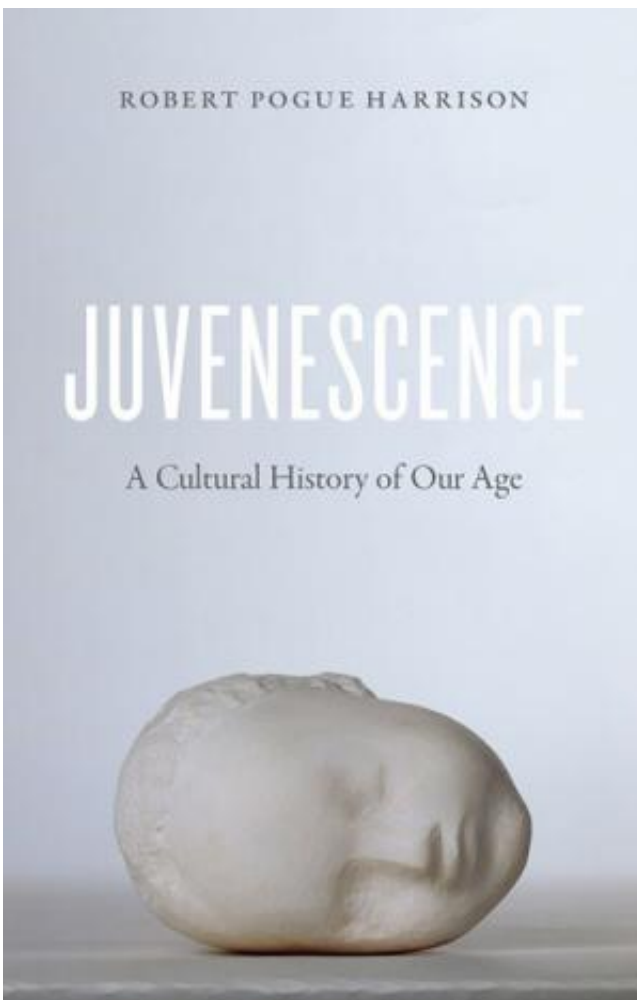


# Scholar traces cultural history of obsession with youth

November 20 2014, by Tom Winterbottom

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"Juvenescence" draws on the biological concept of neoteny, a term that refers to the retention of juvenile characteristics through adulthood.

How old are you? There's the biological answer, of course, but a cultural perspective gives us another way to respond. If we believe Robert Harrison, a professor of Italian literature at Stanford, people in our society are getting younger even as they continue to age.

A scholar of romance studies, Harrison described his latest research as a "cultural exploration of how youth and aging have interacted and evolved from antiquity to today."

Harrison has examined gardens, forests and death through literature, religion and mythology. Now he's taking a similar approach to the question of age in his new book, *Juvenescence: A Cultural History of Our Age*.

"We age simultaneously in different ways, biologically, psychologically and socially, while also aging within the larger framework of a culture whose history predates us and will outlast us," Harrison noted.

Drawing on literature, philosophy, evolutionary science and other sources, Harrison identified and explored the cultural forces that have helped turn our society into the "youngest" society on earth.

For the first time in human history, "The young have become a model of emulation for the older population, rather than the other way around," Harrison said.

The process of juvenescence that got underway in the postwar period, he observed, "has unleashed extraordinary youthful energies in our species and represents one of the momentous revolutions in human cultural history."

With his latest project, Harrison "wanted to explore that history and understand where we are in relation to it at the present juncture."

Through case studies that deal with Socratic philosophy, the emergence of Christianity, the European Enlightenment and the founding of the American republic, Harrison explored different forms of cultural renewal and [rejuvenation](#), almost all of which involve a creative retrieval of older legacies.

In Western culture, Harrison noted, classical antiquity plays a fundamental role in cultural rejuvenation.

"We have many different antiquities in the course of our history. The Middle Ages had its antiquity, which is different than the antiquity of the Renaissance. There is an Enlightenment antiquity, different than the antiquity retrieved by the Romantics, or the Modernists, and so forth, yet in each case the new grew out of the old."

## **Keeping up appearances**

"We live in an age of juvenescence," said Harrison, who hosts the radio talk show Entitled Opinions (about Life and Literature) on KZSU, the campus radio station.

According to Harrison, the term juvenescence has two meanings, either in positive terms of cultural rejuvenation or, on the other hand, of juvenilization.

"Rejuvenation is about recognizing heritage and legacy, and incorporating and re-appropriating historical perspective in the present – like the Founding Fathers did when they created a new nation by drawing on ancient models of republicanism and creatively retrieving many legacies of the past," Harrison said, citing an example from his book.

"Unlike rejuvenation, juvenilization is characterized by the loss of

cultural memory and a shallowing of our historical age."

Harrison proposed another example from his forthcoming work, drawing on 20th-century literature that highlights these two contrasting aspects of age.

"I use two figures to answer the question of how old we are in our age of juvenescence. One is Lolita, from Vladimir Nabokov's novel, and the other is Molloy, from Samuel Beckett's eponymous work. Culturally, we are at once as young as Lolita and as old as Molloy. That makes us a very strange age indeed," he said.

A bedridden but educated vagrant, Molloy is the heir of multi-millennial tradition but now decrepit and seemingly endlessly old. Lolita, on the other hand, belongs to a new age, as an adolescent with no historical memory who will live and die an adolescent no matter how old she gets.

"Culturally speaking, be that in terms of dress codes, mentality, lifestyles and marketing, the world that we live in is astonishingly youthful and in many respects infantile," Harrison said.

As Harrison sees it, the average citizen of the developed world today enjoys the luxury of remaining childishly innocent with respect to the instruments that he or she operates, consumes and otherwise depends on daily. "I feel ambivalent about where we are culturally in this age of ours. It is hard to say whether we are on the cusp of a wholesale rejuvenation of human culture or whether we are tumbling into a dangerous and irresponsible juvenility."

## **Infantilization of society**

In his book, Harrison centrally draws on the biological concept of neoteny, a term that refers to the retention of juvenile characteristics

through adulthood, and expands it into a cultural and historical context.

On the one hand, youth is essential for culture's innovative drive and flashes of genius. At the same time, however, youth – which Harrison considers more protracted than ever – is a luxury that requires the stability and wisdom of older generations and the institutions.

According to Harrison, "constantly chasing after novelty is not rejuvenation. Innovation ex nihilo is often isolated and forgets where it comes from. The truly new is a renewal from what has preceded and a recognition of that age."

Harrison cited what Ezra Pound said about literature, that it is "news that stays news," as well as Pound's battle cry to other great modernist writers – W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Beckett, for example – that they should "make it new."

"Newness in this sense relied on what came before. They were making new something that was old, recognizing and appropriating cultural and historical age in their writings. It was not coming from nothing," he said.

Such was the case, Harrison argued in his book, for platonic philosophy, the spread of Christianity, the Enlightenment and the founding of America.

"These were all neotenic revolutions, a process of rejuvenation whereby older legacies assume newer or younger forms thanks to a synergy between the synthetic forces of wisdom and the insurgent forces of genius," he said.

As Harrison concludes in *Juvenescence*, education – and an awareness of [cultural history](#) – is vital "to increase the age of young people exponentially – to make them hundreds, if not thousands, of years older

than they were when they entered the classroom or sat down with their student's lamp to enlarge their minds. For it is through books, or other forms of writing, that a culture transmits the inner core of its historical age."

Provided by Stanford University

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