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“It is best to eat poems” – Þórarinn Eldjárn’s and Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry for children



Hann Guðmundur á Mýrum borðar bækur,
það byrjaði upp á grín en var svo kækur.
Núorðið þá vill hann ekkert annað,
alveg sama þó að það sé bannað.

[Guðmundur from Mýrar eats many a book.
It started as a joke but then he got hooked.
He refuses to eat anything else now
regardless of what common rules allow.]
(Þórarinn Eldjárn, ‘Bókagleypir’)¹

Gobbling up books, in other words being a voracious reader or a book-worm, is regarded as a perfectly normal and even desirable habit. Gobbling up books as Guðmundur from Mýrar does in Þórarinn Eldjárn’s sonnet is diagnosed, however, as a disturbing quirk and, as a result, the bookgobbler is not allowed in public libraries. Guðmundur does literally eat them just as a book-worm, a type of maggot feeding on books,² would do. However, if we believe the illustration accompanying the poem, our bookgobbler tends to follow the rules of human table etiquette. The poem further informs us of Guðmundur’s versatile diet – books ranging from substantial ‘serials’ to lighter ‘ditties’ and in the final couplet the bookgobbler passes the following evaluative judgment: ‘yet it is best to eat poems / but only those that are any good’.³ Here the polysemy of ‘good’ is exploited as we can either understand ‘good’ to imply a commendable quality of this particular genre of literature or, in this context, as ‘fit to eat’ / ‘tasty’. A further interpretive ambiguity ensues: is it better to eat poems rather than other types of texts or is it better to eat poems rather than read them? This all turns a seemingly straightforward utterance into a complex aesthetic statement.

The Bookgobbler’s opinion, however, and the poem as whole may serve as a starting point for a discussion about poetry for children, addressing questions like: should one regard such poetry to be of inferior aesthetics and, if not, what makes it aesthetically challenging? In order to answer the above questions, the scope of the discussion shall be limited to the presentation of two popular but also highly regarded contemporary practitioners of the genre – the Icelandic poet Þórarinn Eldjárn (b. 1949) and the Scottish-born British poet Carol Ann Duffy (b. 1955). The key themes of their main works are introduced while the latter part of this article contains a closer examination of two of their poems discussed in relation to the tradition of literary nonsense.

Happy Meal or food for thought?

The first of the above questions may appear entirely out of place if asked in the context of the BIN Conference. It is not, however, completely ungrounded. For the sake of brevity of argument, the problem of aesthetic evaluation addressed earlier may be simplified along the following lines. Poetry for children has been regarded as a “lesser” genre than that written for grown-ups and until recently it has been, like the whole literature for children, relatively marginalized in literary studies.⁴ The problem lies in the very division⁵ between the two and the common assumption that children’s poetry tends to address only one audience – an assumption one would hardly make about poetry for adults – and therefore lacks complexity and/or seriousness. In other words such literary texts are best described using Barthes’ concept of ‘readerly’.⁶ This implies that children’s poetry may be considered to work at one level only and thus fails to be aesthetically challenging. To that we may add the conflict between two functions – didactic and aesthetic – and the likely dominance of the former over the latter in poems for children.

The simplified argument presented above has long been thoroughly revised and refuted by scholars who deal with children’s literature. And yet what happens, particularly in the case of poetry, is that when works of an author writing for both audiences are analyzed, a clear division is still made in her or his oeuvre and poems for adults receive noticeably more attention than those for children. Are they not ‘good’ enough? It is noteworthy, for instance, that even though Duffy has, to date, published more books for children than for adults, this imbalance is not reflected in critical studies of her poetry.⁷ Eva Müller-Zettelmann makes an observation in her study of Duffy’s poems that aptly identifies the problem in relation to contemporary poetry: “Literature for children is subject to a number of limitations conditioned by the special needs of its lively, pleasure-seeking readership, and this to some scholars may seem incompatible with the formal and intellectual challenges of the postmodern avant-garde.”⁸ She then argues convincingly that meta-textuality or carnival subversiveness can also be considered as defining features of children’s poetry. This is possible in poetry which is not deliberately simplified in order to communicate with the audience, where language can be direct but not watered-down and the poets do not shun experimentation.

Pórarinn Eldjárn: madflies, comets, Seers and lean-meals

Both Pórarinn Eldjárn and Carol Ann Duffy, who debuted as poets in the seventies,⁹ are established authors of poetry for grown-ups but works for children comprise a substantial part of

their oeuvre. One important aspect of their poetry is their interest in the commonplace and their revaluation of clichés. The frequently colloquial language employed by both poets is invariably questioned, taunted and played with, and both often resort to traditional narratives such as myth and folk tales to present them from a subversive, revisionist perspective. A similar approach is discernible in their works for children, which include both original poetry and re-tellings of traditional stories. They have been extremely popular among children (and school teachers) and well received by critics, especially in their respective home countries. While in Britain there have been a number of other contemporary poets who have succeeded in writing equally effectively for both audiences (one can mention Ted Hughes, Brian Patten, Roger McGough, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Jackie Kay), in Iceland Eldjárn almost single-handedly conquered an unoccupied niche. The publications of such collections of children's poetry as "Óðfluga" (Madfly, 1991), "Heimskringla" (World Ring/Stupid-Confused, 1992), "Halastjarna" (Comet, 1997) and especially "Grannmeti og átvextir" (Lean-meal and Eat-growths, 2001)¹⁰ made the poet the best-known contemporary practitioner of this genre in Iceland with many of these poems subsequently turned into songs.¹¹ An interesting example of a collection that simultaneously employs both media is his most recent book "Gælur, fælur og þvælur" (Lullers, Scarers and Twaddlers, 2007) where he revives *rímur*, the most traditional Icelandic poetic form. Enclosed in that book is a CD with chanted *rímur* – something that enriches the book in terms of its performativity.

A choice of traditional metrical forms for the present-day subject matter or a juxtaposition of a lofty style for some most prosaic themes characterizes many of Eldjárn's poems. They tend to be rooted in the recognizable more or less distant past, but simultaneously grow in new, challenging directions. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that his poetry is grounded in traditional Icelandic metrics and yet it is firmly anchored in the reality of here and now.

Eldjárn is an ingenious verbalist, very much concerned with words, their roots and paradoxes created by everyday usage. This concern transpires in a number of ways but most prominently in his effective use of wordplay which functions, for instance, as a means of revitalizing worn-out expressions. Such approach to language is intensified rather than abandoned in his poetry for children. As in the poem quoted at the beginning, Eldjárn often explores literariness of common, often clichéd expressions, the figurative meanings of which we tend to take for granted in an everyday context. His concern with the workings of language shows on a number of levels. At one end of the scale we find such self-referential poems as "Ljóð um ljóð" (Poem about poem)¹²

reflecting on its own creation while, at the other end, the focus zooms in on individual sounds. “Klarinettittré” (Clarinet Peg Tree), which exploits the almost limitless possibilities offered by Icelandic language in terms of creating compound words, may serve as an example here. The governing device is phonetic as most words contain series of triple identical consonants: “Gunnjáll um nammmálin rassíður ræddi / raddigur takkór um stásstofu flæddi.”¹³

In terms of subject-matter Eldjárn finds his material in the very immediate world of objects – furniture, clothes, food – which, just like the common expressions, undergo transformations by means of wordplay, as will be shown in the latter part of this article. At the same time his poetry abounds in motifs and characters replanted from Icelandic folklore, mythology and history into the context of contemporary reality. As an example may serve the poem telling of Ingólfur Arnarson, the founder of Reykjavík who looks for his high-seat pillars at the shores of the city but comes across all sorts of modern artifacts such as wellingtons – it is the “right Reykjavík but at the wrong time”.¹⁴ In a similarly subversive manner parsonages ranging from the saga hero Egill Skallagrímsson, through the Christmas ogres *Grýla* og *Leppalúði* to the Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness are revived and confronted with the here and now of Iceland. Such juxtapositions unavoidably become a source of humour, surprising us into new perceptions or levels of understanding. ‘Bisociation’, a term coined by Arthur Koestler, rather conveniently captures the process of a humorous clash of two levels of meaning. In his “Act of Creation” (1984) Koestler defines it in the following way:

I have coined the term ‘bisociation’ in order to make a distinction between the routine skills of thinking on a single ‘plane’ as it were, and the creative act, which ... always operates on more than one plane. The former may be called single-minded, the latter a double-minded, transitory state of unstable equilibrium where the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed.¹⁵

Bisociation aptly describes one of the most frequently employed devices in Eldjárn’s poetry: that of applying exalted form to trivial content. This happens also on the level of language. Nonsense, which can be found so often in Eldjárn’s poetry for children, lives on bisociation.¹⁶

Carol Ann Duffy: Grimms, Wives and Elvis

Similarly to Eldjárn’s, Duffy’s poetry for children flourished in the 1990s although the poet admits she had never intended to write for children.¹⁷ The Grimms’ tales rewritten by the poet for stage adaptation¹⁸ seem to be one of the most discernible influences on her poetry, traceable especially in the two early collections “Meeting Midnight” (1999) and “The Oldest Girl in the World” (2000). In her retellings of Grimm Brothers’ stories Duffy’s intention was to go back to the original folktales and render them in the language that is spoken today. Consequently her versions are not bowdlerized and mollified to suit some specific audience and the language is

fresh and direct. It is this directness of language, which tends to be demotic or even slangy, that characterizes Duffy's poetry for adults. She often takes clichés and X-rays them, looking for the original metaphors that they had once been. This is what she brought into her poetry for children.

However, the Grimms' tales may be held responsible for the poet's interest in story-telling that resulted in subversive re-tellings of myths, fables and folktales, in addition to the creation of new myths and tales for a modern society. In that respect, we see how her poetry for adults overlaps with her writing for children. "Little Red-Cap" opens her most successful (adult) collection to date, "The World's Wife" (1999), containing dramatic monologues by such challenging but hitherto largely ignored or simply non-existent characters as Mrs Faust, Queen Kong or Mrs Beast. Elsewhere Duffy plays with her own "wife" concept by giving the voice to "The Loch Ness Monster Husband": "She's real. Ah married her and we bide / In the Loch. No weans."¹⁹

In her collection "The Good Child's Guide to Rock 'n' Roll" (2003) an interesting twist is given to the idea of mythologizing popular culture. As the title suggests canonized here are, among others, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and Carl Perkins. The seriousness of this canonization is deflated by the last poem about musicians, which concerns Johann Sebastian Baa, who "was a very talented sheep. / He could write the most sublime music / in his sleep".²⁰ Another, this time literary, canon appears in Duffy's most recent book "The Hat". There another revision takes place – the canon of the English poets becomes more balanced, i.e. gendered. Similar to Eldjárn, Duffy's technique reflects either a juxtaposition of well-known traditional (and thus often cliché-ridden) motifs, characters and tales with active present-day reality or, as is the case with her re-tellings of Grimm, a revitalisation of the original, something which is achieved by the effective use of language designed to speak to a contemporary audience.

This element of renovation or revitalization for a new audience is also seen in Eldjárn's work. Just as Duffy repackaged the Grimm tales for a modern set of readers, Eldjárn rewrote one of the Poetic Edda's principal poems "Völuspá" (The Sybil's Prophecy). This work, just like Duffy's Grimm tales, was later given another level of semiotic meaning when it came to be staged, thereby entering into a new field of multi-media multi-levelled living communication with its audience.

Cross-writing

In terms of address, Eldjárn's and Duffy's poetry for children can be effectively discussed in relation to what Barbara Wall terms "double" or "dual" address: their poems regularly shift between these two modes. It is a feature of the "dual" address that both audiences are openly addressed (as opposed to talking behind children's shoulder in the "double address") but, as Wall says, it is "rare and difficult, presupposing as it does that a child narratee is addressed and an adult reader simultaneously satisfied".²¹ Cross-writing is not independent of the poets' intentions. From what Duffy and Eldjárn say about their approach to writing poetry for children one can conclude that they do not particularly adjust their approach to writing, or especially language, depending on the audience. The main difference, as they both admit, is that they have more freedom in children's poems.²² This reflects especially the fact that the language of the poems is not deliberately simplified or mollified. As mentioned above, some of the poems tend to be self-referential, foregrounding the process of poetry-making and drawing attention to the linguistic texture of the poem. One of the most interesting aspects of this interest in the exploration of literariness of figurative expressions which can be also considered in relation to what the British Poet Adrian Henri termed as "the revaluation of cliché".²³ The exploitation of common expressions and attempts at revising them go hand in hand with their focus on the common objects and activities.

What I have mostly focused on so far is the poets' strategy of juxtapositions and recontextualisations, which they make use of in their work in order to 'update' traditional or just commonly known stories, thereby offering new perspectives. In what follows I shall focus on another shared aspect of their poetry, especially that for children, namely their exploration of the everyday experience whereby socks, washing machines or cucumbers, for example, prove to be a fertile ground for poetic studies. It is this realm of the commonplace and its creative potential, which brings us again to nonsense.

Nonsense

In successful modern fiction for children the already mentioned "dual address" has been the key mode in a number of books with Harry Potter being the most obvious and recent example (something seen in the fact that in the UK the books were first published with two different covers, each one aimed at a different audience).²⁴ "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" (1865) and "Winnie-the-Pooh" (1926) are two classic examples of 'dual address' because here both types of readers seem to share the reading experience at the same level, especially once they

encounter *Humpty Dumpty* and other examples of so-called “nonsense poetry” by authors like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear (“A Book of Nonsense”, 1846). Indeed, this genre which transcends single age groups has also been effectively adopted by Eldjárn and Duffy.

Carroll’s and Lear’s books practically defined the genre for the twentieth century literature and were also of key importance to the first avant-garde movement (Dada and surrealism).²⁵ Rolf Hildebrandt, one of the early critics of the genre, classifies nonsense as an “aesthetic category”²⁶ while in his “Anatomy of Literary Nonsense” (1988) Wim Tigges defines literary nonsense through the following four characteristics: “an unresolved tension between presence and absence of meaning, lack of emotional involvement, playlike presentation, and an emphasis, stronger than in any other type of literature, upon its verbal nature”.²⁷ In terms of subject-matter we can refer back to Elizabeth Sewell who, in her pioneering book “The Field of Nonsense” (1952), argues that, rather than being isolated from the real world, nonsense poetry actually feeds off “normal experience”. We can find countless examples of this in Carroll’s and Lear’s poetry or that of Spike Milligan, poetry where the most ordinary objects and creatures are regularly subject to nonsensical treatment. Sewell says: “The words which Nonsense is going to employ are those referring to normal experience, shoes and ships and sealing-wax and cabbage and kings.”²⁸ Tigges specifies basic recurring nonsense themes, listing among other things, devices such as: “language, reversal, permutation, coupling, space and infinity... identity and nothingness, doubling, negating, parallelling and circularity.”²⁹ As Tigges notes, food clearly belongs to this repertoire. Indeed, from Alice’s mushrooms and Pooh’s honey pots onwards, food has always been one of the most interesting and widely explored subjects in fiction and poetry for children. In keeping with the overall theme of this article, in what follows two nonsense poems by Duffy and Eldjárn that deal specifically with food are discussed. What is interesting in analyzing these poems together is that, while they show different treatments of the same subject, both can be discussed in relation to the aforementioned tradition of literary nonsense and simultaneous revitalisation of the prosaic. As in many nonsense poems, there is no storytelling in these poems, no context, just lists of incongruous but often comical images created through unexpected juxtapositions. They are, however, all served up in a completely different way by each poet.

Friendly food

Duffy’s poem “The Fruits, the Vegetables, the Flowers and the Trees”³⁰ is divided into four parts dealing respectively with the four categories of items included in the title. The title itself

suggests nothing unusual and, as a matter of fact, it could well be taken from the table of contents of a biology book. Nothing nonsensical seems to happen in the opening lines of the poem. The pattern adopted in the whole poem resembles a question and answer game:

Which is the most friendly of the fruits?
 Is it the apple?
 No, for the apple is the most romantic of fruits.
 It is the apricot?
 No, for the apricot is the most self-conscious of fruits.³¹

The same question is asked about a number of fruits with the explanatory answers giving us hardly any clue as to why the guesses are incorrect. Finally, after a long list of such failed guesses all of a sudden and out of the blue comes the correct one:

So it is the banana!
 Yes! For the banana is the fruit in the bowl that smiles.³²

The beginning and even the ending of this section seem logical enough – a banana shape resembles a smile and that, as some of us believe, may be an indication of friendliness. Similarly in the conclusion to the vegetable section it is the visual and not, for instance, aural resemblance that gives the correct answer – the cauliflower is the most intelligent of vegetables “for the cauliflower is the vegetable in the rack with a brain”.³³ But we can also look at this final line as a revaluation of a cliché “to rack one’s brains” which basically captures the nature of any question and answer game. However between apple and banana we also find kumquat, ugli fruit and lychee, the list of vegetables including such common vegetables as carrots or peas alongside more exotic visitors such as mangetout or Jerusalem artichokes. To non-native speakers of English, lychee or mangetout sound like perfectly coined nonsense words (similar to those quoted from Eldjárn’s poem below) even though they are actually not unusual. More importantly, however, there is no indication of how the ‘guesser’ in that game came up with the right answer and therefore the closure hardly satisfies the readers’ expectations.

For this poem, Duffy adopts a technique common in nonsense verse – a catalogue or a list; in Icelandic, a *pula*. Apart from that, though, there’s no rhyme or prevalent alliteration, nothing that would help explain the juxtapositions of the fruits and later vegetables in the given answers. The main device employed in the poem is a repetition which gives it a certain rhythm. It is therefore the often unexpected associations employed in finding adjectives for the objects and more precisely the choice of predominantly anthropomorphic adjectives to describe every fruit and vegetable that make the list different from, for example, a shopping list.

fruits		vegetables	
apple: romantic	tangerine: festive	asparagus: aloof	mangetout: bossy
apricot: self-conscious	elderberry: fussy	green beans: parochial	turnip: spooky
	nectarine: sartorial	carrot: perceptive	Jerusalem artichokes: stubborn

cherry : cheerful
raspberry: rude
quince: ironic
grape: healing
damson: particular
fig: demure
Victoria plum:
solemn
kumquat: clever
pineapple: spiteful
lemon: naive
melon: optimistic
orange: gregarious
ugli fruit: intellectual

juniper berry: cunning
watermelon: extrovert
pomegranate: macabre
star fruit: wilful
date: punctual
coconut: lenient
lychee: flirtatious
gooseberry : intrusive
mandarin: feudal
kiwi fruit: poetic
banana : friendly

dill: confused
kale: derivative
lettuce: sluggish
broccoli: bored
haricot beans: pretentious
iceberg lettuce: trivial
onion: attention-seeking
spinach: relaxed
endive: over-dressed

peas: polite
fennel: bohemian
rocket: effete
watercress: ornamental
potatoes: childish
zucchini: bilingual
yam: calm
cauliflower : intelligent

The question that begs to be asked here is: on what grounds are the above connections made? Is there any pattern? Anything that would fulfil and not only frustrate our expectations? We can actually find very few pairs that exploit the polysemy of words: as in “punctual date”, “rude raspberry” or some plausible associations, for instance “sluggish lettuce”. It is also possible to see the logical link between the solemn Queen Victoria and the “Victoria plum” as well as the romantic apple and Adam and Eve. Then there is “kale” for the derivative cabbage, a Scottish dialect form possibly derived from the Old Norse “kál”; and finally turnips may seem spooky because they are hollowed out by the Scots for Halloween. The sear may continue but it will lead us nowhere, or rather will not help us build any coherent world. There seems to be no tangible rule, no recurring pattern, no obvious logic or even rhyme explaining the use of such associations. As a result the poem leaves us with an impressive gallery of revitalised characters such as “ironic quince”, “gregarious orange”, “attention-seeking onion”, “lenient coconut”, “spiteful pineapple”, “bilingual zucchini”, “aloof asparagus” or “polite peas” but they are given no script, no story explaining why the pineapple became spiteful. On the other hand by means of this simple device, the run of the mill fruit and vegetables are now being given personalities and hence uplifted from the world of the commonplace. These fruits and vegetables will never be the same again.

The clash of codes of meaning surprises, but rather than being humorous, the poem is better described as interestingly puzzling. Despite the fact that the correct answers get confirmed in the end, there is hardly any sense of closure because so many of the explanations provided remain unresolved. The way “normal experience” undergoes a certain metamorphosis in Duffy’s poem through the use of tentative, sometimes too idiosyncratic associations can, in some sense, be termed “tamed nonsense” because somehow it remains bound to our world. There is the physical distance between the words in the structure of the question and answer pattern that leaves room for reflection before the association is made. Each word retains its individuality. In Eldjárn’s

poem on the other hand, the words are yoked together to plough rather deeply into the field of nonsense.

Food for what?

The technique employed in Eldjárn’s food poem is already signalled by the two interesting coinages in its title. With very subtle changes to the words the perfectly normal “grænmeti” (vegetables) and “ávextir” (fruits) are suddenly transformed into new, familiarly sounding but at the same time completely ridiculous objects along the following pattern:

græn meti : vegetables	á vextir: fruits
grann meti: lean-meals	át vextir: eat-growths
grænn : green → grannur : slim,thin, slender	á : on → át : eating, > éta : eat
-meti – food	vextir (pl.) > vöxtur – growth

As in Duffy’s poem, we also have lists of fruit and vegetable related nouns but their gradual accumulation and the fact that most of them are portmanteaux words (a combination of two or more words) produces a much more humorous effect than that which occurs when reading Duffy’s verse. Portmanteau words, the definition of which was provided by Humpty Dumpty himself, has been described as “the quintessence of nonsense” and is included as one of the main devices in the Nonsense Repertoire. Unlike the title of Duffy’s poem here certain expectations are created from the onset and then suspended by a fairly conventional beginning, before the massive attack of nonsense commences. The frame of the poem – both the introductions to the lean-meal and eat-growth departments and the conclusion of the poem are deliberately ordinary – creates a fairly dull wrapping for this extraordinary content, and helps increase the humorous surprise that occurs when the reader ventures further into the shop. In the table below there are a few specimens from both sections:³⁴

grannmeti (lean-meals)		átvextir (eat-growths)
sviðaldin :	brimsætar hnuðlur : seasweet kneadles	sveppurur : mushroompears
<i>svið</i> : singed sheep head, <i>aldin</i> : fruit	hnuðla : knead; hnuðkál : turnip;	<i>sveppur</i> : mushroom, <i>pera</i> : pear
sæfíkjur : seafigs	núðlur : noodles	átómatar : automatoes
nöldrur : grumblets	brimsaltur : briny, very salty;	tómatar : tomatoes, át : eating,
<i>nöldra</i> : grumble, <i>nöldur</i> : fuss, grumbling	sætur : sweet	átómat : automat
sigurber : winberries	biðlistasúrur : queuesorrels/waity sorrels	loðbaunir : fur-beans
<i>sigur</i> : victory, <i>ber</i> : berry	(hunda)súra : sorrel, biðlisti : waiting list	<i>loðinn</i> : furry, <i>baunir</i> : bean
fríðaldin : fairfruits	úlfaldinkjarna : camelly kernels	grísablöðkur : porklamines
flatberry : flatberries	<i>úlfaldi</i> : camel, <i>aldin</i> : fruit;	<i>grís</i> : pig, <i>blaðka</i> : big leaf
snjóþrúgur : snowgrapes	kjarna : kernel	erkinæpur : archturnips
<i>þrúgur</i> : grape (as in þrúgur)	granatsveskjur : prunegranates	salatfætur : lettucefeet
reiðinnar : the grapes of wrath)	granatepli : pomegranate, apple-granate	baunagúrkur : beancucamberries
lítrónur : seetrons	veimiltítur : weaklings	beinhreðkur : boneradishes
<i>sítróna</i> : citron, lemon, <i>líta</i> : look, see		undirlægjur : vassals
skvöldrur : prattlets		ratatoskur : squirrels
<i>skvaldra</i> : prattle, chatter		<i>ratatosk</i> (bore-tooth): squirrel who lives on Yggdrasil

ofurepli: superapples
umsínur: straysins
um: about, **rúsínur:** raisins
andrésínur: daisyducks
grammófinur: grammophins
grammófónn: gramophon
meðalónur: mellowins

vitsmunierur: witrnuts
vitsmuna- rational, **vitsmunir:** wit
sýndarperur: pseudopears
sýndar-virtual, pera: pear
granatsveskjur: prunegranates
ritepli: writeapples
myndber: filmberries

Even though compound nouns are rather common in Iceland, the rules of grammar are carefully twisted and bent in many of the above creations. It becomes a challenge to visualize many of the “grannmeti” and “átvextir”. Another strategy – that of matching the words with the pictures – may prove to be futile, as was often the



case in Lear’s nonsense verse, because the pictures do not seem to depict the objects listed above. The poem is also a good example of dual address – the absurdity of most of the newly created words seems (in my experience) to appeal equally to children and parents – although the reception may differ, depending especially on the reader’s imaginative capabilities or nonsense-resistance. Readers get drawn into a game governed by the main principles of literary nonsense – oscillating between meaning and non-meaning. The tension between “what is presented, the expectations that are evoked” and “the frustration of the expectations” varies as the poem continues.³⁵ As in Duffy’s poem one is tempted to search for meaning that would tie these objects to the world that we know. Indeed, some of the words deceptively resemble well-known fruits or vegetables, as for instance in the cases of “winberries” (sigurber), “seetrones” (lítrónur), “superapples” (ofurepli), “mushroompears” (sveppperur), “archturnips” (erkinæpur) or “automatoes” (átómatar). Among them there are also existing nouns such as “undirlægjur” (vassals) which are however completely incongruous amongst a pile of fruit, and finally there are the completely absurd ones as for instance “daisyducks” (andrésínur), “grumblets” (nöldrur) or “porklaminas” (grísablöðkur). The catalogue of products from the eat-growth department ends with “ratatoskur”, which is the name of the mythological squirrel that nibbles on the tree Yggdrasil. It is hard to tell whether it is the nibbling habit or being a squirrel that accounts for the word’s final position on the list. Here the rules of grammar are deliberately sacrificed for the sake of rhyme but this aural patterning actually augments and accentuates the nonsensibility for Icelandic readers. We are seemingly taken to a new parallel world. The degree of defamiliarisation used here also varies between verses, meaning that the readers will sway between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the word as we know it and the world that we don’t really want to know.

There is a category of mnemonic or learning poems for children consisting primarily of lists including, for instance, numerals, colours, the letters of the alphabet or, fruits and vegetables. Usually the categories of the items that become the subject of the poem do not mix. Naturally such poems tend to rely heavily on rhyme and alliteration that help to memorize the lists of often many words. We find a number of such fairly conventional ‘list poems’ in both Eldjárn’s and Duffy’s oeuvre. However, this particular type of poem undergoes a serious transformation in the two examples discussed above as they boldly defy and frustrate the readers’ expectations both in terms of form and content. Both contain lists of words, but various highly arbitrary connections are made between them and, as a result, the idea of ‘learning’ becomes secondary (if not just vaguely distant) while an interesting conceptual game is foregrounded. The fact is that the following much-quoted lines from *Alice* could have been taken as motto to both of the above poems:

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master - that's all.'³⁶

Chewing on

In this article an attempt has been made to extract some sense out of seeming nonsense, but most importantly to show that Eldjárn and Duffy are two uncompromising poets who approach poetry for children with both seriousness and humour, revitalising and renewing the subjects this poetry deals with and the language used to approach it. It successfully realizes what J.R.R. Tolkien referred to as Recovery. Drawing on the tradition of literary nonsense, as well as on the achievements of the first avant-garde (especially Dadaism and Surrealism), their works prove that, in the postmodern context, poetry for children may well be aesthetically challenging but does not have to be limited to and enjoyed exclusively by one group of readers. At the same time it is impossible to ignore the fact that both poets are most likely to succeed in bringing up a new voracious and word-thirsty generation of readers.³⁷ Since the opening quote came from Eldjárn’s poem about Guðmundur the Bookgobbler, it seems fitting to finish off with a quote from a poem by Duffy, because this particular poem shifts the focus away from poetry and back toward the poet – or more precisely from the consumption of poetry to reflections on the possible edibility and crunchiness of the poets themselves as they present themselves to their readers:

A poet might not be chewed.

People might not sit on a poet.

You cannot peel a poet.

(...)

A poet is probably not animal feed.

A poet is probably not used in Oriental cooking.
A poet is probably not crunchy.
(...)
(Carol Ann Duffy, "Skeleton, Moon, Poet")³⁸

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Notes:

Þórarinn Eldjárn, *Óðfluga (Madfly)* (Reykjavík: Forlagið, 1991), 79. Both illustrations used in this article are by Sigrún Eldjárn.

² I refer directly to a definition provided in *OED* although in a reverse order: “book-worm” **1. lit.** A kind of maggot which destroys books by eating its way through the leaves. **2. fig.** One who seems to find his chief sustenance in reading, one who is always poring over books. (Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd edition. 1989).

³ [Hann segir: Þó er best að borða ljóð / en bara reyndar þau sem eru góð.]

⁴ See, for instance, Peter Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

⁵ On the subject of artificiality of such division in poetry for children see, for instance, Morag Styles, "Country rhymes and 'fingle-fangles': what is poetry for children?," in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 2004), 396.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1975). On the discussion of ‘readerly’ texts in children’s literature see: Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984).

⁷ See: Eva Müller-Zettelmann, "Skeleton, Moon, Poet," in *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: 'Choosing Tough Words'*, ed. Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), David Whitley, "Childhood and Modernity: Dark Themes in Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry for Children.," *Children's Literature in Education* 38, no. 2 (2007). The case of Þórarinn Eldjárn is more complicated since no comparable full-length academic study of his poetry has been published yet. But as a fairly representative example, one might consider the section devoted to his poetry for children and adults in the recently published history of contemporary Icelandic literature (Daisy L. Neijmann, ed., *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, In cooperation with The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 2006), 606. Full credit should be given to Kendra Wilson who treats these collections on equal terms in her overview of Eldjárn’s works (Kendra Jane Willson, "Þórarinn Eldjárn," in *Icelandic Writers*, ed. Patrick J. Stevens. (Detroit: Gale, 2004).)

⁸ Müller-Zettelmann, "Skeleton, Moon, Poet," 186.

⁹ Carol Ann Duffy, *Fleshweathercock and Other Poems* (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Outposts Publications, 1973), Þórarinn Eldjárn, *Kvæði (Poems)* (Reykjavík: 1974). It is noteworthy that Eldjárn’s debut collection has been one of the most popular and re-printed books of verse in the history of post-war Icelandic literature.

¹⁰ Translations of the titles come from Willson, "Þórarinn Eldjárn."

¹¹ Þórarinn Eldjárn and Jóhann G. Jóhannsson, *Best að borða ljóð* (Reykjavík: Japis, 2000), Þórarinn Eldjárn and Jóhann Helgason, *Óðflugur* (Reykjavík: Umhyggja, 2005), Þórarinn Eldjárn and Tryggvi M. Baldvinsson, *Gömul ljósmynd (includes poems from Heimskringla)* (Reykjavík: Artifex, 2006).

¹² Þórarinn Eldjárn, *Grannmeti og átvextir (Lean-meal and Eat-growths)* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2001), 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁴ ———, *Óðhalaríngla (Madcomhere)* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2004), 30-31.

¹⁵ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Arkana, 1989), 13-14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷ Carol Ann Duffy, *Work in Progress...* (London: BBC 4, 1990), Interview.

¹⁸ ———, *More Grimm Tales* (London: Faber, 1997), Carol Ann Duffy, *Grimm Tales* (London: Faber, 1996).

¹⁹ Carol Ann Duffy, *The Good Child's Guide to Rock 'n' Roll* (2003), 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice: the Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 35-36. Cf.: Peter Hunt, *Children's Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 20.

²² Þórarinn Eldjárn, *Þórarinn Eldjárn: ritþing 11. mars 2000* (Reykjavík: Menningarmiðstöðin Gerðuberg, 2000), 28-29. Duffy, *Work in Progress...*

²³ Adrian Henri, "Notes on Painting and Poetry," in *Tonight at Noon* (London: 1968), 9. Henri’s concept and approach to poetry in the 1960s and 1970s is very much indebted to the art of Dadaists and Surrealists.

²⁴ See: Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb, *Introducing Children's Literature: from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 139-50.

²⁵ Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 116-25.

²⁶ See: Rolf, Hildebrandt, *Nonsense-Aspekte der englischen Kinderliteratur*, Diss., Berlin, 1962, qt. in Tigges’ *Anatomy*, 17.

²⁷ Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, 55.

²⁸ Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), 99.

²⁹ Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, 31.

³⁰ Carol Ann Duffy, *The Hat* (London: Faber, 2007), 61-79.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

³² *Ibid.*, 62-63. The same image actually appears in another of Duffy’s children’s poem: “Why do bananas smile in their bowl? / because of your kind smile.” (“Question, questions” in: Carol Ann Duffy, *Meeting Midnight* (London: Faber, 1999), 6.)

³³ Duffy, *The Hat*, 70.

³⁴ This is only a rudimentary translation. A rendering of wordplay in Icelandic has been attempted in some of the above examples. In some cases the parts forming the compound words are given underneath.

³⁵ Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*, 47.

³⁶ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass* (London: Penguin, 1998), 186.

³⁷ Andri Snær Magnason described this process of “bringing up” new readers in the following way, once again underlining elements of nutrition: “these poetry books for children are” he says, “sly tactics of a writer who rears the whole generation of word-thirsty, nonsense-loving, rhyme-comprehending readers who enjoy eating poems.” (Þessar barnaljóðbækur eru náttúrulega eins og allir sjá lýmskulegt herbragð höfundar sem er að rækta upp heilu kynslóðarinar af orðþyrstum, bullelskandi, rímstiljandi lesendum sem finnst gott að borða ljóð.’ (Eldjárn, *Þórarinn Eldjárn*: ritþing 11. mars 2000, 4.)

³⁸ Carol Ann Duffy, *The Oldest Girl in the World* (London: Picador, 2000), 46.