

BOOK REVIEW

Burt, Stephen. *The Forms of Youth: 20th-Century Poetry and Adolescence.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Adolescence comes at us in familiar shapes. We recognize its characteristic vehicles—rock music and hip hop, video games and skate boards. Poetry not so much. Perhaps the exquisitely (and embarrassingly) tortured lines of teenage loneliness scribbled in notebooks, but otherwise, adolescence seems to be anything but a poetic affair.

Stephen Burt's new book *The Forms of Youth* turns this idea on its head by arguing that adolescence and its cultural representations serve as a major source for poetic innovation and accomplishment across the twentieth century. Burt's unfolding of this idea also becomes a grand tour of the century's dominant schools of thought, and many of his conclusions offer (sometimes inadvertent) critical perspective on these philosophical trends even as they suggest useful strategies for understanding the flow of poetic invention in late-modern America.

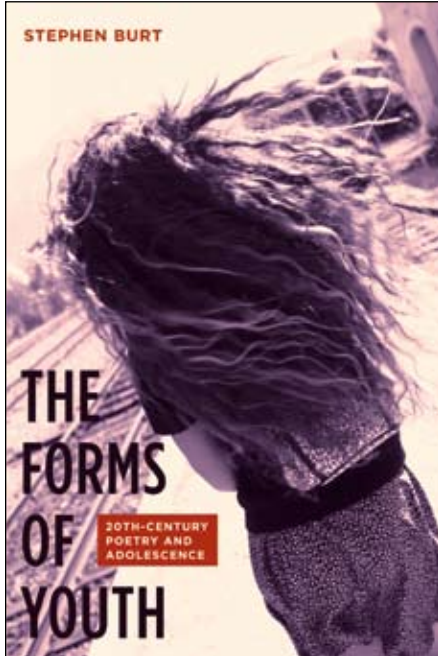
The core of the book is Burt's thesis that new and changing ideas of youth were taken up by American poets, from the turn of the century on, as a way of formally and thematically working out a new sense of poetic selfhood: "all find in the modern adolescent a focus for their own concerns and a figure for the distinctively modern poem" (43).

This focus on adolescence often takes two contradictory forms—a nostalgia

for an early, "pastoral" stage of life that cannot be regained, and a revolutionary hope for the possibilities of harnessing the unique energies of a transitional stage outside the bounds of normal, adult authority. Burt finds the tension between these ideals of youth spurring some of the best American poetry, from the early modernist experimentations of William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* to the basketball poems of Yusef Komunyakaa.

The oddity of this poetic strategy is that it often puts the poets in strange and uncomfortable positions. When middle-aged men like Philip Larkin and Basil Bunting reminisce poetically on the sexual uniqueness of teenage girls—and try to recapture this imagery to describe their sense of youthful rebirth in the midst of adult life—the result can be thoroughly awkward, if not downright off-putting. The same seems true of the fifty-something political warriors who sought to associate themselves poetically with the juvenescence of 1960s resistance movements to keep at arms' length their own sense of belonging to an established order that was implicated in the abuses being protested.

And yet, the poetics of youthfulness have also helped to carve a creative space for new and emerging kinds of thought. Burt shows how Gwendolyn Brooks employed a hybrid style—"mixing blues quatrains with Anglo-American 'high' forms"—to create a poetry of black resistance that channeled the energy of youthful rebellion into a larger political struggle (108). For Brooks, the tough guys and bad girls of the Chicago gang scene became heroes who could buck the system in the name of a greater cause, and she expressed their sentiment in large part by adopting their idiom. She spliced



slang words right into her lines of poetry and broke up the lines to create a harsh, halting lilt that captured the determination of her subjects to alter the unjust, adult world around them through insistence on a youthful optimism that things could be different.

While Brooks' style is the most politically successful, Burt makes the point with all the poets he studies that the adoption of certain adolescent positions and sentiments can be seen in the formal choices American poets are making during this time. Feminist poets like Laura Kasischke and Jorie Graham, for example, import an intentionally adolescent "girls' talk" into their poetic diction, and Burt sees "the mobilization of long lines, enjambments, and grammar" as a way to "postpone closure" and defer the adult need for completed meaning (157).

This reluctance to connect the poetic subject to a larger story of life development is at the core of Burt's exploration of

what is new in twentieth-century notions of adolescence. The modern experience is one of the failure of such narratives to meaningfully explain the shape and progression of a human life, and the quintessentially modern poem (he argues) seeks to explore the creative potential of this in-between space. In addition to the youthful deferral of meaning, there is also the clinging to secret, specialized languages (whether on the sports fields or in the insider world of a city's punk rock scene) that would fade away with the assumption of more adult roles.

With the precision of a craftsman, Burt (himself a poet) elaborates the differences these decisions make on the page. He spends less time making the point that the assimilation of modern forms of adolescence has made these poems, or poets, better. The contemporary inheritors of this line of American poetry have found it a ready form for representing "the undecidabilities of contemporary poststructuralist theories," but there is no strong sense in his argument that poetry has thereby gotten itself anywhere really useful (200).

One of the most interesting moments in the book comes in Burt's discussion of the Australian poet Les Murray, who "may be the only prominent and aesthetically original twentieth-century poet who takes sustained notice of modern adolescence in order to attack it seriously and to repudiate all it represents" (185). This recognition of conflict *within* the cultural space of poetic production earns slight notice from Burt, but it raises a crucial question that, despite all the fine formal analysis in the volume, remains unanswered.

Why did so many "prominent and aesthetically original" poets of the twen-

tieth century take up the new cultural forms of youthfulness so willingly and uncritically? If the major result was to provide a method for colonizing poetry to the demands of poststructuralist theory, one wonders whether it was worth it. Or if poetry is better off for it. Burt describes a few worthy cultural-political victories achieved in the poetic sphere through employment of *the forms of youth*, but the mass of other material he deals with in the book too often leaves us wondering what might have been if the poets had resisted the allure of adolescence and written poetry in voices more suited to complex, sometimes dire, often dark times.

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