

## “‘Old Age’s Lambent Peaks’: On Organic and Dialectical Paradigms of Lateness”

Eighteenth-century concepts of ‘late style’ invoked an organic metaphor of growth, decline, and death drawn from neoclassical criticism of Hellenic culture epitomized in the work of Johann Winckelmann. This organic metaphor informed nineteenth-century discussions of late style, but alongside it emerged a dialectical metaphor derived from Goethe criticism and the poet’s own writings. For some critics, his last works, especially *Faust*, Part II, were the products of a failed dialectic: subjectivity’s alienation from the objective, or what Goethe himself called the “withdrawal from appearance.” While the neoclassical organic metaphor still flourished in Friedrich Vischer’s *Faust* study (1875), which condemned the “degenerate traits” of the poet’s last works, other writers adapted the Goethean dialectical metaphor to approbative ends. Georg Simmel’s *Goethe* (1913), for example, explained the poet’s development as a dialectical progression from homogeneous unity through heterogeneity to a triumphal synthesis, so that his late works revealed a “deeper, truly profound reality.”

The divergent implications of the organic metaphor and subject-object dialectics are manifest in early Beethoven criticism. François-Joseph Fétis’s and Wilhelm von Lenz’s views on Beethoven’s late works both relied on the neoclassical organicist metaphor, but their conclusions diverged. While Fétis pathologized Beethoven’s late works as withered products of creative sclerosis, Lenz proposed that these same works were not testaments of decay, but were instead quintessentially Romantic: the “apocalyptic abysses” of Beethoven’s late style were conjured, he thought, by the composer’s “longing for the infinite”—for a unity of subject and object.

These contradictory narratives—one culminating in decline and aesthetic failure, the other achieving transcendence—constitute a fundamental binary of late style discourse. This binary is rooted in an antinomy of the concept itself: while in the eighteenth century an artwork’s

possession of ‘style’ was seen as contingent on the mimesis of nature, ‘late style’ denoted an artist’s aberration from nature—an absence or failure of mimesis that precluded style *per se*. The late works of Beethoven and Goethe, however, catalyzed a new, redemptive concept of late style that would give sanction to late works and play a central role in a discourse that included Lenz in the 1850s, Theodor Adorno in the 1930s, and Edward Said at the end of the century.

Anthony Barone  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas