The Aesthetics of Children’s Poetry
A Study of Children’s Verse in English

Edited by
Katherine Wakely-Mulroney
and Louise Joy

STUDIES IN CHILDHOOD, 1700 TO THE PRESENT
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10 Cognitive poetics and the aesthetics of children's poetry

A primer of possibilities

Karen Coats

I start my university classes on children's poetry with chocolate. I give each student two small squares of single-origin chocolate, and ask them to experience one of the squares with as many senses as possible. We then generate adjectives to describe those sensations. After they have exhausted their store of sensory vocabulary, I read them professionally prepared tasting notes. These might include references to top notes of cherry, almond, or citrus, middle hints of tobacco, smoke, or vanilla, and finishes of caramel or coconut. Following this, they taste their second piece of chocolate. To their amazement, many of them find that they can now taste introduced feelings they couldn't before; the words have actually changed their sensory experience.

As we process this activity, we discuss the relationship between language and sensory experience, how each informs the other as imbricated and yet heterogeneous registers. We talk about how language evokes memories, expectations, and emotions that work their way into our perceptions, and how synaesthetic metaphors form a large part of their everyday vocabulary for describing experience. We talk about the conventionality of metaphors, the pleasure and surprise of novel ones, and the ways language can both enhance and limit our ability to process sensory experience. My purpose in starting my study this way is to induct students experientially and multimodally into an approach to children's poetry, informed by cognitive poetics.

Cognitive poetics has been called the "next big thing" in literary studies, but it really isn't particularly new (Cohen n. pag.). The term itself was coined by Reuven Tsur in the 1970s as he sought to push the work of the Russian Formalists and French and Czech structuralists in a cognitive direction — that is, he wanted to consider how the structures of texts were related to and mediated in and through the human mind. However, it has only been in the past two decades that the field has taken off, mostly due to the explosion of research in cognitive science afforded by new technologies that enable research into mental processes as they occur. The excitement of figuring out how the brain processes experience has bled over into literary response, and while it doesn't take fMRIs to glean how readers read, it does require certain paradigm shifts, such as a greater emphasis on embodiment and the multimodal aspects of literary experience, that such research both prompts and enables. Still, much of the theoretical and empirical research conducted on aspects of readers' cognitive and affective responses to literary texts has been undertaken with adults under conditions that do not mimic what children do with texts. For instance, anyone who has watched a child encountering a book will notice that most don't simply open it and read the words in a linear fashion. Young readers examine the book, flip the pages back and forth, and seek out ways to get physically comfortable before they even start reading the words. They laugh out loud and share what they are reading. They may even smell a book. And these are just the externally observable behaviours. Certain strands of cognitive science attend to those behaviours, but they also ask how a reader "gets into" the world of a book, how they imagine scenes as they read, what effects novel metaphors have on reading speed, how closure is effected on a semantic and syntactical level. Only recently, however, have children's literature critics begun to exploit the resources of cognitive stylistics to look at texts written with a younger readership in mind. When we do look closely at these texts, we find that children's poems and stories prompt any number of fascinating questions regarding how psychology, stylistics, embodiment, and cultural contingencies intersect.

Cognitive poetics is actually a blanket term covering a range of approaches to literary study. Hence, depending on the area of emphasis, some researchers choose to call what they do cognitive narratology or cognitive stylistics, or they might even branch out into areas such as evolutionary biology and neuroaesthetics. The accumulation of terms bears witness to the range of possibilities that open up when literary study intersects with cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics, and cognitive science. This incursion is not universally well-received by the practitioners of these areas of inquiry, which bears witness to the long antagonism between the sciences and the humanities, but also to the difficulty of responsible interdisciplinary study. However, given the persistence of literary art in human communities, a persistence that, as Jonathan Gottschall points out, seems to defy evolutionary logic, it is clear that cognitive scientists have as much to learn from literary study as literary theorists have to learn from those who study the ways the brain processes information and emotion.

So what, then, are some of the possibilities cognitive poetics opens up for the study of the aesthetics of children's poetry? First and foremost, as I have argued elsewhere, cognitive poetics enables us to enact a paradigm shift in the way we view the meaning of children's poetry generally. Cognitive poetics is not an interpretive method like, say, feminism or Marxism; that is, it doesn't aim to produce virtuoso readings of individual poems that reveal their deeper political, historical, or social meanings. Rather, it directs our attention to the processes whereby the stylistic and structural dynamics of children's poems produce specific cognitive and emotional effects as we read,
listen to, and recite them. It aims to explore the conditions that make meaning possible. Because of this general framing approach, I would suggest that it enables us to formulate a theory of children’s poetry as a whole that positions children’s poetry as the ground on which all of our understanding and appreciation of the temporal arts, and indeed language in general, rests. A key text for cognitive poetics is George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s Metaphors We Live By, which argues that metaphor, once thought of as mere ornament, is actually fundamental to the way we process experience through language; they argue that our embodied experiences transform into concepts that we express as linguistic metaphors. To take a very simple example: since humans walk upright, learning to walk upright is both a developmental goal and an empowering achievement. From this achievement comes the conceptual similarity between being upright and being happy or making progress. Hence, the conceptual metaphor “HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN” engenders further linguistic metaphors, such as “My spirits rose,” or “I fell into a depression” (Lakoff and Johnson 15).

Given this way of thinking about metaphor, it makes sense to look at children’s poetry as foundational to the project of developing conceptual metaphors in the first place, because poetic language in childhood is the method through which children negotiate the transition between embodied experience and linguistic representation of that experience. Children’s poetry holds a special place in that project because its styles and structures bring the body alongside linguistic expressions in a material way, mapping organic processes through the rhythms and prosody of the poems. One of the basic tenets of cognitive poetics is that “[e]xperience explains conceptual structure, and conceptual structure explains linguistic structure” (Steen and Gavins 9). I would argue that it is through children’s poetry that linguistic structure most directly mirrors embodied experience through the bounce of rhythm and rhyme that mimics the symmetry and balance of walking or skipping. While poetry that is written for and appeals to adults may take up some of these same prosodic elements, the emphasis in much adult poetry is on conceptual material that leaves the body behind, as it were, in favour of an appeal to a fully developed interiority. Children’s poems are more actively engaged in the process of building the linguistic and conceptual framework for that interiority, of constructing the body as a place where the soul can take up residence. I would argue that the forms, structures, and metaphors of children’s poetry play a key role in completing the aesthetic framework: linguistic structure shapes and changes experience. Our paradigm shift thus must be away from interpretation towards the dynamic, embodied experience of children’s poetry, taking up Susan Sontag’s challenge that “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (14). Instead of looking for, and sometimes deploring the lack of, deeper, “hidden” meanings in children’s poetry, we should be analysing the ways that those forms and metaphors condition and conceptualise the experience of bodies interacting with the world and with other bodies.

It might seem that cognitive poetics leads away from this project of realising an “erotics of art” in its dependence on a scientific paradigm. But one must be wary of the metaphors one uses to describe cognition. Some threads of cognitive science build on the ideas emerging from artificial intelligence, viewing the brain as an information processing machine similar to a computer. But David S. Miall, Catherine Emmott, and Michael Burke have each posed significant challenges to that model, stressing the importance of cognitive models that include integrative attention to affect and emotion. Children’s brains are amazingly effective information processing machines, but children are also feeling beings, and their emotional centres and affective capabilities are far more available to them than the emerging but less developed executive functions that enable narrative memory, inhibitory control, metacognition, and problem-solving. As a result, their feeling responses to literature are dominant, so that the structures and stylistics of children’s poetry must be understood through their emotional effects. Thus Burke’s model of “affective cognition” is particularly useful in considering children’s poetry, as it pays attention not only to content, but also to style, mood, and physical interaction with texts. And he seeks to account for these things through in-depth considerations of how memory, sensation, image schema, and stylistic foregrounding techniques all work to create emotional effects.

While cognitive science opens out to all aspects of mental functioning, cognitive poetics zeroes in on the multisensory, structural, and temporal ways that readers engage with literary texts. My original plan for this essay involved setting forth micro-examples of the various ways different aspects of cognitive poetics could be productively employed to help us bring the aesthetics of children’s poetry more forcefully into view. I soon realised that to do that responsibly would be the work of a book, or several, and not all written by me, rather than a single chapter. What follows, then, is a rationale that I hope will inspire further explorations under the auspices of a cognitive poetics approach to children’s poetry.

A rather lengthy theoretical preamble, or teaching the ear to smell

As Peter Hunt astutely points out in “Confronting the Snark: The Non-Theory of Children’s Poetry,” the status of children’s poetry is notoriously vexed:

There is a common, basic assumption that poetry— at least, post-romantic poetry— although essentially indefinable, is static, thoughtful, sophisticated, skilled, philosophical— and concerned with sex and death and interiority. The general concept of children is that they are NOT any of those things. Therefore, children’s poetry cannot exist. QED.
One may hear in this a similarity to Jacqueline Rose's infamous contention that children's literature is an impossibility, though her conclusion rests on differently nuanced premises. In Rose's case, it is the status of the audience that is in question; because the state of childhood is a fantasy created by adults, there is no one to whom such literature can be addressed. In Hunt's assessment, the impossibility rests on the form of the literature that bars it from children's understanding. From either side, though, children's literature in general is, in Jacques Lacan's terms, a missed encounter.

It is no accident that Rose, with Juliet Mitchell, produced a translation of Lacan's positions on feminine sexuality where he repeatedly made the analogous claim that "Woman does not exist." In fact it seems to have been quite fashionable in those heady theoretical days to consign things to non-existence; consider Philippe Ariès's contention that "[i]n medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist" (128), and Jacques Derrida's claim that "There is nothing outside the text." What could such absolute statements possibly mean? Many subsequent expositors point to errors in translation, but I think instead that these theorists were working from an ideology to which Hunt's rhetorical framework holds the key. Heavily influenced by the linguistic theories of both Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce as well as the Sapir-Whorf linguistic relativity hypothesis, these theorists assumed that language creates mental concept boxes that we put things in, so that when things appear that don't fit the boxes, they can't enter into our theoretical framing of those things. Heaven forbid that we reconceptualise our theoretical models and open our definitions. Logocentrism is, after all, a mechanism of control in a world that is always in danger of spinning off into chaos and violence. And indeed, on an individual level, I am mostly in favour of language performing that role. But it does present a problem for theorising the peculiar aesthetics of children's poetry.

These peculiar aesthetics are closely linked to the etymology of the word aesthetics itself. As Susan Buck-Morss writes:

*Aisthítikos* is the ancient Greek word for that which is "perceptive by feeling." *Aisthísis* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality – corporeal, material nature ... *[Aesthetics] is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell—the whole corporeal sensorium. The terminae of all of these—nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of the skin—are located at the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer. This physical-cognitive apparatus with its qualitatively autonomous, nonfungible sensors (the ears cannot smell, the mouth cannot see) is "out front" of the mind, encountering the world prelinguistically, hence prior not only to logic but to meaning as well. Of course all of the senses can be acculturated—that is the whole point of philosophical interest in "aesthetics" in the modern era. But however strictly the senses are trained (as moral sensibility, refinement

Such an etymology would seem to locate children's poetry at the heart of our understanding of aesthetics, and point to the possibilities of cognitive poetics as a way of accounting theoretically for the way sense-based metaphors emerge and become conventional or acculturated. After all, children's poetry is an inherently multimodal, multisensory affair that teaches the ear to smell and the mouth to see, as it were. That is, children first encounter poetry aurally and kinetically, making affective associations with sounds and rhythms that they carry with them into conceptual meanings as they begin to understand metaphors. Some poems for children actively apprentice this process of metaphorical understanding. By asking her readers to compare their own homes to the shell of a snail ("To the bare / Stone spiral / Of his one / Unlighted / Stairwell"), Valerie Worth appeals to their sense of empathy – how might they feel about living in a dark, lonely passageway? Through such implicit and explicit comparisons, readers engage in what cognitive scientists call conceptual blends, whereby matches are made between partial inputs from different domains – such as words or images that evoke a chain of associations that are not directly related – and then processed selectively into a new conceptual space or structure.

We might consider, for instance, a traditional North American children's song, "Apples and Bananas," in which the vowel sounds are changed in each verse. From "I like to eat, eat apples and bananas," we move to "Oo looook to oot, oot, oot ooples and boonoonoo." These nonsense syllables offer an aesthetic experience in the archaic sense of the term. Instead of creating conceptual art in and of themselves, they create the *conditions* for art by delighting the tongue and priming the ear for the enthusiastic apprehension and creation of innovative linguistic articulations. In a similar vein, though completely opposite in affect, the long vowel sounds, diphthongs, and dashes used repeatedly in the first few verses of Edward Lear's "The Dong with a Luminous Nose" equate extended sounds and visual markers of stops and starts with longing and futility. Although the narrative is deliberately comic and nonsensical, the sensual experience of reading the poem is one of profound melancholy. Lear begins with a litany of sombre, almost gothic natural imagery: "awful darkness," "long, long wintry nights," "vast and gloomy dark" (422). The sound and pace of the words, together with the visual images they produce, seem designed to instill fear and discomfort in diurnal, warm-blooded bodies. When contrasting images (both sonic and visual) produced by comic figures such as the red-nosed Dong, the Oblong Oysters, and the blue-handed, green-haired Jumbly are introduced, the reader is drawn into a third conceptual space. Here, he or she is forced to reconcile disparate emotional responses (despair tinged with

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hence they are more closely bound to reality as it is; they perceive with their
tory of the theoretical” (13). But such a close attachment to sensory experience isn’t the way we talk about aesthetics today. The original etymology got blurry in 1750, when Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten drew a line between *aesthetica naturalis*, the more or less undifferentiated sensory experience in childhood, and *aesthetica artificialis*, which refers to the refinement of sensory experience into a taste for beauty. Eagleton sees Baumgarten’s work as a missed opportunity: “If his *Aesthetica* opens up in an innovative gesture the whole terrain of sensation, what it opens it up to is in effect the colonization of reason” (15). There is some danger, as I noted above, that cognitive poetics runs the same risk; in attempting to understand aesthetic response through the terms of a scientific paradigm, we might in fact reduce such response to nothing other than the firing of neurons. But an expanded view of cognition, one that takes into account the “whole corporeal sensorium” as it appears in the sounds and senses of children’s poetry, enables us to re-engage with a more properly sensual aesthetics and even perhaps account for the reasons our critical attention turns more often to an ideological view of aesthetics.

Although the aesthetics of children’s poetry calls us back to the earlier understanding of aesthetics as a “discourse of the body” (Eagleton 13), we tend to downplay and closely regulate both the pleasures and pains of embodied experience as we grow older. We control our climates, “manage” our pain, and discipline our pleasures. We have separated the world of verbal meanings from the world of sensory experience, and placed the two in a hierarchy of linear development where verbal concepts and representations supplant and replace sensory experience as a more refined and therefore better way of relating to the world. And in fact, we have gone so far as to undervalue and even pathologise those people who experience the world in a predominantly non-verbal way, whether these people be in the early, that is preverbal, stages of childhood, or evidence limited verbal abilities as they grow, such as those with autism spectrum disorder. So, of course, children's poetry, which is specifically designed to appeal to the senses while at times resisting or exceeding the fixity of verbal meaning, is difficult to bring under the umbrella of either theory or interpretation, which are the currently favoured modes of conceptualising aesthetic experience.

Philosophers Henri Bergson and Luce Irigaray enable us to understand why we seem so ready to acquiesce to “the tyranny of the theoretical.” Bergson argues that intelligence and instinct are two divergent paths of evolutionary development that ultimately distinguish humans from other animals. He posits that animals have more perfect powers of instinct and hence they are more closely bound to reality as it is; they perceive with their senses, and create associative meanings from those perceptions that induce them to act, but their insight is limited. One might say that their percepts determine their concepts, and that is where the chain stops. Humans, on the other hand, begin to draw sensory reality into conceptual frameworks very early in life, even before they have language (Bruner 30). These conceptual frameworks then determine how reality is viewed; we operationalise reality at every turn rather than allowing it to disclose itself to us. More importantly, we use language to separate, categorise, and otherwise control the sensory flood that might otherwise overwhelm us. Language enables us to transfer indiscriminate percepts into manageable concepts which, in turn, focus and limit our percepts. Irigaray proposes a more forceful reading of this process. She argues that, in the process of sexuation, man wishes to discount his indebtedness to a maternal nature, and so he erects a structure of language to distance himself from what he imagines would be an engulfing sensory experience. To quote Sontag, he turns “the world into this world” (8), a world where he is, at least to his own mind, master. But, irigaray maintains, through poetic language that consists of “listening, praising, rhythm accompanying natural growth” (33–4), he may momentarily reawaken his senses to what he has lost in his wilful suppression of sensory faithfulness in favour of mastery through logos.

Psychiatrist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist’s cognitive perspective resonates between Bergson’s naturalism and Irigaray’s gender critique, and is particularly important for a cognitive approach to children’s poetry given that the brain hemispheres are not equally well developed at birth. In *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, McGilchrist argues that while every function of the human mind is assisted by processes in both hemispheres, the right and left hemispheres of the brain operate differently with regard to sensory experience and language; the right, which is more fully developed at birth and through early childhood, is more globally attuned to the environment, thrumming with the wholeness of experience, while the left seeks to carve experience into manageable concepts which it then refers back to the right hemisphere as truths. Experiments conducted over the past fifty years by Michael Gazziniga with split hemisphere patients indicate that the right hemisphere can understand language as well as visual and other sensory imagery, but not express a response in oral words; this is why preverbal children can respond with appropriate emotional tenor to multimodally presented symbols, words, and images for which they don’t yet have a full semantic understanding. On the other hand, Gazziniga’s experiments have shown that the left hemisphere will come up with verbal, post hoc explanations for things it can’t know through the experiment’s controlled sensory inputs. In this way, the right hemisphere, which cannot lie, and should really be the aesthetic master with its ability to register a full range of sense data, is usurped by its chatty left-hemisphere emissary as in the traditional folktale; it also shows how language trumps multimodal sensory experience,
downplaying the erotics of poetry in favour of its conceptual force, and thus diminishing the culturally determined *aesthetica artificialis* evaluation of children's poetry, particularly poems categorised as "nonsense."

Hugh Crago explores the split brain further in his exploration of how and why we respond to certain kinds of stories throughout our lifetime, beginning with an analysis of what Robert Louis Stevenson called "songstries" (Crago 19). Stevenson coined the term to refer to his own childhood practice of self-talk, which occurred at night and which allowed him to work out ideas and theories in a controlled, regular, and seemingly instinctual metre. Crago cites multiple examples of similar repetitive instances of patterned speech that he believes very young children use to express and work through powerful, distressing feelings. By articulating their distresses through patterned sound, children under the age of eighteen months engage their more available right-hemisphere skills in the service of imposing order on their worlds. As their left-hemisphere language skills develop, more words become recognisable in their songstries, but Crago insists that the meaning and utility of these early poems to ease anxiety resides in their regulatory structure and repeated phrases and sounds. In related work, Ralph James Savarese, a literature critic, is building on the insights of autism researcher Olga Bogdashina, among others, to study how people with autism spectrum disorder interact with poetry, focusing in particular on the myth that such literary language is inaccessible to them, and finding instead that the prosody and metaphors of poetry can in fact have therapeutic effects. Each of these cognitive theorists points to areas where the study of children's poetry's structures' and styles' ability to mirror, shape, refine, and enhance conceptual structures gleaned through sensory experience can help us further understand the distinctiveness of the human brain.

Through cognitive poetics and children's poetry to ideology and contemporary aesthetics

It is finally the case, then, that in order to understand the aesthetics of children's poetry, we must go beyond the concept of aesthetics as a refined attunement to beauty and poetry as an elitist expressive form. Of course Hunt would likely agree; he certainly does not accept the notion that there is no such thing as children's poetry. Instead, he elaborates his position by reflecting on the cultural contingencies of power and aesthetic judgement, and ultimately embraces the role of outsider both for children as readers and for the forms of their literature. In essence, he concludes that children's poetry does not and should not belong to adults. Indeed, it should be "precisely that which has NO appeal to adults." Its only preparatory role for the appreciation of adult poetry should be "perhaps, as part of an openness of mind to language and its possibilities" (22). Peeling back the layers of its appeal, situating it as a persistent human activity, or doing any

sort of aesthetic theorising about children's poetry is, under these lights, out of bounds. Perhaps Hunt is meaning to be deliberately provocative (and I must admit that upon reading the essay, I was pleasantly provoked!), but I can see other modes of response. One, of course, is to ignore the naysayers and simply get on with it. Children's poetry most assuredly exists. It has a rich history and appears in diverse contexts, as has been well documented in multiple books and essays. It also has diverse, dynamic and often distinctive aesthetic registers, as evidenced by the various theoretical and methodological approaches in this book. Close attention to the qualities of children's poetry in light of the forms in which it appears and the content it encodes and excludes enables us to distinguish it as a genre according to its dominant characteristics, much as Perry Nodelman does for children's fiction in *The Hidden Adult*. Certainly, there are other ways than the one I am proposing that the aesthetics of children's poetry may be theorised. But what might the characteristics of children's poetry, reinterpreted through a model of affective cognition, teach us about the contemporary aesthetics of children's poetry?

A cognitively framed answer to that question might begin by considering the dominant childhood experiences of play. While Hunt reminds us that most definitions of poetry exclude children's poetry based on what it is (arguably) not — namely, "static, thoughtful, sophisticated, skilled, philosophical" — he locates its incontestable value in its playfulness, its "openness of mind to language and its possibilities." When language is divorced from any obligation to refer to things outside itself, to say something meaningful about the world, it frees the mind to play at creating its own worlds. But such free play, for Hunt, means that children's poetry should have "NO appeal" for adults, who presumably take seriously the responsibility to identify meaning and significance in the real world. I hear faint echoes here of the anxieties Derrida expresses in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences":

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned towards the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who... has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. The second interpretation of interpretation... to which Nietzsche pointed the way... is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin... This affirmation then determines the noncentre otherwise than as loss of center.
Consider the first interpretation of interpretation when it comes to poetry: adherents to this way of thinking want poetry to point to meanings beyond itself, to get to a place where experience stands still, to achieve the stasis of a determinate metaphysics that would give a full and final account for human existence beyond the contingencies of experience. These devotees of Meaning with a capital “M” – meaning that it resides in an ideal, transcendent realm accessible only to deep-thinking adults – are, as Hunt has argued, adult guardians of a poetry that excludes children. Paradoxically, these guardians are likely to view childhood with a Romanticised cast in the vein of Rousseau, who believed that the child’s inherent “naturalness” placed it beyond the artifice of culturally created linguistic interpretations. Adherents of the second interpretation of interpretation have an equally Romanticised view of freplay, believing that children, as well as free-thinking adults, can pass beyond a need for determinate truths and reassuring foundations into a world of “signs without fault, without truth, and without origin.” But a close look at children’s play shows us that it is not without fault, truth, or origin, and it is never, ever innocent. Play is always both referential and dependent on structures, with nonsense in particular being excessively structured to compensate for its lack of lexical semantics. Hence, the structure of play violates Derrida’s binary; it reveals our quest for interpretation even of that which is indeterminate by nature. In fact, adults seem primarily concerned with wresting play down to the man of useful endeavour. How can we make toys into tools for learning specific tasks, we ask? How does children’s nonsense poetry, for instance, produce measurable outcomes according to age-based learning standards? If nonsense poetry fails to accomplish the work specified by these standards, what is the rationale for including it in the curriculum? Play is children’s work, we say, and it is serious stuff indeed.

To understand play, then, both as the work of childhood and as a central aesthetic of children’s poetry, is to understand it as a kind of affective labour, which is by its nature indeterminate – that is, the outcomes of affective labour are neither measurable nor predictable. This takes us back to the multimodal territory currently under exploration by cognitive poetics. I would propose that further research needs to be done to connect up the nature of indeterminacy in children’s thinking and play spaces, their participation in affective labour, and the temporal nature of affective response to the music of children’s poetry. Steven B. Katz, for instance, argues that our modes of understanding rhetoric are locked in the processes of interpretation and analysis based on spatial metaphors (meaning resides in the content of a poem, for instance), while what’s needed is “a theory of affective response ... based on the sensuous nature of language as sound ... [and] aural, temporal modes of experiencing and reasoning” (2). Affective response is a temporal, indeterminate form of knowledge, he argues, that can only be approached through a reconsideration of the way we theorise phonocentric discourses. Sianne Ngai links affective labour, indeterminacy, and comic response in her claim that zaminess is an aesthetic category born out of response to post-Fordist modes of production and consumption. Contemporary economic conditions require continual adjustments to work, new technologies, and varied social roles; the exaggerated performance of the infinitely malleable character of the contemporary worker trying to adjust to new roles becomes fodder for comic projection. Given the contemporary dominance of comic, zany, children’s poetry, the question arises: does this aesthetic trickle down to children’s culture, or might it have trickled up from the comically exaggerated and physically distended figures, both verbal and visual, located in works by poets such as Lear and Seuss? Since children are always already participants in the affective labour of play and the indeterminacy of their future becoming, studying the comic aesthetics of children’s poetry offers us an opportunity to trace with greater specificity the aesthetic categories Ngai seeks to map in contemporary culture.

Because the aesthetics of children’s poetry must take account of the experiences of play and the temporal dimensions of aural discourse, another benefit of understanding the special aesthetics of children’s poetry through cognitive poetics resides in the ability to examine more closely the terms Hunt sets forth that divorce children from poetry. While it is certainly incontestable that children are neither static nor sophisticated in the precise meanings of those terms, the remaining items on the list – thoughtful, skilled, philosophical, concerned with sex and death – leave much room for debate, particularly as they not only exclude children from adult conceptions of poetry, but also from what it means to be human. Because it attends to the multiple ways the body, including the brain, is involved in processing linguistic and sensory inputs, cognitive poetics can more readily account for the two things that children are not, static and sophisticated, as well as help us understand the conditions under which we are, at any age, thoughtful, skilled, philosophical, and concerned with sex and death and interiority. Among other things, for instance, cognitive poetics opens up ways of thinking about both literal and metaphorical movement: what does it mean, asks cognitive psychologist Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., to feel emotionally moved by a linguistic metaphor? What might we learn as we explore and adapt the argument Susan Lohafer makes about the structure of a short story to understand how the structure of a poem corresponds to the periodicity of organic cycles of movement such as breathing, heartbeat, or sex? Cognitive poetics also enables us to theorise the means by which children acquire the sophisticated competencies required to negotiate text-world scenarios. How do our embodied interactions with objects and other people enable us to construct, maintain, and modify what Katherine Emmott calls contextual frames – mental models of spatial and temporal contexts that allow us to picture the scenes and social spaces created by words on a page – and respond to them emotionally and rationally? How do prototypes, that is, normative patterns based on socially shared and
embodied experiences, function to set expectations that enable stylistic foregrounding choices such as reversals, twists, novel metaphors, and other types of figurative language to create their effects.

Clearly, the only possible conclusion here is that there is much more, very exciting work to be done, work that will benefit cognitive poetics as much as it will open up our understanding of the aesthetics of children’s poetry. So now I must get to work, and I hope others will join me.

Notes

1 These various strands of cognitive poetics enable researchers to explore different questions. For instance, cognitive narratology focuses attention on how readers use mental constructs, called scripts and schemata, to make sense of a story that may be outside of their experience, while cognitive stylistics drills down to the way figurative language, such as metaphor, sound patterns, and repetition, affect the reading experience at both cognitive and emotional levels. Evolutionary biology seeks possible reasons for the development and persistence of story in human experience, as well as how story has shaped cultures and communities, while neuroaesthetics focuses on the ways brains process both visual and temporal arts.


Works cited


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