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Critical Summary of Recent Journal Articles on Poetry for Children

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Agnes Perkins (bio)

In an article by the three judges of the first Signal Poetry Award (Signal, May, 1979), Aidan Chambers says, "All three selectors were struck at once by this thought: if 1978's output of poetry books that qualify for the award is typical, then poetry published for children is in a poor state. Maybe we were hoping for too much." The same might be said for the output of critical articles concerned with poetry for children in the last few years.

There have been, of course, book reviews, some critical, most descriptive. There have also been a handful of good critical pieces, a number of largely descriptive or appreciative articles which are undoubtedly useful, and a couple of interesting bibliographies. But two uncomfortable truths stand out to anyone investigating what is available: (1) compared with articles on fiction of all sorts, or even on non-fiction, and biographical articles on authors, and pieces on pedagogical methods, the number of critical works concerned with poetry for children is minuscule; and (2) the best articles do not appear where they are most needed and might do the most good, in educational journals, or in the journal primarily devoted to scholarship, Children's Literature, but mainly in three publications concerned more with literature as literature, The Horn Book Magazine, Children's Literature in Education, and The Lion and the Unicorn.

Some of the periodicals intended for teachers go literally for years without any major article concerned with poetry. Those that do appear often direct attention away from poems themselves, like Buff Bradley's "Growing from Word Play into Poetry" (Learning, Nov. 1976), which suggests a variety of exercises a teacher may employ to lead children into poetry—making posters, illustrating poems, studying kennings—but does not suggest the one essential activity, reading poems aloud. (In fact, the reading of poems in any form is not mentioned, though presumably it is somewhere the end product of all this **[End Page 35]** activity.)

The one primarily educational periodical which publishes articles about

poetry with some frequency is, as might be expected, Language Arts, but a large number of these advocate employing poetry for some other purpose, like "From Cradle to Classroom" by Jacqueline L. Chapario (March, 1979), about using nursery rhyme in dramatization, and "Children's Rhymes and Learning to Read" by Robert Emans (Nov.-Dec., 1978), which suggests using rhymes to help children learn to read because they can memorize rhymes more easily than prose and thereby recognize the words on the page. One recent article, "What Facts Does This Poem Teach" by Louise M. Rosenblatt (April, 1980) has a good idea, that poetry should not be read in the same way that factual material is read, and contains a plea for teachers to encourage an "aesthetic stance" for poetry reading rather than an "efferent stance," but the language of the article is so jargony that it loses its punch long before a reader plows his way to the end. Others are simply poor scholarship or wrong-headed. "Of Cabbage and Kings: Or What Kinds of Poetry Young Children Like" by Carol J. Fisher and Margaret A. Natarella (April, 1979) reports on a study in which poems were read aloud to children who then indicated which they liked, and the results tabulated according to the types that were most often liked or disliked. The authors admit that since the children knew the poems only through hearing them once, some easily apprehended types might be unduly favored. What they did not seem to see was that they had not been at all critical of technique in their selection of poems and that the results might well be influenced by the choice of poorly crafted verse. "A Camel in the Harbor': Poetry and Prediction" by Kenneth J. Kantor (Nov.-Dec., 1978), although admitting that poems work by not using predictable language, advocates choosing poems for children in which the language is clearly predictable in rhyme or image so that children can learn to read more easily. He does not seem to realize that teaching a child to read poor poems is not likely...

all. Sometimes the recollection of childhood is there, but more often it is not. What is there in so many of Van Doren's poems, besides the music, is a keen awareness of what it means to be alive, to experience the world in its infinite detail and freshness. Van Doren never forgot what it was like to be a child. Even when he was an old man whose vision was tempered by wisdom, he spoke with the startling accuracy of the child who sees what lies at the heart of things. His poems have an immediacy about them, a beautifully clear relationship between the language and the experience. They constantly surprise us by the scrupulousness of their language, by the accuracy with which words express feelings and recreate experiences. One senses in his poems what he himself has described, in "The First Poem," as "An odd secret excitement, a strange need/To be there with words when the heartbeat happened..." (GM), and one feels always that he has been there with the right words. "The best poetry," he said, "does not seem hard. Its coming to birth is of course as hard as it is rare, but the poets responsible for it prefer to sound like men who happily, luckily, had those things to say." (Auto.) His own poetry has the virtue of not seeming hard, even though it has been very carefully wrought, and "happily, luckily," among the thousand poems he published, there are many in which he had things to say that are appealing to children as well as to adults.

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CRITICAL SUMMARY OF RECENT JOURNAL ARTICLES ON POETRY FOR CHILDREN by Agnes Perkins

In an article by the three judges of the first Signal Poetry Award (Signal, May, 1979), Aidan Chambers says, "All three selectors were struck at once by this thought: if 1978's output of poetry books that qualify for the award is typical, then poetry published for children is in a poor state. Maybe we were hoping for too much." The same might be said for the output of critical articles concerned with poetry for children in the last few years.

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