

„BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA  
FACULTY OF LETTERS

**ROMANIAN CHILDREN’S POETRY**  
**– ITS SPECIFICITY AND DIDACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**  
DOCTORAL THESIS  
SUMMARY

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This research proposes a history of the way in which Romanian children’s poetry has seen itself and has written itself as a consequence of this preliminary self-image. We dispatch this kind of “interior history” or “within history” by analyzing some of the most significant poetical experiences that attest the genres’ diversity: G. Coşbuc, Elena Farago, G. Topîrceanu, Otilia Cazimir, Tudor Arghezi, Gellu Naum and Nina Cassian, as well as the politically involved (*engagés*) poets of the first communist decades.

The thesis stems from a certain necessity to offer an alternative to the current treatment that this poetical genre receives in the literature that engages in its study: annotated bibliographies, studies dedicated to children’s literature and children’s literature textbooks published so far. These commentaries have highlighted and privileged the thematic and the educational value of poetry – but, although these criteria are capable of describing (up to a certain point) other literary genres, they have proved to be unsatisfactory in addressing the poetical genre. The consequences of this treatment were the imposition of a uniform description of the poetical experiences, leading almost to a neutral interchangeability of creative practices: almost as if all poets wrote in the same way; this amounts to searching the educational value exclusively at the level of what poetry says or enounces, to putting the equality sign between contents and message, and, finally, to the global valorization of poetical experiences not in the light of their artistic realization, but in the light of their good intentions. Addressed mainly to teachers or mentors, this kind of discourse assists the didactical process in a rather informative or informational way, merely mentioning who the important poets for children were and what/about what they have written.

Therefore, our aim was an in-depth discussion of children’s poetry from a literary perspective (treating it as a literary act), a probing from within of the genre that would surpass the general comments – educational value, delicacy and graciousness – that were indiscriminately applied by the pedagogical specialists to all the poets. What we set out to do had therefore to pass through an analysis of what the texts themselves had to say, of the lyrical universe of each writer. However, a research of this kind can’t lose sight of the particularity of children’s poetry – which is that of being an essentially “addressed” poetry – and of the peculiarity that, in approaching this poetical genre both poet and critic find themselves in different positions than those imposed by the “great” poetry (that is, by the poetry with an adult reader which gives, both in the critics’ and the publics views, the definition of poetry itself in the Western traditions).

Here, the poet no longer writes for himself or for an ideal reader, whose ideal figure resembles him simply by presupposing an adult reader. He no longer writes the poetry of his time, polemically engaging other writers or a tradition which he wishes to continue or to surpass by innovating. Rather, he writes for someone else, for a reader different from himself, a reader whom he doesn't know in the way he knows himself and whose reading behavior he can't anticipate but merely approximate. The children's poet would always be forced to define this receptor, to reflect on his interests and his reading abilities, and to build this reader's profile, thus conferring him a more precise reality.

In his turn, the critic faces similar difficulties: he is not the receptor of these poems either and can't test the validity of the poetical experiences he comments on, because they are not addressed to him and he can't listen to their echo in his own conscience. He will invariably read as an adult and his critical reading will always be a secondary construct, a presupposition or an approximation. Therefore, the only remaining access to the poetical work is that of following the poet in what he has set himself to do, identifying the profile of the reader he envisaged and appreciating the way in which he managed to write the poetry he thought suited for the children.

Baring in mind these particularities, we have approached each of the above mentioned poets by reading the biographies, confessions, articles or interviews that were significant for the circumstances in which they began writing for the young (taking part in the publications of textbooks, experience of maternity, avoidance of political censure etc.), significant for the difficulties encountered (how to make oneself understood, without ceasing to make literature) and for their attitude towards the infantile intended addressee and towards the meaning of verses addressing the young age. We then went on to analyze the poetical universe itself, by searching the defining directions that traverse each poet's work and that configure his profile, thus charting territories that were either completely unvisited or only fugitively brushed on by other commentators, territories that often needed important corrections from the point of view of literary history. The discourse is without a doubt descriptive, but it is also axiological in the sense that, having accessed the poetical premises of the writers, we were able to propose conclusions regarding the success of these poetical experiences.

In this line of thought – and this is not an unimportant development of our work –, by staging a dialogue between the poets' and the pedagogues' opinions about the meaning of poetry and about its elements that are suited for didactical purposes, we tried to dismantle certain prejudices and to introduce some nuances in the discourse (and practices) of pedagogical specialists, hoping that, in this way, we would bring some assistance to the efforts of children's poetry teaching, thus conferring it a more diverse and more adequate didactical performing. Showing, for example, that G. Coşbuç and Gellu Naum don't do the same thing, that Elena Farago's poetry is

different from Otilia Cazimir's lyrics, attempting to bring to light the specificity of each poet invites at and incites to a different didactical exploitation of the texts, one that would make use precisely of this differentiated nature of texts.

Writing the history of the way in which Romanian children's poetry has seen itself and written itself in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have initiated its first analysis from literature's view-point (the monographs and existing dictionaries, the critical studies dedicated to one poet or another and the established literary histories don't take children's poetry as an object of analysis). We have therefore assumed the inherent risks of any pioneering enterprise, of any first charting and establishing of a heretofore unexplored poetical domain. We hope our documentation, our commitment to the researched object and the guiding lines by which we've organized its complex problems will help configure a firmer territory than the one we initially engaged ourselves in and that deserves, without a doubt, further explorations.

Serving as an introduction to the thesis, **the second chapter** – *A poem strayed in infantile poetry: "După melci" by Ion Barbu* – argues for the necessity of finding suited and internal criteria, specific to children's poetry and capable of accounting precisely for it, using as an intrigue the exceptional circumstances surrounding Ion Barbu's literary debut. In 1921, while the poet was pursuing his studies in Germany, the poem *După melci* was edited in the form of a brochure illustrated by the painter M. Teișanu. Literary history records the fact that the poet was displeased with the illustration, which he considered uninspired, and withdrew his book from bookshops; other sources simply limit themselves to an *ad litteram* reiteration of the harsh remarks regarding the illustrated brochure made by the critic Tudor Vianu in his 1935 monograph dedicated to the poet. In Vianu's opinion, the cause of the inadequacy was the fact that Teișanu's paintings had transformed the volume in a children's book by illustrating only the text's letter and missing its true spirit, thus lowering it to an inferior, less dignifying rank.

The research of the *După melci* case has brought to light the powerful influence Vianu had over the poet and the fact that the rejection actually belonged to the critic, Barbu having only "borrowed" it afterwards, more or less convinced by it. Also, it highlighted the fact that, taken for indisputable, Vianu's discourse has caused a great image disservice for children's poetry, which was thus drawn into a comparison from which it could have had nothing to gain, but much to lose. It is no surprise that Vianu's discourse became representative for the position of the critics; as an opinion and literary taste shaper, he discouraged both the writers and the commentators of the phenomenon, especially since the circumstances of the debut gradually became the subject of anecdotes depicting an infuriated Barbu ready to fight the painter Teișanu.

Both the editor of the brochure, who thought it was a poem for children and had it illustrated accordingly, and the critic, who was aware of the poem's true spirit, seemed to know very well what

children's poetry is and, respectively, what it is not. In reality, both were imposing exterior and insufficient criteria on it. The editor, Ventura, took in consideration only the décor – a poem about childhood was for children, a poem with child-heroes is for children –, while the critic conferred to the texts addressed to the young characteristics that didn't define them, but merely defined the age of their receptor: naivety, infantilism, limited capacity of seizing the message, lack of profundity. But finally neither managed to be persuasive in pretending that *După melci* was or, respectively, was not for children.

Barbu's debut represents a unique and unforeseen encounter which had, as history went on to prove, consequences that are difficult to evaluate: the actualization, in the same context, of two different poetical genres, each having a message and a specificity of its own. Of these two genres, only one was able to assume its own stand, only one was able to bring arguments to the table, because it possessed a history and a well determined profile. The other one, children's poetry, could not and still can't articulate a response from the standpoint of its own position and still can't invoke a credible specificity. An interior history of the way in which it has seen and written itself over a few decades and a number of significant poetical experiences seems therefore to us important precisely for its conquest of its own positions, that would individualize its profile and would make its voice heard amidst the literary choir.

Considered by G. Călinescu to be the first Romanian children's poet, G. Coșbuc has found his place in literary history as a writer for the young by his verses written for the textbooks he collaborated at, as shown by **the third chapter** of our research, entitled *Didactic poetry*. Appropriating in a professional way the pedagogues' point of view, the poet would make reference to a number of traits he found important in writing for the young: choosing a light subject, treating it lightly – speaking intelligibly for the child using the child's type of language, i.e. simple and naïve –, as well as the following of the pedagogical and moral tenets, i.e. the transmission of instructive and educational values. The analysis of Coșbuc's didactic poetry – written in order to support the learning of reading and writing and the didactic processes – gave us a first occasion to probe the genre and to dismantle some of the prejudices surrounding it: although it often takes the form of a summary or a recapitulation of the world, didactic poetry doesn't educate the child about the universe; its role is not that of informing, but rather that of constituting the support for the appropriation of a beautiful and correct language. The conventionalism of didactic poetry is not a consequence of poetic clumsiness; it is not an effect, but rather a constitutive element of this genesis of a world which is made of raw, essential, durable materials – with the help of the fundamental vocabulary. It makes, at the same time, both a “linguistic” alphabetization and an esthetical alphabetization, representing one of the first initiations of the child in the expressing of emotions



and in what humanity considers beautiful; it marks the child's first encounter with the poetical state, with the ritual generated by the presence of the rhyme and rhythm.

Analyzing Coşbuc's work has given us the opportunity for an important discovery concerning the paternity of the book of poetry *Cartea celor doi zbârliți și-a mai multor alți pârlți*, tacitly attributed up to now to Coşbuc. But it turned out that he is not the creator of Romanian satirical children's poetry, because he is not the author of the mentioned book, being merely its translator. The edition he has translated, *Das bekannte Struwwelpaar und die ganze Struwwelschar*, had in fact been published in 1900 and belongs to the German poet Robert Hertwig; in its turn, this 1900 volume was a compilation inspired by Heinrich Hoffmann's famous children's book, *Struwwelpeter*. Coşbuc's contribution to children's poetry turns out to be not only that of a professional of didactic poetry, but also that of a worthy translator of a well known book of the Western 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Our **fourth chapter** turns towards Elena Farago's moral verses. She represents the first identifiable voice in our children's poetry, the first poet that addresses the young outside the didactic context, the first professional poet of an almost unpopulated literary territory. Her contribution to the development and diffusion of this genre is very important, inasmuch as she illustrates by herself an entire paradigm of children's poetry: that of the intensely moralizing poetry, of the pedagogical and cautionary poetry, bringing the child's figure to the forefront, staging his interests and dilemmas and adequately capturing the young's psychology. However, and against Elena Farago herself, the analysis of her poetical universe lead us to highlight the important assertion that a poem's educational value is inseparably bounded to its esthetic value simply because the merely enouncing of a rule without conveying or transmitting the emotion that would underlie its understanding remains echoless in the child's mind. Coşbuc's verses mark a success of the didactic poetry, but Elena Farago either fails to transmit emotions, or, on other occasions, injects too much emotion in the poetical – and often dramatic – situations she stages.

**The fifth chapter** – *Poetry as emotion* – constitutes an incursion into G. Topîrceanu's poetic laboratory. Even though he didn't directly address the young, Topîrceanu constitutes an important case for us in that he rewrote some of his poems in order to have them published in certain textbooks, but he rewrote them in a way that emphasized their esthetic value, and not their educational virtues. The comparison of the two types of poems (original and rewritten or reviewed for the young) has brought to light some of the important characteristics of this poetical genre: bringing the hero to the forefront and, consequently, the favoring of the narrative; the inscription, within the text, of an infantile correspondent and the infusion of emotion by the use of diminutive forms and by the positioning of the hero in fragility situations, which help confer the hero the

attributes of childhood; the ideological purging and the excess of correctitude, i.e. the sometimes unjustified concern to avoid anything that might, in the adults' eye, suggest inappropriate ideas.

Taking as a starting point the need to adjust the poetry to the addressee's young age, Topîrceanu has the merit of having raised the problem of the infallible dosage, a problem which concerns both those that write for children and that adapt texts for child-readers, a problem that they often fall prey to. Looking for the perfect adjustment, one often gives course to the temptation of uselessly over-clarify the subject and its artistic rendering. Trying to avoid the excessive difficulty of the texts, one tends to fall prey to the risk of over-simplifying them. But if the subject is too easy, than the poetry only offers the child a description of his world, which tells him nothing new and that he only acknowledges and recognizes. Also, treating the subject too lightly means that the reader's only duty remains that of understanding the literal meaning of the words or that of identifying trivial or current meanings and situations. Eliminating all obstacles standing in the way of understanding, erasing all ambiguity deprives the text of all its surprises and deprives the reading of nothing less than its own intrinsic motivation.

**The sixth chapter** – *Poetry as surprise* – is dedicated to Otilia Cazimir. The poetess has successfully deployed an animistic-dramatic type of poetry, emphasizing fantasy and humor. Her poems lead towards a final catch line and create unexpected word-associations, all of which surprises the young reader, unveiling for him a reality that's new, unfamiliar yet charming. Instead of the moral poetry, Otilia Cazimir proposes a toy-poetry, whose goal is not that of educating, but that of delighting the child with new and fresh hypotheses about the world.

Our **seventh chapter** – *Poetry as play* –, dedicated to Tudor Arghezi, depicts a new facet of children's poetry: that of playing with language. It also presents us with a new image of the poet himself, since his children's poems were never commented on. His "alphabet runes" that play with school imagery, his wanton verse of 7-8 syllables and his accessible writing, with its well controlled ambiguity, all these traits give his children's poetry a distinct tone within the general frame of the great poet's work. Solemnity doesn't visit this playful and frolicky poetry that always tries to provoke laughter rather than emotion or enchantment. Indirectly though, it does talk to children about important things: about the meaning and role of reading and writing (by naturally integrating the difficulty of acquiring these instruments into the poems themselves); about the meaning of books and about the way in which writing can serve creation, by becoming poetry making; about the different ways to play with sounds, syllables and words.

**The eighth chapter** discusses children's poetry during the first decades of the communist regime, the specific forms this poetry took under the guidance of the Party's ideas and under the directives of the socialist realism – the depiction of class struggle, the praising of work and collectivity, the hero's enlistment in the working class, the satirical description of its enemies, and

the imperative of a veridical rendering of reality. This explains the emergence of conflicts in children's poems, the metamorphosis of play in work, the ever-presence of the hard-working hero, the depiction of family members as front-rank workers, the foundation of the satirical poetry for children and, finally, the purely denotative, "in black and white" writing. By the propaganda that infused the "engagé" poetry, the young reader always had before him a sole reality, a reality with an exemplary power that aimed at defining the unnatural of certain attitudes and reactions as being the normality itself, which indicated how the child should have been, what he should have wished, which pointed unambiguously towards the hero of the "revolutionary" times or which, by contrast, showed the child how he shouldn't have been: idleness, indulgence and selfishness counting as prime deficiencies.

There are however some exceptions from this militant poetry of the first communist decades, and the most striking are the lengthy narrative poems signed by Gellu Naum (*Cărțile cu Apolodor*) and Nina Cassian (*Povestea a doi pui de tigru numiți Ninigra și Aligru*), which constitute a category that we termed *Poetry as spectacle*. What is worth noting about these poems is their ambivalent nature, inasmuch as they address both the child and the adult, offering elements for different reading types in each of the two cases. They are show-poems, total poems which tell a story that is, at the same time, amusing, moving and instructing. By the playful strategies they propose, they demand from the reader a higher degree of independence during the act of reading, the child-reader finding himself in the situation of taking an attitude with respect to what he reads. The reason for this more demanding nature lies in the fact that both poems contain an important element of parody, as well as ingenious ways of referring to the literary conventions of adventure books (G. Naum) and of the traditional fairy tales (N. Cassian).

The last section of our research proposes some general **conclusions** regarding the specificity of this poetical genre, by pointing out, defining and analyzing the traits that proved to be recurrent in our study of the above mentioned poets. The following traits, drawn from the body of our research, are therefore highlighted: the great thematic stability; the discourse's construction around an infantile correspondent; the predilection for the narrative type of lyricism; the appeal to an accessible way of writing, which makes use of a well mastered ambiguity; the strong attachment to a traditional prosody. To these more obvious traits, we have added other characteristics that had guided our discourse in a more subterranean, yet constant way. One of them is the necessity for the poet to adopt a lyrical role of addressability, of a voice that is imperative in making the dialogue with the receptor possible. We argued that the teacher (G. Coșbuc), the mother (E. Farago), the grandmother (Otilia Cazimir), the playmate (Arghezi) are such roles, and that they constitute modes of communication establishing, modes that are socially predefined but that the poet is forced to assume simply because the dialogue that children's poetry installs would be quite simply impossible

to trigger and to construct without them. It is these roles, these primary types of discourses that, up to a certain point, generate the tones of communication, be it instructive, educational, talkative or prankish.

Another specificity of the genre is given by the fact that its types are crystallized at the level of the reading-effects (knowledge, educating, emotion, surprise, delight), that the reading-effects are the ones that define the ordering of this poetry in certain typologies. This marks another difference of children's poetry from the "great" poetry (poetry written by and for adults that define our sense of poetry) which demands to be organized in typologies by using formal or thematic criteria, as well as the enlistment in the different literary movements. As opposed to this way of "typologizing", within children's poetry we see that Coşbuc's poetry is literally destined to educate and to support the teaching of reading and writing (didactic poetry); Elena Farago's poetry wished to morally and civically guide and instruct (moral poetry); Topîrcianu set out to move and to touch the child's heart (poetry as emotion); Otilia Cazimir chose to delight the child with surprising hypotheses about the world (poetry as surprise); whereas Arghezi provoked his reader in order to amuse him (poetry as play), and Gellu Naum and Nina Cassian assumed the position of a show's director, aiming to do all of the above at once: educate, emotionally move, amuse (poetry as spectacle). Being the only one that is organized by the intended effect on the child, the typology of the reading-effects seems to us to be the only one that could offer guiding lines for the mode of didactic use and performing of these poems.

The lyrical roles we've mentioned and the reading-effects sought by the commented poets are recurrent in children's poetry, being also present in the poetry of the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as in contemporary verses. Without being the only ones possible, they cover a range of fundamental voices and reactions that the poets constantly turn to. They are not characteristic for a certain historical moment, their forms don't depend on such moments and they seem in a way immune to the passing of time.

All the above mentioned traits of the genre form a kind of easy and direct "recognizability" of the genre, and we could even say that this easy access to identifying its figure almost immediately or automatically constitutes, in itself, a final trait of the genre. But it is also this recognizability or this "identifiability" that often leads to the prejudice that all children's poets somehow write in the same way, a prejudice that discourages all thorough commentaries of this poetry. But our research attests that the poets don't do the same thing, that the unity of the genre is real without lending itself to uniformity. The identity belongs to the genre, and not to the poets that exemplify it.

At the end of our research we've asked ourselves if a historical approach – in the classical sense of the term – would have been possible, i.e. if one could properly speak of a diachronic

evolution of children's poetry. Our answer is negative: the lyrical roles of addressability and the reading-effects actualize a type of ever-present possibilities that can be revived and presentified at any time (and are in fact revived), in any text written for children, and this renders a diachronic approach inadequate. Children's poetry can be addressed, for example, by comments regarding the lyrical universe of narrative poems; or the maternal voice and position assumed by certain poets; or to the role of playmates assumed by the ones whose lyrical universe demanded it. Children's poetry can therefore be approached through different types of analyses than the strictly speaking historical one; it can be approached by more minute analyses whose specificity would not be that of describing a development, a progress within a common frame, but that of identifying elements that form a level that would allow works of different moments to communicate and to relate to each other.

We hope that our research constitutes a step forward in bringing to an accord the way in which the pedagogues who teach it and the writers who write it see this poetical genre; a step forward towards bringing together the school system's necessities and the poets' offer; a step forward towards establishing a harmony between the didactic reading of the poem and the reading-effects inherent in the text. The poetical experiences studied have shown that the educational value doesn't have to be exclusively understood in terms of the message the texts carry, as common school practices often do; these experiences have shown that poetry, by its inherent means, contributes to the esthetical alphabetization (G. Coşbuc); to the development of emotional intelligence (Topîrceanu); to the development of mental mobility (Cazimir, Arghezi); to raising an independent spirit that activates during the act of reading (Naum, Cassian). The mere identification of the message of children's poems at the level of their conceptual content seems to us to lead to a paradoxical situation that we've indicated in the hope of stirring the specialists' thoughts on the subject: there is an entire poetical genre that is written for children, that lends its services to the school, but the school seems to reject or to ignore precisely that which is more defining for this genre.