H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen Burt. *The Forms of Youth: Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. viii + 263 pp. $36.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14142-0; (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-51202-2.

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Published on H-Childhood (November, 2008)
Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan

Poetry and the Adolescent Age

The Forms of Youth is an ambitious book. It makes a large claim that the defining features of English-language poems of the twentieth century are grounded in the modern idea of adolescence. For some poets this means taking adolescents and adolescent subcultures as poetic subjects, while for others it means adopting formal stances that, like adolescence, resist the authority of maturity and closure. Stephen Burt, with his vast knowledge and critical insight about modern and contemporary poetry, makes this ambitious argument forcefully and gracefully, though not always convincingly. Readers of modern and contemporary poetry criticism will already be familiar with Stephen Burt's fine study *Randall Jarrell and His Age* (2002), his excellent edition of Jarrell's Princeton 1951 lectures on W. H. Auden, his many provocative essays and reviews in both academic and popular journals, and his own original books of poetry. While I have reservations about *The Forms of Youth* as literary or social history, it is valuable as literary criticism and calls our attention to an impressive number of poems in English that take the idea of adolescence as a subject or employ qualities associated with adolescence in their formal strategies.

In recent years, a number of excellent studies of poetry's relationship to youth have appeared, from Angela Sorby's excellent *Schoolroom Poets* (2005) to Joseph Thomas's *Poetry's Playground* (2007). Unlike Burt's study, these books discuss poetry in terms of an audience of young people. Burt states explicitly that he is not concerned with actual young readers at all: "This is a book *about* adolescence, not … about poems *by* adolescent writers, nor a book about what poems young readers read" (p. 17). In short, he is saying that while his book is about adolescence, it will not particularly concern itself with adolescents. On the other hand, he also claims that the book in many ways is *not* about adolescence. Arguing that modern and contemporary poetry "would make a poor base for a study that aimed to describe a whole culture's attitude toward adolescence," he proposes to "use what we already know about attitudes toward adolescence, what cultural historians, psychologists, social critics, and poets themselves have said and shown about modern youth, to draw conclusions about poets, poetry, and poems" (p. 5).

By relying heavily on what we already know about adolescence, Burt misses opportunities to discover what we *do not* already know. The intentional omission of young readers from the discussion serves to overemphasize the ways in which adult poets view youth with either nostalgia or envy, and it also tends to obscure the cultural specifics of adolescence as it is experienced by adolescents themselves. What Burt thinks we already know about adolescence is, by his own admission, heavily indebted to Patricia Meyer Spacks's 1981 study of fiction, *The Adolescent Idea*, which in turn is heavily indebted to the work of Erik Erikson. Whatever its virtues, Spacks's study is a poor example of social history, and Erikson's concept of adolescence as a "moratorium" between childhood and adulthood is limited by the developmental assumptions of midcentury ego psychology. Thus, the thematic paradigm for the study seems relatively narrow. "Poems from every decade in the last hundred years," writes Burt, "attend to the distinctive powers, the even more distinctive language, and the unfinished, uncertain, or unstable attitudes that characterize adolescence, as adults continue to imagine it, in much of the English-speaking world" (p. 3). Despite provocative assertions such as the opening of chapter 2, "British adolescence has a history all its own; so do the poems that describe it" (p. 44), the idea of adolescence as a universal, international, and largely twentieth-century phenomenon serves to obscure both cultural differences and subsume British poetry (and later Irish and Australian poetry) under the overarching American historical narrative that

defines the trajectory of Burt's argument.

In his first chapter on modernism, Burt notes the growing interest in youth cultures in the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century, which correspond to the rise of modernist poetry and poetics. Noting that T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens (and I would add Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats) are uninterested in the rise of youth cultures, Burt turns to William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore, contrasting their opposing views of adolescence. Williams, in *Spring and All* (1923) and other works, admires the libidinal energy and freshness of adolescent girls and sees in the emergence of youth culture "the models and metaphors for his own deliberately unfinished, always-beginning-again works of art" (p. 33). While Williams valued the rebelliousness and sexual experimentation of adolescents, Marianne Moore "identified her poetic methods with the procedures of a responsible student … defend[ing] the virtues of mind engendered by well-run educational institutions" (p. 35). Despite their differences, Burt sees both views as "an extension of pastoral tradition": adolescence is either a separate "insulated" space or the site of rebellious and potentially transformative energy, or potentially both (p. 43), and it is this view of adolescence that sets the stage for the modern and contemporary poems that follow.

Turning to British poets W. H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn, and Basil Bunting in chapter 2, the story turns grimmer. For Larkin, in particular, but also for many poets discussed in this and subsequent chapters, distance from youth and a nearly debilitating envy and nostalgia prevail. For Larkin, the adolescent experience "led always to vacancy, disappointment, self-declared (even flaunted) isolation, and the making of those feelings into art" (p. 68). Though Larkin provides the most extreme example among the poets discussed in the chapter, one gets the distinct impression that midcentury British poetry is relentlessly Peter Pannish. This view of adolescence again suffers from Burt's decision not to take young readers and the poets who write for them into account. There is an honorable tradition of accomplished British poets who write and anthologize for young people as well as adults (Charles Causley, Ted Hughes, and Seamus Heaney come immediately to mind). I longed for one example of a young reader interacting with poetic language to leaven the erotically tinged ennui of these pitiful oldsters.

In chapter 3, "Soldiers, Babysitters, Delinquents, and Mutants," however, Burt really hits his stride. In this very fine chapter about American poetry in the 1960s, George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* (1968), the later work of Gwendolyn Brooks from *In the Mecca* (1968) and after, and Robert Lowell's *Notebook* (1970) stand as examples of the ways in which older poets draw on their interactions with actual youth and youth movements. Of the three poets Burt discusses, Robert Lowell is given the most revealing treatment. Most critics tend to dismiss the unrhymed sonnets of *Notebook*; indeed, this poetic sequence has been written out of the Lowell canon, since the *Collected Poems* (2003) appeared, which contains only the later revised versions from *History* (1973) and *For Lizzie and Harriet* (1973). It is really only in their original context that the poems capture Lowell's ambivalence toward the young revolutionaries he at once admired and deplored. Unlike Oppen, who sees "social and even artistic hope" in student demonstrations, or Brooks whose verse gains new energy in her odes to the Chicago street gangs of the Black Power movement, Lowell's sonnets "reject the seeming promise of adolescence even as they deny the authority of experience and of adulthood" (pp. 101, 117).

From 1970 onward, Burt concludes, poetry increasingly rejects adolescence as a trope for "hope or energy," but sees it primarily as "the absence of adult authority" or immaturity (p. 117). Hence, his discussion of a "feminist poetry of adolescence" focuses on poetry more indebted to Anne Sexton than to Adrienne Rich that locates its theoretical roots in the work of Carol Gilligan or even Mary Pipher. Baby-boomer male poets such as Larry Levis, Yusef Komunyakaa, and John Koethe define adulthood in terms of its "distance from the remembered promises of … youth" (p. 195). More recent poets, he argues, adopt adolescence as a formal strategy through which they may reject closure–this argument is made in the context of a perceived lengthening of adolescence into one's midtwenties that is often lamented in the popular press. Poets today are caught "midair" to use the metaphor Burt chooses for his concluding chapter. Adulthood, for contemporary poets, "seems to have no value anymore," and adolescence, rather than a state of becoming, "is simply the state we are in" (p. 211).

I see cause for alarm rather than celebration in this last observation. And frankly, I do not buy the notion that "we" are simply in the state of adolescence. The "rejection of closure" in Lyn Hejinian's famous phrase is not a formal stance that endorses the kind of perpetual adolescence Burt describes, and there is much poetry produced today by both formalist and experimental writers that can only be appreciated by adults who have lived a certain number of years in the world and are sufficiently informed and well read. Burt says in his conclu-

sion that contemporary poets have rejected maturity so completely that "the 'poetry of a grown man' (in James Wright's famous phrase) would simply be no poetry at all" (p. 212). This would be depressing if it were true. As I read and re-read *The Forms of Youth* I found myself making copious notes in the margins both to admire its precise and thoughtful interpretations of poems and also to disagree strenuously with this and similar assertions. Nevertheless, I *do* take it as a cause for celebration that I could be so provoked by a work of criticism. Readers who are concerned with the history and culture of childhood and youth will find much to engage them in this compelling study.

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Citation: Richard Flynn. Review of Burt, Stephen, *The Forms of Youth: Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. November, 2008.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22814

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