

YOUTH PAUSED: EPIPHANIES IN THE SEED-TIME OF LIFE

ALISON WALLER

The loss of time is irretrievable: opportunity must be taken at the moment, or it goes by, never to return. The value of the *teens* is beyond calculation; it is the seed-time of life. (Taylor 11–12)

Isaac Taylor's call to seize opportunity in the seed-time of life in his *Advice to Teens, or Practical Helps Toward the Formation of One's Own Character* (1818) is a reminder that adults had ideas about, and ambitions for, youth well before the concept of the adolescent was given official credence by Granville Stanley Hall, or before the 'teenager' appeared on the cultural scene in the twentieth century.¹ Taylor's remarks, which form part of a larger argument counselling young people to live full but moral lives, demonstrate a concern common in writings on youth that it is a brief moment or series of moments in the broader pattern of a whole life. Thus the child has to be taught in the ways of adulthood; the pre-teen aches to be a teen; the young man or woman must escape the trap of childishness; and the elderly look back and lament the swift passage of time. This hastening through human experience encourages a discourse of endless transit, of preparatory movements and ritual transition, not only in personal narratives of selfhood but also in theoretical discussions of representations of youth in art, history and society and of youthful cultural endeavours.

The papers that have emerged from the Youth Studies Network and Conferences and appear in this issue of *Peer English* change the pace, settling and pausing on the question of youth and its various meanings across time and disciplines. By slowing down and looking more closely, they are able to interrogate processes that might usually be invisible, silenced or taken for granted. The authors of these papers have taken time to listen to young girls and notice how they think; to pay attention to the rebellious student voice in a schoolroom; to allow for contradictions in the cultural production of youth; and think about minute narrative implications in texts where aging, adolescence and generational relationships are central. Speed and movement are not always the key to understanding youth in these studies. Having explored dominant models of transition and developmentalism in my own work on young adult literature, involvement in the Network has encouraged

me to consider alternative ideas in conceptualising youth.² In an early meeting of the group, discussion led to a proposed conceptualisation of youth as the ‘minor key’ of life, where ‘minor’ expresses ideas of legal or social status but also a kind of harmonic complement to adult experience. Taking the musical analogy further, perhaps motifs of pace and tempo can offer a similarly nuanced approach to youth studies.

Where popular music has formed a crucial role in cultural understandings of youth of the twentieth century,³ increasingly it is technology — gaming, information, and communications technologies in particular — that sets the pace for thinking about young people’s social and interior lives. Two recent young adult novels that explore the increasing importance of technological advances for the ‘seed–time of life’ offer a nice case study for thinking about tensions of tempo in portraying contemporary adolescence. In Kevin Brooks’ *iBoy* (2010) and M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* (2002) the frenetic pace of modern adolescent lifestyles and an underlying notion of youth as in perpetual movement are contrasted with important moments of stasis or caesura that might usefully be understood within a tradition of literary epiphany.

In Brooks’ novel, fifteen–year–old Tom wakes in hospital after being hit on the head. It transpires that the offending weapon is an iPhone that fell from his home tower block during an attack on his friend Lucy. Tom gradually discovers that his neurological processes have been changed profoundly by fragments of the device imbedded in his brain, and suddenly he is able to ‘hear phone calls...read emails and texts...hack into databases...access *everything*. All from inside [his] head’ (40). Tom becomes ‘iBoy’ and his secret special powers also include the ability to transmit violent electronic shocks, helping him investigate Lucy’s rape and eventually punish the gang members who abused her.

The iPhone links communication functionality and mp3 capabilities for listening to music, and has proven popular amongst teenagers who are often early adopters of technology. Apple’s sleek design and marketing campaigns emphasise the intuitive ease and problem–solving essence of the iPhone for a young user, but in *iBoy* the gadget and its effects on Tom’s brain are thematised as temporal and informational excess. On first waking, Tom tries to describe the sensation using a swarm of bees as an extended metaphor:

Imagine a billion bees. Imagine the sound of a billion bees, the sight of a billion bees, the *sense* of a billion bees. Image their movement, their interactions, their connections, their *being*. And then try to imagine that

these bees are not bees.... They're something else. Information. Facts. Things. They're data.... And then, if you can, try to imagine that you can not only experience everything about these billion non-bees all at once — their collective non-sound, non-image, non-sense — but you can also experience everything about every individual one of them...all at the same time. And both experiences are instantaneous. Continuous. Inseparable.... There was no *time* to it at all. (8–9)

The text offers its readers the impression of ceaseless input figured here as buzzing 'non-bees' and uses a range of playful devices to enhance this impression. Fragments of data from the iPhone are interspersed with Tom's first-person narrative in the form of URLs, Wikipedia entries, SMS threads or snippets from online records to demonstrate the direct flow of information in the biotechnological realm of his brain. Chapter epigraphs are taken from literature (including another of Brooks' own YA novels), pop lyrics, fictional and real websites, and the writings of recent evolutionary thinkers and technology gurus. Speed of access to these sources is paramount: much of the plot also relies on Tom being able to respond quickly to his adversaries with information drawn from the internet or from private text messages he can access with ease. Tom's cyborgised mind, his iHead, represents the essence of what might be considered contemporary youth's determined desire for information and consumption, *now*.

Feed, an important dystopian science fiction novel for young adults written eight years earlier than *iBoy*, anticipates in fiction the kind of instantaneous mobile technology soon to become almost available in reality. *Feed* offers a nice comparison to *iBoy* in terms of tempo, as M.T. Anderson critiques the fetishisation of speed and constant activity that has become synonymous with a modern idea of youthfulness. The titular 'feed' is a synthetic implant, a digital chip inserted into an individual's brain in childhood, which provides instantaneous information and distraction 24/7. The novel's opening chapters take the reader on a rollercoaster ride of empty commercial and sensory stimulation. Titus and his friends travel to the Moon, and on their arrival they — and the reader — are bombarded with banners and 'bumff' from 'casinos and mud slides and the gift shops and places where you could rent extra arms' (18). The expected thrills of space travel collapse into entertainment and consumer options as mundane and potentially mind-numbing as any out-of-town retail park and, as many critics have pointed out, *Feed* presents a scathing satire of the 'contemporary alliance

between techno–science and global consumer capitalism’ (Bullen and Parsons 128).⁴ Young people in the novel are engaged in a desperate race to follow the feed’s direction from fad to fad and fashion to fashion (trendy hairstyles change every few minutes and, more insidiously, skin lesions caused by pollution and genetic deterioration become a la mode accessories). Youthfulness itself is portrayed as a questionable commodity or lifestyle by Anderson, as the adult characters in the novel are often portrayed as infantilised and ineffectual: most notable is the president of America whose youth speak and undignified responses in the face of global disapproval are reported through the feed: ‘*It has to be understood that when the President referred to the Prime Minister of the Global Alliance as a “big shithead”, what he was trying to convey was, uh — this is an American idiom used to praise people*’ (133).

Like the ‘bumff’ rained on them at the Moon, the modes of interaction that Titus and his friends use with each other are also instantaneous and excessive. Anderson employs the rapid and disjointed linguistic style of an imagined future youth with ‘futuristic slang words largely borrowed from the IT world’ as Noga Applebaum points out (91). They can privately and collaboratively ‘m–chat’ (a form of text or instant messaging) and can send manners, webpages, files, and clips of memory to each other via the feednet. Speed, rather than quality, of information and communication is valued. When Titus meets an attractive but eccentric and dissenting teen, Violet, he queries her use of old, dead languages, saying ‘Why don’t you use the feed? It’s way faster’ (78). Ironically, the dead languages Violet and her academic father indulge in include programming languages that were presumably the bedrock for the feednet technology that Titus takes for granted.

While both *iBoy* and *Feed* attempt to portray the excitement and possibilities of instantaneous knowledge and high–speed information through narrative form, these literary treatments of youthful interaction with technology also seek out or give value to a different, slower tempo. Brooks’ young protagonist revels in his identity of iBoy and enjoys the enhanced abilities that in many ways are available to all of modern youth as mobile technology increasingly changes the way new generations gather and exchange information and ideas. However, while Tom insists on the conflation of ‘always–there and never–there’ in his new experience of the world, it becomes clear as the novel progresses that such a heady vision of the cyborg mind is difficult to portray in a conventional hero story. Although there are some exciting scenes in which he attacks the bullies who live around his tower–block using his zapping ‘iPowers’, many of his actions involve narratively static events, such as transferring cash to his grandmother’s account or sending fake

text messages. Moreover, alongside a surface-level celebration of speed and movement runs a debate about Tom's adolescent identity that relies on internal contemplation and moments of iPhone-free epiphany. Tom ponders the role of his new super brain, and wishes that it was more useful for the moral dilemmas he faces: 'No, it was no help at all for that. And neither was my iBrain. Deciding *what* to do was a job for my normal brain' (107–8). In fact, much of the novel is taken up with Tom's internalised ethical wrangling rather than iBoy's fast-paced action. Not only that, but the most rewarding episodes in which Tom seizes opportunity come, not when he controls and commands streams of data, but when he takes 'time out' with Lucy on the tower-block roof. The final chapter includes a long monologue about the roles and responsibilities of iPowers, which supports my contention in a previous study that '[t]eenage superheroes are constrained by changing narrative conventions which force them to "grow up" into modern men' (Waller 189). Pausing and looking down on the fast-paced chaos of 'Crow Lane, Compton House, flashing blue lights in the darkness', Tom reaches an epiphany with the help of Lucy:

As she slowly leaned back and lay down on the roof, looking straight up at the sky, I didn't move for a moment. I just sat there, staring out at the dying horizon, wondering if perhaps there *was* something out there for me after all, a future beyond the horizon. (289)

The literary epiphany has perhaps come to mean an ideal state, 'free of culture's "noise"' as Paul Maltby puts it (6) and Tom's retreat from the cacophony of contemporary life to think about his identity reflects this need for a caesura even in youth. John Sturrock notes that autobiographical epiphanies, at least as they are related in contemporary memoirs, are most commonly laid down in the memory in mid to late teenage-hood, so it is not as unlikely as it may first seem that young people can be aligned with a 'sudden spiritual manifestation' (Joyce 211) or 'exquisite pause...in time' (Pater qtd. in Iser 196). Usually, such literary epiphanies occur at the end of a story and in fact act to accelerate events towards closure, but the turning point or potential epiphany in Anderson's novel occurs near the beginning, when Titus and Violet are attacked by a protesting hacker in a Moon nightclub and lose access to the feed. They are hospitalised and, like Tom awakening to 'the sound of a million bees', when Titus comes round he discovers his brain has been rewired. In Titus's case, he is forced to rely on his human perceptions to

work things out rather than the networked system of information, communication and advertising he is used to:

The first thing I felt was no credit.

I tried to touch my credit, but there was nothing there.

It felt like I was in a little room.

My body — I was in a bed, on top of my arm, which was asleep, but I didn't know where. I couldn't find the Lunar GPS to tell me.

Someone had left a message in my head, which I found, and then kept finding everywhere I went, which said that there was no transmission signal, that I was currently disconnected from feednet. I tried to chat Link and then Marty, but nothing, there was no transmission signal, I was currently disconnected from feednet, of course, and I was starting to get scared, so I tried to chat my parents, I tried to chat them on Earth, but there was no transmission etc., I was currently etc.

So I opened my eyes. (*Feed* 55/np)

It is noteworthy that Titus's first feeling of loss of selfhood is depicted as a lack of credit, a digital signifier of commercialism. Without recourse to GPS or other electronic devices, he has to turn instead to feeling his way into the world through physical sensation and sight, using his rusty intelligence to work things out. Using these normal human tools at a human pace is a challenge for a teenager so accustomed to cyborg existence, but one that has useful results. As Titus enters a period of enforced slowness and contemplation he observes the picture of a boat hanging on the hospital wall opposite his bed and fails to find 'anything interesting about that picture at all' (57/np); just a few pages later he gets angry that nobody seems to be able to help him and he

couldn't do a fuckin' thing except look at that stupid boat painting, which was even worse, because now [he] saw that there was no one on the boat, which was even more stupid, and was kind of how [he] felt...there was no one on board to look at the horizon. (61)

Anderson plays with the moment of epiphany a hero often experiences at times of trauma or crisis. Although Titus is not completely aware of it, his imagination has been coerced into making meaning out of the

painting and has forged creative connections between a deserted boat and his own brain emptied of the feed.

The constructive possibilities inherent in moments of stillness and meditation like these remind the reader that youth might be conceptualised through tempos other than *allegro*. Although Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons argue that in *Feed* the teen characters' 'synaptic pathways have been formed according to the laws of the corporation' (133), Titus's respite from connectivity has the potential to allow him to rewire his brain into a slower but more viable young adult identity. Newly attuned to the potential for symbolism through extended observation (of the boat picture), he is ready to respond when Violet takes him to a window in the hospital and they gaze together at a haunting vision of a dead garden and leaking waste pipe. Titus describes the scene as 'like a squid in love with the sky' (74) and as Applebaum has pointed out in her reading of the novel, this ability to make metaphor, combined with the freedom he feels to be still and quiet with Violet, leads to her softening towards him and their first kiss. Throughout the narrative, Violet attempts to gently educate and provoke him into political consciousness but his intellect and empathy is limited, even if his imagination begins to mature. Their developing relationship is peppered with further romantic episodes set in devastating scenes of futuristic natural beauty, where Titus's uber-consumer mind is challenged to find beauty and poignancy, albeit often in the most contrived and clichéd way: most gruesome is beef country, where filet mignon is grown in fields and where in some places 'the tissue had formed a horn or an eye or a heart blinking up at the sunset, which was this brag red, and which hit on all those miles of muscle and made it flex and quiver' (158).

Despite moments of creativity and perception like this, Titus craves to be reinstalled with the rapid stimulation of the feed. In this desperate urge for conformity and endless distraction he becomes a kind of dystopic everyman for modern youth. As Clare Bradford and Bullen and Parsons have noted, readers are encouraged to identify with him because of this ordinariness but also to resist his mindless acceptance of, and dependence on, the feed and its sinister bio-technological implications for humanity. Similarly, the velocity and endless motion that his adolescent culture represents is recognisable and seductive, as well as ripe for critique. Of course, technology on its own offers neither utopia nor the end of civilisation — Harraway calls for us to live a 'cyborg' life that embraces the painful possibilities alongside the idyllic, while Andy Clark points out that the cyborg figure can merely be a way of thinking about the relationship between humans and their tools rather than a

symbol of a brave new world. Anderson's vision of a fast-paced, transitory, biotechnological near future is similarly ambivalent. The moments of contemplation that occur when Titus and Violet are living without the feed have value but need to be examined alongside the fact that the violent hacking that caused the idyllic 'salad days' in the hospital is also the cause of a dangerous weakening of Violet's already frail software-wetware interface (her feed was installed late in childhood due to her parents' ideological reservations). Although a canny reader will blame the system's dominance, rather than the brief respite from it, for Violet's physical decline and ultimate death, other narrative ambiguities continue to question the relative merit of speed and fleeting pleasures against profound contemplation and epiphany in an adolescent's life.

Consider, for example, Titus's reaction to the reinstatement of the feed after the 'salad days' in the hospital:

And the feed was pouring in on us now, all of it, all of the feednet, and we could feel all of our favorites, and there were our files, and our m-chatlines. It came down on us like water. It came down on us like water. It came down like frickin' spring rains, and we were dancing in it... (82)

Later, feed banners are described as 'friendly butterflies' that 'keep coming and coming, and their wings were winking beautifully' (120). Titus's celebration of the feed reads like another type of epiphany and is rather beautiful, reminiscent almost of Virginia Woolf's account of consciousness in her essay 'Modern Fiction', which calls for novelists to attempt to represent experience in the stream of consciousness:

The mind receives a myriad impressions — trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms.... Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall. (89)

Woolf probably did not have adolescent culture and networked technology in mind in her metaphors or her thinking about moments in time, but it is worth noting that as well as being disturbing, Anderson's vision of cyborg youth is often rendered as exquisite and careful as a modernist experiment. If Titus is ultimately too unintelligent and interpolated too far into the capitalist consumer ideology of *Feed*, and

Violet is too physically and socially weak to succeed in educating him otherwise, the young reader at least is encouraged to take time to resist the speed and transience of this near-future world and contemplate instead moments of wonder.

There is, of course, a structural irony in young adult literature that attempts to reflect and capture fleeting moments of youth culture and technological developments, particularly marked in speculative fiction like *Feed*, which anticipates mobile, 3G technology in the context of an end-time for humanity, and in fantastic realism like *iBoy* which feels somewhat behind the times even at the moment of publication. Further ambivalence occurs in the commonsense connections between youth and technology: teenagers may be early adopters of gadgets like the iPhone which make promises about living at high-speed, but according to marketing truism young people also have the potential to quickly reject the latest fad and move on to something new. In the literary imagination, this new thing might just be the chance to slow down and welcome moments of epiphany.

NOTES

¹ Granville Stanley Hall's 1904 study on adolescent psychology is often cited as the point of 'invention' of modern adolescence, while the 'teenager' is a cultural category most clearly defined in the context of post-war social changes (see Abrams; Rollin).

² In my doctoral research I analysed discourses of adolescence shared by sociological and psychological models of adolescence and fictional representations in young adult fantastic realism. I found significant dialogue between theory and fiction in areas of developmentalism, individualism, gendered agency, and temporary social spaces. See Waller 2009.

³ Frith is a seminal example of this work.

⁴ See also Applebaum; Bradford; Mendlesohn; Zipes.

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