

*ZOHAR SHAVIT. *Poetics of Children's Literature*. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press 1986. 200 pp. US\$ 25.00

During the past ten or fifteen years, literary scholars have been witnessing an encouraging increase of innovative research in the field of children's literature. Thanks to studies such as Zohar Shavit's, which replace outmoded paradigms with novel perspectives and methodologies, this once neglected branch of literary studies has begun to emerge from its underprivileged status. Indeed, *Poetics of Children's Literature* must be credited as a landmark piece of scholarship which, through its reconciliation of more traditional and historical models with recent developments in the area of semiotics, initiates a new stage of research in children's literature.

The methodological inspiration for this study is derived from the "polysystem theory" as formulated by the scholars of the Porter Institute of Tel Aviv. In compliance with the premises of this conceptual framework, the author posits that the production of children's literature constitutes a system which exists not autonomously but in a perpetual state of dynamic interaction with other literary and cultural systems. Previously, historically oriented studies had already described the factors which influenced children's literature. Shavit's work by far surpasses these studies by presenting influence not as a simple cause-effect relationship, but rather, from a semiotic perspective, in terms of a complex network of dynamically interrelated systems governed by specific laws. The main advantage of this particular focus is that it provides the basis for a description of the laws, both internal and external, that govern the functioning of the children's literary system in general, independent of temporal and geographical boundaries. Thus the seven chapters of her book are dedicated to an examination of the realm of external constraints which intervene in the production of children's literature, the relationship of the children's system to these other conditioning systems, and the ways in which "the cultural position of children's literature imposes certain patterns of behaviour" (ix) on the system itself.

Part one of *Poetics of Children's Literature* examines the status of the children's system in relation to the cultural and literary polysystem. In Chapters 1 and 2, the author establishes, as others already had, a correlative relationship between dominant cultural conceptions of childhood and the intrinsic, structural properties of children's literary texts. She extends the analysis beyond the scope of these studies, however, by formulating the effect of these cultural norms on the children's literary system in terms of its behavioral response patterns. To illustrate this interaction between external constraints and internal reactions, she provides i) a *diachronic* summary of various notions of childhood that have prevailed in different historical moments, ii) a *synchronic* description of the subordinate, and hence inferior status that the production of children's literature suffers as a result of these conditioning norms, iii) a *systemic* description of the behavioral patterns developed by the children's system in response to these cultural constraints, and iv) a *structural* analyses of a few given texts which she regards as "test cases." The latter two perspectives form the basis of the remaining five chapters.

It is the third perspective, the systemic, which clearly is the most original, and possibly also, the one that raises the most questions. As mentioned, the author formulates the internal laws of the system in terms of behavioral response patterns triggered by external forces. Among some of the patterns she discusses are "a tendency to self-perpetuation, a readiness to accept only well established models, the need to appeal to two contradicting audiences, and others" (xi). Thus the analysis of different versions of "Little Red Riding

Hood" in Chapter 1 serves to illustrate the consequences of intersystemic relations and constraints, such as the children's system's tendency to borrow from canonized adult literature elements no longer in vogue in that system (e.g. fairy tales), as well as its address, through ambiguous structures, to two different audiences, as it must satisfy adults who either continue to derive a secret pleasure from these outmoded literary models now relegated to this "inferior" system, or who need to supervise the educational and cultural content of the texts. Here the author walks on safe territory. The conclusions drawn from the study of R. Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World* in Chapter 2, however, can be debated. By comparing two versions of the same text, the original, *Kiss Kiss*, written for adults, and its adaptation for children, the author argues that the changes made in the second illustrate the extent to which societal perceptions of the child reader exercise a constraining effect on the writer, who is compelled to imitate certain conventions (genre, the happy ending, unequivocal attitudes, greater narrative simplicity, the elimination of ambiguity) in order to "ensure the acceptance of the text by the children's system" (45). For Shavit, the adoption of given conventions is the necessary result of a response to external cultural factors. Yet it seems reasonable to argue that the modification of the communicative process in the text written for children is due not to external constraints but rather to an internal, invariable property of the children's system itself, namely, the obvious differences that separate the adult-author from the child-reader. To write specifically for children is to write for an audience of dissimilar receptive faculties. Although the nature of the perception of these faculties may be contextually determined, their existence itself is not. The fact that the same conventions continue to be adopted by twentieth century writers for children after centuries of usage is sufficient proof of this. This difficulty in distinguishing between intrinsic properties and external constraints renders problematic the author's data analysis in Chapter 2. Here certain authors' negation of their attributed status as children's writers is presented as proof of the system's poor self-image. Yet it could just as readily be argued that these remarks are indicative instead of the writers' confidence that their art need not conform stringently to normative restrictions regarding the practice of writing for children. Indeed, they may be proof that cultural perceptions of the child's mental and receptive categories are a less official and pervasive constraint than one might suspect. One could conclude therefore, that not all that comprises the activity of writing for children should be regarded as a systemic response mechanism, and that although there is some overlap between the general act of writing for children and the institutionalized system, the former exceeds the limits of the latter and enjoys a greater degree of flexibility, which in itself may influence the system.

Part two further elaborates on the study of the system's behavioral responses. Chapter 3 examines the need to appeal to a dual reader. The study of Carroll's manipulations of subsequent versions of the original *Alice* convincingly demonstrates the virtual impossibility, within the canonized children's system, of addressing only the child reader. Chapter 4 demonstrates how non canonized children's literature (eg. the Nancy Drew series and Enid Blyton's books) deals with this constraint by excluding the figure of adults from the narrated world, thereby purposely ignoring the adult reader. Chapter 5 examines the systemic constraints, namely didactic and educational, which govern both the translation of children's books as well as the adaptation of adult literature to the children's system. The nature of the changes which occur in the transfer from the source to the target system are described as symptomatic of the system's "tendency to accept only the conventional and well known" models (115).

The very interesting and important question of the relationship between canonized and non-canonized children's literature initiates a potentially very fruitful line of research which, hopefully, will be further pursued by scholars, as the intersystemic relations of the polysystem are more complex than can be accounted for in any one study. For example, the fact that some mainstream children's literature, such as M. Richler's *Jacob Two-Two and the Hooded Fang* also eliminates adults from the greater portion of the narrated world may suggest that the elements borrowed by the canonized children's system have their origin not only in the outmoded canonized adult system, but also in the uncanonized children's system.

Part three applies the concept of the polysystem to a discussion of the origin and stratification of the children's system. Chapter 6 examines the relationship between the educational system and the canonized children's literary system which developed within its framework. The final chapter of the book completes the historical picture by illustrating the extent to which canonized children's literature arose as a result of "the need to combat popular literature" (134), as the religious and educational systems, followed by the publishing industry, combated the production of "lowly" chapbooks with the production of more "respectable" works for children.

Poetics of Children's Literature will undoubtedly come to be considered a seminal piece of research in this field. It is to be hoped that scholars inspired by it, while orienting its methodology towards an even more rigorous analyses of the highly complex laws which regulate the children's system, will nonetheless be sensitive to the elements of flexibility and openness which also affect the system. (M. BORTOLUSSI, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA)