CHAPTER 5

Late-Life Creativity

The Continuity Position and Alternatives to Decline

It is always in season for the old to learn.
Aeschylus, Fragments

The decline position on late-life creativity has not gone unchallenged. One leading researcher called it a “myth” (Torrance, 1977, p. 16). The continuity model, in which creativity continues beyond the middle years, is the most prominent alternative. It was first formulated around the end of the 19th century, long before the work of Lehman (1953) and the ascendancy of the decline position. Other options come from the humanities, and from anecdotal evidence.

THE CONTINUITY OF CREATIVITY

In 1869, Galton (1822–1911) wrote Hereditary Genius (1952), the first major scientific approach to creativity. (Genius is an extreme form of creativity.) Galton and those who followed him (Bowerman, 1947; Bramwell, 1947; Clark, 1916; Cox, 1926; Terman & Oden, 1959) relied on biographical accounts in the historical record rather than productivity tallies. Galton and his successors examined the lives of outstanding figures with highly significant contributions in a variety of fields, including family circumstances, like size and birth order, and from these drew inferences, mainly about the intellect and intelligence of these great men, along with their personal traits. Galton and others concluded that creative individuals were outstanding in intellect, had excellent physical and mental health, were long-lived, continued to add to their original accomplishments through adulthood, and in addition, were highly versatile, that is, displayed extraordinary competencies throughout their lives in areas other than the one in which they
initially made their reputations. Thus, White (1931) examined thousands of biographies of 300 men of eminence who lived between 1450 and 1850. He concluded that Goethe was the most versatile individual in history; his talents spanned 18 different fields (of 23 possible), including literature and several other areas of the arts, as well as philosophy, language, history, and medicine; he also had a well-known theory of color. Benjamin Franklin ranked second. Least versatile was Rembrandt, whose biographical record reveals a proficiency "only" in art, although "he would appear more versatile if more were known [about him]" (p. 485). As a group, statesmen were the most versatile; novelists and dramatists ranked second, and poets fifth, tied with scientists; lowest were musicians (ranked twelfth). Artists of all kinds ranked tenth overall, but varied for specific kinds of art: Painters and sculptors were the most versatile, making notable achievements in invention, science, mathematics, handwork, conversation, and administration, followed by novelists, dramatists, poets, and musicians; the latter were versatile in only two areas, art and humor.

In a more circumscribed study of several professions, Raskin (1936) concentrated on the versatility of 120 scientists (biologists, physicists, and mathematicians) and 123 men of letters (poets, novelists, dramatists), again relying on biographies. Like Lehman, she counted the frequencies with which their accomplishments were mentioned. Some of her results paralleled Lehman's: the first works of both scientists and literati were published when they were fairly young, with the former group slightly favored over the latter (average ages were 25.2 and 24.2, respectively); the greatest works were completed about 10 years later, with scientists again slightly older than men of letters (35.4 and 34.3, respectively). However, indicators of versatility occurred later, in the mid- to late-50s (59.4 and 55.0, for scientists and literary men, respectively). Scientists, as a group, too, were more versatile than men of letters, particularly in languages, while the latter excelled in several areas of the arts.

A long life not only provides opportunities for versatility to flourish, but also creativity, according to the Bulloughs and their colleagues (Bullough, Bullough, & Maddalena, 1978; Bullough, Voght, Bullough, & Kluckhohn, 1980). Biographies were examined again in order to study the lifelong accomplishments of notable aging artists of Renaissance Florence and eminent elderly Scottish figures of the 18th century (Adam Smith, Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns, James Watt, James Boswell, David Hume, and James Mill). Their achievements, the authors concluded, depended on living long: "eminence requires longevity" (Bullough et al., 1980, p. 119).