The Meaning of Children’s Poetry:
A Cognitive Approach

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Critical attention to children’s poetry has been hampered by the lack of a clear sense of what a children’s poem is and how children’s poetry should be valued. Often, it is seen as a lesser genre in comparison to poetry written for adults. This essay explores the premises and contradictions that inform existing critical discourse on children’s poetry and asserts that a more effective way of viewing children’s poetry can be achieved through cognitive poetics rather than through comparisons with adult poetry. Arguing that children’s poetry preserves the rhythms and pleasures of the body in language and facilitates emotional and physical attunement with others, the essay examines the crucial role children’s poetry plays in creating a holding environment in language to help children manage their sensory environments, map and regulate their neurological functions, contain their existential anxieties, and participate in communal life.

Key words: children’s poetry, cognitive poetics, embodiment, attunement, infant development, poetic language

Much critical work on children’s poetry, indeed on poetry in general, begins with a lament: poetry has lost its pride of place in culture at all levels; it is an unpopular form in the marketplace; it has become the insular property of creative-writing programmes and small presses, an elite product available only to the enlightened few who understand and can evaluate the good from the bad. If this marginalisation from the mainstream is the case for poetry in general, the argument goes, it is even more so for children’s poetry. Except that it is not, at least as far as the first two complaints go. Poetry is certainly alive, if not entirely well, in children’s culture; as Anita Tarr and Richard Flynn assert: ‘No one needs a reminder of how prevalent poetry is in children’s lives, ranging from nursery rhymes to advertisement jingles to song lyrics to poetry in the classroom’ (2). Moreover, children’s poetry is a thriving market concern, with picturebooks featuring the work of a single poet or with rhyming text, omnibus and more
discretely themed anthologies, and verse novels forming a healthy percentage of
the five thousand books published for children in the US each year. In fact there
is so much poetry in the swirl of childhood life and culture that Tarr and Flynn
say we take it for granted. They then proceed to make their lament that what
is lacking with regard to children’s poetry is critical attention to the genre; that
is, even within a robust critical climate that unpacks the ideological, aesthetic,
and pedagogical values and implications of all aspects of children’s literature and
culture, not much ink is devoted to a discussion of children’s poetry.

I would argue that at least some of this neglect has to do with the third
facet of the lament. While children’s poetry is widely available, its criticism tends
to belong to a select few who haven’t been scared out of their own competence
by teachers who insist that they must not only learn to distinguish their dactyls
from their iambics but that they must also determine what the poet is really saying
underneath all of the ornamental wordplay. The students in my upper-division
university course on children’s poetry often express their anxiety, not about
reading poetry, which they love to do, but about understanding it; they worry that
they can’t interpret poems like the experts. Whether it deserves it or not, critical
discourse about poetry often has an aura of elitism surrounding it; it’s a game for
gifted intellectual athletes that can be beautiful and thrilling to watch but might
be bruising to enter, and is certainly not for those who have not married rigorous,
targeted training to already exceptional talent and insight. For instance, I often
find myself wincing as I read the annual essays celebrating The Lion and the Unicorn
Award for Excellence in North American Poetry, not because the essays aren’t
brilliant, but because they make me feel like a dolt for liking some of the poetry
they reject as facile, or for not knowing what they know (and what I must then
need to know) about the long history and current movements of poetic culture in
order to understand and appreciate the poetry the way they do. Such, however,
is perhaps the paradox of all expertise: it excludes even as it instructs. What I
offer here might thus be thought of as a theory for the ‘rest of us’: those who
want to teach and think critically about children’s poetry as part of children’s
literature and culture but who aren’t poets or specialised poetry critics. Because,
for some reason, expertise in reading poetry seems more out of reach, even to
avid readers and expositors of literary prose, than other forms and genres.

‘For some reason’: there is perhaps no more tantalising phrase to a literary
critic. We are, after all, the detectives of the aesthetic realm, seeking answers to
questions not only of what a work of art may mean, but also of how a literary
work affects us as it does. In this essay, I wish to unpack the factors at work in the
critical resistance to children’s poetry by way of examining what poetry is and
what it means to people, especially children. Further, I will offer an intervention
through cognitive poetics that might help us re-evaluate our positions vis-à-vis
those factors with respect not only to our understanding of children’s poetry, but
also to current social problems such as the seeming loss of empathy in our culture.
But to be consistent in my critique of the often elitist positioning of the criticism
that seeks to tell us what is good, bad, or indifferent in terms of children’s poetry,
I will not be offering readings or evaluations of individual poems; instead I invite
readers to read widely and like what they like, and then perhaps use the ideas presented here to figure out why they respond as they do.

FOR WANT OF A THEORY …

…the criticism of poetry was lost. Well, maybe not lost exactly, but certainly floundering. One of the factors that feeds a resistance to write about children’s poetry is the lack of clarity with respect to what, exactly, we are talking about and how we should value it. While there are critical camps that operate out of implicit theoretical positions culled from approaches to adult poetry, children’s poetry has no coherent theory of its own. Peter Hunt even hints in his essay ‘Confronting the Snark: The Non-Theory of Children’s Poetry’ that children’s poetry would be better off without a theory as such. Taking up his call for a childist approach to children’s literature in general, Hunt forcefully argues against the view expressed by W. H. Auden that ‘while there are some good poems that are only for adults, because they presuppose adult experience in their readers, there are no good poems which are only for children’ (quoted in Hunt 21). Such assumptions are, in Hunt’s view, ‘arrogantly demeaning to and dismissive of the primary audience’ (21); to employ Maria Nikolajeva’s very useful term, they reflect the ‘aetonormativity’ that pervades both literature for children and the criticism of that literature (Nikolajeva passim). Nikolajeva proposes that, just as heteronormativity establishes what counts as normal and deviant in gender roles and relationships, and in fact imposes an unequal power dynamic in doing so, aetonormativity assumes that adult perspectives are the standards and goals that characterise the adult–author/child–reader dynamic in children’s literature. From an aetonormative perspective, the roles, responsibilities, and attitudes that characterise maturity in one’s culture are the setpoint, rendering the child not only other but also lesser in understanding and accomplishment; thus for instance Harry Potter may perform the actions that save the day, but in the end Dumbledore has to tell him what it all means. Hunt rails against aetonormativity in children’s literature criticism generally, but his resistance doesn’t address the particularity of children’s poetry, which I maintain is distinct from prose for children and needs a theory all its own.

Richard Flynn, who does direct his critical attention specifically to poetry, nearly always positions his inquiries into the status and nature of children’s poetry in the midst of broader arguments about the unsettled definitions of childhood and poetry in general. In his essay ‘Can Children’s Poetry Matter?’, Flynn points to the unexamined connections between poetic language and childhood, arguing that both are mistakenly seen as a means of access to an authenticity of experience and expression that is lost as we grow older; hence poetry and poetic language, through its association with childhood, becomes one of those childish things we put away as we develop more direct and efficient, if not authentic, ways of articulating experience. But since poets have to make money doing something other than writing poetry, they often ply their wares in school,
where this romanticised notion of children’s unschooled access to an authentic language of sensual experience and imagination becomes a site for a predatory pedagogy as poets attempt to rediscover the innocence of their own childhoods in the supposedly more poetic expressions of children. Rather than empowering children as writers, Flynn argues, poets in schools (including graduate schools) are more likely to impose their preferred method onto their students: ‘Today, children who are taught to “appreciate” and to write poetry are more often being taught how to consume products according to the particular persuasions of whatever poet happens to be in the schools rather than to recognize and attempt to discover value’ (40). Flynn does not articulate his understanding of what that value consists in other than in the negative: we must stop thinking of poetry in terms of market value. Instead, he quotes with approval James Applewhite’s contention of ‘the essential idea of artistic value’ (quoted in Flynn 42). Flynn then takes William and Betty Greenway, who promote the writing of free verse as a way to teach children to appreciate contemporary poetry, to task for their ‘largely naïve and discredited theory of language’ (39), which asserts the connection of a word to a thing as transparent and linked through sonic qualities, but doesn’t offer his own theory of children’s or poetic language to counter their naïvety. Perhaps he is simply assuming that his audience works from the post-Saussurean view of language as conventional and arbitrarily related to its referent in the latter case, but with regard to the former – that is, the existence of an ‘essential idea of artistic value’ – critics who agree with Hunt might find Flynn’s easy acceptance of this view no less naïve and discredited because of its aetonormativity. And indeed, critics such as Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu would discredit it in terms of its latent ideological imperialism, as artistic value is certainly culturally defined.

Flynn does nod toward giving children’s preferences for rhyme and repetition their due, but only as a concession, stating that ‘it seems irresponsible to disregard such preferences’ (41). More insistently, he agrees with the Greenways that the tightly rhythmical, rhyming poetry of most children’s anthologies, often humorous and almost always readily understandable, is poetry for a season: ‘[a]lthough children may initially share Prelutsky’s preference for Lilian over Marianne Moore, we are doing them a disservice if we encourage them to retain that preference into adulthood’, says Flynn (41) at his most aetonormative. While poetry and poetic language itself are to retain its value, then, children’s poetry of a certain sort is something to be put away with childhood. Despite his persistent calls for positive critical attention to children’s poetry, Flynn’s own positioning assumes that its essential artistic value can only be measured in comparative terms with adult poetry, that somehow Marianne Moore’s poetry is essentially better than Lilian Moore’s work and children should be taught to recognise this so that they can cross over. And while here he seems to be in most direct opposition to Hunt, who argues that children’s poetry shouldn’t be a gateway to anything other than the promotion of language play, Hunt also argues that children’s poetry belongs only to childhood, the difference being that for Hunt ‘its evanescence does not make it lesser’ (22).
Flynn’s fellow judges of *The Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry seem to share both his implicit theories and their contradictions. The judges often distinguish between the good and bad based on how the work in question responds to the established traditions of adult poetry, and chide the poets for not operating effectively within or against those traditions, even though children are not likely to have those exemplars to rub their own evaluations against. To be fair, they are literary critics talking to other literary critics, and their insights are always enlightening and extremely well informed. But in addition to their adoption of aetonormative standards for evaluating the poetry, there seems to be a shared sensibility among them regarding the nature of the children on whose behalf they are reading. Rejecting conventional and discredited connections between the innocence, sincerity, and authenticity of both children and poetic discourse, they see themselves instead as champions of the knowing child who rejects easy rhymes and trite observations, the child who somehow intuits and prefers the syncopated rhythms, silences, and hesitations of poetry, as well as the innovative uses of language and visual effects that delight and sometimes offend adult sensibilities because they surprise, shock, and refresh them. They have, as Karín Lesnik-Oberstein asserts in a review of Joseph T. Thomas’s book *Poetry’s Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children’s Poetry,* constructed a neo-Romantic child on the ashes of his sentimental Romantic predecessor. Rather than seeing the child as one who lives close to nature and trails clouds of glory from his heavenly origin into his stilted, because conventional, poetic images and rhymes, Thomas’s child is anarchic and subversive, knowing what adults expect of him and thus how to appall them, but he is no less ‘natural’ or ‘true’ because of this; in fact, it is his tendency toward rebellion and specifically sexual knowingness that makes him attractive to many contemporary critics of children’s literature. Repeatedly, the critics who shepherd the *Lion and the Unicorn* poetry awards dismiss poetry that favours the patterned and predictable and value poetry with an ‘edge’. They complain, for instance, that a school bus reimagined as an angry beast in Betsy Franco’s *Messing Around on the Monkey Bars and Other School Poems* is a ‘tired metaphor’, and that ‘Franco doesn’t have the guts to extend the conceit and have the bus vomit forth its passengers (or, more daring, to excrete them in some other way)’ (Heyman et al. 358). Most children, I would imagine, would not find the metaphor as exhausted as do these critics and may even experience it as generative, needing the poet to take their imaginations only halfway to the proposed destination so that they can experience the transgressive joy of completing it, just as the critics obviously do. Alternately, and this is important, they may choose not to take the metaphor to such an extreme place, preferring instead to locate their edges closer in or in another direction.

Generally speaking, these arguments about children and poetry are engaged expansions and reconceptualisations of an old quarrel between Kenneth Koch and Myra Cohn Livingston (see, for instance, Flynn; Thomas; Torres; as well as Koch and Livingston themselves). Briefly, Koch avers that children are natural poets, that in fact their very naturalness makes their poetic images and word play
richer and more sensual. Livingston, on the other hand, sees poetry, even and especially poetry written for children, as the exacting and disciplined production of figured language that engages life’s challenges through a consciousness that understands its effervescence and impermanence, a feat that could not be accomplished by children; to ask children to write their own poetry trivialises the form because, while children can certainly produce rhyming text with ragged right margins, their productions are no more to be considered poetry than shapes glued onto paper plates can be considered art. Thus critics who wish to assert the naturalness of children’s poetic sensibilities and the freedom of their wordplay fall more closely in line with Koch, while those who place children’s poetry on a continuum with adult poetry in terms of its production, meanings, and value would find more in common with Livingston’s perspective. The problem is that, due to muddled and often contradictory perspectives about who we want children to be, do, and mean, and what we want poetry to be, do, and mean, we don’t yet have a clear understanding of what children’s poetry is, does, and means. Considering the problem from the perspective of cognitive literary studies, we can start by moving away from what we want children’s poetry to be, do, and mean and consider what it actually does.

CHILDRENS POETRY IS WHAT CHILDRENS POETRY DOES

My first task, then, is to work out a definition of children’s poetry that distinguishes it from prose or other forms of literary art. No small task and oft attempted by far more accomplished thinkers than myself, many of whom simply give it up as a bad job (see Styles xxv, for instance). Many definitions are fanciful and attempt to convey their truth through metaphor or synesthetic allusions (Tia), but there are some conceptual differences between these definitions that are relevant to a cognitive approach. Perhaps the most oft-cited definition of poetry is given by Coleridge: ‘the best words in the best order’. Setting aside the intentionally deliberate vagueness of the adjective ‘best’, Coleridge’s definition is rather odd for a Romantic in that it emphasises the rational properties of language over its sensual qualities. One could argue that those prosodic qualities are inherent in what could be considered ‘best’ in a given circumstance, but the fact is that, from the compactness of Coleridge’s definition alone, one would have to argue and elaborate it, and the use of the word ‘order’ suggests a taming of those sensibilities at any rate. And anyway, couldn’t the same maxim be used for good literary prose or even (perhaps especially) technical communication? The brilliance of Coleridge’s definition lies not in what it says, but in the form of its expression – that is, its trim succinctness, the repetition of the word ‘best’, and the play of the internal syllable ‘ord’, which, according to a particular pronunciation, tricks the eye upon its first repetition by sounding more like the final syllable rather than its ocular twin in the word ‘order’, so that it introduces novelty and surprise into what might otherwise be a disappearance of meaning into patterned repetition.
So even within Coleridge’s prosaic definition, we can start to see that what is distinct to poetry are the sensual qualities that require the engagement of multimodal ways of processing – in this case, the eye and the ear but also, unconsciously, the kinesthetic bounce of repetition and surprise. Again, though, this can be said of prose; good prose facilitates the creation of word pictures and sensations in an amodal way – that is, it provides enough perceptual information to trigger our ability to complete the picture through concepts, memories, and associations. A strong definition of poetry must allude to the distinct way it not only mediates or invokes sensual experience but actually produces it as well. Emily Dickinson’s definition of poetry stands in almost direct opposition to Coleridge’s, conceptually speaking: ‘If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry’ (Higginson). In this way of thinking about poetry, Dickinson is referencing its direct sensual effect on her body; for Dickinson, poetry bypasses concepts and interpretation and reaches directly into embodied experience to produce its effects, which exceed its linguistic meaning.

At the risk of being reductive, I would argue that Coleridge and Dickinson thus represent two divergent ways of thinking about the distinctiveness of poetry and its value that are relevant to our discussion here. ‘The best words in the best order’ implies an emphasis on linguistic meaning and interpretation, while Dickinson’s visceral response is predicated on sensory experience that is not able to be fully articulated in words. I think that one of the reasons there is a general resistance to think critically about children’s poetry is that we have, as literary critics, formed a prejudice in favour of the interpretation of content over the experience of literature, and children’s poetry often eludes the kind of interpretation we favour. We want the words and images of our literature to mean something, to be ideologically laden with rich and subtle hegemonies that we can decipher and reveal to be problematic and causal with regard to what we perceive as society’s ills. But what we don’t want to face is that such interpretation is in itself an effacement of the true meaning of children’s poetry, which, as I will argue presently, is at least partly to connect the body to language in a material and sensual, rather than linguistically or conceptually meaningful, way. Archibald MacLeish may tell us that ‘A poem should not mean/ But be,’ but we can’t leave the meaning of poems alone and still be doing our jobs unless we undertake a paradigm shift that understands children’s poetry as meaningful in its use by children rather than its forms or interpretations. Hunt calls for such a shift by affirming the non-theory of children’s poetry (21), but he attributes the need to leave children alone with their poetry as a need to release the experience from the burden of adult power. I argue that there is a place for theory and critique, but it consists in recognising, as Peter Stockwell puts it, that ‘[m]eaning, then, is what literature does. Meaning is use’ (4). We need to understand, then, the uses of children’s poetry in order to understand how to interpret its meaning.
THE BODY IN LANGUAGE

Certainly cradle songs, nursery rhymes, and children’s poems anchor us in our particular language groups as they replicate the rhythms, sound patterns, and material concerns of our culture. They form an enduring thread of tradition that binds us to our cultural and linguistic past. They introduce language as a site of play and often of humour. But I would argue that children’s poetry accomplishes a feat even more profound than that of connecting us to a particular cultural heritage, with its unique histories, material conditions, and sense of humor. I would argue that children’s poetry enables each of us, no matter what our culture, to move from being bodies in the world to being bodies in language. The rhythms and sounds of poetry for children, whose metrics, phonetics, and structures resonate with bodily architecture and processes, preserve the body in language, while its metaphors, which are almost always rooted in sensual experience, help us understand who we are as subjects and objects in a world of signs.

This transition from being a body in the world to being a body in language is no small thing. In learning to talk, and later to read, children move from a fully immersive life-world that engages them at the level of all of the physical senses into a world of representations and symbols. These representations render the existing multisensory life-world rather pale and banal, while at the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, open up possibilities of thought and imagination that extend beyond the life-world into the numinous. Language names our world and carves it up into categories. But poetic language shapes our world, enchants it with patterned sound and metaphors that link our bodies to the world around us.

Thinkers as diverse as philosophers Henri Bergson and Luce Irigaray, writer and psychedelic-drug advocate Aldous Huxley, neuroscientist and psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, autism researcher Olga Bogdashina, linguist Benjamin Whorf, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, cultural critic Susan Sontag, poet Donald Hall, and literature professor turned software engineer Amittai F. Aviram (and of course there must be others) all converge in their assessment of language as a conceptual system that distances us from the very percepts on which the concepts are founded. That is, our embodied senses initially mediate the world for us, but, except in cases of autism spectrum disorder, are quickly overtaken by concepts marked by a language that divides and conquers the natural world, forever circumscribing our access to things as they are. Each of these thinkers sees this as a problem first and foremost because in separating us from our own sensory experience we lose our sense of connectedness with the world and each other; if we can’t feel ourselves, we can’t feel with others. This loss of empathy, then, is what is at stake in living in ‘anti-poetic times’ (Tarr and Flynn 2), and this is precisely what children’s poetry can remedy by replicating the body in language. Donald Hall names these replicating features Goatfoot, Milktongue, and Twinbird: Goatfoot being the bouncing rhythm of the heartbeat repeating itself in muscle movements, contractions, and expansions; Milktongue being the sensual feel of the mouth as it ‘curls around the sounds, the way his tongue warms
with the tiny thread of milk that he pulls from his mother’, relishing ‘the deep and primitive pleasure of vowels in the mouth, of assonance and of holds on adjacent long vowels; of consonance, mmmm, and alliteration’ (148); and Twinbird being the experience of symmetry the child finds through watching his hands and finding the pleasure of two in unity – two hands, two feet, two eyes – alike but opposite, dependent and independent.5

Situated between the body and language, children’s poetry draws these two heterogeneous realms together in ways that enable children to feel at home in their own bodies as well as in their social, languaged worlds. The task is monumental and multifaceted: how do we represent embodied feelings in disembodied words and images, and how do we use words to express what can’t be felt with our bodies? How do we transform these bodies, these words, into sufficient containers of meaning and wonder so that we are touched but not overwhelmed by the sensory flood of lived experience? And how do we share our vision with others so that they do something more profound than merely understand, but actually re-experience that vision? This transformation starts in the songs and poetry that pass between an infant and another person, welcoming that infant into the world of human language. That poetry is thus as important to us as food, as breath, for it fundamentally brings the two planes of our existence – sensory experience and conceptual language – together as one.

While evolutionary biologists can only speculate about how humans as a species acquired the world we now inhabit, we can explore with more specificity how that world begins for each of us. Unlike other mammals, human beings are born prematurely; indeed many neuroscientists follow Dr Harvey Karp in calling the first three months after birth the ‘fourth trimester’, indicating that the brain and body development that takes place before birth is an incomplete project that should be continued after birth by replicating womb-like conditions as nearly as possible. This includes, for Karp, what he calls the five S’s: swaddling, side or stomach position for sleeping, shushing, swinging, and sucking. These techniques correspond to what psychologist D. W. Winnicott calls a ‘holding environment’, where the baby is ‘gather[ed] . . . together’ (87) by the caregiver and made to feel secure in her own body. Further, Winnicott stresses that the ‘child’s ability to feel the body is the place where the psyche lives could not have been developed without a consistent technique of handling’ (194). Our experience of the world and our place in it thus begins with being closely held, enclosed in the safely muffled world of the endless rhythms of body-to-body contact. Part of the holding environment includes limiting and regulating sensory input, which is especially important for children with neural processing differences, since they are easily overwhelmed by the flood of sensation. Vestibular rocking and the repetition of sounds and movements, which psychologists call self-stimulating behaviours, are often in fact self-calming behaviours, since they serve to introduce regular patterning to the chaotic experience of unregulated sensation.

I would add that the voices of the child’s family members are also an important part of this holding environment. After all, those voices are also part
of the womb experience, since babies can hear long before birth, and people instinctively adopt a particular way of speaking to infants—a lilting, rhythmical speech that replicates the shushing sounds of the womb and swinging rhythms of the moving body. As David Miall and Ellen Dissanayake have observed, these protoconversations between infants and caregivers are inherently poetic in that they consist of speech patterns specifically modulated in terms of their sound and structure. In fact, researchers have begun to call this ‘communicative musicality’ and to explore the many ways that it undergirds our ongoing attunement with others and provides a foundation for the development of all of the temporal arts. Dissanayake insists that we remember that adults do not teach babies to like the particular kind of poetic language they use to speak to them, but rather babies teach adults how to talk to them by showing adults what they like (‘Root’ 23). Adults adjust the rhythm, stress, and intonation of their speech according to the feedback they get from their infants, and the collective research of developmental psychologists, as well as the experience of caregivers everywhere, finds that babies prefer and require simple, rhythmic, patterned, repetitive, exaggerated speech, accompanied by movements and visual cues that also share these qualities.

Interestingly, these very qualities characterise much of the poetry that many children’s poetry critics disdain. They aren’t edgy. But I would maintain that we have to remember that the edges exist in different places for children than they do for adults. As adults, we live in a world of language that is largely stripped of its materiality in favor of its abstract conceptual force; in fact that is one of language’s purposes. Benjamin Whorf introduced the idea that our experience of the world, including our concepts of space and time, is circumscribed by the language we use to describe phenomena. Luce Irigaray says that the man under the sway of logos ‘looks to discourse for a coherence that he has lost’ (34). The originary coherence, she avers, is found in Nature, in the real of bodies rather than in the artifice of language. Preverbal children live in an unarticulated and chaotic swirl of sensation that is nevertheless held in check by the rhythms and symmetries of their own bodies and the consistencies of repetitive experiences. Yes, they must learn to separate experience into categories and map it onto domains in their neural circuitry, which then makes the domain-crossing of metaphor an effort. They must learn to foreground important elements of their environments, which means other elements must recede from conscious attention. They need simplicity in their language, because their experience is harrowingly complex if for no other reason than it is new. They need patterned repetition so that they can discern what is predictable from what is novel. Much of this work is done through language: naming the world gives us a means, albeit illusory, to control it. Thus, language as such has an agenda—to stem the tide of sensory flooding so that the sense of a coherent self can emerge. Children’s poetry, however, has a more inclusive, more imperative agenda: to bring sensation alongside the heterogeneous mode of representation, to reproduce the body in language. Thus the ways the sonic qualities of a word or phrase relate to its referent are not accidental, and the tight metrics of children’s
poetry are something more profound than ornament; our poststructural theories may discredit that view of language and poetry, but our bodies embrace it. To use Amittai F. Aviram’s terms, children’s poetry allegorises the embodied self as ‘not merely conceptual but material’ (24).

As adults, or even, I would argue, as preadolescents, we may complete the transformation Irigaray warns against, abandoning the nourishing but unpredictable flows of natural, sensory life for the illusory control offered us by logos; many older children do in fact reject poetry as something they have outgrown. Alternatively, we may begin to feel the constraints of metric predictability, and, either paradoxically or as an effect of the valuing of sensation mediated and controlled through language over sensations of embodiment, struggle to find ways to refresh our sensibilities through edginess, in either form or content. But for young children, sensibility, with its ecstasies and terrors always threatening to spill over into the pain/pleasure of jouissance, is where they live, and thus their poetry must help them establish boundaries without estranging them from their bodies. They need their poetry to set the edges, to enclose sensation in a manageable form. Adults, on the other hand, have already enshrouded themselves in languages that are not at all poetic and hence court the edges that will reawaken sensibility and reconnect them to their bodies. Adult poetry may take as its goal defamiliarisation, but children’s poetry has the opposite goal of establishing representation as a familiar site in which to live our bodies.

FEELING WITH OTHERS

My definition of children’s poetry thus far has been focused on its quality of helping a child transition from a body in the world to a body in language through its formal features. But children’s poetry often (not always) has meaningful content and, content or no, is a communal act as well as a self-referencing one. By communal, I mean to convey that one of the things children’s poetry does is connect us to others. Sometimes that connection is through a message that is communicated by the words of a poem, but sometimes the connection is not message-driven at all but rather an experience of emotional attunement. Rhythm is contagious, rhyme is predictable, and the result is that children’s poetry is almost irresistibly participatory.

Just as adults adjust their speech into a poetic pattern to talk with infants, infants learn very quickly to adjust the prosody of their utterances to get what they want. Sometimes the goal of their utterances is self-calming, but most often they are using their voices to appeal to an other. While this appeal is largely instinctual in the first six months of life, several curious and wonderful things happen when a baby is around eight months old. First, she learns that the world exists, regardless of her interaction with it. She develops what Jean Piaget calls object permanence, or the knowledge that just because she can’t see an object doesn’t mean it isn’t there. Second, she develops meaningful separation anxiety – that is, prior to her understanding of the permanence of objects in the
world, any warm, caring adult could comfort her in her loneliness. At around eight months old, however, the desire for a particular person, usually the mother, becomes active; we could say that this is when mother becomes an object in the world like other objects, able to be missed, rather than merely an extension of the baby’s own body. Like communicative musical attunement, separation anxiety is a reciprocal phenomenon – not only can the mother leave the baby, but the baby, now mobile, is capable of leaving the mother under her own power, making them each responsible for staying attuned with the other. But also, at eight months, babies are beginning to understand the meanings of certain words. They cannot speak all the words they understand, but they know that words are associated with objects, and they can be comforted, and comfort themselves, by hearing and approximating the words in absence of the things. Their holding environment has expanded to the point where words are becoming placeholders for things. They are beginning to develop a sense of the way a body can be preserved in language through words as well as rhythm and sound.

Cradle songs, nursery rhymes, children’s poems, and the spontaneous rhythmic utterances of parentese thus begin to take on multivalent significance. While the primary importance is still the prosodic elements more than their meaningful content, the words themselves take on a nascent significance as a part of the holding environment. As Lucy Rollin points out, many children’s poems comment specifically on common anxieties of embodied experience – the baby falling, the absence of fathers, or the worry about separation between parents and their infants. Consider the familiar English nursery rhyme (Opie 71):

Bye, baby bunting,
Daddy’s gone a-hunting,
Gone to get a rabbit skin
To wrap the baby bunting in.

The words of this poem speak of an absent father who nevertheless longs to hold his child, so much so that he has gone to seek a soft skin to hold her in (and in performed versions the final line is often “To wrap his baby bunting in”). This narrative is sure to bring comfort to a child missing an absent parent if she understands the words. But the sounds are equally important. The repetition of a few distinct phonemes, along with the rhythm and rhyme, make this a verse that creates a multifaceted holding environment for the baby – that is, it takes an anxiety-producing situation and wraps it in a tightly controlled metre with a limited number of sounds. The rhyme and metre take the baby back to a time before lack, a womb-time where the steady rushing of blood and the regular beat of the heart held their bodies securely. Through poetic language, the memory of that time is evoked; the balance and symmetry of walking, running, and bouncing, and the pleasures of making repetitive sounds with their mouths provide nostalgic echoes of archaic experience. Now consider the rhymes and songs you remember from childhood, or the ones you share with your children and grandchildren: even when the words are nonsensical or even appear mildly threatening, the beats of the syllables are rhythmic and regular, the sounds are
balanced and pleasing, and the verses themselves have definitive, comforting closure.

The holding environment of children’s poetry thus works sometimes at the level of both content and form, though form continues to be paramount. Winnicott believes that the chief anxieties of the developing sense of self include ‘going to pieces, falling forever, having no relationship to the body, having no orientation, and complete isolation’ because there is no means of communication (Rollin 76). I have argued elsewhere that the fear of going to pieces is addressed by the persistence of the cognitive metaphor of the ‘body as container’ in children’s poetry, concluding that it is the poems themselves that become containers that connect children to the body while addressing the anxiety of existential frailty and impermanence (see Coats, ‘If it rhymes’ 125–6). But children’s poetry addresses each of these anxieties by creating rhythmic patterns that replicate and regulate bodily processes, transforming language into a holding environment and attuning us to others through communicative musicality.

Children’s poetry is almost always shared communally and is hardly ever done without the involvement of the entire body. Children’s poems and songs often have actions to accompany them, gestures that adults teach children to imitate as part of the song. These rhymes are almost always conceptually meaningless, though one might push an interpretation of the itsy bitsy spider as a petite Sisyphus, or argue that the little teapot participates in the ‘body as container’ metaphor. But Swedish neuroscientists Patricia Eckerdal and Bjorn Merker were puzzled as to the utility of this conceptually vacant activity until they realised that teaching children action rhymes was a way of training them to participate in communal ritual behaviour. By interacting with adults to learn the combination of melody, words, and movements that form the practice of action songs, children must participate in shared attention and attune their bodies to the bodies of others. The success of the attunement is in some ways its own reward, but such attunement also performs important neurological functions that require the coordination of multiple areas of the brain that control emotion, language, and movement, resulting in a greater sense of coherence, focus, and control both in one’s own body and in a social group. Because humans possess the capacity for generalised imitation – that is, we can extend our imitative behaviours beyond the original conditions under which they were learned – this early training in embodied attunement facilitates our participation in other contexts that require us to feel with others.

This shared participation in action rhymes and recited poetry thus forms the substrate for the future ability to participate in communal ritual, which is key to positive social functioning, the development of empathy, and the creation of a coherent culture. Citing E. O. Wilson along with her own work, Dissanayake argues that increased intelligence facilitates greater behavioural flexibility. This is, of course, a boon for individual and species progress, but it comes with the price of uncertainty and the possibility of isolation; new actions and assertions of self have uncertain outcomes. But the growth of memory and the ability to plan and predict possible outcomes based on both past events and innovative
hypothesis-testing and problem-solving enable people to be proactive rather than simply reactive in uncertain circumstances. This desire to actually do something about the unpredictable and sometimes unpleasant conditions of human life rather than merely accept them, Dissanayake contends, undergirds the energy we pour into the arts and religious ceremony. She quotes Wilson’s claim that the purpose of the arts is ‘to create order and meaning from the chaos of daily existence [and to] nourish our craving for the mystical’ (Wilson 232, cited in Dissanayake 25). Shared poetic language mirrors and amplifies human emotion through rhythm and other sonic qualities that exceed any conceptual understanding of a linguistically meaningful message; it may calm or excite, but its chief function is to unite. Children’s poetry forms the foundation of this process by transforming the body’s own processes into a special way of using language for communal bonding, enabling the holding environment to reach beyond a parent and a child into a larger social form that has the power to comfort and bind us together.

CONCLUSION

If children’s poetry is what children’s poetry does, then I would argue that a children’s poem is one that creates a holding environment in language to help children manage their sensory environments, map and regulate their neurological functions, and contain their existential anxieties. Rather than substituting language for sensation, a children’s poem brings the body into language through strong beats and sounds that evoke their sensory referents. It doesn’t have to make sense in any conceptual way, nor does it need to challenge the adequacy of language to frame reality; rather, its particular task is to create sonorous, kinesthetic, gestural, and visual links between the heterogeneous realms of what can be said and what can only be felt. Initiated in the attunement between infant and caregiver, it keeps a child in touch with his own feelings, which enables him to feel with others. As such, I would argue that children’s poetry should not be something that we put away with childhood. While we learn to appreciate the disruptive effects and conceptual challenges of adult poetry, we do ourselves a great disservice if we allow those values to close off the bodily pleasures we experience through Goatfoot, Milktongue, and Twinbird, those whimsical gods of children’s poetry.

NOTES

1. I must admit trying this once in high school. Assigned to write a poem about nature, I asked my five-year-old cousin what he thought clouds were made of. He looked at me with disgust and snorted, ‘Water vapour,’ as if I were the stupidest person alive. Any notion I had of the superiority of the unfettered poetic vision of children was disabused that day.
2. Thomas is one of the creators and founding judges of the award. He served as judge for seven years and has now assumed responsibilities as the Poetry Award Editor for the journal.
3. I am indebted to Laura Apol for sharing this reference with me.
4. Stephen Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen assert: ‘We define musicality as expression of our human desire for cultural learning, our innate skill for moving, remembering, and planning in sympathy with others that makes our appreciation and production of an endless variety of dramatic temporal narratives possible — whether those narratives consist of specific cultural forms of music, dance, poetry, or ceremony; whether they are the universal narratives of a mother and her baby quietly conversing with one another; whether it is the wordless emotional and motivational narrative that sits beneath a conversation between two or more adults or between a teacher and a class’ (4–5).

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