

No Future? Aging, Temporality, History, and Reverse Chronologies

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*When that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part
shall be done away*

1 Corinthians 13:10

THE FUTURE IS KID STUFF

IN HIS INAUGURAL ADDRESS IN JANUARY 2009, President Obama alluded to an often-quoted passage from the Bible and adapted it to recast America's idea of itself: "We remain a young nation," he said, "but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things."¹ By articulating his exhortation through the opposition of youth and age, Obama sought to reframe positively, as maturity, what might otherwise be seen as an era of national decline. Like many political speeches, his went on to invoke a sense of continuity with the past and project it into a reassuringly optimistic vision of the future: "The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from

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¹ Barack Obama, "Transcript—Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," *NYTimes.com* 20 (2009), <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html> (accessed March 4, 2011). The text source is 1 Corinthians 13:11.



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generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.” By suggesting that Americans can “choose” a “better history” from among the many tangled strands of its complex past, Obama’s rhetoric acknowledges the mythmaking through which a sense of national identity is constructed and the illusions through which it is projected as an immaterial “idea” into the future. The assurance of endurance and continuity is in tension, in this speech, with the call for a transformative maturation. In its original context, the passage from Corinthians promises redemption, with greater clarity and recognition of the divine waiting ahead, but “setting aside childish things” in our current historical moment instead entails a reevaluation of the past and a recalibration of expectations for the future. As the United States and other Western nations experience a multitude of crises, and as many of their citizens wrestle with a sense of diminishing control over personal circumstances, notions of youth and age, development and decline, investment in the future and commitment to the past take on new resonances in popular culture. For researchers in age studies, attending to the implications of temporal ideologies can help us better interpret the cultural resonances attached to the aging process and the significance of developments in cultural forms.

In recent years, queer theorists have developed a rich body of work suggesting that queerness entails a different relationship to time than heteronormative temporality.² Although there are significant differences between queer sexuality and old age as embodied subjectivities and categories of identity, these new approaches to queer temporality suggest intriguing possibilities for reconsidering the temporalities of old age. This article aims to demonstrate the relevance of theories of queer temporality for age studies by analyzing narratives of reversed aging in the light of Lee Edelman’s critique of “reproductive futurism,” Western culture’s fetishization of the future and idealization of the Child.³ The uncanny depiction of characters moving backward from death, through old age, to youth, and then to “birth” in such texts as Martin Amis’s novel *Time’s Arrow* (1991) and David Fincher’s film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) calls into question not only perceptions of aging and available narratives for the individual life course but also concurrent myths of national development.⁴

In his influential polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman compares the future-oriented politics of “hope” that undergirds ideological positions across the political spectrum to an illusory Ponzi scheme. The little orphan Annie singing bravely about “Tomorrow” and the waif from *Les misérables* who calls for a revolutionary outcome to be realized only in an ever-deferred future (“One Day More!”) epitomize, for Edelman, this optimistic displacement of personal and political investment onto the Child and into the future.⁵ Adapting Lacan’s linked models of psychic, linguistic, and social structures through his own dynamic web of prose, Edelman connects the ever-deferred hope of heterosexual love (as figured by the lovers on Keats’s Grecian urn), the unrealizable drive to stabilize linguistic meaning, and the relentless “snare” of the social order in which the normative subject is caught while pursuing these impossible goals.⁶ The broader conse-

² For a helpful overview of contributions to the study of queer temporality, see Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction: Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 23 (2007): 159–77.

³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2. For Edelman, the overvalued figure of “the Child” is always capitalized.

⁴ Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow, or The Nature of the Offence* (New York: Vintage, 1992); *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, directed by Martin Fincher (Burbank, CA: Paramount, 2008), DVD.

⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 18, 11. His references are to the popular musicals *Annie* (1977) and *Les misérables* (1985).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

quence of these deferrals is a misunderstanding of history as “linear narrative (the poor man’s teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—*as itself*—through time.”⁷ In heteronormative Western culture, Edelman asserts, the “Futurch” that has replaced traditional religion with worship of the Child promises to endow both individual lives and the historical moment with meaning, and thus to transcend mortality.⁸ Instead, however, futurism delivers violence enacted in the very name of attempting to secure that impossible future.

In contrast to this hopeless engine of illusory hope, Edelman locates queerness as “the place of the social order’s death drive.”⁹ He appropriates the charges of sterility, death, and negativity that straight culture has long projected onto those who refuse heteronormative codes and defiantly declares that “the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form.”¹⁰ Rejecting the false promise of future fulfillment embodied in the figure of the Child entails, for Edelman, also turning away from political engagement, which necessarily seeks to impose one or another vision of the future: “Politics (as the social elaboration of reality) and the self (as mere prosthesis maintaining the future for the figural Child) are what queerness, again as figure, necessarily destroys.”¹¹

Edelman’s controversial, antisocial stance has coincided with and informed lively debates among other queer theorists, who have produced an exciting range of approaches to the relations among temporality, identity, and sexual difference. Far less remarked upon, however, have been the implications of Edelman’s theories and other new perspectives on temporality for the growing field of age studies.¹² Even though the fact of aging is universal for anyone who lives into it, I contend that there are significant resonances between queer subjectivity and the condition of old age. No longer employed, not reproducing, perhaps technologically illiterate, and frequently without disposable income, the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future. Beyond the accumulation of recognized milestones and often-denied projection into activities—that is, “projects”—read as socially meaningful or measurable, the older subject faces a shrinking horizon of future potentiality.¹³ And like queers, the old have projected onto their bodies that which normative culture fears and represses within itself: the knowledge of eventual bodily failure and mortality.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Robert L. Caserio et al., “Forum: Conference Debates, ‘The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,’” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 821.

⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 3. I note suggestive links between Edelman’s queer antifuturity and the refusal to value duration or teleology—the “disconnection of the good life from temporality”—that Helen Small identifies in Epicureanism. Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 89–93.

¹⁰ Edelman, *No Future*, 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 30.

¹² Exceptions include Leerom Medevoi, who notes the relevance of Edelman’s work to considerations of American childhood and calls for more sustained theoretical attention to age; and Melanie Mircir, who reads Sylvia Townsend Warner’s archive of “literary remains” through queer temporality. Leerom Medevoi, “Age Trouble: A Timely Subject in American Literary and Cultural Studies,” *American Literary History* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 657–72; Melanie Mircir, “Living in Two Tenses: The Intimate Archives of Sylvia Townsend Warner” (paper presented at the MLA convention, Los Angeles, CA, 2011).

¹³ Simone de Beauvoir discusses the significance of “projects” in making life meaningful and the erosion of projects along with the “shrinking” of the future in old age. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O’Brien (New York: Norton, 1996), 437.

Idealizing youth over age in the physical body also has implications for the rhetoric and realities of the political body. Valuing the illusion of continuity forecloses change in the present and risks leading to stagnation and stasis. Edelman's recognition that Western political rhetorics of all stripes fetishize the Child and mobilize investment in the future surely rings true in current political debates in the United States, in which one side decries the excessive debt with which we are "bankrupting our children and grandchildren," while the other bemoans cuts in funding for education, prenatal and children's health care, and other areas in which we are "failing to invest in the future." Rather than securing the future, these competing investments have resulted in a political stalemate. At the same time, political discourse in the United States is saturated with social and economic ageism, including widespread hand-wringing about the insupportable economic "burden" the older generation increasingly imposes on younger workers. Futurist priorities result in proposals to revoke pensions and to ration medical interventions for older adults in order to reserve resources for younger, more highly valued citizens and for "future generations."¹⁴ While it is certainly the case that many, probably most, older individuals in Western cultures do participate in the normative ideological investment in the future that Edelman derides and measure their own value through a sense of continuity—whether genetic, affective, religious, or nationalist—with something that will outlast their individual lives, it is also true that by attributing greater value to the future, the older generation is in a way participating in its own devaluation.¹⁵ The attempt to achieve duration and chase meaning into the future denies the potential for the identification of other modes of being in the present.

The emergence of the antisocial turn in queer studies and the reevaluation of temporal signification are consequences of the devastation of the AIDS epidemic, which foreclosed the life span and redistributed the pace of time for a generation of male homosexuals.¹⁶ Judith Halberstam explains the impact of the epidemic on the queer experience of time: "The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and . . . squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand."¹⁷ In considering the difference of queer time, Halberstam posits a "queer epistemology of youth"—an "extended adolescence" available through nonnormative approaches to the life span and nonreproductive time.¹⁸ As she puts it, "Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death."¹⁹ Halberstam specifies that "queer," in this context, refers not exclusively to sexual practices but rather

¹⁴ For more on political and economic ageism, see, e.g., Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Helen Small addresses related questions about "ageism toward ourselves" and its relation to temporal perceptions in *Long Life*, 151.

¹⁶ On the antisocial turn, see Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); also see Caserio et al., "Forum: Conference Debates, 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,'" 819–36.

¹⁷ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, Sexual Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 175.

¹⁹ Judith Halberstam, "What's That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives," *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2003), <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/halberst.htm> (accessed June 9, 2011).

to “an outcome of temporality, life scheduling, and eccentric economic practices.”²⁰ For the old, too, time’s pace is quickened, its horizon foreshortened, and changes to schedules and finances are likely. Halberstam’s model for charting queer time and space suggests, therefore, intriguing possibilities for teasing out the multiple epistemologies of old age and helping to theorize the complex intersections between age and temporality, both in the sense of how time is experienced or perceived and in the sense of how available time might be filled.

Halberstam’s argument is so strongly associated with notions of youth culture and developmental delay that adapting her ideas to the analysis of old age might seem counterintuitive. However, older adults whose economic, physical, and/or cognitive resources are compromised (which is the case for a significant subset, although, to be sure, not for all) or who are marginalized by widespread, institutionalized ageism may well find themselves outside mainstream temporal structures.²¹ Identifying with residual cultural practices, the old may also feel as alienated and out of step with mainstream habits, assumptions, and values as the younger generation, who are developing emergent forms.²² Elizabeth Freeman articulates the ways in which the residual is stigmatized with an embodied suggestion of belatedness or obsolescence: “Bodies . . . come to ‘matter’ through kinetic and sensory forms of normativity, modes of belonging that make themselves felt as a barely acknowledged relief to those who fit in, while the experience of not fitting in feels both like having the wrong body and like living in a different time zone.”²³ Like other minorities, the elderly often find themselves “outside the rational time of capital, nation, and family” and therefore without a comfortable place in chrononormative structures and institutions.²⁴ The ways in which these and other critics of queer temporality identify and theorize potentially asynchronous modes of time open up the interpretive possibilities for recognizing alternative temporal experiences of old age.

“SUNRISE, SUNSET”: NARRATING THE LIFE COURSE

Although, when she is a child, Annie sings loudly and optimistically about the sun coming out “tomorrow,” by the time she grows into an old woman, she is expected to quiet down, keep out of the way, and contemplate the setting of the sun at the end of the day. Margaret Morganroth Gullette has documented ways in which the pervasive ageism of Western cultures is often coded into a narrative structure that associates old age with inevitable decline and decay.²⁵ Although this “decline ideology” might seem to work against the futurist assumption of redemptive hope, Gullette explains that we are trained to assume the decline of the old in order to make room for the more-highly-valued young.²⁶ To counter this tendency, Gullette urges the proliferation of

²⁰ Ibid. Indeed, in our current historical moment, when gay marriage and parenting are gaining greater visibility, the relevance of sexual orientation to the condition of reproductive and chronological normativity may be eroding.

²¹ Medevoi makes a different but related point when he suggests that deviations from “anticipated norms” in any age category might produce what Halberstam calls “queer temporalities.” Medevoi, “Age Trouble,” 670.

²² See Raymond Williams, “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent” and “Structures of Feeling,” in his *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–36.

²³ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories, Perverse Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 172.

²⁴ Roderick Ferguson in Carolyn Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 23 (2007): 180.

²⁵ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Gullette, *Agewise*.

²⁶ In one powerful essay, Gullette argues that the fashion system teaches us to detach ourselves from and then discard clothes and other no-longer-fashionable commodities *as a means* of training ourselves for our own obsolescence in old

“progress narratives,” which project “a moving image of the self through its past and onward to its better future.”²⁷ Mary Russo, on the other hand, elaborates on the *dangers* of the progress model: “Hope, desire, understanding, and optimism seem ineluctably joined against the forces of the past, the backward, the unenlightened, the old. The trajectory of a lifetime, for instance, is ideologically weighted in favor of a future goal, a going forward into empty time.”²⁸ Whereas in Edelman’s Lacanian model, the futurist search for (impossible) meaning and fulfillment can be opposed by queer refusal of meaning, Russo maintains that it is futurism itself that, in effect, renders time meaningless: “It is negation,” she explains, “the against-time, an ana-chronism which propels the mindful and embodied soul into life. The seeming meaninglessness of life is a function of the ‘progressiveness’ which steps over one death and then another.”²⁹ Rejecting both progress and decline as limiting models for the structure of life, Russo goes on to defend instead “randomness as a way of understanding and assuming the risks of aging.”³⁰ In a similar vein, Helen Small suggests not only that the “prescriptiveness, or assumed validity, of the narrative view of lives” is problematic (particularly in cases where advanced years bring diminished capacities) but also that “very complex narrative structures” could be deployed to capture more effectively the multifaceted and disjointed lives we all live.³¹ To insist on a single kind of narrative, or even on the narrative unity of any given life, can be unnecessarily limiting. A rejection of reproductive futurist ideology not only might open up the kinds of stories that could be told about the life course but also could validate lives that do not cohere into a recognizable narrative.³²

Individual narratives of progress, decline, anachronistic randomness, and multiplicity take place not in a vacuum but within—sometimes constrained by but also helping to construct—broader national and global narratives. Pointing to the loss of systematic progress in an employment system that no longer rewards seniority, for example, Gullette asserts that progress narratives for aging are now more necessary than ever.³³ I would argue, however, that with eroding economic security and fraying social stability, we might seek new narrative developments that chart changing possibilities for the life course and evolving assumptions about the future—both

age. Margaret Morganroth Gullette, “The Other End of the Fashion Cycle: Practicing Loss, Learning Decline,” in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 34–55.

²⁷ Gullette, *Agewise*, 149, 154. Although she emphasizes the value of progress narratives (even as “positive illusions” for those facing definitive decline), Gullette recognizes the “irrelevance” of blithely insisting on “positive aging,” particularly given disparities in material circumstances and the pervasive social damage of ageism, and at one point she calls for alternatives to the “too narrow” dichotomy of progress versus decline (she offers satire, jeremiad, and tragedy as possible alternatives). *Ibid.*, 157, 154.

²⁸ Mary Russo, “Age and the Scandal of Anachronism,” in Woodward, *Figuring Age*, 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22. Russo draws her notion of anachronism from the work of British philosopher Gillian Rose.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

³¹ Small, *Long Life*, 117.

³² That the phrasing of this consideration of alternatives to reproductive futurism deploys the language of the future to imagine other (redemptive) models is evidence that I do not join Edelman in his radical call for the complete rejection of politics and futurity. Rather, I seek to understand how reproductive futurism (and its manifestation in literature and culture) constrains our understanding of both the individual life span and the nation, and I urge a recalibration of value (again, through the analysis of cultural artifacts) that does not insist on continuity through reproduction and that does not automatically elevate the young and the new over the old and experienced. Of course, Edelman would be contemptuous of, though not surprised by, my recuperation of his idea.

³³ Gullette, *Agewise*, 152.

the uncertain old age of individuals who cannot count on job security, stable pensions, or property values and the uncertain future of national entities in North America and in Europe whose cultural and material dominance appear to be diminishing. These narratives are likely to complicate and potentially challenge the cult of youth widespread in Anglo-American and, more broadly, Western culture, as well as accompanying myths of growth and expansion.

Texts that employ the narrative device of reverse aging, such as *Time's Arrow*, a novel by Martin Amis that narrates a Nazi doctor's life in reverse, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, a film directed by David Fincher about a man who ages backward through the twentieth century, can reframe ideas about the past, the future, and the process of aging. Foregrounding and defamiliarizing the effects of aging, such narratives raise significant questions about the physical and psychological manifestations of old age, as well as about characteristic narratives of progress and decline. If, as Elizabeth Freeman suggests, "temporality is a mode of implantation through which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts," then texts that reverse the somatic facts by reversing the processes of aging can expose something meaningful about those institutional forces.³⁴ At the same time, they inevitably offset, and thereby highlight, the link between an individual's chronology and his or her historical and political context. In different ways, Amis's novel and Fincher's film investigate the experience of aging through narratives of reversal that question the ethics of reproductive futurism and the Western cult of youth and probe their effects on constructions of old age, as well as on the myths of cultural superiority and political destiny. Each text not only offers a depiction of complex temporalities of an individual subject but also exposes a national narrative of development as an ongoing deferral that actually entails stagnation.

"THE ATAVISTIC AND THE MODERN": ANTIFUTURITY IN *TIME'S ARROW*

In seeking to purify the Aryan race and perfect the German nation through the elimination of "degenerate" elements of the population, Nazi ideology is the epitome of reproductive futurism at its most horrific. It is significant, then, that when crafting this fictionalized story of a Nazi doctor, Martin Amis resists the redemptive logic of futurity, with its false promise to realize meaning in an unfolding teleology, and offers instead an untelling, or inversion, of historical events. Faith in human progress—the dangerous legacy of the Enlightenment—is one of the master narratives that the events of the Holocaust undermined. As Amis explains in an afterword, "the offense was unique, not in its cruelty, nor in its cowardice, but in its style—in its combination of the atavistic and the modern. It was, at once, reptilian and 'logistical.'"³⁵ The Nazi's application of modern "efficiency" to the most primitive aggressive impulses exposes the fallacy of progressivism. Moreover, tracing the life of a perpetrator of mass extermination backward illustrates the moral backwardness of Nazi ideology—a rationalization of genocide that, as Greg Harris points out, was considered "forward thinking" by its adherents.³⁶ The logical distortion of this "psychotically inverted world," Amis explains in an interview, was such that "if you did it backward in time, it would make sense."³⁷

³⁴ Freeman, "Introduction: Theorizing Queer Temporalities," 160.

³⁵ Amis, *Time's Arrow*, 168.

³⁶ Greg Harris, "Men Giving Birth to New World Orders: Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*," *Studies in the Novel* 31, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 489–505.

³⁷ Anthony DeCurtis, "Britain's Mavericks," *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1991, 146.

The reader first encounters the doctor at the center of this narrative, Odilo Unverdorben, at the moment of his death in small-town New England, where he has lived in hiding as “Tod Friendly.” Many critics have pointed out the doubled irony of both his pseudonym and his given surname: “Tod” is the German word for death, and “Unverdorben” means “uncorrupted, unspoiled, innocent.”³⁸ The relation between innocence and corruption—a binary that undergirds the value system of reproductive futurism—is a pivotal concern of the novel. The doubleness of Odilo’s names is an echo of the uncanny doubleness of the protagonist himself, for the novel is narrated by a consciousness, or conscience—he calls himself a “passenger or parasite” and, elsewhere, an “exiled or demoted soul”—who is born within Odilo at the moment of his death and whose own existence is trapped in a reversed reenactment of Odilo’s life.³⁹ This Soul cannot communicate with his host nor exert any influence on his actions or movements, and he has no access to Odilo’s conscious thoughts, but he finds himself “awash” in Odilo’s emotions.⁴⁰ He is born “not [as] a complete innocent,” he tells us, but rather “equipped with a fair amount of value-free information, or general knowledge,” including scientific facts, grammar rules, clichés, and jokes. That these facts are, indeed, “value free” for Soul is underscored when we recognize that, although he lists “1945” among a series of historically important dates, he “knows,” it is evident, when he later arrives at Auschwitz and believes that he and Odilo are healing victims and creating Jews, that he has no understanding of the moral significance of the Holocaust. And the clichés he has at hand, the rhetoric of the “you’re-okay-I’m-okay” culture into which Soul has been “born” (“It’s swings and roundabouts. You win some, you lose some. It evens out. It measures up. What goes around comes around.”), are exposed as being not only trite but also dangerously false, as Soul tries but fails to understand the circumstances of Odilo’s irreversible crimes.⁴¹ He has access to the “ready-made” speech of the symbolic order from the outset, but it never offers him the “meaning” of Odilo’s experience that he seeks.⁴²

Although Soul does not fully understand his environment, his intuition tells him something is not quite right.⁴³ He is aware of “the heat of fear and shame” that Odilo “feels” (or, rather, represses by projecting onto his internalized but inaccessible other), and he senses that his environment is uncannily distorted: “Watch. We’re getting younger. We are. We’re getting stronger. We’re even getting taller. I don’t quite recognize this world we’re in. Everything is familiar but

³⁸ On the significance of Odilo’s names, see, e.g., James Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 2nd ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 136; Richard Menke, “Narrative Reversals and the Thermodynamics of History in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 4 (1998): 965.

³⁹ Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, 16, 8. I follow Chatman and Phelan, who, in a humanizing gesture, refer to this unnamed, disembodied character as “Soul.” Seymour Chatman, “Backwards,” *Narrative* 17, no. 1 (January 2009): 31–55; James Phelan, “The Ethics and Aesthetics of Backward Narration in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*,” in *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future*, ed. Jakob Lothe, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and James Phelan (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012).

⁴⁰ Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, 7. Many critics have discussed the influence of Robert Jay Lifton’s documentation of psychic “doubling” in his study *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), which Amis acknowledges in the afterword as the source for his decision to split his protagonist into an actor/thinker and a conscience/feeler. See, e.g., Sue Vice, “Formal Matters: Martin Amis, *Time’s Arrow*,” in her *Holocaust Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 30–37; Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 136–39.

⁴¹ Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, 6, 9.

⁴² Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 2010), 366.

⁴³ For an analysis of Soul’s periodic “pockets of reliability,” see Phelan, “The Ethics and Aesthetics of Backward Narration in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*.”

not at all reassuring. Far from it. This is a world of mistakes, diametrical mistakes. . . . It just seems to me that the film is running backward.”⁴⁴ By “diametrical mistakes,” Soul invokes both his own inverted understanding of his circumstances and the profound ethical/philosophical mistake at the center of Nazi ideology. Exposing these through the embodied reversal of Odilo’s physical changes over time reveals the dangerous mistake that dismisses the significance of the aging body and seeks meaning and fulfillment in younger, future generations.

“The humiliating decay of the body has been an endlessly insistent theme” throughout Amis’s oeuvre, Joseph Brooker tells us, and in this novel Amis exuberantly depicts each reversal of Odilo’s physical deterioration with characteristic virtuosity.⁴⁵ As we read his accounts of his reversed age trajectory, however—his improvements in strength and mobility, his greater facility in the bathroom, his increasing virility—readers are subjected to the tension between the narrator’s elation with each physical achievement and the increasing sense of dread that the novel builds through clues in Odilo’s nightmares about what lies ahead, or, rather, behind, in the history of the Nazi doctor. Soul senses that with increasing youth he is losing the “passive uniform of old age” that protects Odilo from exposure and retribution for his crimes because of a culture-wide discounting of the old: “The old aren’t cruel, are they,” Soul reflects. “We don’t look to the old, to the stooped, for cruelty. Cruelty, which is bright-eyed, which is pink-tongued . . .”⁴⁶ Ageist assumptions become part of the “uniform” of age that allows the heinous Nazi doctor to take cover in suburban America.

If cruelty is, for Soul, associated with youth rather than age, the very greatest power and danger he attributes to the very youngest humans. Describing a recurring dream that torments Odilo, Soul explains: “You naturally associate babies with defenselessness. But that’s not how it is in the dream. In the dream, the baby wields incredible power. It has the power, the ultimate power of life and death over its parents, its older brothers and sisters, its grandparents, and indeed everybody else who is gathered in the room.”⁴⁷ Eventually we learn that the dream replays a moment when a crying baby exposed to Odilo the hiding place of a large group of Jews. Tellingly, the dream affects Odilo with his own kind of regression to infancy: he “weeps like a baby before [after] the dreams happen,” revealing a degree of remorse for his crimes, perhaps, but also underscoring the irreversibility of those actions and the continuing power of the past over the present and the future.⁴⁸ The power of babies that echoes throughout this novel can be read as an implicit critique of futurist ideology and its fetishization of a particular vision of the future, along with the dehumanization and destruction of those who do not fit that vision.

The logic through which violence is deployed in order to “protect” the supposed “innocence” of the Child is explained by Edelman in his critique of reprofuturism. The Child “marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism.”⁴⁹ Quoting the bomb-making guide of the militantly antiabortion group the Army of God, Edelman points

⁴⁴ Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, 8. On the relevance of Freud’s notion of the “uncanny” to Amis’s novel, see Diedrick, *Understanding Martin Amis*, 139.

⁴⁵ Joseph Brooker, “The Middle Years of Martin Amis,” in *British Fiction Today*, ed. Philip Tew and Rod Mengham (London: Continuum, 2006), 5. See http://www.martinamisweb.com/scholarship_files/Brooker_middleyears.pdf.

⁴⁶ Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, 23.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 22.

out that those who use violence to “protect,” say, the unborn fetus see no contradiction between their “pro-life” stance and the murderous actions undertaken in the name of reproductive futurism. Nazis, too, imagined themselves to be participating in a reproductive project—certainly one “invest[ed] in the rigid sameness of identity” and one that, according to Greg Harris, was thought to have even greater value than sexual reproduction. As a Nazi doctor, Odilo has mastered “an eerie means of male birthing, but his contact with creation comes by way of his control over what forms of life are permitted a right to life, and those forms of life that must be destroyed. . . . With the conception of a militarized, National Womb that gives birth to a nation through war, the German soldier-male comes to perceive himself as playing an even more essential role in re-production than the German woman.”⁵⁰ Amis’s novel centers on this version of reproductive futurism that reframes murder as creation. That, of all his crimes, the “bomb baby” is the figure that consistently haunts Odilo in later life reiterates the inflated power attributed to the figure of the Child, even this “degenerate” Jewish child who is destroyed to protect the racial purity of theoretical Aryan children.⁵¹

In a twist on the “male birthing” that Harris describes, Soul imagines, from his inverted perspective, that his/Odilo’s work at Auschwitz is to *create* Jews: “Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make a people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with fire.”⁵² Soul goes on to claim the Jews as his own children (“I am childless; but the Jews are my children and I love them as a parent should”), and he believes that the Nazis’ mission in “creating” and later “dispersing” them is “to make Germany whole. To heal her wounds and make her whole.”⁵³ This misreading of the eugenic project (one of the “diametrical errors” that Soul has predicted) is, perhaps, the novel’s most explicit evocation of the Lacanian search for imaginary “wholeness” that, according to Edelman, fundamentally accounts for reproductive futurism.

Although Soul prides himself on his participation in creating a special race, both at the beginning of the narrative (the end of “Tod’s” life) and at the end (the beginning of Odilo’s life) Soul marks his difference from Odilo’s tendency to categorize and devalue individuals according to ethnic, sexual, socioeconomic, age-related, or other hierarchies. Early on, he tells us:

I’m way ahead of Tod on this basic question of human *difference*. Tod has a sensing mechanism that guides his responses to all identifiable subspecies. His feeling tone jolts into specialized attitudes and readiesses: one for Hispanics, one for Asians, one for Arabs, one for Amerindians, one for blacks, one for Jews. And he has a secondary repertoire of alerted hostility toward pimps, hookers, junkies, the insane, the clubfooted, the hairlipped, the homosexual male, and the very old.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Harris, “Men Giving Birth to New World Orders.”

⁵¹ Odilo’s reaction to this “bomb baby” is also intensified by his repression of his own young daughter’s death while he is working at Auschwitz. While watching a three-year-old girl crawl on the hospital’s waiting-room floor, Soul experiences a moment when time suddenly reverses into a normal trajectory, suggesting that Odilo was disarmed for a moment, and his separate, doubled selves were momentarily integrated as Soul experiences a “lucid interval” in which the baby crawls forward. The vulnerability of Odilo’s self-protective doubling to memories of his daughter, along with the recurring dream of the “bomb baby,” explains why, in his earlier (later) life in disguise in the United States, Odilo refuses to become sexually involved with women who are mothers.

⁵² Amis, *Time’s Arrow*, 119–20.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 152, 141.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

These categories of difference, which depend on what Edelman, after Lacan, calls “the structural logic of opposition,” continue throughout his life to represent, for Odilo, that investment in the “rigid sameness of identity” on which reproductive futurism rests.⁵⁵ Soul goes on to identify how the repression inherent in the construction of binaries results in violence against others:

The homosexual male is fine—is pretty good news, in fact, on the whole—*so long as he knows he's homosexual*. It's when he is, and thinks he isn't: then there's confusion. Then there's danger. The way Tod feels about men, about women, about children: there is confusion. There is danger. Don't get me wrong. I'm not fingering Tod for a fruit, not exactly. I'm just saying that things might be less confused, and less dangerous, if he could soberly entertain the idea of being homosexual. That's what I'm saying.⁵⁶

Of course, if one could “soberly entertain the idea” of being the other, there would be no need to project the Jew and the queer into the category of “degenerate” who then must be eliminated to protect future generations.⁵⁷ In contrast to Odilo's attitudes, Soul explains his own “original” openness to difference: “All these distinctions I've had to learn up on. Originally at least I had no preselected feelings about anybody, one way or the other. . . . Visualize the body I don't have, and see this: a sentimentalized fetus, with faithful smile.”⁵⁸ Identifying himself as a fetus—unborn, impotent, and innocent—Soul marks himself as unaffected (at least at the outset) by that corrosive structural logic, despite the ready-made access to language with which he was “born.”

Although, toward the end of the book, he declares the young, post- [pre-] war Odilo “innocent” and “purged of menace and sickness,” Soul documents the very moment at which, as he enters into language and takes on the rules of grammar, Odilo is simultaneously inducted into the “category mistake” of oppositional thinking that made the entire Nazi project imaginable:⁵⁹ “you can't eat chicks. Not the little good chicks. Because chicks are good. You can just stroke them and everything. But you *can* eat ducks. Because ducks are fat.”⁶⁰ Soul immediately recognizes this as a serious error (“Wait. Mistake there. Mistake. Category”) when his host begins to lose the rules of grammar: “We brang, we putten, their own selves we token all away. Why so many children and babies? What got into us? Why so many? . . . I choiced it, did I? Why? Because babies are fat?”⁶¹ In Odilo's final moments of linguistic coherence, Soul finally acknowledges that Odilo's participation in the Final Solution was a choice founded on a style of thinking that makes distinctions between chicks and ducks, Jews and Gentiles, the old and the young. The result of his realization, and/or of Odilo's transgressions, is the binding together of Odilo's doubled selves in what appears to be an endless trek back and forth across his life. For the novel does not end with Odilo's conception, which might have been expected to terminate the existence of both Soul and his host body; instead, Soul suddenly sees an arrow shot by an archer moving forward through space, suggesting that he and Odilo are about to relive again the events of Odilo's

⁵⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 22, 21.

⁵⁶ Amis, *Time's Arrow*, 41.

⁵⁷ Edelman's construct of the “*sinthomosexual*,” onto whom the death drive inherent in normative culture is projected, is relevant here, as is Odilo's sadistic misogyny toward his wife, Herta. Edelman, *No Future*, 33–66. In a divergent reading of this passage, Harris argues that Soul exposes his own homophobia here by “underplaying” Odilo's “sexual confusion.” Harris, “Men Giving Birth to New World Orders.”

⁵⁸ Amis, *Time's Arrow*, 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 163–64.

life in their original order. Such unending repetition is a fitting nonfuture for the murderous Nazi doctor, as it enacts the death drive that, although disowned and projected onto the “degenerate” other, is actually the repressed drive that motivates reproductive futurism. The endless repetition of Odilo’s experience renders meaningless the fantasy of progress and the illusion of “forward thinking.”

Amis has asserted that the Holocaust was unique “in its style” and that, in response, he has written a stylistically unique untelling of the life of a perpetrator. According to Edelman, following de Man, irony, “with its undoing of identity and refusal of historical progression,” leaves narrative (for de Man) and futurity (for Edelman) “suspended, interrupted, [and] disrupted.”⁶² The ironies enabled by the reversal of the aging experience are redoubled by the suspension of this duo, Soul and Odilo, in an endlessly reversing immersion in the events of Odilo’s life. It is another kind of irony that, after publishing this novel that reverses and ironizes such oppositions as youth and age, birth and death, power and helplessness, Martin Amis was castigated for highly controversial (and, Amis later claimed, satirical) warnings, made during an interview, about the coming “silver tsunami” of “demented very old people” and his suggestion that “euthanasia booths” be set up on UK street corners to avoid “a sort of civil war between the old and the young.”⁶³ Although he constructed *Time’s Arrow* as a fictional challenge to the futurist logic of oppositions and the destruction of those deemed “undesirable,” his later comments suggest that Amis has not fully internalized Soul’s insights about difference, “category mistakes,” the danger of fetishizing youth, and the projection of the feared part of the self onto the abhorrent other.⁶⁴

“THERE ARE NO RULES TO THIS THING”: MULTIPLE TRAJECTORIES IN *THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON*

If *Time’s Arrow*, in its bracingly ironic mode, “shatters narrative temporality” by reversing not only chronological events but also ethical meaning and exposing the destructiveness of a nominally forward-looking “social” vision, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* offers an apparently nostalgic tale about a love that transcends, even as it also succumbs to, time and corporeal contingencies.⁶⁵ In contrast to the eroticism of power and violence that Amis reveals as the engine of National Socialism, Fincher’s film depicts a rarified, albeit tragically embodied, romance. Moreover, whereas “category mistakes” and the destruction of the threatening “other” structure *Time’s Arrow*, *Benjamin Button* portrays a remarkably harmonious New Orleans in which racism seems almost entirely elided.⁶⁶ And yet I find telling correspondences between these two texts. Both central characters (i.e., Benjamin and Soul) have in common not only that they move through time in a body that is getting younger in vivid (visual or verbal) detail but also that both

⁶² Edelman, *No Future*, 87.

⁶³ Caroline Davies, “Martin Amis in New Row over ‘Euthanasia Booths,’” *Guardian*, January 24, 2010, sec. Books, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jan/24/martin-amis-euthanasia-booths-alzheimers> (accessed July 10, 2011).

⁶⁴ Kathleen Woodward describes this process in “The Mirror Stage of Old Age: Marcel Proust’s *The Past Recaptured*,” in *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, *Theories of Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 53–71.

⁶⁵ On the relation between irony and narrative temporality, see Edelman, *No Future*, 23–24. On the ironic and nostalgic modes and their shared reliance on affective agency, see Linda Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html#N38> (accessed July 4, 2011).

⁶⁶ Numerous critics noted the omission of race relations as a serious failure of the film. See, e.g., Scott Foundas, “The Curious Case of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*: Old Man Pitt,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 24, 2008, <http://www.laweekly.com/2008-12-25/film-tv/old-man-pitt/>.

remain remarkably passive, as well as “innocent and well-meaning.”⁶⁷ In addition, each of these characters is intimately linked to another whose forward life course lends an uncanny and resonant sense of anachronism to their experiences. And just as the reversal of aging in *Time’s Arrow* responds to historical events in Europe and acknowledges the failure of the Western myth of progress, so, too, an individual’s age reversal in *Benjamin Button* is depicted as a response to historical trauma and ultimately points toward the loss of faith in America’s futurist narrative of increasing power and prosperity. By “youthening” its protagonist through a retrospective that carries viewers from the celebration of Armistice Day in 1918 to August 29, 2005, the day New Orleans was devastated by Hurricane Katrina, *Benjamin Button* contrasts the cult of youth and the thrill of military victory with the recognition that the sun might not shine quite so brightly “tomorrow.” This film challenges assumptions about the life course not only through the reversed aging of Benjamin but also through the proliferation of counternarratives and digressions. These various fragments of the film do not comfortably resolve into a coherent whole but leave us without a clear path “forward,” facing instead a state of narrative and national stasis.

What it means to look or act one’s age is one of the questions at the heart of the film. Born with the physical characteristics—but not the cognitive capacities—of an old man,⁶⁸ Benjamin is abandoned by his father at the entrance to an old age home and raised by Queenie, a caregiver at the home. We watch Benjamin move through the expected stages of human development—playing with his food, learning to walk, making friends, experiencing erotic pleasure—but all standard models of development are disrupted by Benjamin’s anomalous corporeality. Much of the power of the film lies in watching Brad Pitt challenge perceptions of age and acting; it can be exhilarating to watch the spectacle of an old, wizened, disabled body emerging into Pitt’s powerful physical presence and then into a series of adorable, though increasingly helpless, children. And given Mary Russo’s point that “we measure ourselves by the aging of everyone—from close relatives to film stars,” the uncanny effects of Benjamin’s youthening also have a disorienting effect on the viewer’s internalized sense of chronocorporeality.⁶⁹

Throughout his trajectory from chronological childhood in the old-age home until the “second childhood” at the end of his life, however, Benjamin changes hardly at all in temperament. His wide-eyed wonder, personal integrity, and emotional stability remain with him apparently from infancy until he is overtaken by dementia. Some reviewers have attributed Benjamin’s resilience to his isolation in the absence of a peer group and to the way he was “humbled early by the vicissitudes of aging [and therefore] did not experience the arrogance that comes with youth.”⁷⁰ However, without a recognizable age cohort with whom to experience change and without an opportunity to grow into the successive stages of life, Benjamin is left nearly as passive and silent as

⁶⁷ “Innocent and well-meaning” is a phrase Menke uses when describing *Time’s Arrow* as “*Forrest Gump* meets *Schindler’s List*.” The analogy is notable because *Forrest Gump* and *Benjamin Button* share the same screenwriter, Eric Roth, and many commentators have identified similarities between the two films. Richard Menke, “Narrative Reversals and the Thermodynamics of History in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 44, no. 4 (1998): 974.

⁶⁸ In this respect and many others, the film differs from its nominal source, a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald whose title character is born with the temperament and intellectual profile as well as the body of an eighty-year-old. F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” in F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tales of the Jazz Age* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 192–224, <http://www.archive.org/stream/talesofjazzage00fitzuoft#page/ii/mode/2up>.

⁶⁹ Russo, “Age and the Scandal of Anachronism,” 25.

⁷⁰ Desiree Compton and Rosellen Rosich, “Movie Review: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 21 (2009): 284–313.

the Soul trapped counterchronologically in Odilo Unverdorben's body. The notion of getting younger over time might sound appealing in a youth-worshiping culture (indeed, one reviewer predicted that the film seemed likely to become "a cult film with the Botox crowd"⁷¹). However, as Roberta Maierhofer has observed, Fincher's film challenges the binary between youth and age by illustrating that in emotional and ultimately also physical terms, getting younger over time is just as challenging as getting older.⁷² Edelman asserts that "the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust," but when that child appears at the end of a long life, his incapacities and dependence expose the illusion behind the Ponzi scheme that inflates the value of newness and untried potential.⁷³

Benjamin's "curious case" of un-aging is set against the normative chronology of his beloved Daisy (Cate Blanchett), for whom the emotional challenges and perceived loss of social value associated with aging for women are intensified by her lover's reversed trajectory. Although Daisy ages beautifully and gracefully, her increasing sense of loss is evident as she evolves from a fiery, adventurous, self-absorbed, and talented young dancer to a subdued Southern matron. Although a devastating car accident that ended her career hastened this transition for Daisy, Benjamin points out that "even if nothing happened, there was only a short window of time" she could have continued as a professional dancer. Daisy replies, in tears: "I just don't like getting old"—a frequently uttered sentiment by women in midlife that takes on intensified poignancy here given Benjamin's inverted journey toward youth.⁷⁴ During her final sexual encounter with Benjamin, when she is in her midfifties and Benjamin is around twenty, the shame Blanchett expresses through her gestures and facial expressions, as well as her words when he touches her ("Benjamin, I'm an old woman now!"), convey the sense that she ought not, at her age, to be seeking erotic pleasure—most especially not with a man who looks like the young Brad Pitt.⁷⁵ Although the fantasy of heterosexual love, as Edelman reminds us, aims to "deliver" us from the knowledge of mortality into "endless narratives of generation," the inversion of Benjamin's and Daisy's physiological paths leaves them with a heightened awareness of the inevitability of decline and death.⁷⁶ When Daisy asks, "Will you still love me when my skin grows old and saggy?" Benjamin replies, "Will you still love me when I have acne? When I wet the bed? When I'm afraid of what's under the stairs?"⁷⁷ From this perspective, the film highlights the vulnerability of both the young and the old and identifies the ways in which, even in their so-called prime, adults are haunted by the anxiety about decline that constitutes the repressed core of reproductive futurism.⁷⁸

The film's response to that anxiety is to alternate between competing visions of resignation and transcendence. This ambivalence is evident, for example, in the way the lovers take turns asserting and denying the redemptive potential of love. When one mourns, "Nothing lasts," the other asserts, "Some things last" or "I will never stop loving you." In his review of the film, Eric

⁷¹ Foundas, "The Curious Case of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*."

⁷² Roberta Maierhofer, "Aging and Memory as Continuity and Change: Narrated Aesthetics of Growing Old" (paper presented at "Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics" conference, University of Toronto, March 25–27, 2011).

⁷³ Edelman, *No Future*, 11.

⁷⁴ Scene 13, "Meeting in the Middle," in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

⁷⁵ Scene, 14, "Postcards," in *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Edelman, *No Future*, 82.

⁷⁷ Scene 12, "When It Was Supposed to Happen," in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Foundas persuasively attributes this ambivalence (he reads it as incoherence) to a tug-of-war between screenwriter Eric Roth's sentimentality and director David Fincher's more acerbic sensibility.⁷⁹ These conflicting visions are accommodated by the fragmented, picaresque structure of the film, which intersperses in the story of Benjamin's journey toward youth and his romance with Daisy snippets of narrative about the individuals from whom he has learned something along the way. For example, Daisy's loss of fulfillment as a dancer (which remains devastating even though the film suggests, in a futurist move, that she is somewhat compensated by teaching children to dance) is countered by the story of Benjamin's earlier lover, Elizabeth (Tilda Swinton), who failed to swim the English Channel in her twenties but succeeds in her late sixties. Moreover, through the inclusion of multiple narratives, the film suggests that an individual life intersects with, and in a way contains, many others in a way that cannot be reduced to a chartable trajectory or to a romantic/erotic attachment.⁸⁰ By disrupting the narrative sequence of the love story, the film's structure destabilizes what Edelman calls "the royal road to consequence" and undermines the lure toward a redemptive, unifying, reprofuturist "meaning."

Significantly, though, Benjamin's and Daisy's cross-aged arcs through time as well as the other fragmented, disjointed episodes are framed and periodically interrupted by the labored breathing, croaking speech, and pained expressions of the eighty-one-year-old Daisy in a hospital bed, experiencing her final moments of life while the hospital staff prepare—or, rather, fail to prepare—for Hurricane Katrina. Although parts of the film celebrate human agency and freedom from rigid age-related roles, it also insists that that we look closely and often at Daisy's wasted face and hear her moans of pain, exposing to us the dramatized experience of dying. Daisy resists the notion that her story is ending and murmurs the resonant word from the film's title: "I'm curious," she says, "about what comes next." But with the fragments of Benjamin's story and those of his friends frequently interrupted by Daisy's groans and her daughter's calls for more morphine, as well as by the weather forecasters' changing predictions about the projected path of the hurricane, the sentimental recuperation of the love story and the nostalgic lure of the American past (and the implied, imagined potential of the future) are disrupted by the reminder of grim, inexorable somatic and environmental realities.

Intersecting with the characters' encounters with birth and death, youth and age, and love and loss, a third narrative line in the film consists of the historical trajectory of what Henry Luce, editor of *Time* magazine, famously called "The American Century." In the context of twenty-first-century fears about personal and national decline, this aspect of *Benjamin Button* may at first seem like a comforting fantasy in which the progress of time brings increased youthfulness via a sepia-hued, comfortingly nostalgic journey through American history. The version of history it offers, however, is bookended by trauma: Benjamin's narrative begins with the victory celebrations at the end of World War I that kicked off the period of American global emergence, but his condition is tied to the personal tragedy of the city's clockmaker, who built a clock that moves backward as a response to his grief over the loss of his son and so many other young men in the war. The film ends with the arrival of Hurricane Katrina, invoking the natural, human, and institutional (and racially inflected) disasters that the storm set in motion. The questions about maturity, progress, decline, and individual agency raised by this film take on a more pronounced

⁷⁹ Foundas, "The Curious Case of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*."

⁸⁰ Small makes a similar point in her discussion of narratives of aging in Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*: "Our life is not singular . . . but plural. We have multiple ways of being; we live also not merely as isolated units but caught up in, and in important ways inextricable from, other lives." Small, *Long Life*, 106.

political valence given its release in a time of national instability. In *A Shrinking Island*, Joshua Esty writes about the cultural implications of the contraction of British power in the mid-twentieth century. How, he asks, was English literary culture “shaped and inflected, not just by the accumulation and concentration of power in metropolitan London from 1880 to 1930, but also by the relative diffusion of that power from 1930 to 1960?”⁸¹ He then traces the thematic and aesthetic evolution of British literature through which writers reframed notions of national identity and invented new cultural forms with which to articulate it. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the United States seems to be going through what might come to be considered a similar contraction of influence. In this moment of political—and often personal—instability and widespread anxiety, it seems reasonable to ask what effect the apparent erosion of both international power and personal security might be having on American culture, on expectations or hope for the future, and on related perspectives about youth, age, and available life-course narratives. *Benjamin Button* offers a conflicted and ambivalent response, but one that, in the preapocalyptic moment at the end of the film, registers a kind of impasse that might make room for alternatives to limiting narratives of progress and decline.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant defines the “impasse” as “a space of time lived without a narrative genre . . . a holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety.”⁸² But it is also a historical space that demands adaptation and adjustment, and in this sense it might offer its own promise of the potential for change. As Berlant explains, “one takes a pass to avoid something or to get somewhere. But the impasse is a cul-de-sac, [where] one keeps moving, albeit paradoxically, in the same space. . . . Its unbound temporality marks a delay that demands activity. This activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading.” Sometimes, the impasse can “dissolve the old sureties and force improvisation” in potentially transformative ways.⁸³ It is with such an impasse that *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* stalls the apparent futurist imperative as well as the trajectory of personal and national decline.

Although Fincher’s film centers on Benjamin and Daisy, after it has ended we are left neither with the old woman, who has led a rich life with a remarkable, though unusual, loving relationship, nor with the baby/old man, who has declined into a youthful dementia and then ceased to exist, but with the next generation, their middle-aged, Generation X daughter, Caroline.⁸⁴ She seems awed and somewhat cowed by the intensity of her mother’s experiences as an object of love and as a traveler toward death. Her face has its own incipient wrinkles, but we know nothing of her experiences other than that she fears she has been a disappointment to her mother—and a failure in the drive for reproductive futurism—because she “hasn’t amounted to much.”⁸⁵ Although Caroline has been trying to connect with—to say goodbye to—her dying mother, the remote Daisy has been more interested in hearing (and thereby passively revealing to Caroline) the contents of Benjamin’s diary. When the hurricane hits, Caroline misses the

⁸¹ Joshua Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 2.

⁸² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 199.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 199–200.

⁸⁴ This is a marked difference from Roth’s screenplay for *Forrest Gump*, the final scene of which epitomizes sentimental reproductive futurism as we watch the widowed Forrest send his young son off for his first day of school.

⁸⁵ Scene 1, “Mr. Gateau’s Clock,” in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Her mother describes her as having seemed “somewhat lost” even in childhood and says that this reminds her of Benjamin, as though Caroline, despite aging normally, has unknowingly inherited an element of her father’s displacement.

moment of her mother's death. Without the reassurance of a familiar past (she has just learned the secret of her paternity), and without any narrative direction toward a hopeful future, Caroline seems stuck in a narrative paralysis, about to be engulfed by the destructive storm.

GENERATIONAL TIME UNTOLD

According to Judith Halberstam, an important element of heteronormative temporality is “the time of inheritance[, which] refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability.”⁸⁶ On the final day of her life, Daisy finally passes down to Caroline the story of her origins (in a move that echoes Benjamin's father's attempt, at the very end of his life, to reveal himself to and form a relationship with his son).⁸⁷ Going through the birthday cards that Benjamin sent each year of her childhood and identifying how old she would have been when he wrote each card is one way Caroline tries to reconstruct, temporally, that absent relationship. The diary Caroline reads is full of homilies and advice as well as information, but its many messages often conflict with each other, offering the adult child—the offspring of Benjamin and Daisy's relationship—a cacophony of perspectives on time and value rather than a clear direction for Caroline to follow. On the one hand, the diary (and therefore the film) repeatedly invokes the unpredictability and ungovernability of experience: “You never know what's coming for you.” On the other hand, toward the end of the diary Benjamin addresses his daughter directly, emphasizing individual agency and the freedom from predetermined narratives:

For what it's worth, it's never too late, or in my case, too early, to be whoever you want to be. There's no time limit. Start wherever you want. You can change, or stay the same—there are no rules to this thing. You can make the best or the worst of it. I hope you make the best of it. . . . I hope you live a life you're proud of. If you find that you're not, I hope you have the strength to start all over again.”⁸⁸

Although for Benjamin (both because he is male and, perhaps, because he is increasingly young over time) there have been “no rules,” for Daisy, there certainly have been: “Sooner or later, you lose the line,” she says with resignation about the erosion of her balletic form. The moment that, perhaps, most effectively captures the film's resigned undertone comes with Benjamin's voice-over while he helps his father make his peace with life and death: “You can be as mad as a mad dog at the way things went. You can swear and curse the fates. But when it comes to the end, you have to let go.”⁸⁹

In the film's final moments, the image on the screen shows the backward-running clock that had been constructed in the vain hope of resurrecting the young men lost in World War I. We have seen this clock, with its reversed spatialized time, replaced in the central train station by the atomized, decontextualized time of a digital clock. The old clock, still running backward, is stored in a

⁸⁶ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 5.

⁸⁷ Scene 9, “Mr. Thomas Button,” in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Benjamin sold his father's house along with all the photographs of his ancestors so that he and Daisy could be free to “make [their] own memories.” At the same time, however, Benjamin names his daughter not after Queenie, who raised him, but after the mother he never knew.

⁸⁸ Scene 14, “Postcards,” in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

⁸⁹ Scene 9, “Mr. Thomas Button,” in *ibid.*

warehouse. As the rising floodwaters from the broken levees eddy around it, Benjamin's final voiceover moves beyond temporality and narrative direction, invoking instead, in the present tense, a timeless essence for each of the individuals who have made an impression on him: "Some people make buttons. . . . Some people are mothers. . . . And some people dance."⁹⁰ Caroline is not among the list of characters; Benjamin does not know what she "does," and neither do viewers. This figure of the present seems paralyzed both by her generational disconnection and by the approaching environmental/social disaster. Perhaps, however, we can read her as caught at an impasse and thereby freed from the constraints of heterofuturism, with its demands of lineage and language and its relentless movements toward the (false) promise of meaning.

Catherine Gallagher has identified a narrative technique she calls "undoing," which she defines as "an attempt to change the present by subtracting a crucial past event and thereby sending history off in an alternative direction."⁹¹ In both *Time's Arrow* and *Benjamin Button*, the phenomenon of reversal can also be seen as structured through the desire to "undo" an historical event or circumstance (in *Time's Arrow*, the mass exterminations of the Shoah, and in *Benjamin Button*, the deaths of soldiers in World War I). A signal difference, however, is that Gallagher identifies a culture of optimism and activist intervention (through affirmative action for African Americans and compensation for Japanese American victims of internment during World War II) as the cultural context in which the fantasy films that she considers (*Back to the Future* and *The Terminator*) were made. The reversed historical fictions under discussion here reveal instead a passive resignation in the face of historical trauma. Both the imprisoned Soul of *Time's Arrow* and the gentle Benjamin Button are helpless to alter their circumstances; the imagined film sequence in which young men rise from the battlefields and return home and Soul's misperception of his ability to "create" Jewish people out of ash and smoke at Auschwitz are each a fantasy and an interpretive error that definitively mark irreversible losses. We are left, on the one hand, with the Soul passively caught in what seems to be an endless loop of repetition and, on the other, with stagnation and stasis in the face of an imminent hurricane that might seem to offer the possibility of a cleansing new beginning but that, historical awareness makes abundantly clear, offered no dramatically new paths forward. The film *Benjamin Button*, having impressed us with the need to "keep moving" (like the film's metaphor of the hummingbird, which we are told will die if it stops moving for more than ten seconds), leaves us at a postoptimistic impasse with no hint of how—or whether—Caroline might project herself into the future.

The downgrading of America's credit rating in August 2011, which followed frequent accusations of "childish" behavior among governmental representatives as they sought to raise the debt ceiling, explicitly calls into question the projection of American solvency and ability to meet its financial obligations in the future. Similar concerns about the viability of economic and social institutions have arisen in Europe. The two texts I have examined here expose the notion of a redemptive future embodied in the Child as a bankrupt illusion. Perhaps the time has come to reconsider Obama's inaugural invitation. If we were to set aside childish things, if we were to give up the "fetishistic fixation" on the "rigid sameness of identity" that Edelman identifies as the core of reproductive futurism, if we were to value the old and experienced as much as the young and the new—what might then be possible in the present? The paradox remains that these questions

⁹⁰ Scene 15, "Good Night, Benjamin," in *ibid.*

⁹¹ Catherine Gallagher, "Undoing," in *Time and the Literary*, ed. Karen Newman, Jay Clayton, and Marianne Hirsch (New York: Routledge, 2002).

project ahead into a theoretically redemptive future the very possibility of giving up on the fetishization of the future. A