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Shifting the Horizon of Reception – Contemporary Poetry for the Lower Primary Grades

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Extended summary

The paper explores poetic conditions for a favourable reception of contemporary poetry among the primary school pupils. Readers are perceived as a reactive category, implying that there is a type of conditionality in which a text exerting influence on a reader becomes a sum of all reader's reflections manifesting as reception. This does not mean that the paper, by focusing on the aesthetics of receiving and reacting, neglects the aesthetics of the works themselves. Fluidity is the characteristic of every "horizon of expectations" defined by the reception theory. The perceptions of the adequacy of the content are built from the outside, by a distancing "evaluator" of the other person's horizon of expectations labeling it as a failed or confirmed "horizon of expectations". The issues pertaining to the reception relative to the assumed recipient are reflected in the literature theory in the form of a relative distinction between "the poetry for adults" and "the poetry for children and young adults". The paper looks at the active category of students who read contemporary poetry and possess the skills of progressive reception, namely, the students who could be recommended to read both the contemporary poetry which is not written primarily for children and young adults and the poetry written with a full awareness of the young readers' aptitude.

The key change in the reception of the poetry for young adults, in terms of the status which "naïve poems" have in the history of Serbian literature, occurred with the emergence of the avant-garde movement, especially the surrealist poetry which abandoned the modernist postulates by putting the equation mark between the principle of poetry in general ("for adults") and the principle of childhood, claiming that "irrational absence of logic suits the natural form of children's thoughts". By creating a new paradigm in the literature for children,

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which is based on removing or shifting the barrier “keeping one away from things that are not meant for children”, the horizon of reception in terms of its purpose is poetically directed towards the poetry for adults and it merges with it. The paper analyses the reception on the example of the surrealist texts and poetry of Vasko Popa. The reception of this kind of poetry requires primarily that pupils have mastered reading techniques, while their age is less relevant.

How a poem will be received depends mostly on the poetic dominants of the text. The metaphor, the key source of poetic images important for the pupils’ experience of poetry, takes the central place in the works of the surrealists and Vasko Popa. The understanding of the metaphorical meanings in Popa’s poetry is somewhat constrained because he does not use the surrealist metaphors which leave analogies far behind. Popa’s poetry relies heavily on the metaphor which preserves the analogical links in itself, and analogy as a poetic hint enables the interpretation of the meaning. The analogy is here presented as the most productive means on which the metaphorical imagery is based, which requires from readers to connect two distant concepts, usually on the basis of the similarities between them. This is a closed-type analogy where both elements of the analogous relationship are represented (*metaphora in presentia*). Other poems contain metaphorical expressions which require from the readers, and this is typical of the afore-mentioned “surrealist metaphor”, to find the external analogon, outside the text, usually of the realistic origin. These analogons can be considered as open (*metaphora in absentia*), and they are, in fact, associations that are more or less made intentionally.

The interpretation of many poems by Popa at the primary school level cannot be fully carried out because this poetry is laden with historical, cultural and culturological references, mythological and archetypal links, intertextuality, and citations – the facts calling for the conditionality of knowledge. As the young readers may find the culturologically more appealing books of poetry which call for the knowledge of culture both motivating and distracting, the interpretation of poetic texts should begin with imagining and end with cultural aspects. In the case of younger/young readers, the freer and wilder poetic images make the texts more accessible for imagining and experiencing. Poems that are more deeply rooted in tradition require *disentanglement* by a wider education which the youngest pupils have not acquired yet. These pupils will rely more on the poetics of play in the language and the nonsensical play, which leads us to the nature of the text similar to the poetry of nonsense.

The problems in understanding/interpreting poetry arise due to the following distractors: 1) readers’ inability to move away from the literal meaning and move into a sphere of the more abstract categories and transferred meanings 2) the inability to connect the poetic images in a poem into a coherent whole at conceptual and thematic levels 3) inert imagination – inability to experience suggestive poetic images.

When pupils interpret poetic images, they tend to move away, to a greater or lesser extent, from the literal meaning of the texts and the poetic projection. The level of their success in doing this determines how creative, analytical, reflective, meaningful and demetaphorical their interpretation will be. And interpretation is always educational – into the bargain.

Key words: contemporary poetry, reception theory, horizon of expectations, methodology of teaching Serbian Literature, Vasko Popa.

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