

Introduction: “Poetry for Children and Youth”

Language begins within the poetic, not only when it comes to our collective language evolution (“the infancy of language”), but also for the individual (“the language of infancy”), according to how Debbie Pullinger argues in her book *From Tongue to Text: A New Reading of Children’s Poetry* published in 2017 (45). If we accept such an argument, an affinity between poetic language and childhood comes with the package – in a metaphorical sense as well as in terms of developmental psychology.

Literature, as we know it, springs from rites and ceremonies, and involves a rhythmically embodied orality (and is, in this sense, poetic), which conceptualises humankind’s most fundamental existential issues. The individual’s process of language acquisition begins, in turn, with a socially driven yearning for comfort and guidance in a world full of impressions and emotions but void of concepts.

These affinities were a strong incentive for the decision to choose “Poetry for Children and Youth” as the 2020 theme for the annual conference arranged by the Network for Nordic Modernist Poetry (NORLYR). As it turned out, the pandemic year 2020 was a year like no other, and the conference could not take place. Instead, a collaboration between the NORLYR network and *Barnboken: Journal of Children’s Literature Research* emerged. The result is a *Barnboken* theme in which scholars of poetry and scholars of children’s literature share perspectives in order to find common ground, as well as break new one.

Research has long been underlining the relationship between the young child and poetic language, in various manners. Korney Chukovsky stresses how the young child, particularly between the ages of two and five, acquires language through what he speaks of as creative imitation, which involves playing with sounds and language content in ways similar to poetic use of language (24–26). Furthermore, Margaret Meek shows how children experience poetic language through bodily unfoldment (182), whereas Niklas Pramling and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson define the poetic as the nodal point where artistic language and children’s language meet (11).

Poetry for young people involves a large number of modalities and genres. Lullabies and the comforting nursery rhymes of early

childhood can easily be connected to the above-mentioned lines of thought, as can more playfully oriented language games and rhymes for young children. As they get older, children tend to find their own arenas, and turn to the sometimes provocative culture of playgrounds and alleys, labelled “playground poetry” by Joseph T. Thomas Jr. Through these poetic forms – which can also be related to the aforementioned affinities between the poetic and childhood – a significant and carnivalesque poetic tradition is constituted, in which children raise their voices against adult discourse. Yet another such discourse involves the teenager’s search for words to describe the earthquake of emotions that marks the entrance into adulthood, taking place within the reading of traditional poetry, musical lyrics, partaking in social media poetic traditions, and not least, the *writing* of poetry. Due to its ability to address the embodied primary affects of human beings, poetry can – in all these transitional periods – fill young people’s shifting and oftentimes intrinsically entangled and simultaneous needs for both individuation and socialisation.

Despite the well-documented connections between poetry and children’s language, poetry for children and youth has received sparse attention within children’s literature research, as well as in poetry research in general. However, the year 2010 seems to mark a turning point, as a number of researchers pointed out the need for more scholarly attention: Evelyn Arizpe, Morag Styles, and Abigail Rokison claimed that children’s poetry is amongst the “sidelined categories” (126) in the research field of children’s literature. In her introduction to the influential volume *Poetry and Childhood* (2010), Styles even called it “the Cinderella of children’s literature, receiving very little scholarly attention” (xv). Peter Hunt’s simultaneous take on the issue, from the same volume, was that both poetry directed to children and children’s reading of poetry had up until then been subject to prejudice. Stemming from ideas of children as inexperienced readers, poetry directed to them had been regarded as a mere “step on the way” towards a more sophisticated, *real*, poetry (17–18), a (mis)conception which might very well have contributed to the lack of scholarly attention.

In the years following 2010, a certain change has been seen in this department. Research on children’s poetry has indeed taken a more central position, not only in the anglophone parts of the world, but also in the Scandinavian countries. The foregrounding of the affinities between childhood and poetic aspects of language has, among other things, turned the “step on the way” argument on its head. Scandinavian research includes monographs and anthologies (see

e.g. Bjørlo; Skaret) as well as a number of articles, which have paved the way for this special theme in *Barnboken*. As editors, we were delighted (but in no way surprised) to see that the call for papers in the early autumn of 2020 received such enthusiastic response, demonstrating that poetry for children and poetic language in children's literature are areas which have finally come to attract apt scholarly attention. The seven articles that are the result of this process involve various perspectives on just as various kinds of poetry for young people. We, the editors, have each contributed with an article to the theme, and in these cases the peer review and editing processes have been overseen by the other guest editor.

Two of the articles shed new light upon Finland-Swedish Tove Jansson's picturebooks, by focusing on the poetic qualities of her work. In the article "The Child Reader and Poetry in Tove Jansson's Picturebook *The Book about Moomin, Myrble and Little My*", Johan Alfredsson demonstrates how poetry is an integral part of the exceptionally interactive format of this, by all means, classic Nordic picturebook. The role of poetry particularly offers an opportunity for the child reader to deal with the delicate balance between the attachment-seeking struggles of the anxious character of Moomin, on the one hand, and the exploratory individuation of the adventurous character of Little My, on the other.

Another classic work by Jansson is scrutinised by Cecilie Takle and Hans Kristian Rustad in the article "Tove Jansson's Picturebook *Who Will Comfort Toffle? as a Heroic Poem*". They have chosen to stress the ways in which this picturebook can be read as a heroic poem and – as such – a dramatic monologue. Through these optic shifts, they succeed in showing how the book involves a ritualistic, iterative, and performative retelling of the story as part of how it "makes itself memorable" (Culler 131). And this does not only go for the events of the narrative, but just as much for its main character, Toffle, and the internal processes he goes through within it.

In their article "'This was supposed to become a poem which someone would remember for a while': Stage Art as Poetry for Children in the Theatre Performance *Snutebiller, stankelben*", Silje Harr Svare and Anne Skaret study the transformation of four modernistic poems by Norwegian poet Rolf Jacobsen into a theatre performance for children. Informed by Jonathan Culler's theory of the lyric, Meek's and Chukovsky's perspectives on children and poetic language, as well as intermediality perspectives, Svare and Skaret investigate how – and to what degree – the performance preserves the poetic qualities of the original poems. One of their key findings is that the poetic

re-emerges in the scenic expression when the performance stays sufficiently true to the poems.

Yet another of the articles takes on a classic, although still active, poet: Swedish ALMA laureate Barbro Lindgren. In her article “‘The stones where they sat/are still there’: Ecocritical Readings of Barbro Lindgren’s Poetry”, Karin Nykvist discusses Lindgren’s poetic oeuvre in its entirety from an ecocritical perspective. Adding an important dimension to the research on Lindgren’s poetry, this choice of theoretical perspective reveals a fundamentally non-hierarchical attitude, frequent references to the cycle of life and death, as well as a constant shifting of scales – all of which being strategies that have the potential to question and overturn anthropocentric ways of thinking.

In “Making Sense of Nonsense: Readings of Children’s Poetry as Play and Creative Thinking”, Claus K. Madsen and Lea Allouche explore nonsense poetry in the contemporary picturebook *Funkelgnister: Rim, råb og remser* (Glittersparks: Rhymes, Roars, and Rigmoroles, 2015) by Danish Birgitte Krogsbøll and Kamilla Wichmann. The article takes as its starting point the premise that nonsense and meaning are closely related – even interdependent – concepts. Drawing on theories by Johan Huizinga and Gilles Deleuze, the authors demonstrate how the nonsense poetry in *Funkelgnister* creates meaning along different layers and directions in the verses, constituting a ground for creativity-based development of meaning.

Berit Westergaard Bjørlo takes on the long tradition of humorous children’s poetry in her article “Humour in Two Contemporary Norwegian Poetry Picturebooks: *Pling i bollen* and *123 for barske barn*”. Focusing on two Norwegian contemporary poetry picturebooks, she examines in what ways they relate to established humour traditions of children’s poetry. Drawing on intermedial theory, picturebook theory, children’s poetry studies, and literary traditions, Bjørlo emphasises the interplay between words and images. Her results demonstrate that, compared to conventional children’s poetry, the two contemporary picturebooks include more diverse combinations of visual and verbal humour, as well as wilder and coarser forms of humour.

Finally, Evelina Stenbeck’s aim in the article “The Poetic Form of Youth: Poetry for Young Readers in the Anthologies *Kärlek och uppror* and *Berör och förstör*” is to compare two renowned Swedish poetry anthologies for young readers, published in 1989 and 2019. By contextualising the books formally, situating them in an anthology tradition, and relating them to Vanessa Joosen’s conceptualisations of childhood, Stenbeck’s main conclusion is that the poetic forms of the

anthologised poems reflect their respective times of publication: the aesthetic ideals of 1989 and 2019 are shown in what kinds of poems have been included in the two volumes. Her results not only point to changes in aesthetic, and poetic, ideals during the 30 years between the two books, but also in altered conceptualisations of youth.

We hope that the reader will not only find the seven articles that constitute this special theme interesting, but also thought-provoking enough to let their findings inspire new and ground-breaking research on poetry for children and youth.

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