

## ***“Let the Reader Think of the Burden”: Old Age and the Crisis of Capacity***

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IN FEBRUARY 2010, the *Economist* magazine ran an editorial entitled “The Silver Tsunami” that discussed the projected impact of aging baby boomers on economic growth.<sup>1</sup> Its opening conceit intrigued me for two separate—but, as I hope to show, interrelated—reasons. First, it cites a now-infamous interview with the controversial British novelist Martin Amis in which Amis laments that advances in medical science have forced novelists “to live through the death of our talent. Novelists tend to go off at about seventy.”<sup>2</sup> In the next breath, he asks, “How is society going to support this silver tsunami?” The answer: voluntary euthanasia, rewarded (Amis suggests) with “a martini and a medal.” While the *Economist* demurs—“Novelists will have their jokes”—in referring to the tsunami, the editorial introduces its own unwitting irony by relying on this figure of speech to turn from the aging artist to a second issue, that of an aging workforce. The reader is informed that Amis and others “are right to warn about the threat of the ‘silver tsunami.’ Most people understand

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<sup>1</sup> “The Silver Tsunami,” *Economist*, February 20, 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/15450864> (accessed June 18, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Camilla Long, “Martin Amis and the Sex War,” *Sunday Times*, January 24, 2010, [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article6996980.ece?token=null&offset=36&page=4](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article6996980.ece?token=null&offset=36&page=4) (accessed June 18, 2011).



about the ageing of society in the abstract. But few have grasped either the size of the tsunami or the extent of its consequences.”<sup>3</sup> As I write this paper in the weeks following the Japanese catastrophe of 2011, the fatal immediacy of the tsunami should shock us out of this crude, familiar metaphor. For what could be more “abstract” than comparing the instantaneous destruction of cities, food and water supplies with the progressive aging of society?

I begin by referring to this editorial because it testifies to the barely conscious figurative language that serves to construct perceptions of an aging population. More suggestively, it also implies that the demographics of aging can be linked to aesthetic appraisals of the aging writer. For the purposes of this essay I will not address the complex web of economic, political, biological, and demographic factors that contribute to general theorizations of population aging. Rather, my hypothesis is that the demographics of societal aging and the aesthetics of late style habitually employ a shared suite of conceptual metaphors to announce the so-called problem of old age. Specifically, both discourses conceive of old age as what I term a crisis of capacity. When we think of “capacity” with regard to aging, we are apt to call up associations with ability: cognitive capacity, legal capacity, and so on. Without dismissing such definitions, my interest in the productive effects of language puts this paper on a slightly different track. I focus on the implications of the etymological roots of “capacity” meaning “to bear” or “to take in,” because it is in this sense that we can apprehend the demographics of old age and the critical aesthetics of late style as surprisingly congruous discourses. I draw out this tentative equivalence for the way it highlights a modern and interdisciplinary habit of conceiving agedness as a damaging and destructive excess: a tendency that afflicts literary criticism as much as economics, politics, or medicine.

In what follows, I discuss the role of capacity in describing both individual old age and contemporary demographic apprehensions of aging populations. I then show how the language of capacity similarly underpins the language of late style and the aging artist. To braid together these two strands of my argument, I turn to *The Fixed Period* (1881–82), the last novel published by nineteenth-century novelist Anthony Trollope during his lifetime. I argue that *The Fixed Period*—which imagines a fictional British colony, Britannula, where euthanasia is made compulsory at the age of 67.5—is itself concerned with how capacity problematically circumscribes both aging populations and the aging artist. On the one hand, Trollope’s novel clarifies how demographics and aesthetics conceive of older age as a potentially catastrophic force and, subsequently, how the rhetoric of capacity can be used to disaffiliate the aged from a privileged, non-old social body. On the other hand, even as President John Neverbend employs this conceptual vocabulary to assert the social benefit of his Fixed Period law, *The Fixed Period* also undermines that logic as it applies to the demographer and author alike. Trollope’s radical ambivalence concerning the affixing of age to the matter of capacity challenges readers, I conclude, to engage in the hard work of imagining later life outside the binary of containment and catastrophe.

Critics such as Stephen Katz and Margaret Cruikshank have observed that contemporary societal aging is characterized by an “alarmist” or even “apocalyptic” demography.<sup>4</sup> Terms like the “silver (or grey) tsunami,” “age wave,” “grey hoard,” “avalanche,” or “flood” are regularly

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<sup>3</sup> “Silver Tsunami.”

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 69; Margaret Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Ageing* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 27. For an authoritative and historically situated analysis of the emergence of aging as a social and medicalized problem, see W. Andrew Achenbaum’s *Crossing Frontiers: Gerontology Emerges as a Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. pt. 1; or his more recent *Vital Americans, Vital Communities: A Bold Vision for Societal Ageing* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), esp. chaps. 1 and 4.

employed not only by popular media but in professional registers as well. For instance, the Winter 2010 President's Message from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research begins by invoking "the 'grey tsunami'—the tide of chronic diseases rising from an ageing population which threatens to swamp our health-care system, economy, and quality of life."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in 2010 the Alzheimer Society of Canada published a major commissioned report on the projected impact of dementia entitled "Rising Tide."<sup>6</sup> This ominous rhetoric of rising, swamping, tides, and disease—amplified by the authoritative tones of medical and health policy expertise—conceives of population aging as an imminent catastrophe. Conceived en masse, the elderly are naturalized as a liquid cataclysm whose volume exceeds the nation's ability to contain, or even guard against, an abstracted human burden.

The image of the uncontrollable flood has long been aligned with the fluid excesses of femininity, given its association of the female body with the fearful antitheses of order and reason. As David D. Gilmore writes in *Misogyny: The Male Malady*, "These soggy images . . . are an effective visual representation of generalized moral anxiety in terms of liquidization: melting of the will, liquification, floating away."<sup>7</sup> The repressed eroticism of "apocalyptic misogyny" perhaps most immediately distinguishes that deliquescent imagery from its gerontophobic form.<sup>8</sup> And yet we might also glimpse in the gray tsunami and its variants—animated as they are by images of failed containment and immanent social collapse—vestiges of this moralizing Malthusian panic, one concerning not the expressly sexual *means* of reproduction but, rather, the *appearance* of increasing human numbers. Contemporary discussions of baby boomers, for example, regularly stamp this demographic as a dangerously propagating class whose projected tempo of growth directly threatens the interests—if not the day-to-day quality of life—of the non-old. As one recent study in the *British Medical Journal* has shown, over the last decade influential opinion-forming news sources such as the *Economist* have persistently framed population aging in terms of apocalyptic demography.<sup>9</sup> The overwhelming superfluity long associated with misogynistic notions of female sexuality (and the threat to social order it implies) appears to have translated into increasingly ubiquitous population-based apprehensions of the elderly: a discomfiting update to what Frank H. Nuessel Jr. has described as the language of ageism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Canadian Institutes of Health Research, "Your Health Research Dollars at Work: An Update from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research—Winter 2010," [http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/documents/mp\\_newsletter\\_winter10\\_e.pdf](http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/documents/mp_newsletter_winter10_e.pdf) (accessed June 19, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Commissioned study by the Alzheimer Society of Canada, "The Rising Tide: A Report on the Impact of Dementia on Canadian Society," [http://www.alzheimer.ca/docs/RisingTide/Rising%20Tide\\_Full%20Report\\_Eng\\_FINAL\\_Secured%20version.pdf](http://www.alzheimer.ca/docs/RisingTide/Rising%20Tide_Full%20Report_Eng_FINAL_Secured%20version.pdf) (accessed June 19, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> David D. Gilmore, *Misogyny: The Male Malady* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 144.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>9</sup> Based on a content analysis of the *Economist's* digital archive between 1997 and 2008, Ruth Martin, Caroline Williams, and Desmond O'Neill conclude, "There is a noticeable trend to ageism in one of the most influential economic and political magazines in the world," and "Geriatricians and gerontologists who want to influence policy makers to improve services for older people will need to engage in a dialogue with journalists in areas other than the biomedical literature." See "Retrospective Analysis of Attitudes to Ageing in the *Economist*: Apocalyptic Demography for Opinion Formers," *British Medical Journal* 339:b4914 (2009): 1435–37.

<sup>10</sup> Frank H. Nuessel Jr., "The Language of Ageism," *Gerontologist* 22, no. 3 (1982): 273–76. Nuessel observes, "Ageist language falls into two distinct categories. One division includes words whose denotation specifically refers to the elderly. The other component contains lexical items whose connotation or intentional meaning is associated only with the elderly" (273–74). The "tsunami" marks a new way of conceiving the elderly as a demographically conceived—or,

Was it ever thus? In contrast, the Old Testament regularly describes the accumulation of years as the consummate measure of a righteous life. Consider Abraham, who “died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years” (Gen. 25:8), or Job, who “died, being old and full of days” (Job 42:17). Here the aged individual is conceived as a satiated, singular container: a conceptual metaphor that persists in contemporary views of successful aging and fulfillment in later life.<sup>11</sup> To explain the implications of such language we might look to the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who argue that metaphor, rather than existing solely in the purview of poetics, is instead “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action.”<sup>12</sup> Expressions such as “I’ve had a full life” or “Life is empty” come to possess such ontological plausibility that it is easy to overlook how such language apprehends the older person as a bodily receptacle for a materialized temporality. When we speak of aging in terms of fullness, richness, gain, or wealth, chronological years are apprehended as one might the accumulation of coins or capital. Familiar ideas such as the “wealth of experience” or the assumption that the aged possess greater emotional intelligence or wisdom as a result of living longer draw attention to the easy slippage between the literal and figurative phraseology of such “gain perspectives” on old age.<sup>13</sup>

This recuperative ideal of aging—by which I mean that real or perceived losses in older age are understood as compensated for by gains in other quarters—is commonplace in Western literature. Consider Robert Browning’s often-cited “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (1864):

Youth ended, I shall try  
My gain or loss thereby;  
Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold:  
And I shall weigh the same,  
Give life its praise or blame:  
Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being old.<sup>14</sup>

The aging rabbi cheerfully rejects the conflation of older age with compulsory decline, choosing instead to judge his “gain or loss thereby.” Fortunately, the cleansing fire of experience renders the aged body as something of greater value than the alloyed goods of youth (a compensation hinted at in Browning’s terminal rhyming of “gold” and “old”). Rabbi Ben Ezra’s certainty in the accumulations of old age (“Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be”; lines 1–2) is further reflected at the level of poetic form. The stanza is split into two tercets, the first of which contains six, six, and eleven syllables per line; although the speaker is convinced that in the latter part of

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by the same token, obscured—population. For a more recent and extensive discussion of social ageism, see Margaret Morganaroth Gullette’s *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the Old Testament’s generally optimistic conceptualization of the older person as an abundant container, see Stephen Sapp’s *Full of Years: Ageing and the Elderly in the Bible and Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>13</sup> See Paul B. Baltes and Jacqui Smith, “New Frontiers in the Future of Ageing: From Successful Ageing of the Young Old to the Dilemmas of the Fourth Age,” *Gerontology* 49 (2003): 124. Fredric Jameson launches a similar critique from another disciplinary perspective in his comments on the “ideology of experience,” which he describes as “the idea that we learn from the past and that the older we are and the more experiences we are supposed to have had, the more we know and the more suitable we become for occupying a paternal function that consists in explaining things interminably and in showing off our infinite know-how.” See Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 337.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Browning, “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” in *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning* (New York: Modern Library, 1934), 291, lines 85–90.

his life he "shall weigh the same," an extra, twelfth syllable is quietly added to the stanza's final line as if to convey the poem's overarching promise of the gains intrinsic to later life.

But one older person's gain might eclipse another's drain. Speaking of differences between positive views of the healthy young-old (what age theorists since Peter Laslett have called "the third age") and the physical and cognitive frailty that often afflicts the oldest-old ("the fourth age"),<sup>15</sup> Paul B. Baltes and Jacqui Smith propose that optimistic ideals of older age demand greater scrutiny. "Increasingly, the scientific news about prospects of survival into very old age is shifting from a focus on aspects of gain to aspects of loss."<sup>16</sup> Evidently this impulse is already hard at work in nineteenth-century literary portrayals of senescence. Contrast Rabbi Ben Ezra's account with that of Alfred Tennyson's perpetually aging Tithonus (1833, revised 1859), whose immortality has not spared him the debilities of the fourth age:

I wither slowly in thine arms,  
Here at the quiet limit of the world,  
A white-haired shadow roaming like a dream  
The ever-silent spaces . . .<sup>17</sup>

Tithonus's sense of diminution in protracted age is reflected in Tennyson's superimposition of multiple domains: the physical ("I wither"), the sensual (from the sonic "quiet" and "ever-silent spaces" to the quelling of color in this "white-haired shadow"), the geographical ("limit of the world"), and ultimately the existential (the "shadow"-being's emptiness of purpose, "roaming like a dream"). Matthew Arnold offers a similar rejoinder to Browning's buoyancy in the final stanza of "Growing Old" (1867):

It is—last stage of all—  
When we are frozen up within, and quite  
The phantom of ourselves,  
To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost  
Which blamed the living man.<sup>18</sup>

The poem's initiating question—"What is it to grow old?" (line 1)—is answered by this tragic sketch of the total evacuation of selfhood in older age. Such bleak descriptors continue to echo in present-day descriptions of older persons, particularly those with dementia, who may be viewed—often by their loved ones—as empty shells of their former selves. However, Arnold's "phantom" differs importantly from Tennyson's in its paradoxical double vision of emptiness and surfeit. Perhaps gesturing toward the Aristotelian association of old age with cold and lethargy, Arnold's "hollow ghost" is "frozen up within": a vacant mass of dense, emotional frigidity far removed from the ardent passions of youth.<sup>19</sup> Yet the core of Arnold's dread lies in the poem's concluding impression that the individual catastrophe of old age is inexorably trans-

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), esp. chap. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Baltes and Smith, "New Frontiers in the Future of Ageing," 124.

<sup>17</sup> Tennyson, "Tithonus," in *Tennyson: Poems and Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 90, lines 6–9.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Arnold, "Growing Old," in *Victorian and Edwardian Poets: Tennyson to Yeats* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 210–11, lines 35–40.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle writes: "We must remember that an animal is by nature humid and warm, and to live is to be of such a constitution, while old age is dry and cold, and so is a corpse." See G. R. T. Ross's translation of Aristotle's *On Longevity and Shortness of Life* (Raleigh, NC: Alex Catalogue, n.d.), 3.

formed into a social spectacle. To grow old is no longer to occupy the crowning stage of life's journey. Instead, the horrors of the fourth age implicate the destiny of a population (the anonymous beholding "world") beyond the individual sufferer ("the living man").

I want to use Arnold's abstraction of aging as a way of returning to my earlier comments concerning the prevalence of apocalyptic demography in our own time. It is arresting to see how the language of twenty-first century population aging has continued to build upon the profoundly negative sense of sublime fullness and immensity latent in Arnold's desolate imagery; contemporary references to "glacialization," for instance, perceive, like Arnold, population aging explicitly in terms of an icy, eroding density.<sup>20</sup> I am particularly intrigued by this coalescing of individual and societal metaphors around what we might call a volumetric aesthetics of aging, which is to say, the habitual representation of older age in terms of a metaphoric of capacity that makes use of images pertaining to mass, density, and volume: either in their positive connotation (as in the language of individual aging, i.e., the fullness of years) or in the pejorative sense (increasingly often applied to the elderly as an excessively massive, dense, or fluid, characterless populace). Whereas resilience, accumulation, and adaptation often manifest auspiciously for the aging individual, these very qualities appear malignant when viewed with regard to the elderly en bloc. Rabbi Ben Ezra's optimistic sense of individual capacity is decidedly undermined by a modern panic that views the aged as an alien mass pressing at the limits of a decisively non-old nation. Today, old age connotes less the happy fullness of days than a collective burden urgently requiring containment.

This distinction suggests an essential shift in the primary conveyor of what the Roman historian Tacitus once called "the weight of years."<sup>21</sup> By migrating away from the person-based bodily container full of days toward modern anxieties concerning a "massified" gray tsunami, agedness has become synonymous with a threat to the integrity of an emphatically non-old social container. Key to effecting this shift is the language of capacity manifest in the discourse of statistics that, since Malthus, has permitted certain populations to be conceptualized as problematic for the rest of an amorphous "us." Elizabeth Grosz writes that concepts are "always and only occasioned by problems" and function as "temporary contraptions" that provoke "multiple responses, conceptual, perceptual, and affective."<sup>22</sup> Capacity, I argue, is one such conceptual contraption, providing as it does a foundation for alarmist views of aging as a demographic catastrophe. Given the ubiquity of volumetric rhetoric applied to population aging today—as announced by the media's unhesitating references to swelling numbers, rising costs, the draining of limited resources, and so on—one might say that the abstractions of the silver tsunami have not only tarnished but thoroughly devastated the gleam of the golden years.

So far, aspects of my discussion of the figurative language of contemporary aging will no doubt be familiar. What I wish to pursue, however, is the strange continuity between the volumetric aesthetics of aging and the critical foundations of late style. There are many late styles, but

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<sup>20</sup> In "Globalization and the Biopolitics of Ageing," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 163, Brett Neilson writes that "population ageing places a glacier-like pressure on the nation-state, slowly but surely eroding its centralized apparatuses for managing the production and reproduction of life." Similarly, in *Gray Dawn: How the Coming Age Wave Will Transform America and the World* (New York: Random House, 1999), 3, Peter G. Peterson argues, "The challenge of global ageing, like a massive iceberg, looms ahead in the future of the largest and most affluent economies of the world." I am grateful to Kathleen Woodward for bringing these references to my attention.

<sup>21</sup> *The Works of Cornelius Tacitus: With an Essay on His Life and Genius, Notes, Supplements, &c* (Philadelphia: Thomas Wardle, 1836), 125.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "The Problem of Theory," *theory@buffalo* 5 (1999): 2–16.

this paper will focus on the artistic productions made late in one's career and in older age: a period Edward Said characterizes as "a nonharmonious, nonserene tension [with one's earlier work], and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against* . . ." <sup>23</sup> To speak of artistic lateness means regarding not only the life course but age and aging as elements of artistic production. It seems necessary, then, that the critical language of late style should also disclose something about the aesthetic apprehension of older age itself. For example, Said refers to Theodor Adorno's famous essay on late style in which the latter writes, "In the history of art, late works are catastrophes." <sup>24</sup> "Catastrophe": that word again. Not surprisingly, the etymological roots of "catastrophe"—meaning to overturn, to suddenly turn away from—supplement its more widespread connotation of "disaster." Although Said's analysis is not reducible to this view (nor do I claim that catastrophe is the prevailing account of late works), especially when discussed in terms of ruptures and breaks, the aesthetic production of the older artist may well be conceived of as a disaster of diminishing ability.

Recent scholarship concerning late style has, in essence, argued with or against Martin Amis's contention that artistic success is incompatible with older age. In cases where late works seem to indicate a "going off"—such as that of painter Willem de Kooning, for example, or the novelist Agatha Christie—the choice for readers, curators, or critics is often to downplay or even expunge such works in order to maintain a cohesive narrative of the artist throughout the life course (certainly the language of artistic "stages" or "phases" evinces this preference for organic models of progressive development). <sup>25</sup> Responding to the potentially ageist impulses of such assessments, Michael Hutcheon and Linda Hutcheon argue (in this issue) that to speak of late works as either the culmination of a life's artistic labor or as chaotic digression and rupture is a construction more reflective of reviewer bias than of objective artistic details. Given the multitude of ways in which late works may present as a catastrophe, and in step with reservations as to the critical utility of late style broadly conceived, there exists a need for more responsive apprehensions of lateness if this category is to bear substantial meaning with regard to the aging artist.

I see an opportunity to refine the critical language of late style in light of the problematics of capacity. Like the demographics of aging, late style is habitually figured in reference to containment, especially when late works appear to signal the drainage or rupture of defining aesthetic principles. In this case, the breached container is the oeuvre: a collectivized body that appears particularly vulnerable to the threat of age when the principle of aesthetic unity—the critic's word for containment—goes awry. Such conceptualizations of late style assume a synecdochical relation between the individual artist and his or her oeuvre; as we shall see presently, the contiguousness of an artist and (especially in the case of the prolific scribbler) his or her cumulative body of work is maintained by means of a compulsory principle of authorly unity. The language of late style thus encodes the ultimately totalizing hermeneutics of capacity. Once again we are made to understand that under the strain of age, the container is at pains to hold.

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<sup>23</sup> Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> For one example of an empirical, cognitive approach to assessing late style in cases of age-related dementia, see Ian Lancashire's *Forgetful Muses: Reading the Author in the Text* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). Alternatively, Philip L. Sohm's *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy, 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) explores the impact of bodily degeneration on artistic production and reception during the Renaissance.

The so-called burden of age gives rise to what I call the crisis of capacity. I use “crisis” purposefully to capitalize on its meaning of decision or turning point. Importantly, “crisis” is a term familiar to both contemporary demography and literary criticism, indicating an apical tension or crux in the course of human action. Moreover it is notable that demographics and aesthetics each rely on positive and negative figurations of capacity to describe the effect of aging on their subjects. On the one hand, the language of capacity idealizes containment by implying the possibility of continuity, unity, and order. On the other hand lies the specter of catastrophe: the disorder pursuant to excess, the break, the rupture, the tsunami.<sup>26</sup> As it regards aging, then, the crisis of capacity functions as a binary contraption that forces the abstraction of older age in terms of either successful management (containment) or proliferative chaos (catastrophe). I have shown how, in the early twenty-first century, population aging is urgently framed in terms of its threat to the integrity of the social container. But the language of late style is often just as anxious to determine what can or cannot be encompassed within the artist’s oeuvre, what ought to be exiled to the archive or even expelled from critical memory so as to preserve the integrity of the unwavering artist’s body of work.

But what examples exist—besides the *Economist’s* accidental allusions—to link the demographics of aging with the aging artist? Anthony Trollope’s *The Fixed Period* presents an especially compelling study of the intersecting age-related crises of aesthetic and demographic capacity. In its obsessive attention to numbers and statistics, *The Fixed Period* registers accelerating Western anxieties about an aging population; in fact, it precedes by more than a century Amis’s modest proposal concerning the silver tsunami. Moreover, Trollope’s novel can be read as an index of the blindnesses intrinsic to the conceptual logic of capacity and why, perhaps, we might revise or even attempt to reinvent this axiomatic suite of metaphors in the language of aging. As is, the metaphors of capacity enables the critical discourse of late style to separate the aging artist from his or her lifework. In effect, the unity of the artist—here, Trollope—is preserved by containing the oeuvre, that is, by walling it off from certain, late productions of the self-same aged person. In what remains of this essay I aim to show how *The Fixed Period* simultaneously deploys these two aspects of containment—first, in its portrayal of aging as a demographic crisis and, second, as a key element at stake for the aging writer.

Trollope (1815–82) is best known for penning more than forty-five novels over the course of his prolific writing career. His best-known work includes the multibook *Chronicles of Barsetshire* and novels that generally revolve around charming marriage plots, petty quarrels of the landed gentry, and, occasionally, the more overt machinations of British aristocracy and political life. Literary historian Asa Briggs has asserted that Trollope’s oeuvre conveys better than any other contemporary a “convincing impression of what everyday life was like in England in the middle Victorian years.”<sup>27</sup> Yet some of Trollope’s peers, while generally in agreement over his “inestimable merit,” nevertheless resisted the frequent narrative irruptions undertaken by his self-conscious editor-narrator.<sup>28</sup> With equal parts approbation and exasperation, Henry James once concluded that Trollope “took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story

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<sup>26</sup> The catastrophe, of course, also refers to the final stage of tragedy, in which one witnesses the tragic dénouement culminating in a “destructive or painful action,” as Aristotle describes in *Poetics* (London: J. M. Dent, 1963), 21. My thanks to Duncan McFarlane for this reminder.

<sup>27</sup> Asa Briggs, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851–67* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 93.

<sup>28</sup> Henry James, “Anthony Trollope,” in *Century Illustrated Magazine* 26 (1883): 386.



he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe," and that "Trollope will remain one of the most trustworthy, though not one of the most eloquent of writers who have helped the heart of man to know itself."<sup>29</sup>

If we, like James, take Trollope's earnest trustworthiness as a defining attribute of his oeuvre, then *The Fixed Period* (1881–82) is written emphatically against this grain. As one 1882 reviewer noted with lament, Trollope breaks from his forty-four preceding works by swerving from the "limits of the fanciful into the realms of the fantastic."<sup>30</sup> Set in 1980, *The Fixed Period* portrays a futuristic and dystopian British colony in which euthanasia at the age of 67.5 is made compulsory by law. In addition to this thematic departure, *The Fixed Period* also represents a formal break with precedent, written as it is using the first-person "I" and initially published anonymously in serial magazine format. Intriguingly, Trollope wrote this novel in bad health in the year before his death—at the age of sixty-seven and eight months, no less. Now as then *The Fixed Period* is rarely read and, with few exceptions, is disparaged or viewed as an anomaly in the context of Trollope's work.<sup>31</sup> On the whole, *The Fixed Period* remains obscure as to its underlying sincerity and purpose; like Amis's controversial joke, it is perpetually unclear whether Trollope intended his work as make-believe. He allegedly claimed of the novel, "It's all true—I mean every word of it," and his letters written during this time betray acute irritation at his own failing health.<sup>32</sup> In its eccentric and only possibly satirical meditation on the question of aging, *The Fixed Period* is conspicuously anti-"Trollopean."

To demonstrate how the metaphors of capacity comprises the matter of Trollope's late style, I outline how *The Fixed Period* depicts aging as a crucial issue of demographic containment. President John Neverbend explains, "Statistics have told us that the sufficient sustenance of an old man is more costly than the feeding of a young one. . . . Statistics also have told us that the unprofitable young and the no less unprofitable old form a third of the population."<sup>33</sup> To contain the ballooning cost and numbers associated with the aged, Neverbend passes a popular law concerning "the prearranged ceasing to live of those who would otherwise become old" (10). Behind this euphemistic veil, the Fixed Period law is specifically one of containment: temporally, in its limitation of life to 67.5 years, but also spatially, for the law demands that the elderly spend their last year in Necropolis, a seraphic college physically zoned off from the rest of society so as to enhance the palatability of "depositing" the aged.

Such containment is necessary, Neverbend confides, because of "an ill-judged and a thoughtless tenderness" that has forced the aged "to live a useless and painful life" (11). He asks

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>30</sup> Unsigned review, *Times* (London), April 12, 1882, in Donald Smalley's *Anthony Trollope: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 490.

<sup>31</sup> After its 1882 publication in book form, *The Fixed Period* remained out of print until 1981; see R. H. Super's preface to *The Fixed Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1990), x–xi. Even in 2011 new copies are often available only via on-demand publishers. Karen Chase gives a helpful overview of the critical responses to the novel in *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In 1882 the *Times* (London) found it "essentially ghastly," and in the twentieth century *The Fixed Period* has not fared much better: Bradford Booth deemed it "a very dull novel [with] no talent for satire on ideas," while David Skilton called it a "failure." See Chase, *Victorians and Old Age*, 99.

<sup>32</sup> See W. L. Collins's note in *Blackwood's* cited in Smalley, *Anthony Trollope*, 492. Sam Silverman's essay "Trollope's *The Fixed Period*: A Nineteenth-Century Novel Revisited," in *Illness, Crisis, and Loss* 12, no. 4 (2004): 272–83, gives a comprehensive sense of Trollope's compounding depression at the time of writing this novel.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Fixed Period* (Winnetka, CA: Norilana Books, 2008), 11. Hereafter, page numbers will be given in the text.

directly, “Look round on the men whom you can remember, and tell me, on how many of them life has not sat as a burden at seventy years of age?” (36–37). But Neverbend’s complicated sympathy for the individual bearer of years quickly slides toward anxieties for the well-being of the non-old. He personifies the nation by conceiving it as a noble beast staggering under the weight of so many years, so many old people: “How are a people to thrive when so weighted?” (11). Under the Fixed Period system, the elderly “would depart with the full respect of all their fellow-citizens. To how many does that lot now fall?” (12). Yet ensuring the dignified “departure” of the elderly would have further civic benefits. Overwhelmed by “the idleness of years that are useless,” Neverbend complains that “our bridges, our railways, our Government are not provided for. Our young men are again becoming torpid beneath the weight imposed upon them” (14). Neverbend makes a direct appeal to those perusing his memoir: “Let the reader think of the burden”—the twin burden suffered, but also exerted, by the weight of age and an elderly population (11).

Neverbend sees the need to contain aging to prevent both individual suffering and social catastrophe. Little wonder, then, that the critical language of capacity overlaps with that of humanitarianism. In their theorization of metaphor Lakoff and Johnson also note that in addition to providing a conceptual structure for language, “the blind acceptance of . . . metaphor can hide degrading realities.”<sup>34</sup> We should therefore be alert to Neverbend’s euphemistic language of containment—depositing, Fixed Periods—for it is also the language of finance. While the Fixed Period policy is ostensibly a humanitarian endeavor intended to subvert the miseries of old age, such tenderness is incentivized by its padding of the social coffers. The aged body—in both its individual and its demographically conceived senses—becomes an avatar of literal and figurative cost.

That this logic is under scrutiny is clear by the novel’s climax. To thwart the carrying out of the Fixed Period law, the elderly Britannulans secretly summon an emphatically quantified 250-tonne British warship (dubbed the *John Bright*, after the great Victorian reformer and statesman) to blow up the island. Yet the vast ship’s capacity to obliterate the rogue colony is not so much Captain Battleax’s deterrent to attack as is the cost of firing the hugely expensive mechanism: “each shot costs two thousand five hundred pounds, and . . . the wear and tear to the vessel is two thousand more” (133). It is clear that both Neverbend and his British nemesis understand how effectively numbers convey an abstracted menace (as one ship lieutenant explains, “There are things so terrible, that if you will only create a belief in them, that will suffice without anything else” [133]). That Neverbend and Battleax would each base their respective interventions on the unanswerable threat posed by vast quantities (an example of what Kathleen Woodward has recently described as “statistical panic”) demonstrates how the language of capacity may be co-opted to suit the insidious ends of fiscal austerity.<sup>35</sup> Trollope is clear on this point: following Neverbend’s permanent exile from Britannula, we learn that his British successor, Sir Ferdinando, immediately transforms the college into a chamber of commerce, effectively translating the implied metaphor of depositing the elderly into the financial terms that originally motivated the Fixed Period law. As the frank Mrs. Neverbend steadily insists, the capitalist aims behind the Fixed Period are indistinguishable from its humanitarian artifice. Dressing up the containment of the elderly in a tastefully ornamented college would only ensure that “all the old men and women may be killed artistically” (94).

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<sup>34</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 237.

<sup>35</sup> See Kathleen Woodward, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

Mrs. Neverbend's gesture toward art is not frivolous. For as much as John Neverbend is the statistically minded author of the Fixed Period policy, he is also the writer of this fictional memoir. This strange continuity of Neverbend's disciplinary roles underscores the congruity of demographic and aesthetic understandings of aging in *The Fixed Period* and, as I hope to show, works to signal the aging Trollope's own ambivalence concerning the metaphors of capacity in older age. The reader first encounters Neverbend aboard the *John Bright*, having been politely removed from Britannula by Captain Battleax and deported to England. Now sixty years old, Neverbend is struck with a desire to "publish . . . a book in which I should declare my theory—this very book which I have so nearly brought to a close" (175). It is significant that Neverbend is able to so fluidly transition between demographic and writerly presentations of his Fixed Period cause; indeed, following his current publication, Neverbend determines to write yet another volume as "argumentative and statistical, as I have here been fanciful, though true to details" (195). Despite his enthusiasm, however, the otherwise hapless author-narrator is astute enough to conclude that his controversial subject will be difficult "to bear" in England (198). I highlight this rhetoric here for its overlap with Neverbend's earlier concerns with the demographics of aging, and because throughout Trollope's novel these two discursive modes of understanding old age conspicuously bump up against one another. Let the *reader* consider the burden: by the novel's end, there can be little doubt that the reader is asked to apprehend capacity as a matter of concern for both the aging author and the aging, ageist "demographic demagogu[e]." <sup>36</sup>

Trollope's view of the consonance between demographics and aesthetics is evinced in his doubling of Neverbend: first with Crasweller (whose optimistic, person-based views of aging are contrasted with Neverbend's grim populationist outlook) and then with Sir Ferdinando (whose aversion toward the Fixed Period law prompts Neverbend to write this memoir defending his thwarted reform). In their respective engagements with the metaphors of capacity, Neverbend and his doubles serve to map as well Trollope's radical ambivalence as to its aptness with regard to old age. *The Fixed Period* is predicated upon Neverbend's relationship with his best friend, Crasweller, another aging man and the first scheduled entrant to the college. Despite originally supporting the implementation of the Fixed Period law, as Crasweller's day of deposition approaches, he deliberately misremembers his birth date. Crasweller's continuing success in business and robust physical health are far from Neverbend's appalling, discursive caricature of agedness as "the miseries, weakness, and *fainéant* imbecility" (10) of the fourth age. These competing viewpoints collide at the novel's climax as Crasweller's case rouses the elderly Britannulans to petition Britain to help stop the Fixed Period law:

"God bless the old flag for ever and ever!" said Mr Bunnit. "I knew they wouldn't let us deposit any one."

Thus their secret was declared. These old men,—the tanner and whisky-dealer, and the like,—had sent home to England to get assistance against their own Government! There had always been a scum of the population,—the dirty, frothy, meaningless foam at the top,—men like the drunken old bar-keeper, who had still clung submissive to the old country,—men who knew nothing of progress and civilisation,—who were content with what they ate and drank, and chiefly with the latter. (129)

Neverbend's use of liquid metaphors ("scum," "frothy, meaningless foam") betrays a forceful disgust with the aged squarely at odds with Crasweller's example of health and financial inde-

<sup>36</sup> Cruikshank, *Learning to Be Old*, 27.

pendence in older age. Neverbend persists in viewing Britannula as a fixed container now permanently despoiled by a riotous species of wet, repellent, and, above all, useless human excess determined to overcome its prearranged spatial and temporal period. The destructive liquidity of the elderly population is doubly manifest in Neverbend's spirited pun, for the elderly are indeed "content" with their drinking just as they are contiguous with the excessive slaver of a menacing population. First conceived en masse and then, ostensibly, individually (but only insofar as they represent type—"the tanner and whisky-dealer, and the like"), the elderly are perceived by Neverbend as a synecdoche of perceived population characteristics intrinsically opposed to the enclosed order of uncontaminated youth. That the elderly are rescued by a sublimely destructive force equal to that which they are supposed to signify cannot be lost even on this unbendable president.

If the two men represent the dueling sides of resistance and capitulation to an ideology of decline, then Crasweller's relentless productivity in older age can also be read as a cipher for Trollope. This reading is suggested by a passage in Trollope's *Autobiography*, published posthumously but written at about the same time as *The Fixed Period*, in which he describes his compulsive writing routine. "I have allotted myself so many pages a week. . . . The average number has been about 40. It has been placed as low as 20, and has risen to 112. And as a page is an ambiguous term, my page has been made to contain 250 words; and as words, if not watched, will have a tendency to straggle, I have had every word counted as I went."<sup>37</sup> Trollope's productivity in older age is astonishing, but his insistence on fulfilling the quantitative requirements of his daily allotment has as much the dogmatic prescription of Neverbend as the prosperous persistence of Crasweller. Thus, when Neverbend confronts Crasweller about resisting deposition to the college, his words read as probing something more than just the politics of geronticide: "I spoke my thoughts freely to him. 'Are you afraid of departure?' I said—'afraid of that which must come; afraid to meet as a friend that which you must meet so soon as friend or enemy?' I paused; but he sat looking at me without reply. 'To fear departure;—must it not be the greatest evil of all our life, if it be necessary?'" (37). Clearly, "departure" signifies differently for each man (of course, it is an ironic reversal that on the fateful day scheduled for Crasweller's deposition it is Neverbend who is exiled from Britannulan life instead) but also, it would appear, for Trollope the author as well. For in departing so jocosely from the expectations established by his oeuvre—formally as well as thematically in *The Fixed Period*, as we have seen—Trollope is nevertheless loath to divert from the labor of writing itself. His *Autobiography* asserts: "I have prided myself especially in completing [my work] within the proposed time,—and I have always done so. There has ever been the record before me, and a week passed with an insufficient number of pages has been a blister to my eye, and a month so disgraced would have been a sorrow to my heart."<sup>38</sup> Were Neverbend merely a satirical mouthpiece, it is unlikely his laments would overlap so conspicuously with Trollope's view of his own quantifiably productive utility. Without wholly espousing the ideals represented by either Crasweller or Neverbend, Trollope manages to align himself with both the artistic laborer and the statistician to produce *The Fixed Period*'s principal dyad: a fictional-autobiographical doublet through which readers are charged with imagining the contradictory potentialities of productive later life against views of the aged as a population problem or an economic one.

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<sup>37</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography*, chap. 7, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5978/pg5978.html> (accessed June 19, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Whereas Crasweller helps illustrate Trollope's ambivalence concerning productivity in older age, Sir Ferdinando brings to light the matter of style. Neverbend is appalled by his replacement's chronic artifice ("a man who thought much of his own eloquence,—and much also of the advantage which he might reap from it in the opinion of his fellow-countrymen generally" [156]). His antipathy is confirmed at Sir Ferdinando's inaugural speech to the residents of Britannula: "I had never before heard a specimen of that special oratory to which the epithet flowery may be most appropriately applied. . . . It streams on without a pause, and without any necessary end but that which the convenience of time may dictate. It comes without the slightest effort, and it goes without producing any great effect. It is sweet at the moment. It pleases many, and can offend none. But it is hardly afterwards much remembered, and is efficacious only in smoothing somewhat the rough ways of this harsh world" (157). Neverbend's sudden impatience with the "fervid" and excessively "flowery" "stream" of such stuff aligns him with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's contention that old age should be "a time for speaking concretely" (his own use of euphemism, by contrast, is apparently indispensable to the implementation of the Fixed Period law).<sup>39</sup> And yet, does the ostentatiously named Sir Ferdinando not also read as a kind of reflexive critique of the "Trollope" Trollope had become by the end of a long career, an author admired by the likes of Henry James for his mellifluous charm but never for the serious content of philosophy? Read alongside his strange meditation on the enforced containment of life span, Trollope's *Autobiography* highlights a concomitant struggle between writing too little and too much. "[I have] never put a book out of hand short of the number by a single word. I may also say that the excess has been very small. I have prided myself on completing my work exactly within the proposed dimensions."<sup>40</sup> The ironic and highly unreliable mode of *The Fixed Period* defies the dimensions of Trollope's trustworthy pastoral realism and begins, perhaps, to gesture toward why he would author a text in which the older person (first Crasweller, then Neverbend) inevitably must suffer shame, exile, and ridicule. It is as if the ailing Trollope could anticipate—and, in some way, sought to witness—the kind of unbending critical fixity by which his last authorly exercise would be received: as if the Fixed Period, as James implied and Amis would intractably observe, was already a suicidal law to which the artist is inexorably subject.

Thus, the lasting perplexity of *The Fixed Period* springs from the wholly opaque "I" of its first-person perspective. I have described how Neverbend is himself fragmented and refracted into the age-related problematics of demographics and style via his doubling with Crasweller and Ferdinando, respectively. But the novel further convolves this state of narrative affairs by forging yet another nexus of doubling between the authors Neverbend and Trollope. When Neverbend despairs at the likelihood of the Fixed Period cause being taken seriously, it is difficult not to read Trollope himself in these lines: "What shall I do with my book? Who will publish it? How shall I create an interest for it? Is there one who will believe . . . that I believe in the Fixed Period?" (201). In using this technique, Trollope at once breaks with his own formal precedent while also returning to a near origin. In *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson: By One of the Firm* (1861–62), an early and acerbic meditation on the follies of advertising, Trollope makes similar use of a first-person chronicler whose continuity with the author is determinedly obscured (Trollope is credited on the title page as the novel's "Editor"). Twenty years later, *The Fixed Period* elaborates upon the vocal multiplicity of the authorial "I" in yet another fiction of autobiographical fixity. This ironic plasticity of selfhood is enhanced by the proliferation of dou-

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (London: Verso, 1994), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Trollope, *Autobiography*, chap. 7.

tion of doubles in *The Fixed Period*, which further entangle the novel's speculative politics with the life of the aging author. By deciding to view events exclusively through Neverbend's eyes, Trollope undoubtedly weakens the novel's potential as a fictional meditation on the politics of geronticide or the ethics of euthanasia. Nevertheless, in constructing this perspectival hall of mirrors in which Trollope is and is not Neverbend, and in which the enigmatic Neverbend is himself doubled again, *The Fixed Period* defies containment by oeuvre or, at the very least, points up the fictional potentialities of such failed containment. Let the reader think of the burden: for it is the reader who is left to contend with Neverbend's and Trollope's conterminous proposals concerning what to do with the aged and the aging author.

In his essay "What Is an Author?" Michel Foucault points out modern literary criticism's reluctance to view the author as anything but "the principle of a certain unity of writing—all differences [in a series of texts] having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or influence."<sup>41</sup> I have established how *The Fixed Period's* relationship to the remainder of Trollope's oeuvre reveals the tendency of critical evaluations of late style to neutralize or even expunge productions deemed incompatible with the ostensibly authentic expression of an author. Trollope's sensitivity to the problematics of capacity, as evinced in his exploration of the strange parity between demographic appraisals of aging and the aesthetics of the aging author, asks readers to refine long-held ideals concerning the integrity of a writer's life and oeuvre without relying upon the sanctified principle of authorly and thus aesthetic containment.

Throughout *The Fixed Period* Trollope's unrelenting ambivalence concerning the metaphors of capacity undermines the fearsome binaries of surfeit-excess, gain-loss, and containment-catastrophe. If the author's body of work, like the social body, is inadequately conceptualized as a fixed container, then what alternatives exist? For me, the convolutions of *The Fixed Period* suggest Giorgio Agamben's understanding of potentiality and the "potential not to" as one way of conceiving older age outside the volumetric prescriptions of capacity. "To be potential," writes Agamben, "means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential."<sup>42</sup> Fiction provides an ideal space for this very specifically ambivalent mode of being; I think it no accident that Trollope's last novel published during his lifetime would be so intricately constructed upon a series of elements (e.g., thematic, generic, formal) that take the topic of aging as an opportunity to exercise the simultaneously oppositional expression of authorly (im)potentiality (i.e., a strategy made central to *The Fixed Period* via the essential coagency of aesthetic and nonaesthetic discourses, ironic and pastoral modes, fiction and autobiography). I find Agamben's discussion of human action as a function of both an active potentiality (the power to be and do) and an impotentiality (the power to *not* be, to *not* do)—or, to speak specifically to the matter of this essay, the fundamental concomitance of capacity with incapacity—a most compelling means by which to enhance both the critical and the ethical texture of late style in the aging artist: especially for the way it promises assessments perhaps more sensitive to shades of intentionality than the deliberately unproductive productiveness of Said's going "against." In the context of aging, making a place for the "potential not to" obviates the positivist hegemony of capacity by dissolving the crisis of capacity through which

<sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 111.

<sup>42</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 182.

modern population aging is so often figured. Could we foster the hope that the literary critic might also be prompted to think without the age-related dilemma of containment or catastrophe?

Trollope exemplifies this sort of authorly incapacity in both the form and the content of *The Fixed Period*: formally, in terms of embracing something other than the trustworthy pastoralism of his preceding work, but also in the strange potentiality of Neverbend's final resolution. At the conclusion of *The Fixed Period*, Trollope's protagonist decides to believe that his imagined audience will never believe his seriousness about the Fixed Period law; thus, for Neverbend and, as I see it, for Trollope as well, this final, puzzling narrative stratagem becomes a way of both admitting and undergoing a way of living that embodies a passive yet enduringly arduous relation to one's own incapacity. Speaking elsewhere of "today's man," Agamben writes, "He has become blind to not his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what he cannot, or can not, do."<sup>43</sup> I wonder if *The Fixed Period*, in foisting its age-related burdens on to the reader, is engaged in a similar kind of critique by demanding that its reader tarry with the ironic potentiality of this can-not—by which I mean that Trollope's late work prompts a consideration of lateness that foils merely therapeutic attempts to *accommodate* artistic difference and formal rupture in older age (a move obviously motivated by the conceptual biases of capacity). I conclude with this rough-hewn reflection on Agamben's work for the way it alerts us to how perceptions of the older person, like the aging artist's oeuvre it supplements, might seek to elude the flawed conceptual dimensions of containment.

The language of ageism is promiscuous. Its terms are not confined by discipline. Yet the literary study of older age provides an opportunity to witness the ethical stakes of the metaphors we live by. I have shown how the menace of aging populations in economic, political, and medical discourses finds its equivalent in the professional language used to assess the aging artist. For better and for worse, artistic productions are capable of exposing the degrading realities of the conceptual language evinced at both the microlevel of metaphor and the visionary scope of the novel. *The Fixed Period* is one of several late nineteenth-century novels that imagine a socially disruptive, aging population. The shared constraining premises of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon; Or, Over the Range* (1872), Walter Besant's *The Inner House* (1888), and Lillian Frances Mentor's *The Day of Resis* (1897) indicate that capacity and its alternatives might be further investigated in novels grappling with the nascent reality of population aging.

More recently, Chris Buckley's *Boomsday* (2007) provides an up-to-the-minute rehash of these themes, wherein "voluntary transitioning"—a Neverbendian euphemism for elder suicide—is proposed as a means of solving American Social Security insolvency.<sup>44</sup> But Katsuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) has undoubtedly produced the most compelling contemporary meditation on the matter of containment and life span. In this spare and elegant dystopian novel, Ishiguro imagines a certain class of young people destined to live according to a fixed term so as to extend the lives of (much older) others. As with Trollope, the story is told from a first-person perspective to reveal a disturbingly naturalized suite of euphemisms; Ishiguro's reader, however, only gradually learns how "students," "donations," "caring," and "completion" constitute the sordid code for an alternative present in which compulsory organ harvesting is medically and culturally sanctioned. Like *The Fixed Period*, *Never Let Me Go* demonstrates how fixing or containing the roles of oppressively aged individuals reduces such a class to their monstrously ra-

<sup>43</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 44.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Buckley, *Boomsday: A Novel* (New York: Hachette, 2007).

tional, instrumentalized value. Although Ishiguro's novel is not as conspicuously entangled with the matter of authorly late style (rather, the focalizer and protagonist Kathy H. writes her memoir shortly before retiring as a carer and, as a result, in view of her own fixed life span), *Never Let Me Go* also describes a society in which artistic creation is understood as testifying to the essential fact of selfhood. In Ishiguro's and Trollope's narratives of age-related containment, the creative life figures strongly as a potential means of eluding the totalizing grip of governance: a manner of making meaning in life, and for certain lives, in which years are comprehended as set, inalterable, and irrevocably delimited. In "Last Walk of Season," poet Robert Penn Warren insists, "We must not count years."<sup>45</sup> Questioning the metaphors of capacity, especially alongside the literature that has grown up around the containment of aging, invites us to consider an alternative to this imperative. We can not count years. A

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<sup>45</sup> *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 559, line 29.