Review Article[1]

Children's Literature Comes of Age

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It is no longer possible for one person to cover the entire range of children's literature. The global nature of culture today, the availability of literature from Japan, China, the Middle East, Africa, and even the English translations of the stories told by the Australian aboriginal people or the First Nations peoples of Canada and the Russian transcriptions of tundra peoples, discourage any claim to an exhaustive review. Above all, the domination of English in publishing and on the Internet contributes to a "uniformization" of the imagination, particularly in children's culture, through the mass production of films and the press. This new international order increases the responsibility of the critics and of any statement intended to define the legitimacy or distinctive signs of chaotic production; the requirements of theoretical clarity must not lead us to overlook the possible impact and consequences of every formal statement.

This is why Maria Nikolajeva's attempt is provocative and stimulating for an examination of the cultural and—to a lesser degree—of the political values implicitly at stake in the field of children's literature and criticism. In *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic*, which reflects the breadth of her culture, the finesse of her analysis, and a carefully argued thesis, she does not imagine that she can cover the entire range of contemporary children's literature; on the contrary, she modestly points out in her conclusion that "everything that has been said obviously refers to a very small portion of modern children's books, even a very tiny part of what is normally classified as quality literature" (207). However, the method she uses, the books she chooses to study, and her general approach, all reveal

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ambiguities which we should examine in order to elucidate the assumptions which underlie her approach. These ambiguities are important for the issues which they reveal. Nikolajeva's assumptions seem to admit, beyond the critical and literary points she explicitly discusses, a social vision of cultural matters on a worldwide scale which we can question on other grounds. To speak more plainly, we cannot subcribe to what we consider an implicit acceptance of the domination of a cultural order which, in its aesthetical manifestations, warps the critical approach through the very method it resorts to.

Nikolajeva summarizes her main point several times. She writes: "The central idea of my whole study is the general tendency in contemporary children's literature towards the disintegration of traditional epic narrative. Children's literature today is catching up with mainstream literature in its so-called postmodern phase, which has as its most prominent slogan the violation of generally accepted literary norms" (119). Nikolajeva justly proposes the acceptance of a cultural object which, in the eyes of many academics, is still not sufficiently acknowledged; she "aspires to place the object of study on an equal footing with mainstream literature and to point to the complexity of the modern children's books" (10-11). All the efforts of her research are brought to bear on her presentation of this "complexity and sophistication on all levels"—in fact she is more concerned with questions of narrative texture than with the imaginative aspects of the text—which makes it possible for her to dismantle the barriers which she identifies between mainstream literature and children's literature. As she re-affirms in her conclusion: "This complexity is reflected in such phenomena as the disintegration of traditional narrative structure and the extensive use of different experimental forms, in the intricate use of time and space, in a growing intertextuality, in a questioning of conventional approaches to the relationship between text and reality" (207). The chapter dealing with the "chronotope," a concept borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin, and the later chapters which are devoted to intertextuality and the complex relationships which may emerge between the various narrative structures, more specifically in metafictional stories, offer a novel exploration of avant-garde types of contemporary writing.

This claim for complexity in contemporary children's literature is carefully and often brilliantly carried out, but according to Nikolajeva's own analyses, the innovative trend in children's literature reflects authors' "confidence in their readers' ability to read," and she goes on to predict: "This also means that children's literature will *on the whole* come closer to mainstream literature" (208). Now, this is a path along which we cannot follow her, first because we do not think that this literature is any "closer" to what is referred to here as "mainstream" than it was formerly. Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* is no closer to the fictional work of Umberto Eco than the Perrault tales published in 1696 were to the works of Fontanelle. I would say that each historical period has a children's literature which is involved in an inevitable process of interaction with other cultural activities. The entire area is moving and I think that a distinction should be drawn between the "status" of children's literature and the "shapes" or complexity it assumes in its proximity to "mainstream literature": the former may well be acknowledged as "equal," whereas the latter still keeps different features and specific strictures suggested by the very specificity and status of the readers themselves. A discussion of the issues in this field should also draw the line between children's literature and adolescent literature, whose field includes different definitions of the young readers; the adolescent might have almost the same outlook as the grown-up, but the child's perception definitely limits the scope of literary innovation; what we call in France, after Tsvétan Todorov, "le fantastique" (which is quite different from the English "fantasy") is not grasped by small children who have not the intellectual capacity of "hesitating" between two possible interpretations of the same phenomena.

I am also unable to accept that increasing structural complexity is the only sign of the modernism or postmodernism of a work; on the contrary, many stories revert to the simplicity of oral tales and owe their impact to the clarity of their style. Such is the case with the Michel Tournier novel referred to above, and with the work of William Steig or Le Clézio, and it is in the intellectual capacities of the reader that we must seek the subtlety of the postmodern interpretation.

Nikolajeva's projection into the future rests on a literary method and theory which we are unable to share. Our refusal is based first on the fact that it would imply that recognition of children's literature rests on its identification with mainstream literature, thus obliterating everything that distinguishes and specifies the child reader. The child reader is indeed a "constructed" reader, as Karin Lesnik-Oberstein argues in *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (1994), but there can be no question of returning to an earlier concept which viewed the child as a mini-adult. Today we have many images of childhood, ranging from traditional Catholic or Islamic models to those of Freud and modern communications; of course, these images have a definite impact on forms of writing and it is not clear that we can envisage any "progression" or evolution: each one is to be respected for its own values, and it is difficult to establish any clear hierarchy, any process of legitimization because of the influence of cultural tenets and political engagement. On the other hand, we know that children's literature is sometimes more avant-garde than contemporary adult literature because it explores new relationships between pictures and text and deals with themes usually censured by convention; it helps to broaden the scope of literature, as is the case with books published by the Sourire qui mord Publishers, who won the 1996 Novita Bologna Award with Christian Bruel's *Nicole Claveloux & Compagnie.*

Nikolejeva's definition of children's literature is part of a theoretical view which fails to account for the reader's reception, and we know that it is always impossible to predict the success or failure of any book, as many publishers have forcefully confessed to me on different occasions. More specifically, what faces us is a lack of definition in her book, which proceeds by a series of exclusions in its opening chapter; the reader will no doubt be surprised to learn that neither "folk tales" nor "the classics" can be considered to be "real" children's literature. We are told of the former that,

> Reading a collection of folktales is also different from reading a children's book. Instead of a writer—the sender of information in a simple communication model—we have in the case of folktales a mediator (the person who tells the story orally), a collector (the

> person who makes a transcript of the oral text), and an editor or publisher (the person who is responsible for the published version of the text). (14-15)

This is to forget that these distinctions between the various modes of publication are not usually apparent to children, who are quite willing to accept what Nikolajeva calls "a writer" of a collection, without quite being able to put a name on him or her. We also know that the collections of folk tales from various countries, such as those published by Syros publishers in France, are not only "adapted to prevailing moral and pedagogical views," but also attempt to display the cultural and stylistic differences of their sources. Tales from North Africa differ from Jewish tales, not because they constitute two antithetical moral blocks, but as two original readings of the world, with highly distinctive stylistic patterns. Since this is the case, how can we accept that they are "essentially not children's literature" (15)? They are certainly perceived as children's literature by young readers in our housing estates.

The sweeping generalization which rejects the "classics" is not acceptable either, and I cannot agree that these texts are "hopelessly obsolete" any more than other texts which have been very popular with children in previous centuries: *The Story of a Bad Boy* is no longer read any more than Berquin. Even so, the "obsolete" flavour of the original Perrault's tale of Little Red Riding Hood is part of the pleasure of reading, as it involves words such as "chevillette" and "bobinette," which children do not really understand and which are for them part of the magic of reading. Similarly, Nikolajeva gives scant credit to Rousseau and misunderstands his pedagogical theories when she states that, "When in the eighteenth century Rousseau recommended *Robinson Crusoe* as suitable reading for his ideal pupil Emile, he most probably did it for lack of anything better" (16). Rousseau, a former tutor, wanted education to be pragmatic and rooted in concrete reality and doubtless felt unable to use the "best sellers" of the time, Fenelon's *Contes*, which were excessively fantastical, or *Le Magasin des enfants*, written in 1758, by Madame Leprince de Beaumont, which had an immediate appeal to the children for whom it was written but which would have struck him as too worldly or even too conventional.

Finally, if we are to avoid extreme critical negligence, we cannot reduce the work of Jules Verne to the function of documentaries and reject his novels on the pretext that some of his characters are "bleak and schematic, the evil are totally evil and the hero totally good" and that this novelist is of no further interest to "young people who prefer to get their information from non-fiction" (19). Far from being documentaries, his works are a poetry of the universe, of the imagination, and of a type of adventure that we see, for instance, in *De la terre à la lune* and *Le pays des fourrures*, yarns which still appeal to many youngsters today. The schematic nature of some of Verne's characters is a cliché of the adventure story, and does not prevent his providing gems of humour and irony in his caricatures. More serious investigation would be required before one could make such sweeping statements about works which have had such an inspirational impact on the imagination of Tove Jansson and which have such a wide range of readers today.

Nikolajeva's comments also reduce *Treasure Island* to a story narrated in the first person from a "didactic standpoint" (99), and fail to consider the many ambiguities of the teasing and swashbuckling narrative based on double meanings and the falsely naive vision of Stevenson's aestheticism. Although Nikolajeva never states this clearly, the reader has the impression that, for her, "real" children's literature (20) has just one valid form: "traditional Anglo-Saxon fantasy" (25). To this form, she compares all modern or postmodern texts which have the effect of breaking with the past. This is no surprise as this is the field that she has explored wonderfully in her book *The Magic Code* (1988), but it cannot serve as the basis for a broader generalization. The philosophic tale, in the eighteenth-century style of Voltaire, or the detective suspense novel introduced by Edgar Allan Poe, could provide other bases for methodological approaches to writing for children.

Such assumptions doubtless result from Nikolajeva's theoretical framework. This is determined above all by the work of Yuri Lotman, to which she refers continually. According to Lotman, the concept of culture as a series of "semiospheres" means that we can distinguish a "centre" and a "periphery." Adopting his

point of view, Nikolajeva is of the opinion that "Sweden, which has been in many aspects a peripheral country as far as children's books are concerned, has recently gained international acknowledgment for, among other things, its excellent picturebooks" (25). Without denying the excellence of many Swedish books, we question this central assumption: is this centre the American or Anglo-Saxon market with its written fantasies in English? Is the centre the Disney empire with all its ramifications or some other hidden literary "Wall Street Stock Exchange"? But if this is the case, what can we say about excellent Italian books and their critics (Antonio Faeti)—neither mentioned by Nikolajeva—or about the fact that only one quarter of the awards of the international jury of the Bologna Book Fair last year went to this sector and the other three quarters to picturebooks produced by the French avant-garde?

Is my plea some secret counter-offensive instigated by the European Union as a result of their concern about the domination of some cultural dollar and ticket? We can see that the question is not neutral, and critics must declare their hand: this analysis could be interpreted as the response of some French or Latin editorial ambassador, but what we want to do is quite dispassionately to query this notion of a "centre," which we think is an outdated concept. It may have been valid in the 1970s, when Lotman was forging his ideas, and the Soviet empire, on which this semiotic model appears to be based, was still in place. Rather than this model with a "centre" and a "periphery" or edge, which transposes ideas formerly used in propaganda and ideological conflicts to the literary domain, we prefer the metaphor of a "field" with multiple entries. This metaphor was developed as early as April 1977 by Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean Louis Fabiani, co-workers of Pierre Bourdieu, in an article published in *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, "Children's Picturebooks: The Editorial Field and Social Definitions of Childhood."

Far from giving us a centralized vision of culture, this approach takes account of cultural and national diversity which cannot be reduced to one-direction market forces: the avant-garde may spring from the main editing houses as well as from marginal ones, and it may introduce breaks from a multi-faced

tradition in diverse ways, not merely through modifications of form. It is this one-directedness which leads to uniformity—and here, unlike Nikolajeva, we do not think that today "Children's literature becomes national and isolated" (20). What we actually see is an erosion of national characteristics and conformity with supposedly "natural" standards, which are in fact the outcome of misundersatnding, ignorance, or blinkered ideology. Here Nikolajeva is justified in her protest against the idea of "touchstones" of children's literature, "which in the United States are not only Anglo-Saxon, but very distinctly North American" (31). We should examine this phenomenon perhaps unrelated to the fact that the American publishers who came to the 1995 Bologna Fair were there to sell their wares, some of which were "quality goods" but others were poor quality Disney by-products, and not to buy. It is a culture's ability and willingness to translate, appreciate, integrate, and import outstanding foreign works which determines its openness.

To demonstrate that the increasing insularity of cultures is making it impossible to share and translocate, as "was common during the age of *Robinson Crusoe*," Nikolajeva writes challengingly:

> As we have seen, self-evident texts of American contemporary children's literature may be totally unknown in Russia, while modern Swedish classics will not be known in the United States, and both will be equally unfamiliar in France. (34)

This claim is based on an ignorance of the French reading public and on an unjustified assumption, for in fact translations of a good number of American books (Paterson, Cormier, and others) and the Swedish "classics" (Lindgren, Jansson, Peter Pohl) mentioned in her book are available in our country. In the case of Peter Pohl, for instance, who has not been translated or marketed in the US, the French translation of *Johnny my Friend* was the topic of a paper presented by Joëlle Turin at a symposium organized by the Institut Charles Perrault in 1995. More challengingly, Nikolajeva remarks that in the United States Pohl "will most probably be perceived as merely a Swedish version of Robert Cormier," and adds that "he will probably be rejected in the US, because the semiotic space that he represents in

Sweden is already occupied by another author" (37). It is certainly strange to reduce an author to a "semiotic space"—as though occupying a strong position could exclude the symbolic involvement of any other cultural actor in the reader's reception, or as if the text did not in fact refer us back to irreducible cultural differences. Lotman's theory therefore offers a schematic and mechanical representation of the concrete act of reading and of the reader's projections, an interpretation which is contradicted by the success of the two authors mentioned above in France.

So far as the problem of cultural interaction is concerned, we can nonetheless note the remarkable analysis that Nikolajeva presents of the "translatability" problems of Swedish works facing American publishers, which, we think, is quite independent of any Lotman-inspired systematization. For it is indeed true that cultural traditions hamper or facilitate the apprehension of foreign cultures and literatures, as is shown in the US by the simplifications made in translating *Pippi Longstocking* for instance. Here, as Nikolajeva argues, the difficulty experienced by American specialists in appreciating quality works such as the books by Maria Gripe results from specific cultural tendencies, which Nikolajeva defines as follows:

> While contemporary Scandinavian children's literature often explores the traumatic processes of childhood, American readers are much more oriented towards rationalism, everyday situations, comic events, down-to earth problems and material things in general. As a young, dynamic and expanding nation raised on the national myth of a strong and active hero (Superman, the invincible cowboy, the brave cop), America favors characters who acquire material wealth rather than spiritual knowledge and maturity. The "spirituality" of European children's literature is alien to Americans. (37).

This is an interesting and questionable hypothesis, which is left to the reader and reveals one of the most tantalizing aspects of Nikolajeva's book: her ability to arouse reflection on the difficult encounters of cultures. The outlook behind this questioning is enriched by the experience of an academic whose position in Sweden is that of a multicultured mind whose gaze seems to be focused on what some people consider as the dominant pole of attraction, after the fall of the communist "centre" that counterbalanced it. This critical attitude, which clearly reveals the direc-

tion her mind is taking, leads us to temper some of her more extreme statements, such as that about what she calls "Mutual ignorance in Europe" (26): for, in addition to Rodari and Collodi, whom she acknowledges, many other Italian writers, such as Bianca Pitzorno and the remarkable Roberto Puimini, have been translated into French, and the Norwegian writer Ann C. Vestly, who is described as "practically unknown in Sweden" (26) has had her hour of fame during the 1970s thanks to the translations of her novels published by Rageot-Amitié. Nordic literature is doubtless better known in the south of Europe than vice versa, because the critics who reflect this awareness are more willing to be absorbed into what I would call the American mirage.

But these elements may seem to be side-points, given the value of books which Nikolajeva demonstrates so well, the changes in a certain type of postmodern writing tending towards textural complexity in the plot, notably through the interplay of "meta-fiction" and the more explicit intertextuality which results from this awareness on the part of modern writers of the issues involved in their own writing. However, here again we cannot accept the idea that this intertextuality is the sign of a deeper writing, nor of more marked convergence of the genres: there is as much intertextuality in the stories of Perrault, referring to Basile, to the novels of the seventeenth-century Précieuses, and by antithesis to Latin and Italian texts, as Marc Soriano has demonstrated, as in a contemporary work such as that of Tove Jansson. Convergence of the genres, of the psychological novel, with mythological symbolism and the adventure story in *Treasure Island*, for instance, occurs in as complex a way as, say, in the novel of Michel Tournier to which we referred above. "Children's literature" has certainly never been as aware as at present of the importance and limitations of its domain, but here again, no more than in mainstream literature, which also finds itself challenged by the new cultural forms of the audio-visual media.

Two last quibbles concern first what seems to be Nikolajeva's contradictory affirmation that children's and adults' literary forms are going to grow closer to each other, that one is not inferior to the other, followed by her reversion to the standpoint

of Perry Nodelman, who thinks that the same instruments cannot be used to analyse them. Her attempt to compare Proust and Edith Nesbit leads her to conclude with the following reflections:

> It is ridiculous to analyse Proust and Edith Nesbit, with the same instruments, not because Nesbit is a worse writer than Proust. She is "worse than Proust" only in the sense that the Japanese artist Hokusai, who painted 36 landscapes of Mount Fuji, is "worse" than, for instance, van Gogh. They are phenomena from different categories. They cannot be compared. (58)

If this is true, why bother to undertake any such comparison? And how can the two trends come close, if they are so different one from another?

Second, in Nikolajeva's last chapter concerning metafiction, we have noted the distinction she makes between "Writer, Implied Writer and Narrator" (195). This distinction, first drawn by Wayne Booth in the 1970s, between "the author" and "the implied author" appears to be too vague, confusing and no longer relevant in the most recent developments of narratology, as is pointed out by Gérard Genette in *Nouveau discours du récit* and by Vincent Jouve in *L'effet-personnage dans le roman*, in 1992. These are seminal works of which Nikolajeva appears to be unaware, and the second one examines literature in terms of the effects of reading and reception as a process.

We return to what is the central thesis of *Children's Literature Comes of Age*: a change in the narrative techniques in children's books. Nikolajeva's study offers some extremely pertinent analyses as a result of her own position at the crossroads of the Russian, Swedish, English, and German languages. Her evaluation of contemporary Russian publishing and on the futurist period in particular are remarkably penetrating and accurate, as is her research based on the work of Bakhtin and the concept of the "chronotope," the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationship that are artistically expressed in literature" (121). The chronotope makes it possible to make distinctions where critics have failed to do, such as for example between the folk-tale (which has just one) and the fantasy (which has two) and to provide new insights into the "disintegration" of the plot in contemporary writing. Nikolajeva also very usefully highlights

the works of Tove Jansson, Alan Garner, Catherine Paterson, Patricia Waugh, Janet Lunn, and others. Overall, despite its limitations and precisely because of the assumptions which we have identified, the book makes an important contribution to a debate which shows that today children's literature is one of the major issues facing our civilization and that theoretical decisions about it reflect—and may even determine—the cultural future of our world.

NOTES

[1] Maria Nikolajeva. *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic.* New York and London: Garland, 1996. Pp. xii, 239. $35.00.

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