces of time and decay, and in so doing it serves as a contemporary expression of the great shift effected by Romanticism, picking up on and developing the possibilities apparent in Montaigne’s slightly querulous desire to make the most of his remaining time.

‘Late Shakespeare’ out of context: old age in midde age

By the late nineteenth century, critics had produced a ‘late Shakespeare’ whose works were in effect cut off from their material origins in the commercial theatre of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and read instead as expressions of the poet-playwright’s development as a man and as an artist: thus, the comedies and histories became markers of his youthful engagement with desire and patriotism, the tragedies of a mid-life crisis of conscience, and the late plays—finally—of the synthetic potential present in true genius that only fully expresses itself towards the end. For Edward Dowden, the key late nineteenth-century Shakespeare critic, the late plays expressed

a certain abandonment of the common joy of the world, a certain remoteness from the usual pleasures and sadnesses of life, and at the same time, all the more, a tender bending over those who are like children still absorbed in their individual joys and sorrows.

(Dowden 1875: 415)

‘The spirit of these last plays’, he states elsewhere, ‘is that of serenity which results from fortitude, and the recognition of human frailty; all of them express a deep sense of the need of repentance and the duty of forgiveness’ (Dowden 1877: 60). At the end of his life, Dowden felt, Shakespeare had found a way to resolve the ‘dissonance’ of the tragedies he had written in mid-life ‘into a harmony, clear and rapturous, or solemn and profound, a reconciliation’ (Dowden 1875: 406). And so Shakespeare’s late work became a chronologically, generically and stylistically distinct set of plays emerging from the sensibility of an old man at the end of an extraordinary career.

Yet the relationship between this construction and the actuality of Shakespeare’s working life as a dramatist for the leading acting company of his day is tenuous at best, and the model created requires a great deal of elision if it is to be sustained in context, a process that is at its most apparent in the continued critical insistence that The Tempest—its protagonist a great magician giving up his art and going home to the place of his birth—is both the end-point of Shakespearean biography and the very final play, when in fact Shakespeare continued to write (and—in Romantic terms, worse—with a collaborator), producing at least three further plays. Moreover, one further awkward problem, usually eased away metonymically by the casting of an ageing actor as Prospero, is the simple fact that Shakespeare was not an old man when he wrote his ‘late plays’; the play usually held to be the first in the group, Pericles, was co-written when Shakespeare was 43 or 44, and The Tempest when he was 47 or so—which was, in those days as now, middle-aged at most (McMullan 2007: 259–17).

Late style: from Romanticism to Modernism

Eliding chronological age to suit a story was to become something of a pattern in the discourse of ‘late style’. Beginning—somewhat ironically, given his age of 35 at death—with Mozart, nineteenth-century thinkers began to establish the idea that certain geniuses (few enough to
ensure exclusivity, numerous enough to establish a genre), instead of fading away at the end of the life, experience a burst of remarkable creative activity late in life, producing a set of works both quite different from their early or middle output and remarkably akin to the late work of others considered geniuses. Thus the late work of Titian could be seen to be similar in certain ways to that of Sophocles, that of Beethoven to that of Turner, and so forth—and one of the characteristics of these works, it is claimed, is a degree of transcendence, a stepping outside of the earthly, the material, and the normative.

Each of these careers, according to the Austrian writer Hermann Broch, writing in the mid-1940s, was characterized by a ‘sharp, stylistic break’, a caesura marked by the reaching of a new level of expression such as the old Titian’s discovery of the all-penetrating light which dissolves the human flesh and the human soul to a higher unity; or such as the finding by Rembrandt and Goya, both at the height of their manhood, of the metaphysical surface which underlies the visible in man and thing, and which nevertheless can be painted; or such as the last quartets of Beethoven, in which he—only then in his fifties but already near to death—found the way from earthly music to the music of the infinite; or such as Goethe’s last writings, the final scenes of Faust for instance, where the language discloses its own mysteries and, therefore, those of all existence.

(Broch 1947: 10–11)

This essentially Romantic understanding of late-life creativity was refined by Modernism—by Modernist art historians, in particular—so that, by the second half of the twentieth century, it was as if all late work, in effect, aspired to a condition not unlike that of Abstract Expressionism: a certain looseness of facture, a fuzziness or cloudiness understood as immaterial, as other-worldly, an allegedly transcendent engagement with the metaphysical—a condition that could not always be distinguished from incompletion (a significant problem, this, given the tendency of creative artists to leave works unfinished at death)—which ensured that late Rembrandt, late Henry James, late Ravel and late De Kooning would all be seen to share certain characteristics, to express a marked degree of similarity in their artistic production at the end of the life, even though they may have been working centuries apart in wholly different circumstances.

Modernism refined the Romantic understanding of late work but did not fundamentally change it: for Romanticism, ‘lateness’ was a key marker of success, of the genius’s ability finally to synthesize the disparate materials of creativity into a transcendent unity, while for the Modernist philosopher Theodor Adorno, the twentieth century’s key theorist of lateness, it was the opposite—an indicator, finally, of the impossibility of synthesis, of the artist’s acceptance of the insignificance of the individual, of the inevitability of dissolution (Adorno 2002). Either way, lateness combines a resurgent energy late in life with a kind of redemptive resignation.

Late Hardy: close reading and the critical interrogation of age and its meanings

Once the idea of late style as an expression of genius had become established—had, in effect, become a genre—writers, artists and composers would inevitably begin, quite consciously, to map their own late creative output onto the received model of late style. One of the most highly marked instances of this phenomenon—which Michael Millgate has valuably called the artist’s ‘testamentary act’ (that is, the wilful complicity of the artist in the establishment of his own ‘late period’)—is the later work of Thomas Hardy (Millgate 1992: 110–74). In this section, we show
how reading a poem that purposefully participates in a genre or discourse of late style can enable gerontology to explore and reflect on meanings associated with age.

In 1916, when Hardy was 76 years of age, he published a collection of poems entitled *Moments of Vision* in which he can be seen self-consciously to fashion a ‘late style’ for himself. James Gibson, Hardy’s biographer and editor of his *Complete Poems*, wonders whether Hardy ‘thought that this might be his last book’ (Gibson 1996: 174). The closing poem, ‘Afterwards’, has Hardy foreseeing his own death (‘When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay’). Yet this turned out not to be his last collection: Hardy lived on to be 88, publishing three further collections, two of them before his death in 1928, and the theme of lateness persists across these volumes in titles such as *Late Lyrics* and the posthumous *Winter Words*. Some of Hardy’s ‘late’ poetry clearly expresses what Hall calls the ‘autobiographic impulse’ that he took to be a key manifestation of later life. However, Hardy’s poems could also be less about his ‘lateness’ *per se* than a mode of verbal experimentation with age-associated meanings. This is to conceive a poem less as Romantic personal expression and more as a creative artistic resource for critical reflectiveness.

Hardy’s *Winter Words*, for instance, includes a poem entitled ‘The Aged Newspaper Soliloquizes’, which offers a fascinatingly resonant negotiation of the function and place of memory in old age:

> Yes; yes; I am old. In me appears  
> The history of a hundred years;  
> Empires’, kings’, captives’, births and deaths,  
> Strange faiths, and fleeting shibboleths.  
> —Tragedy, comedy, throngs my page  
> Beyond all mummed on any stage:  
> Cold hearts beat hot, hot hearts beat cold,  
> And I beat on. Yes; yes; I am old.  

(Hardy 1976: 913)

Writing near the end of his life in 1926, Hardy here writes an ‘occasion’ poem to mark the birthday of an ageing institution—the hundred-and-thirty-fifth anniversary of the *Observer* newspaper. Hardy’s own long life coincided, roughly, with the ‘history of a hundred years’ in which newspapers became an affordable part of the daily rhythms of modern domestic life, bringing, as the poem observes, exotic public events and identities to insular localities through life-cycle stories (births, deaths) about both rulers and the subjected. Newspaper stories recorded the rise and fall of empires as well as the rise, fall and passing newsworthiness of ‘fleeting’ faiths and markers of party, sect and orthodoxy, a process rendered archaic in a word of Hebrew origin, ‘shibboleth’. A revolutionary century of shifting thoughts and events thus fuels the ‘observations’ of the aged *Observer*.

Variable contexts and different material circumstances of publication, however, make a difference to our reading of this poem. In common with practices of syndicated publication developed during the nineteenth century, Hardy also published his poem in the magazine *The Living Age* (April 1926: 206). This was an American digest magazine (1844–1941) comprising re-prints of current select items from a variety of Anglo-American magazine and newspaper publications. In this publication context, the poem was titled ‘The Newspaper Soliloquizes’. The absence of the adjective ‘Aged’ arguably makes a subtle but tangible difference to a reading of the poem. In this context, and without that adjective, the poem appears as a ‘public’ utterance about the work of a newspaper; yet when published posthumously in the self-consciously ‘late’ collection, *Winter*
Words, and with the restoration of the word ‘Aged’ in the title, the poem’s subject matter, along with its soliloquizing act, merges with the poet’s own ageing identity. Readers are directed to the subjectivity of the poetic act, yet this ‘subjective’ reading of lateness should actually extend beyond Hardy’s authorial identity, given the ‘public’ dimensions of the poem that remain as part of its creative drive. Thus, in its focus on speech, the poem blurs the identity of the aged newspaper and the articulateness of human identity in general. Soliloquizing, the speaking newspaper resists saying anything about its appearance; instead, it offers a vibrant, aural dramatization of the tragic and comic in contrast to the actions that are ‘mummed’ (performed silently in an archaic dumb show) on the stage of ‘real’ life.

Like the newspaper, there is a sense in which, in our later years, we have ‘archived’ all of the stories that we may have heard, and indeed told, in the course of a life, including our own. Hardy’s style is playful; he uses the resources of poetical art to extend his point: also, if we tend to think of print as inert and lifeless, we should note that typographic convention plays with this impression by both setting and concluding the beat of the poem, an idea which is linked, in the penultimate line, to references to hot and cold heartbeats. ‘Yes; yes; I am old’ opens the poem: the semi-colon forces a deliberate pause in the reading, establishing a (heart)beat of which we are reminded when the opening line is repeated in the poem’s final line. The ‘beat’ of the soliloquizing aged newspaper persists and ‘beat[s] on’ at the end of the poem. The poem asserts perpetuation rather than termination, offering itself as a late-life production that appears in a certain way to outsmart death. In one sense, this is a ‘pessimistic’ Hardy sentiment, a gesture of redemptive resignation: the individual will be reduced to dust while the stubborn resources of civilization—here exemplified as newsprint—persist and endure. Another way to read the poem, however, is to note that it draws an association between later life and the resources of culture in the form of shared story-telling in the making of new meanings.

New late styles, new late-life participation

While Hardy’s late poetry is most usually highlighted and valued because of its individual memory work—its ‘autobiographic impulse’, in Hall’s words—the poem ‘An Aged Newspaper Soliloquizes’ is an instance of innovative creativity because it implicitly constructs memory as vested in a shared cultural resource. That is, the poem reminds us of the importance of late-life creative work that is not premised on individual memory—an insight into the social interactivity that characterizes memory and story-telling that may be especially, and increasingly, valuable in contexts of dementia care, where the memory we would consider ‘individual’ may no longer be accessible but where dramatic story-telling and articulation can nevertheless be important, shared forms of artistic expression. This is of course the territory that Anne D. Basting has explored in her book Forget Memory (2009), where she explores the paradox of older people with dementia who lack the capacity to recall their own life stories, but who might be the subject of fear-dispelling stories about the ability to move through dementia, given that stories (and memories) are fundamentally grounded in social interactivity (Basting 2009: 4, 16).

Conclusion

‘Late style’, then, is not a ‘natural’ phenomenon but a concept that has developed since the mid-nineteenth century, one that has tended wilfully to overlook the conditions from which it emerged, typically seeking its exemplars exclusively from high art, as the product, supposedly, of geniuses who were, by definition, few in number. By acknowledging the extent to which ‘late style’ is a historically and contextually generated construct rather than a ‘given’—a discourse
in which artists, writers and composers have more or less self-consciously participated since its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century—an interdisciplinary alliance between historical literary studies and critical and cultural gerontology may at last, by recognizing the unnecessary and arguably even harmful limitations of such simplistic, mythmaking understandings of creative work at the end of the life, begin to make the potentialities of late-life creativity available to a much wider range of participants and across a broader set of styles and modes of expression.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding the research network ‘Late-Life Creativity and the “New Old Age”: Arts and Humanities and Gerontology in Critical Dialogue’, and to the authors and practitioners who contribute to it. For further details see www.latelifecreativity.org.

References


