KINDERLITERATUR IM INTERKULTURELLEN PROZESS

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Studien zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Kinderliteraturwissenschaft

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Herausgegeben von Hans-Heino Ewers, Gertrud Lehnert und Emer O'Sullivan

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Vorwort

»Wer auf dem Wege zur Komparsitik je glaubt, er sei an seinem Ziele angelangt, muß wissen, daß er von diesem Weg abgekommen ist.«

(Emil Cioran)


Im Hinblick auf ihre Verbreitung und Rezeption durch das kindliche wie erwachsene Lesepublikum ist gerade die Kinderliteratur ein Weg zur Komparistik, wie es kaum einen besseren gehe. Kindliche LeserInnen werden gleichwohl wie von selbst zu einer internationalen Literaturkonzeption erzogen, die wenig von nachabarischer Beschleunigung weiß. Wie selbstverständlich wird die Kinder- und Jugendliteratur von ihren jugendlichen LeserInnen so rezipiert, als gebe es nur eine unteilbare Literatur und nicht viele Literaturen in vielen Sprachen. Das hat Vor- und Nachteile und liegt unter anderem an
1. Theorie
Beyond the Restrictive Frameworks of the Past: Semiotics of Children's Literature – A New Perspective for the Study of the Field
Zohar Shavit (Tel-Avivo)

In this rather programmatic and provocative paper, I would like to shed light on the current state of affairs prevailing in the field, and to propose some new research perspectives which could better materialize the disciplinary potential of children's literature studies and lead the way to a new and promising future.

1. From being shrouded in veil of obfuscation, children's literature has become an issue worthy of discussion. A new interest in children's literature has arisen during the last three decades. New works have been published, new journals established, and the field has become so active that sometimes we might even be misled into believing that it is prospering.

Playing the devil's advocate, I must say that I am not party to what I regard as an act of self-deception. Granted, I am very suspicious. After reading a large portion of the studies on children's literature, I am afraid I cannot but conclude that the new field of research, which is in the process of development, has not been fully utilized by its scholars. This is so because scholars are not really interested in studying children's literature as a literary-cultural phenomenon, but prefer to impose upon it methods whose value lies in dealing with adult literature, if at all. Most scholars prefer to study children's literature within the context of traditional and rather worn-out questions of «literary criticism» instead of applying the latest achievements of literary studies and cultural studies to this new field.

2. Let us begin with a simple question:
Why study children's literature?

Why not peacefully tread the familiar paths of traditional disciplines of «literary criticism», pay a visit to Shakespeare and Dante, stroll with Goethe and Schiller and then go back as far as Homer?

Why spurn over a field which is just beginning to acquire a name for itself as a legitimate field of academic scholarship?

Why seek to break new grounds?

The answer to all these questions lies, to my mind, in the scholarly value of the field, its recent achievements, in what is yet to be accomplished, and most important of all – in the academic challenge latent within the field.

Researching children's literature constitutes a stimulating academic challenge because the field is new, young and currently generating sound and responsible scholarly work whose value lies beyond mere innovation. Most important of all, this field, more than any other field of literary studies and related disciplines, enables us to be engaged in innova-
tive and pioneering work, instead of reading the beaten tracks marked out for us by previous researchers.

Furthermore, for scholars of cultural studies, children's literature offers a much wider range of academic issues than do traditional fields of research. This is the case because children's literature, more than any other literary system, results from a conglomerate of relationships between several systems in culture, among which the most important are the social, the educational and the literary. If one is interested in studying such complex relationships in culture, one is interested in the mechanisms of culture and its dynamics, children's literature is the most promising area of research.

No other field equals children's literature in the immense scope of the cultural parameters involved. Children's literature is the only system I know of that belongs simultaneously and indispensably to the literary and the social-educational systems. It is the only system whose products have always purposefully addressed two antibalistic audiences, catering to the needs and expectations of both.


From what I have said, it is quite clear that I strongly believe in the huge academic potential of the field. I also believe that a lot has recently been achieved, but much more is yet to be accomplished. It seems to me that we face the danger of resting on our laurels without fully realizing the potential of the field, that we are not aware enough of where we stand and what we are confronting at a crucial academic crossroads in terms of the development of the field.

1. In an interview with Maurice Sendak, he made the following remark:

'We who work on children's books inhabit a sort of literary shell.'

We, scholars of children's literature, may well borrow Sendak's phrase. There is no doubt in my mind that we are the shield of literary studies. In the academic world today, research into children's literature is not really legitimized, not highly respected, and if it is tolerated at all, it is perceived as a peripheral and insignificant field of research. In short, research into children's literature currently suffers from an inferior status. And if nothing is done about it, this will remain so for years to come.

In order to eliminate any doubts, let us examine some facts first. A good point of departure is, for example, the status of research into children's literature in the Western world today. A survey of various academic curricula reveals that only a few countries support the existence of academic institutions devoted to research into children's literature. Fewer offer positions in children's literature, let alone chairs. Most well known universities in the United States, the United Kingdom and France for instance, do not offer courses, nor do they do full programs, in children's literature.

Even in cases when children's literature is taught at a university level, even when we find XX and studies of research there and there, we should not be misled by delusions. Children's literature is regarded by traditional «dressed to kill» literary criticism as an unwanted step-child.

Being the step-child, the Cinderella of literary studies, entails several implications. Like Cinderella, who has to prove that she can indeed wear the «right» shoe, a scholar of children's literature doesn't stand on her/his own merits. He (or she) is always asked to prove that he (or she) can wear the hat of «a real scholar» if he (or she) wishes to be accepted by scholars of «general literary criticism». Only if one is esteemed in a field other than children's literature, does one stand a fair chance of becoming a member of the academic-literary community. Otherwise, one would most probably be regarded as a «follower-traveler», belonging essentially to a different academic domain, certainly not to «Literary Studies».

If we paraphrase what Maurice Sendak said upon receiving a prize for his children's illustrations this father then asked him whether he would now be allowed to work on «real books»: «When I won the prize for Wild Things, my father spoke for a great many critics when he asked whether I would now be allowed to work on «real books», we can say that in most cases one «will» be able to deal with children's literature either because one is not very highly esteemed, or because one has gained recognition as a scholar of adult literature, or one has some «respectable» field. Research into children's literature is regarded as least as a whim, or at best, as an option of other disciplines such as education, sociology and psychology. To the famous American saying: Publish or Perish, one can easily add: publish in fields other than children's literature, if you do not wish to perish.

4. When an academic is presented as a scholar of children's literature, he will most likely encounter a skeptical reaction, and if the scholar happens to be female, this would most likely be followed by a few nice, but not as anything «significant» enough to be dealt with seriously.

By no means do I wish to claim that children's literature is neither «nice» nor «useful». I would even go so far as saying that in most cases it is less boring than modern adult literature. However, I do wish to emphasize that this is not the point. The question of whether we like children's literature or not is simply irrelevant to its potential for constituting a worthy subject of scholarship.

I contend, that this question of its disciplinary potential can be dealt with only in terms of the academic value of the field, or otherwise phrased, in its ability to supply frames of reference for new questions, that is to say, questions «which otherwise could not be dealt with so expeditiously.»
work of traditional "literary criticism." However, surprising as it may sound, a survey of a large portion of the studies on children's literature, demonstrate clearly that quite a few scholars, especially in the United States of America, prefer to study children's literature within the context of traditional questions of "literary criticism," though, more often than not, these questions are recycled with glossy new embellishments. We may ask why scholars venturing into a new academic field prefer to work in traditional discipline? Why has the thrust of studies in children's literature to date been lacking in the self-confidence essential to the pursuit and acquisition of a new theoretical framework? Why do students adhere to prevailing and well-acclaimed norms, and why are they not able to break away from conceptual constrictions of the past? The answer lies perhaps in the lack of self-assurance required for a theoretical venture. Scholars feel more secure and self-assured sticking to familiar issues that have already been raised, because their choice of the field of study is problematic enough. The result, however, has been unambitious.

In spite of the massive proliferation of so-called "research" into children's literature, we cannot really attach pride in a great many achievements. The main outcome has been that much of the research has underlined the distinct image of the field, and strengthened the opposition between "serious" research on "serious" works of literature, and the less important type of research, i.e., that which dominates children's literature. The "romantic" view, to use Bloom's term, offered by scholars of children's literature, has not successfully conveyed the academic world to accept children's literature as a legitimate field of research for literary studies.

Dare I elaborate the metaphor of Cinderella by slightly changing the fairytail: I believe that in trying to place the study of children's literature among traditional literary studies, we are trying on the wrong shoe. Like the sisters of Cinderella who cut off their toes and hands respectively, we would be cutting off our noses to spite our faces if we try to wear the shoe, we shall have achieved little, and be handicapped to boot.

If the traditional shoe cannot lead us very far, which shoe should we then take? 7. Before answering this question, I would like to make a small digression and to maintain that at least one area of research has flourished, despite the overall sterile position of the field. I refer here to studies on the history of children's literature, which have managed in the last two decades to yield significant and innovative scholarly works. These studies have primarily dealt with the questions of the emergence of children's literature and the question of the boundaries between adult and children's literature, the process in which the system of books for children was established, the question of the linkages between societal concepts and children's literature, the social implications of this linkage and mutual encroachments. Scholars, who based their research on this new body of primary works, have discovered a new cultural horizon.

Why has historical research been so fruitful? Why did it manage to succeed where other aspects of study failed?

The answer, in my mind, is evident. The scholarly results of historical research into children's literature were valuable due to the nature of the questions raised, and the disciplines employed. Why historical research has retained that other spheres of research
This latter tradition of semiotics of culture, postulated from its inception that culture entails a highly complicated set of relations and developed a set of theoretical concepts as well as a methodology for dealing with such relations. Thus it became possible to discuss issues involving complex oppositions, contradictory historical developments, ambivalent patterns as well as their dynamics in terms of the systemic relations in culture and their functioning.

With this postulate as its point of departure, the semiotics of culture enables us to handle the multi-systemic situation typical of children's literature and its various implications. Since the semiotics of cultural postulates the hierarchical organisation of culture, one of its main tasks is to ask how this hierarchy was created and is being created, rather than to try to participate in the process of shaping it.

Thus, within this frame of reference, a scholar does not need to change the evaluation of texts for children, in order to legitimize their study.

10. In order to establish the field of semiotics of children's literature, scholars must change their postulate of study. As a first step, scholars should rest their study neither on value judgment, nor on 'educational purposes.' As I have already claimed, evaluative questions, by their very nature, limit the scope of research, and in the case of children's literature, they may even be meaningless.

Yes, it makes sense to discuss Alice in Wonderland and Water Ship Down in the framework of the questions offered by traditional literary studies (though this may not necessarily be very rewarding), but these works belong to a limited category of texts which are purposely designated officially for children but appeal in fact to adults (an issue with which I dealt in Shavit 1986, chapter six-'Ambivalent texts'). At any rate these works of literature are simply exceptions which prove my general argument: they do not represent the substance of children's literature, not even in terms of the official system of books for children; consequently scholars who study them cannot but be precluding to deal with 'children's literature.'

Educational aspirations, on the other hand, turn children's literature into a mere vehicle for achieving other goals. Such an approach is of course justifiable in the framework of pedagogics; it actually constitutes the core of this undertaking. The mandate given to educationalism is exactly this one, but this does not necessarily mean that pedagogical issues should determine options or objectives of research, as has more often than not been the case.

In order to free the discussion from such limitations, our point of departure should assume that children's literature is an integral part of a stratified system. Secondly, normative or ideological questions must be totally excluded from research practice. Instead, a descriptive-analytical approach must be adopted. This means that the texts for discussion should be selected not on the basis of value judgments, but due to their significance for the issues at stake and their capacity to illuminate them. Thus, texts will be studied not because they are believed to be of high literary value, or of high educational value, but because their analysis can contribute to a better understanding of a specific literary-cultural phenomenon.

The benefits of such an approach are, it seems, self-evident.
10.1. A normative approach considerably limits the scope of potential questions. Moreover, it imposes on scholars the task of the critic whose main, if not sole, responsibility is to determine the public's taste. Such a task, important as it is, simply does not belong to our domain of research. Rather it belongs to the domain of 'people-in-the-culture,' whose society has mandated to determine the public's taste. Thus, the first step which must be taken involves a redefinition of the boundaries between research and criticism which have been obscured in most traditional literary studies.

Once the boundaries become clear, as well as the mandate given to the scholar, scholars will invest their time and energy in scientific work, rather than in interferring with the critic's tasks. This of course does not mean that as people-in-the-culture we cannot take part in the process of determining public taste, nor that as scholars we cannot describe this process and account for it, or wear the hat of critics outside our scholarly enterprise and engage in this process. It only means that the two different spheres are not to be confused. In the same way that we do not become children while reading children's literature, we should not change into critics when we are involved in the scholarly investigation of children's literature.

10.2. Such an approach will enable mining new questions whose potential is virtually unlimited. It is, after all, the very objective of a theory to generate as many questions as possible, which can guarantee its flexibility and its capacity to survive. It is the existence of a reservoir of new questions, or the very existence of its potential, which ensures the ongoing vitality of any discipline. When the same questions are repeated over and over again, the discipline in which they are asked tends to exhaust itself rather rapidly.

11. One of the advantages of a semiotic discipline lies in its spectrum of options for the questions raised by research, their flexibility and openness. However, a semiotic frame of reference is very ambitious with regard to the almost unlimited perspectives it involves, but it is also very modest, or if you wish, unambitious, with regard to the eventual answers reached.

This is so first of all because of methodological possibilities which enable us to deal with mirror as well as major segments of culture, and secondly because the semiotics of culture does not seek to monopolize answers. Quite the contrary, by its very nature, it almost rules out the possibility of a simple, one-sided answer for any question.

As I have said, studying children's literature in the framework of the semiotics of culture, promises to be most fruitful in dealing with the conglomerate of cultural relationships provided by children's literature. From this perspective, it seems to me that 'the sky is the limit.' It would be impossible to cover here even a small range of the potential options generated.

12. A thorough description of the hidden possibilities of the semiotics of children's literature is not only time consuming; at this stage it is unfortunately an impossible mission, as the field has only just begun to bloom. Yet, because semiotics of culture is already considerably accomplished, and even more crucially, because quite a few scholars of children's literature have done semiotic research without explicitly indicating this as such (to mention just a few: Bruckman 1962, Bridgegmann 1985, Chambers 1977, Ewers 1987, 1991; Higcott 1992, Lehman 1992, Macleod 1976, 1992; O'Sullivan 1990).


In a semiotic conceptual framework children's literature is understood as one component in a polysemous sign, which maintains a complicated network of relationships with other systems, and whose processes of development are determined by these relations. When children's literature is understood as such, it can inspire into children's literature in the broadest possible context — into its multi-relation with social norms, literary norms and educational norms, and analyze how and why texts for children are a product of this complicated set of relationships. Furthermore, one can examine how texts for children in turn shape societal ideals and ideas and take part in transforming them into new patterns.

Issues of a very broad nature can be raised, such as, who is culturally responsible for children's literature as a literary product of society, or how it is possible to understand the behavior of children's literature as a result of various cultural considerations, or what is the particular cultural context in which children's literature has developed.

13. In the framework of the semiotics of culture, the equivalent features of children's literature become an object for our research, instead of a canvas for witnesses to change the status of children's literature, as was often the case in the past. Consequently, we can try to understand why children's literature was subordinate to adult literature from its very foundation, which cultural forces dictated this status and the textual and other implications of this position of children's literature in culture. Furthermore, we can ask why children's literature is today the only literary system which is perceived by culture as belonging to both the educational and the literary systems at one and the same time? What are the implications of this dual attribution? How does it affect the development, structure, textual options, readers and writers of children's literature? How and to what extent do notions of childhood determine the character of the text for the child as far as poetic norms are concerned? In and regard to the acceptance of such texts by the people-in-the-culture? What are the relations between cultural contexts, images and societal coercion and the message of children's literature? How do writers for children react to such societal and poetic demands in producing their texts?

Or we can ask why the governing literary norms of adult literature are transformed at a later stage of development into children's literature. Why does their transformation involves a process of simplification? The answer to these questions lies partially in the systemic implications of the status of children's literature in culture. Analysis of the cultural position of children's literature reveals the fact that procedures and procedures involved in the production of the child's system are both random and static. Research shows that they can be described as having an accountable and recurring pattern, as dynamic processes, governing the history and the development of children's literature since its inception.

In fact, recent research into children's literature has reopened accepted questions, through re-examining accepted tenets of previous research: The question of the emergence of children's literature and the creation of the boundaries between adult and children's literature; the process in which the system of books for children was established; the
question of the link between societal concepts and children's literature, the mutual implications of this link and the textual manipulations thereof, were found to be highly complex issues, having a different status than first assumed (to mention just a few examples: Ewers 1988, 1990; Grenz 1990, Hunt 1991, Lyp 1984, Shaner 1992).

14. On the other hand, from the point of view of the semiotics of culture, children's literature presents a range of highly provocative and productive questions, concerning the history of culture and cultural mechanisms. One might even go so far as to say that no other sphere of cultural studies contends with quite such a vast scope of cultural issues as does children's literature. Indeed, historical research into children's literature managed to introduce into the academic world a new corpus which had never previously been dealt with. By inquiring into this new domain, research proved able to shed new light on cultural history. The study of this corpus proved to be of substantial importance for the understanding of cultural life (especially European and American cultural life), including some of its more intricate aspects.

Few, if any, cultural fields have come about as the result of, and despite, quite so many cultural constraints, as children's literature. Consequently, no other field is able to examine cultural mechanisms, manipulations, and procedures in quite the same way as children's literature. Children's literature evolved from the fusion of and interaction among several cultural fields or systems, of which the most prominent were the social, the educational, and the literary systems. Any interest in studying the complexity of such reciprocal cultural relationships, or examining the mechanisms and dynamics thereof, proves to be rewarded by the study of children's literature, which has recently raised some most promising issues.

15. The few questions to which I have just pointed, do not of course constitute a full program. One of the major tasks of a program for the field will be to outline a new set of questions which would suggest further directions for study and new research options.

The field's current state-of-the-art is characterized by the emergence of a range of new issues and directions to be addressed. How many of these will in fact be sustained depends entirely on us as scholars of children's literature. There is, however, a price to pay for being new and untested: the pioneering nature of this new field of study means that current research cannot hope to guarantee to immediately and long-lasting answers. We know that some working hypotheses will fail to be confirmed at all, others will require modification, while still others will enable progress and advancement. As things stand, what we do have to offer is the hope of generating a lively, provocative, and stimulating field of inquiry for the coming decades.

References