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## Introduction

WHAT WAS THE most important new word of the twentieth century? In December 1999, one authority on the English language picked “teenager” (Cornwell, “The Words of the Decade,” ii).<sup>1</sup> Forty years earlier, the controversial historian Philippe Ariès called “adolescence . . . the privileged age . . . of the twentieth” century, as childhood was the privileged age of the nineteenth (32).<sup>2</sup> Teenagers are adolescents of a particular era, of a particular kind; other kinds appear in other eras. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines adolescence simply as the “period between childhood and manhood or womanhood.” While earlier thinkers such as G. Stanley Hall and Erik Erikson considered it a human universal, historians and social scientists now recognize our concept of adolescence—with its quasi-autonomous tastes, lingo, peer groups, and youth subcultures—as distinctively modern.<sup>3</sup> Some argue that adolescence was “invented” or “discovered” in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century; all agree that the category became more important, organized more experience in more ways, in America after about 1900 and in Britain decades after that.<sup>4</sup>

Twentieth-century poetry in English built twentieth-century adolescence, its changing meanings and its cultural powers, into its succession of projects. William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, W.H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn, Gwendolyn Brooks, George Oppen, Robert Lowell, Paul Muldoon, and Jorie Graham—among others—made ideas of and about adolescence inseparable from their aesthetic goals, for part or all of their careers. Changes in the meanings of adolescence also lend interest to poets less well known, either because they now seem outmoded or “minor”

or because their careers are still underway. The poets covered here, I hope to show, repay rereading in the light of adolescence, of what adolescence meant to them and to their readers, where and when they wrote their poems.

John Ashbery's "Soonest Mended" (1968) has as good a claim as any to representative, even canonical status in contemporary American verse: often and rightly discussed as an *ars poetica*, the poem also offers incontrovertible evidence that the poetic art it displays can identify itself with adolescence. The poem begins with poets, or would-be poets, "living on the margin," hoping "to be small and clear and free," and ends in nostalgia for youthful origins, "always coming back / To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago" (Ashbery, *Selected* 86, 89). Its climactic passages imagine fluidity, incompleteness, "this not being sure, this careless / Preparing," as the best state of mind: "fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an aesthetic ideal" (88–89). "From this standpoint," Ashbery continues, "None of us ever graduates from college, / For time is an emulsion, and probably thinking not to grow up / Is the brightest kind of maturity for us, right now at any rate" (88). The place in the life course that the poem describes—neither innocent nor adult, slippery and unfixed—resembles the place in the American language that Ashbery's slippery syntax seeks. And the self or speaker whom Ashbery imagines—so different, as his critics note, both from the autobiographical self of confessional poetry and from the impersonal authority of some modernists—is immature, promising, uncertain, and even indefinitely undergraduate: a trope or an instance of modern adolescence.<sup>5</sup>

Poets quite unlike Ashbery share his occasional identification of adolescence as a source of poetry, a trope for contemporary culture, and a model for the poet's state of mind. In Amy Clampitt's "Gooseberry Fool" (1985), the poet promises to cook for a friend the eponymous dessert; she describes at length its chief ingredient, a "thorny and tart" berry whose taste is like

having turned thirteen.  
The acerbity of all things green  
and adolescent lingers in  
it—the arrogant, shrinking  
prickling-in-every direction thorn-  
iness that loves no company except its,  
or anyway that's what it gets.

(COLLECTED POEMS, 133)

The adolescent, like the berry and like the poet, resists, and shrinks from, "company," except for that of its peers. Liminal between nature (the bush)

and culture (the dessert, the “fool”), a “not quite articulated thing” which tastes “unripe” even when it is ready for use, the gooseberry also stands for Clampitt’s own poem, and for her “thorny,” hyperelaborate style, which gives her a way to negotiate the demands of the wider world. So the poem concludes:

I’ve wondered what not quite articulated thing  
 could render magical  
 the green globe of an unripe berry.  
 I think now it was simply  
 the great globe itself’s too much to carry.

(133-34)

An undergraduate, for Ashbery, is someone who entertains many ways of being, many ideas, but has committed himself to none; a girl who is turning thirteen for Clampitt is already immersed in a state that can “linger” (in a plucked gooseberry, or in a grown-up poet) unless and until it is treated in the right way—and that right way (as with the makings of a “fool” for dessert) permits much of its sour flavor to remain. The gooseberry thus becomes the girl and the poet and the poem (which must be treated, interpreted, by its reader). Both Ashbery and Clampitt liken their poetry to adolescence as a state of being or becoming, as an attitude toward experience, a state of mind: one describes “turning thirteen,” the other an endlessly deferred graduation from college—the lower and upper limits, respectively, of adolescence as many of us now define it.

Together Clampitt’s and Ashbery’s poems reflect the twentieth-century heritage that this book hopes to describe. That heritage extends from William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore (Moore being one source for Clampitt’s style), through the early Auden (one source for Ashbery’s), to contemporary poets whose disidentification with maturity and authority, whose identification with youth and its subcultures, goes much further than Ashbery’s or Clampitt’s. Poems from every decade in the last hundred years 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.

What do we mean by adolescence, and how do we know what we mean? The educational researcher Gerard LeTendre writes that Americans (and many Western Europeans) “assume . . . that the normal course of human development will involve a period of adolescence in which the person will undergo puberty, attend school, and develop a somewhat adultlike sense of

identity.” Yet “Americans did not make these assumptions 150 years ago, before the term *adolescence* had been popularized, and many people did not go to school at all” (*Learning to Be Adolescent*, xviii).<sup>6</sup> Though the word “adolescence” is attested in English in 1440, it “did not acquire widespread usage,” writes the historian Steven Mintz, nor did it carry “associations with puberty, generational conflict, identity formation and psychological volatility until” the twentieth century (*Huck’s Raft*, 3, 196). For all their argument over earlier analogues, historians agree that modern adolescence depends (in Aaron Esman’s words) on “peer groups . . . defined, at least in part, by their antagonism to ‘adult’ values” (*Adolescence in Culture*, 4). Especially after G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence* (1904), psychologists and social thinkers ascribed great importance to this state, which they observed in the peer groups created by cities, movies, telephones, motorcars, colleges, and high schools; some writers identified this state not just with sexuality, conflict and energy, but with creativity itself.

Modern adolescence thus comprises a cluster of sometimes hard-to-reconcile ideas:

- Both boys and girls experience a distinctive period of life, starting in the early teens and ending in the teens or twenties, before socially recognized maturity and distinct from dependent, presexual childhood.
- This period is either new in modern life, or newly important; today’s youth differ from their elders more than previous generations did.
- This period is characterized by special psychological phenomena, among them heightened sexuality; rebellion against authority; group-mindedness or conformism; a focus on the inner life or the authentic self; emotional volatility; unstable or rapidly changing beliefs and commitments; and freedom from adult mores and norms. Though incompatible with some adult responsibilities, these phenomena may constitute virtues.
- Those virtues may resemble the virtues sought in a particular kind or genre of art (such as modernist writing, lyric poetry, or rock music).
- Modern youth acquire norms from one another rather than inheriting them from their elders or from long-extant institutions; they have created peer cultures, or subcultures, of their own, with new styles of speech and costume, and even new art forms.

Together these propositions form the definition of adolescence that the rest of this book will use. I arrange them above from least to most new (that is, from most to least evident in pre-twentieth-century writings); only

the last seems unique to the twentieth century, though the popularization (not invention) of the term “adolescence” signaled a rise of interest in them all. Only in the twentieth century did the idea of adolescence as a valuable state of consciousness (perhaps even a state preferable to adulthood) acquire the widely recognized importance that could make it the explicit subject of many English-language lyric poems and the foundation for some strong poets’ styles. Not all the poets I discuss accept the premises above; some set out to challenge them directly. In doing so they respond to other writers and to a culture that took them seriously indeed.

Poets do not, as a rule, react to cultural changes by striving to represent them fairly and comprehensively. Rather, poets react to the changes that move them, to what they see in their locales and in their social strata (often, urban, educated elites), or else to popular impressions of a changing culture: those impressions can include moral panics, uncritical celebrations, unrepresentative samples, and tenacious beliefs undercut by later research. Modern and contemporary poetry—reaching far fewer people than does prose fiction, film, or television—would make a poor base for a study that aimed to describe a whole culture’s attitude toward adolescence (or toward anything else). Rather, I 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.

In showing explicitly that adolescence matters, that some major poets and some gifted minor ones derive both subjects and forms from it, I hope also to hint at patterns in the history of literary ideas and modes. One pattern involves pastoral and its sometime opposite, radical or revolutionary advocacy. Poets who associate youth with pastoral—with a self-enclosed, artificial, or innocent other world—suggest that youth does not change from cohort to cohort, that young people will grow up as they always have. Poets who view a particular generation, or a particular adolescent, as something new imply otherwise. The tension between youth as pastoral and youth as rebellious or revolutionary novelty emerges in the development of teen cultures through the twentieth century and in poetic reactions to them. In recent decades, both youth as pastoral and youth as revolution have often come to seem untenable as literary or cultural ideals: contemporary poets have sought alternatives. Some create modes of protest and inquiry specific to girls’ and women’s experience. Other contemporary poets (Ashbery in “Soonest Mended” among them) eschew narrative and conventional closure in forms that emphasize adolescence as uncertainty, as a persistent failure (or refusal) to settle on any one self-definition or goal.

A great deal of modern fiction—as both Patricia Meyer Spacks and John Neubauer have shown at length—depends on ideas about youth.<sup>7</sup> “Since puberty has traditionally involved self-discovery,” Spacks writes, “the subject of adolescence lent itself readily to concentration on selfhood” (*The Adolescent Idea*, 16). In *The Adolescent Idea* (without which my own study could scarcely exist), Spacks describes in modern novels a “literature of antidevelopment” in which “the young stand for the authority of the personal” and narrators grow, from one question to the next, more and more congenial to youth (290–91).<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, many people’s actual experience of adolescence—especially if we limit it to high school—involves repressive conformism or simple misery. Yet the idea of adolescence in literature has meant, above all else, inwardness and self-creation. “Adolescence, most commentators would agree, is the period during which a young person learns who he or she is and what he or she really feels”—so wrote the historian John Springhall in 1986 (*Coming of Age*, 3). Nor are these ideas confined to academics: a *New York Times Magazine* feature called “Being 13” claimed in 1998 that “only when children approach adolescence” do they “start to develop private, inaccessible selves” (McGrath, 30).

If innerness, selfhood, privacy, and individuality are now the province of adolescence, they are also the province of the lyric poem. Allen Grossman writes that with the rise of liberalism “poetry became lyric overwhelmingly, because lyric was the social form of the unknowable singularity of the liberal individual” (*The Sighted Singer*, 247). No wonder, then, that so many modern writers—poets, critics, journalists, novelists—equate adolescents with poems. Clampitt’s “Gooseberry Fool” is, among other things, such an equation: there are other such figures, such equations, in the work of almost every poet this book views at length. For now, one additional recent example will do: in Paul Naylor’s poem “The Adolescent”—one in a series based on the I Ching—the relevant hexagram is “mountain resting on water”: “always the unstable I / appears for the first time” (46).

The adolescent also resembles the modern poem in that she must become the same and yet not the same as her precursors, must both enter and alter their lineage and social space. Walter Jackson Bate in 1970 deemed the task supposedly facing post-Romantic poets uniquely difficult: “In no other case are you enjoined to admire and at the same time to try, at all costs, *not* to follow closely what you admire. . . . The arts [thus] mirror the greatest single cultural problem we face . . . how to use a heritage . . . how to grow by means of it, how to acquire our own ‘identities,’ how to be ourselves” (*Burden of the Past*, 133–34). The originality that Bate says we expect of the

lyric “I” is—far from being unique to poetry—the individuation that modern people, especially Americans, expect or demand of the young. Thus, the philosopher Charles Taylor writes,

we can talk without paradox of an American ‘tradition’ of leaving home. The young person learns the independent stance, but this stance is also something expected of him or her. . . . Each young person may take up a stance which is authentically his or her own; but the very possibility of this is enframed in a social understanding of great temporal depth, in fact, in a ‘tradition’.

(SOURCES OF THE SELF, 9)

Poems in their uniqueness stand for people in theirs: poems, like adolescents, have to learn from their parents and then leave in order to become themselves. The tension in modern and contemporary poetry between a drive to create new forms, on the one hand, and a sense of participation in a tradition (even one as broad or vague as “lyric” or “voice”), on the other, is like—indeed, for Ashbery in “Soonest Mended,” just is—the conflict between accounts of adolescence as something each generation undergoes and accounts of the next generation as something new.

The story of English-language poets’ searches for language and for forms adequate to the youth of their times—a youth conceived sometimes as revolution, sometimes as a source of sexual energy, sometimes as a figure for contemporary indeterminacy—takes in some of the century’s strongest poems: Williams’s *Spring and All*, Auden’s *Orators*, Bunting’s *Briggflatts*, George Oppen’s *Of Being Numerous*, Gwendolyn Brooks’s *In the Mecca*, Robert Lowell’s *Notebook*, and some of the highest lyric achievements of (among others) Larkin, Muldoon, and Graham. Any attempt to consider every relevant poem on a topic as broad as adolescence would make telling that story a fool’s errand. My story will not answer—perhaps no critic could answer—the question, “What can poetry in general tell us about adolescence?” (It is like asking “What can poetry say about life?”) Clearer questions—questions I do hope to answer—are “What can individual modern poets tell us about adolescence, as they saw it, as it appeared in their time?” and—more important for a book of literary criticism—“What can modern ideas of adolescence tell us about modern poets, about why they wrote as they did?” The twentieth century, this book argues, makes available particular concepts of adolescence that my poets adopt. Yet these poets do not simply write poems about teenagers or student protesters, as they might write about pears, pavement, or peregrine falcons. Rather, these poets alter or reinvent verse forms,

literary modes, and verbal resources, trying to make new kinds of poems in order to match the new kinds of young people they see.



Narrative works about youth and coming-of-age, about what the nineteenth century called *Bildung*, date back (depending on how one interprets the term) to Homer's Telemachus, to *Romeo and Juliet*, to Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, to Goethe's *Werther*, or to Jane Austen. Lyric poems about what we now call adolescence have a far thinner pre-modernist heritage. Yet some idea of youth in verse—especially in pastoral poetry—is far older than the English language: when Milton writes of “young Lycidas,” “dead ere his prime,” and recalls the early mornings of youth, he calls on Greek and Latin precedents (*Poetical Works*, 447). Pastoral is, Spenser's “E.K.” explains, a “kind of writing” that “the best and most auncient Poetes” set for young poets “at the first to trye theyr habilities”; Spenser's Colin Clout (the poet within the *Shepherd's Calendar*) is an “unstayed yougth,” “a shepherds boy” who likens “hys youthe to the spring time, when he was fresh and free from loues folly” (*Complete Poetical Works*, 9, 52).<sup>9</sup>

Harry Berger explains how critiques and celebrations of youth in the *Calendar* fit together in one view of the life course, which Spenser conceives as a kind of dynamic equilibrium. “Since the elders bemoan their lost youth and try to project it into the next generation,” Berger writes, Spenser's “youthful and aged speakers hold the same values in spite of their apparent antipathy”—that antipathy becomes “the tradition, which is handed down from one generation to the next” (*Revisionary Play*, 416). Youth is, in Berger's sense, a “Green World,” which “appears first as exemplary or appealing. . . . But when it has fulfilled its moral, esthetic, social, cognitive or experimental functions, it becomes inadequate,” and those who remain there “are . . . in some way deficient” (*Second World*, 36). Indeed, youth is the pattern for such Green Worlds in early modern narrative and dramatic works, most of all in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (Garber). Yet freestanding lyric poems from the Elizabethan era are at least as likely to deprecate immaturity as to praise it.<sup>10</sup>

The modern adolescent is not the green youth of early modern writing; nor is he (much less she) the Romantic child. “Before the Romantic” period, claimed William Empson, “the possibilities of not growing up had never been exploited so far as to become a subject for popular anxiety” (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 21). The idea that immaturity might be preferable

to maturity per se, that incompleteness of any sort might be better than completion, that remaining outside society indefinitely might be better than joining it, that irrational, instinctive, excessive, emotion-driven speech and behavior might have more value than rational, considered action and thought—these are all, of course, Romantic ideas; they inform, but predate, modern adolescence, which acts them out and represents them often.<sup>11</sup> The Romantic child, with his or her absolute opposition to the adult world, and the Romantic fragment, with its appreciation of potential and of the incomplete, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the realization in poetry of modern adolescence; we can trace those conditions through major Romantic poems.<sup>12</sup> Wordsworth in the *Prelude* describes

That twilight when we first begin to see  
 This dawning earth, to recognize, expect  
 And, in the long probation that ensues  
 (The time of trial, ere we learn to live  
 In reconciliation with our stunted powers)  
 To endure this state of meagre vassalage,  
 Unwilling to forego, confess, submit,  
 Uneasy and unsettled—yoke-fellows  
 To custom, mettlesome, and not-yet tamed  
 And humbled down.

(1805: 5:540–46)

This twilight (the twilight of childhood, as infancy is its morn) resembles our modern adolescence but is not, for Wordsworth, a state out of which—or even about which—freestanding poems can be written. Rather, his narrative and discursive poem depicts it as a state to be overcome, as love of nature (recalled from an earlier state called childhood) leads him back to love of humankind.

As for Continental analogues, Rousseau described in himself, and Goethe depicted in *Werther*, a stormy inwardness something like modern adolescence: Harold Bloom even claims that “Rousseau had invented that interesting transition, since,” in Bloom’s view, “literature affords no trace of it before him” (“Introduction,” 3). But neither Rousseau nor *Werther* finds, for that transition, new verse forms (much less new forms that respond to a peer culture): Rousseau is not a poet, and *Werther* is a character in a novel (though one much imitated by real young men).<sup>13</sup> Nor is Keats a modern adolescent. Rather than celebrate his own immaturity, or hold it up as any sort of ideal, Keats apologized for his youth, and for the unhealthy senti-

ments that (his medical training perhaps suggested) came with it. His preface to *Endymion* explains:

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.

(*MAJOR WORKS*, 60)

Keats warns his readers to go easy on the poems—even to expect failures—because they describe his immaturity, which is anything but an asset. Christopher Ricks calls this passage “a sigh, and not . . . a statement that should be altogether believed”; Ricks continues, “what truths about life is the adolescent better stationed to see than either the boy or the man?” (*Keats*, 10–11) It is, perhaps, modern even to ask that question: we may ask it about Keats, but Keats does not ask it about himself. Nor does he ask it about the “happy, happy” young men and girls on the Grecian urn, pure examples of an undying Green World (*Major Works*, 288).

Matthew Arnold’s updated Wordsworthianism differs from its master partly in its pessimism about recompense and partly in Arnold’s location of a superior innocent state not in preverbal childhood, not always in nonhuman nature, but in an idea of male youth drawn partly from classical pastoral, partly from Oxford University. Arnold’s Scholar-Gipsy, who “wander’d from the studious walls / To learn strange arts, and join a gipsy tribe,” thus stays closer to his life at Oxford than any of the ordinary students who took exams, graduated, and joined the adult world; in that world, the poem adds, “mortal men . . . exhaust” their “energy,” “numb the elastic powers,” and succumb to “this strange disease of modern life” (*Poetical Works*, 259). Arnold’s lyric poems invoke “youth’s . . . thwarting currents of desire,” its “step so firm, its eye so bright” (37, 21). His poems set a precedent for Auden and for other moderns with a particular interest in colleges and schools.<sup>14</sup> Robert Lowell once remarked, though, that “there’s no childhood or adolescence in Arnold,” and in an important sense he was right: Arnold’s poetry does not present young rebels (of either gender) whose tastes and language bind them together to discomfit the adult world (quoted in Vendler, “Lowell in the Classroom” 28). And never does Arnold seek, in his ideal of youth, a model for incomplete, uncertain, or newly energetic poetic form.

For such a model we could look to Byron.<sup>15</sup> Yet Childe Harold is either alone or stuck amid adults: there is no peer culture, for him, worth describ-

ing in literary terms. “None did love him” (*Major Works*, 25). There is, however, an energetic instability in much of Byron’s verse—in its motions as well as its sentiments—that we might associate with the phase of life both *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* invoke. Byron likes to say that he himself has grown old too soon, that he has outlived himself despite his few years.<sup>16</sup> “There’s not a joy the world can give like that it takes away, / When the glow of early thought declines in feeling’s dull decay”; “Alas! our young affections run to waste, / Or water but the desert” (259, 182). With his rapidity, his stormy exclamations, his unstable transitions from tone to tone, Byron is the only considerable poet in English before literary modernism for whom ideas of youth are not ideas of pastoral and for whom they contribute to inventions of form.



The ingredients of modern adolescence evolve from Byron and from Arnold forward to the twentieth century, but they do not appear together often in poems. The authors in John O’Sullivan’s *Democratic Review*—a group soon known as “Young America”—pursued in the late 1830s and 1840s, as Ted Widmer writes, a “rhetoric [of] youth and newness”; O’Sullivan’s “persistent obsession with novelty and youth” led to eulogies on America as a young country, and on the promise and force of its young men (*Young America*, 3, 43). But this ideology produced no poems of lasting consequence, and it faded from literary history fast: by the time Whitman—a contributor to *Democratic Review*—began *Leaves of Grass*, he had left Young America’s point of view behind. Indeed, Whitman said as much, asking in 1855: “Where is the huge composite of other nations, cast in a fresher and brawnier mode, passing adolescence, and needed this day, live and arrogant, to lead the marches of the world?” (“Walt Whitman and His Poems,” 30)

Postbellum America instead seemed preoccupied with innocent boyhood. Tony Tanner, Kenneth Kidd, and Steven Mintz have all described this theme in novels and in Gilded Age popular culture; we can find it also in American poems.<sup>17</sup> In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “My Lost Youth” (1855)—part of the schoolroom canon after the war—school time and innocent boyhood are one phase of life, identified with Longfellow’s Maine: “the native air is pure and sweet, / And the trees that o’ershadow each well-known street / . . . Are sighing and whispering still: / ‘A boy’s will is the wind’s will, / And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts’” (*Poems*,

339). Despite the “gleams and glooms that dart[ed] / Across the school-boy’s brain,” Longfellow presents his hometown as a focus for pure and purifying nostalgia, without sexuality and without change, as uncomplicated as his clear syntax and end-stopped line (339).

“My Lost Youth” thus represents (and many other poems could do the job) a nineteenth-century poetics of childhood that the modern poetics of adolescence would displace. Angela Sorby (whose own poetry I will examine in chapter 4) has shown how in late-nineteenth-century America—with its schools named for Longfellow and Whittier, its popular acclaim for James Whitcomb Riley and Eugene Field—“the popular experience of poetry came to be defined as juvenile” (*Schoolroom Poets*, xiv). With “poets framed as children, children seen as poets, children posited as readers” in and outside schools, “children recruited as performers, and adults wishing themselves back into childhood,” Sorby writes, postbellum American poetry seemed “dominated by children”: consider the popular success of Whittier’s “Bare-foot Boy,” Field’s “Little Boy Blue,” and even the early (posthumous, but pre-World War I) reception of Emily Dickinson, who was taken, or mistaken, as a winsome poet for girls (xvii). American modernists reacted both against the idealized childhood of Longfellow and his peers (whose poetry they did not want to rewrite) and against a prosaic, utilitarian modernity (which seemed to hold no place for poetry at all) by associating *their* poetry with the new, much-publicized, third term of adolescence.

Robert Frost—the title for whose first book quotes “My Lost Youth”—may be the last important American poet whose lyric poems describe an apparently ahistorical, purely “pastoral” youth, as A. E. Housman is the last such poet in England.<sup>18</sup> Housman’s “chaps from the town and the field and the till and the cart” are not modern adolescents because they have no distinctive and new peer culture (much less a new language with which to express them) (*Collected Poems*, 38). Housman’s poems do not only argue the case for an unchanging aspect to the feelings of youth; one hundred and ten years after the first of them appeared in print, they provide strong evidence for it. “Youth’s a stuff will not endure” sounds like Housman, but it is Shakespeare (*Twelfth Night* 2.3.53). And yet, as with most pastoral, the poems make more sense if set against the civilization that read them, the civilization out of which their author’s powers come: the ideal of village youth and village courtship, not to mention local athletic games, was already obsolescent in late-Victorian Britain, as lads like Housman’s either extended their educations, or migrated to urban jobs.

The closest nineteenth-century predecessor for the modern English-language poetry of adolescence was written in French. A book much like

mine, with a few of the same examples, might be entitled *Rimbaud in English* or *Rimbaud and Contemporary Poetics* (perhaps surprisingly, no such book exists). Composed in the 1870s, Rimbaud's poetry seemed to him and to its later readers rebellious, uncontrollable, immature, unstable, hostile to received authority, radiant with sexual energy, sensitive to urban social change (i.e., the Paris Commune), and in search of an extraordinary new language. Not coincidentally, Rimbaud was himself in his teens. In "Roman" ("Novel" or "Romance") Rimbaud reminds himself—or reminds us, or asserts in the hope that we will deny it—"No one's serious at seventeen" (*Rimbaud Complete*, 30). One of his most famous letters begins: "These are the months of love; I'm seventeen, the time of hope and chimeras, as they say" (363). Fredric Jameson even discovers in Rimbaud "the production of the adolescent body" as something new ("the emergence of the New") in Western literature ("Rimbaud and the Spatial Text," 67, 87).

And yet Rimbaud's poetry reflects the social formations of his own time, not of the succeeding century that read and reinterpreted him: it is almost, but not quite, a poetry of modern adolescence. Consider the boys and girls in "First Communions," who anticipate not high school, dates, or universities but cafés, compulsory military service, and an adult culture of gender segregation:

The girls always go to church, glad  
 To hear the boys call them sluts, standing  
 On ceremony after mass or sung vespers.  
 Boys destined for life in the garrisons  
 Who'll sit in cafés and jeer at the better born,  
 Wearing new shirts, shouting scandalous songs.

(RIMBAUD COMPLETE, 73)

Le filles vont toujours à l'église, contentes  
 De s'entendre appeler garces par les garçons  
 Qui font du genre après messe ou vêpres chantantes.  
 Eux qui sont destinés au chic des garnisons  
 Ils narguent au café les maisons importantes  
 Blousés neuf, et gueulant d'effroyables chansons.

(418)

Rimbaud's experiments before *Saison en enfer* catch him midway between a post-Keatsian paradigm in which youth means unripeness, hesitancy, and unreadiness and a twentieth-century paradigm in which the energy of do-

ing and saying already belongs to those who are not adult. The prologue to the unfinished prose piece “Deserts of Love” begins, as Wyatt Mason renders it: “What follows is the work of a young—very young—*man*, whose life came together by hook and by crook [d’un jeune, tout jeune *homme*, dont la vie s’est développée n’importe où]” (183, 48r). Yet the young man’s “strange suffering holds an uncomfortable authority [bizarre souffrance possédant une autorité inquiétante]” (183, 48r).<sup>19</sup>

Rimbaud does demonstrate a phenomenon frequent in twentieth-century poetry of adolescence (one that Spacks also finds in *The Mill on the Floss*): absolute resistance to *Bildung*, to any and all attempts to mold, from a youthful life, an adult life course or a career. Instead, as Kristin Ross writes, Rimbaud “proposes the impossible: a narrative which consists of pure transformational energy, pure transition or *suradolescence*,” “a voice which speaks from the place of youth rather than ventriloquizes it, and the impossible notion that youth might not have to come to an end” (“Resistance,” 198). Ross calls this notion an “attack on identity,” a resistance at once to plot, to sequential time, and to goals such as marriage or a profession: the poetry stakes out, instead, a “liminal zone of adolescence” that can and should lead nowhere (*Emergence of Social Space*, 14, 44). That notion of youth as goal seems paradoxical in Rimbaud, which is one reason he surrounds it with other sorts of self-contradiction and paradox. The same notion becomes almost a cultural commonplace in certain parts of 1990s America, with its Generation X and Yers, indie rockers, perpetual students, and “kidults”; we will see them, and the poets who find language for them, at the end of this book.

That we like to read Rimbaud as an archetypal adolescent, in other words, says no more about him than it does about us. Paul Verlaine’s edition of *Illuminations* appeared in 1886, the first *Collected Poems* in 1891, and the first book of Rimbaud’s letters not until 1931, which is to say that Rimbaud’s work entered Anglo-American consciousness during, and not before, the rise of “adolescence” as we know it now. Sustained English and American attention to Rimbaud began in the late 1910s, with the first book about him in English (Edgell Rickword’s *Rimbaud, The Boy and the Poet*) appearing only in 1924 (“Etiemble,” *Le mythe*, 370). Wallace Fowlie’s melodramatic *Rimbaud: The Myth of Childhood* (1946) explained that “in forcing the secret of childhood, Rimbaud discovered revolt; in forcing the secret of adolescence, he discovered poetry” (16). Robert Lowell translated Rimbaud’s “Poets at Seven Years Old”; John Tranter made his running quarrel with Rimbaud the subject of one of his longest poems. Other poets I exam-

ine, though, do not seem interested in Rimbaud at all, or do not regard him as a poet of adolescence.<sup>20</sup> The sense that youth had evolved its own tastes and language; the later sense that the young might take over (or tear down) American, British, or Australian social institutions; and the sense afterward that the young had failed to do so are consequences of twentieth-century cultural, economic, and even demographic history, anticipated in Rimbaud only by retrospective analogies.<sup>21</sup>

What most sets Rimbaud apart from all of the poets discussed in the rest of this book is a quality that also, paradoxically, gives him some of the appeal he has had for actual adolescent readers: his sense that he is one of a kind, a new creation, alone. "I'm an inventor unique among my predecessors" (*Rimbaud Complete*, 231). "If only I had one predecessor in French history! But no, none" (196). He speaks from a phase not child and not adult, but he also speaks from an impulse to prophecy, as a (failed) metaphysical revolutionary, the first and only of his kind. There is, in Rimbaud's imagination, *no group of people like him*, unless one counts the already dispersed (and not especially youthful) Communards.

By contrast, all the poems in English in this book depend on the idea not of one specially endowed (much less miraculously gifted) youth, but of a whole class of people called adolescents, who have and share with one another new habits, words, and tastes. Such people, in their joys and in their griefs, inspire, influence, and *are like* poems, even though the people who write those poems are, by and large, adults. Those poems see adolescents paradoxically as people defined by a peer group but also as incarnations of individuality (whose inner lives prompt lyric poems), as inheritors of pastoral conventions (hence proper subjects for poetry), and as rebels whose force requires new forms.



My first chapter looks at the first generation of poets to make sustained use of adolescence as an idea and as a word. Exciting, sexually potent, given to innovation, full of potential, necessarily incomplete, modern adolescents were like modernist poems, and modernist poets pursued the analogy. No one did so with more success than William Carlos Williams, whose sequences of poems and poetic prose liken their own deliberately unfinished structures and surfaces to the lives of the adolescents they sometimes depict. Marianne Moore answered this idealization of adolescent bodies by

portraying another kind of admirable youth: the careful students in some of her finest poems, and the idealized college education in others, reflect her temperament, her ethics, and her undergraduate years at Bryn Mawr.

A modern idea of adolescence arrived in British poetry amid the early work of W.H. Auden, with whom my second chapter begins. Critics often take his early poems as attacks on the closed, elaborate, homoerotic culture of British public schools (that is, elite private boarding schools). Yet those schools' privileged codes and small groups form the basis of his early style; sometimes, they are all the poems admire. Fascinated by the public school boys who he would never be, and by the girls (in school and outside it) whom he would never meet, Philip Larkin in his own youth and in middle age found ways to make art from that fascination. Thom Gunn, who moved to America just as the idea of youth culture took root in Britain, made the subcultures he saw—bikers, hippies, and, later on, gay club kids—the models for his own admiring poems. Basil Bunting's long poem *Briggflatts*, devoted to a transhistorical adolescence, could not have come into being without the subcultures of the British 1960s, to which it also pays homage.

My third and longest chapter looks at ideas about youth in American poetry from the Second World War through the 1970s, beginning with scattered poems by many hands and ending with three poets whose major late works react to 1960s youth. After a war noted for its young soldiers, new affluence and new national media made possible the dawn of the teenager. Formally conventional poets—most of all the talented and now nearly forgotten Phyllis McGinley—reacted to this new kind of American. Stereotypes about juvenile delinquents affected how Beat poets were received. George Oppen's optimistic ambivalence about student movements suffused his best-known 1960s poems. Gwendolyn Brooks overhauled her style and wrote some of her finest verse by taking cues from militant black youth. Incorporating failed struggles and continual frustrations, the sonnets of Robert Lowell's *Notebook* build into their line-by-line style Lowell's pessimism about the promise of youth, even as they review his own life course.

My last three chapters trace developments in poets' representations of adolescence since the 1960s. Despite the examples of Moore and Plath, a feminist poetics of adolescence—a set of strategies by which poems could encompass the experience of young women and girls *as* young women and girls—came about only in the last thirty-odd years. My fourth chapter shows how those modes took shape, concentrating on the achievements of Laura Kasischke and of Jorie Graham. These poets regard female adolescence not only as a time of self-making but also as a locus of danger: for them, girls' emergence into the social world also means emergence into

sexual visibility, into the “compulsory heterosexuality” that Adrienne Rich has denounced (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, 23).

During the 1960s, youthful rebels who claimed to speak for their generation—if not for youth as such—promised to establish a Green World on Earth. In retrospect, they do not seem to have done so, and many recent poems of adolescence respond to the vacancy that the failure of those utopian projects has left. We will see those responses in Ireland and in Australia, whose key poets of adolescence—Paul Muldoon and John Tranter, respectively—make that phase of life stand neither for pastoral remove nor for social power but rather for a continuing uncertainty. Another prominent Australian poet, Les Murray, rejects adolescence and all it represents—in doing so he rejects modernity too.

We will then see more American responses, differentiated by generation: Baby Boomers—especially male ones, such as Larry Levis—write of adolescent promise nostalgically, as something that has already failed, in language, in society, in their own lives. More recent American poets, among them Ange Mlinko, Thomas Sayers Ellis, and Liz Waldner, speak not so much *about* adolescence, its idioms and its subcultures, but *as though from within* them. For these twenty-first-century writers, adolescence is not so much a stand-in for poems in general but a name for the attitude—hence the poetry—of their generation, and an appropriate synecdoche for the life of our culture now.

I have made my book international, as the idea of adolescence is now international, even if this book is not, could not be, truly global. Some of the most original poems of adolescence come from poets who think transnationally, such as W.H. Auden, Thom Gunn, and the American-inspired “Generation of ’68” in Australia. My first chapter begins in America, because a modern understanding of adolescence (as most cultural historians have it) began in America too. It ends in America in part because I live here and in part because American poets of the last decade seem to have gone further and done more to frame the oddities and the energies of youth subcultures fruitfully in literary poetry. Given world enough and time, there might be another chapter on youth subcultures in contemporary British verse—on John James, Iain Sinclair, and punk rock; on the New Lad in the poetry of Simon Armitage, Paul Farley, and John Stammers; on the bleak models of growing up, or failing to grow up, in the poetry of Lavinia Greenlaw.

This is a book about poems *about* adolescence, not (except coincidentally, as with Rimbaud and Plath) about poems *by* adolescent writers, nor a book about what poems young readers read.<sup>22</sup> Fine individual poems by

eminent poets (James Merrill's "Days of 1941 and '44," for example, and Audre Lorde's "Hanging Fire") are not discussed, either simply for reasons of space or because adolescence never became central to those poets' oeuvres. Other eminent poets (such as Elizabeth Bishop) do not appear in this book because adolescence makes little appearance in their poems; that the topic is broadly and deeply of interest for twentieth-century poetry does not make it omnipresent. Almost every colleague and acquaintance who has seen this book in progress has suggested additional poets or poems that I might include. I hope that readers will judge this study for what it says about the writings it does consider, rather than taking umbrage at its failure to bring in all possible relevant works.



This book about immaturity has perhaps itself taken too long to mature; if so, all blame accrues to me. Credit alone accrues to Jennifer Crewe, Bonnie Costello, James Dawes, Langdon Hammer, Jenny Ludwig, Stuart McDougal, Helen Vendler, and two extraordinarily attentive anonymous readers for Columbia University Press, who read part or all of the manuscript and responded with encouragement and advice. Another sort of credit, of course, belongs to Jessica Bennett, and to our son Nathan, years away from his own adolescence. Many people, and several colleges and universities, have given hearings to my ideas. I thank, especially, Langdon Hammer and Yale University; the University of Connecticut; Mark Ford and University College–London; Ben Friedlander and the University of Maine; Robert von Hallberg and the University of Chicago; Matthew Hofer and the University of New Mexico; Eric Weisbard and the Experience Music Project in Seattle. Parts of some chapters have seen print in earlier versions elsewhere: in *Something We Have That They Don't* (University of Iowa), edited by Mark Ford and Steve Clark; in *Jorie Graham: Essays on the Poetry* (University of Wisconsin), edited by Thomas Gardner; in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* (University of Liverpool), edited by Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald; in *This Is Pop* (Harvard University), edited by Eric Weisbard; in *Wallace Stevens Journal*, edited by John Serio; and in *Boston Review*, then edited by Timothy Donnelly, Mary Jo Bang, and Josh Cohen. My thanks to all these editors, readers and presses; my thanks, as well, to the students at Macalester College—too many to name—whose queries, arguments, writings, and comments have, I hope, taught me enough to make a book.

# 1

## Modernist Poetics of Adolescence

IN 1981 THE Los Angeles punk band Rhino 39 made its third appearance on record, on the compilation LP *American Youth Report*; Rhino 39's anthemic "J. Alfred" took all its words from T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," snarling and yelping through Eliot's "Let us go then, you and I"; "I have heard the mermaids singing"; and other lines (though not the whole poem). For these punk rockers, Eliot's poem of hesitant anxiety—identified by John Berryman as the site at which "modern poetry begins"—became a fit emblem for the energies, anxieties, uncertainties, and aggressions of modern adolescence (Berryman, *Freedom*, 270). Rhino 39 got their scholarship partly wrong: Eliot's backward-looking Prufrock, who sees himself proleptically as middle-aged, belongs not to modern adolescence, with its unchaperoned dates and peer-group slang, but to a pattern of Gilded Age social life in which courtship involved "calling on" young women at adult-sponsored social events or at home (Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*). Though he began the poem at Harvard, Eliot was living in France and England during the years when the newer American system of dates, public entertainments, and self-consciously youthful taste cultures came into its own.

Yet Rhino 39 got something right. Not only does American modernist poetry, in retrospect, permit contemporary adolescents to see versions of themselves, but some American modernists (though not Eliot, with his "strenuous insistence on his own maturity") took a sustained and self-conscious interest in adolescence, in the kinds of experience and the new kinds of persons associated with young men and women in their teens and early twenties (Rosen, "Lost Youth," 487). Poets' responses to the new