A typological approach to the study of *The root cellar*

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Résumé: *Cet article consiste, à partir de la notion d'intertextualité, définie par Bakhtine et Kristeva, en une analyse serrée du livre de Janet Lunn,* The root cellar. *Nikolajeva refuse de faire ici le relevé des influences qui auraient pu s'imposer à Lunn; elle s'attache plutôt à repérer les lieux textuels, dans la fiction britannique surtout, auxquels fait écho l'aventure de la petite Rose à travers le temps.*

The notion of "intertextuality" has now been in circulation for some years, and the use of the intertextual critical method has been greeted with enthusiasm as well as scepticism. Many a critical voice has asked whether intertextual analysis is merely a new label for the old well-approved comparative method. At first sight it may look as if it were the same thing: the researcher juxtaposes two literary texts, that is, compares them in some way or other. However, modern literary theory is no longer as categoric as it used to be towards comparison between literary phenomena. Using Janet Lunn's *The root cellar*, this paper will demonstrate how intertextuality is different from the old "comparative" method and will show how it can be used to provide new insights into children's as well as adult fiction.

Unfortunately, the critics of children's literature have a tendency to lag behind in the application of theory to texts. Many of the newly-published histories of children's literature or author studies still offer a "comparison" between two texts or witness an "influence" of one author upon another. Yet, intertextual connections are often more evident in children's literature than in adult literature. There are reasons for this.

I would argue that children's literature is by nature more *canonical*, more consistent and less innovative, and based more often on established norms. As a result, many works of children's literature are astonishingly similar in narrative structure, characters, style, etc., a feature which sometimes prompts hard and unjust criticism. Children's literature is accused of being *a priori* – inferior to adult literature because it has only a limited number of themes and motifs, and because the artistic devices in it are less innovative than those in adult literature.

However, what the detractors of children's literature do not realise is that there is much similarity between the texts of children's literature and literary

texts from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance or Baroque era – all periods when it was more important to follow the established canon than to produce something new, original, or innovative in form. The philosophy today, of course, is that a writer must "break away" from established norms and patterns. This is, in fact, the basic principle of modern Western literature, especially in its so-called "post-modern phase."

The belief that obvious innovation is necessarily a virtue is challenged by the notion of "sameness," as introduced by the Canadian critic Perry Nodelman in his essay "Interpretation and the apparent sameness of children's novels" (Nodelman 1985). Nodelman shows that children's texts belonging to the same genre are sometimes so similar that you may wonder whether you are confronted with imitation. Nodelman says, however, that it would be wrong to see children's texts as self-repeating and secondary in relation to their predecessors. One can generally say that children's literature is more imitative than adult literature without the word "imitative" being pejorative. It is worth noting, for example, that the *loci communes* (common places) or rhetoric formulas of medieval texts have a function not unlike the formulas within children's texts.

It is precisely here that intertextual studies can help us to unveil the dimensions of children's texts that traditional comparison cannot reveal. Instead of simply stating that two or more texts are similar, we can try to examine in what way the later text develops varying motifs, patterns or ideas from its predecessors. We may also move further away from purely literary analysis and incorporate more interdisciplinary methods such as psychological or linguistic criticism, as I do in this paper. Approaching children's literature in this manner suggests that the literature is more complex than expected. (I examine such factors as these in my study of fantasy *The magic code* (Nikolajeva 1988).)

The intertextual method has its origins in the works of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, introduced in the West by Julia Kristeva. Bakhtin does not himself use the term "intertextual;" instead he speaks of "dialogics." This term suggests that art generates art: literature and art are created in a continuous conversation ("dialogue," "discourse") between creators, where every new piece of art or literature is a new line in the conversation (see Bakhtin 1981; Kristeva 1986). Of all the variations of the notion of intertextuality I think this is the most fruitful, and it is the one to which I will be referring in this article. The meaning of the text is revealed more fully for the researcher and for the reader when seen against the background of previous texts.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogics differs from the traditional notion of literary influence in which a causal relationship is implied and in which the author appears to have been influenced by another. Instead, in an intertextual analysis, the two texts under comparison are equal, and the connection between them is not "direct" in this traditional sense. Whether one generates the other is not a concern, nor is it relevant to determine whether one author has read another.

In the intertextual method, the only relation between the texts rests on whether there is a structural or other essential point of comparison. Thus, while the comparatist is preoccupied with evidence and proof from literary or non-literary sources, the intertextualist builds an analysis on the "codes" (semiotic structures and formulas) present within the text.

The contemporary Soviet critic Mikhail Epstein goes still further away from traditional comparatism. In his stimulating book, *Paradoxes of novelty*, he invites us to consider purely "typological" studies of literature, that is, an investigation of a relation between literary phenomena which does not originate from a direct connection, interaction, or "crossing," but from an independent parallel evolution (Epstein 1988, 42).

It is from these premises that I would like to investigate one of the recent Canadian fantasy novels, Janet Lunn's many-time prize-winner *The root cellar* (1981), to examine the intertextual connection between this book and traditional British fantasy. Since the main structural pattern in *The root cellar* is the time slip, my background texts will be novels about time travel. The comparative approach would then compel a scholar to find proof or at least assume that Janet Lunn has read, for instance, Edith Nesbit, Alison Uttley, Lucy M. Boston and other British masters of time fantasy. With my typological approach, however, I will be primarily interested in the way Janet Lunn makes use of time travelling motifs. Using this intertextual method, I will discuss the innovation of her novels. Does her novel make a new contribution to the genre or merely copy old models? In order to make the method more lucid, I will show how intertextuality enables us to see aspects of the text that the comparative method does not.

In my analysis I will make use of the notion of the *primary and secondary chronotope* which I apply in my book, *The magic code*, and which I have adapted from Mikhail Bakhtin. He defines the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 1981, 84). The chronotope allows us to examine time/space relations in both time fantasy and alternate-world fantasy, which are usually treated as two principally different types of narrative (see e.g., Carter 1973, Cohen 1975, Swinfen 1984).

I see *The root cellar* as belonging to the recent trend in English-language fantasy (although we see some feature of it as early as 1939 in Alison Uttley's novel) where authors are more interested in the character's psychological development than in various phenomena of magic or the supernatural. The impact on the reader of this kind of fantasy can be much stronger than the traditional forms involving abstract distant worlds or times. Often, it is more effective than simple realism in young adult novels.

The protagonist of *The root cellar* is twelve-year-old Rose, an orphan who, at the opening of the book, also loses her grandmother and is sent to live with relatives in Ontario. The initial situation is typical for many fantasy novels:

due to the absence (in extreme cases, death) of the regular guardian, the protagonist, is placed in new, unfamiliar and often slightly exotic surroundings which inspire curiosity and provide the environment in which a magical experience can occur. However, unlike novels by Edith Nesbit or C.S. Lewis, *The root cellar* gives a fairly good picture of Rose's state of mind. It is not a first-person story – a very unusual and daring narrative device in fantasy, which so far has only been used by a few authors – but the story is told through Rose's eyes, with a deep penetration into her thoughts and feelings. This technique creates different expectations from those in traditional fantasy; the reader begins to expect to be given something more than just exciting adventures. This depth is a characteristic of more recent time fantasy, represented, for instance, in *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980) by the Australian author Ruth Park – a trend that might be called psychological fantasy, in contrast to "adventurous" fantasy of the past. Unlike traditional comparatists, we are free from speculations as to whether Janet Lunn has read Ruth Park and has been influenced by her novel. Instead we can state that both texts are part of the same shift in the typological pattern of the fantasy genre.

Rose's first experiences of the past are presented as visions, and the figures of the past may well be assumed – and are by the rest of the family – to be ghosts. This pattern appears very early in British fantasy, such as *A traveller in time* (1939) by Alison Uttley. While time travellers in Edith Nesbit's novels not only were perfectly aware of their transference, and could choose their destination, Penelope in *A traveller in time* has difficulty in believing that she has arrived in another historical epoch. In his book on the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov makes a clear distinction between the fantastic and the marvellous. Todorov defines the fantastic as including the hesitation of the protagonist and the reader as to the reality of the encounter with magic (Todorov 1973, 25). Traditional fantasy for children will, in Todorov's terminology, clearly belong to the marvellous, while in more recent texts hesitation and uncertainty take over. This creates a stronger impact on the reader, who is left to decide whether magical adventure should be interpreted as "real" or seen as the protagonist's dreams, hallucinations or vision. The best fantasy texts from the '80s are examples.

In *The root cellar* we meet the common figure of a *messenger*, a person who in some unexplained magical manner is able to wander through time. The variations of this figure in traditional fantasy are numerous: the mysterious old nurse in Edith Nesbit's *The house of Arden* (1908), appearing in different historical epochs; Dame Cecily in *A traveller in time* who duplicates Penelope's Aunt Tissie in the present; Granny Oldknow in Lucy M. Boston's *Green Knowe*series (195-76), who is grandmother to children from different times, etc. Most often, this figure has the function of supporting the lonely child protagonist who is displaced in time, of providing a sense of security and of serving as a link back to primary chronotope. Not so in *The root cellar*. That there

is something queer about Mrs. Morrissay is obvious, for she says herself that she "shifts," that is, makes transfers in time. Rose also wonders whether Mrs. Morrissay has come to fetch her into another historical epoch. But in the end, we learn that Mrs. Morrissay is really Susan, one of the central characters in the secondary chronotope. The author lets her protagonist meet Susan not as a young girl, but as an old woman, probably suggesting that at the end the two different times are separated forever. The shock of realizing that the old lady is her friend Susan is hard on Rose – harder than Lucy's and Edmund's shock in *The voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1953) when they meet Prince Caspian as an old man, and probably equal to Tom's shock in Philippa Pearce's *Tom's midnight garden* (1958) when he becomes aware that old Mrs. Bartholomew is his secondary chronotope friend, Hatty. An encounter of this kind in a fantasy novel puts a high demand on the readers, compelling them to contemplate the nature of time.

The most common device of passage between chronotopes in fantasy is a door of some kind, real or symbolical. In *The root cellar* the door is quite tangible, leading into a cellar which sometimes, but not always, can lead Rose into the secondary time. It takes Rose several attempts to figure out the mechanism of the opening, and here I think the author goes back to a more traditional pattern of passage: Rose can consciously and voluntarily enter another time. From now on, her time travels are well-prepared and comfortable: she can even bring along her overnight bag! She can make use of modern information services to find out about the past. She goes neatly between chronotopes having all the knowledge and experience of the 20th century with her. The author here makes things too easy both for the character and for the reader. However, at the end of the novel the cellar is destroyed by a storm, which means that Rose cannot go back to say farewell to her friends. The separation of chronotopes is definite and irrevocable.

Rose goes into the secondary time repeatedly, in a "loop," which naturally creates the problem of correlation between the two chronotopes. Like most time-fantasy authors, Janet Lunn chooses to let primary time stand still while Rose is away. But when she is back in the primary time, the two times go at different paces. When she comes back after three primary weeks, it appears that two years have passed in the secondary time. Her friends Susan and Will have grown older, but she has not – a dilemma that Tom meets in *Tom's midnight garden*. Rose discovers a way of preventing time incongruences: another unnecessary "rationalisation," or rather a concession to a more traditional pattern. There is no visible or even hidden "time machine" in Janet Lunn's novel, but the amulet which Rose gives Susan ensures that secondary time will not pass too quickly.

Thus we see that as far as the narrative structure is concerned, *The root cellar* shows a high degree of sophistication, some daring solutions and original patterns that stimulate the reader's imagination. In this way, the novel is

indeed innovative and fresh. However, the central question of modern psychological fantasy is in how the magical adventure affects the protagonist. In Edith Nesbit's novels the time adventure was sufficient in itself, for it offered the readers entertainment plus some practical knowledge in history. The characters of C.S. Lewis do not seem to be affected at all by their involvement with Narnia. Lewis was interested in his secondary world and the children were merely instruments for investigating it. In many novels the characters are offered a choice of forgetting or they are forced to forget the magical experience after they return to the primary chronotope – a most unsatisfactory ending, comparable to the common device in earlier literature where, in the end, the character wakes up and discovers that the wonderful adventure has been a dream.

Few modern fantasy authors show such total lack of confidence in their readers. The best of them are chiefly interested in the way the character is affected by encounter with the secondary chronotope – like Alan Garner in *Elidor* (1965) or *The owl service* (1967). For Abigail in *Playing Beatie Bow* her visit to the secondary time implies maturity, for it enables her to cope with problems in her own time. This is also Rose's situation. Unhappy and unwanted, she is determined at the beginning of the story to stay in the secondary time. By and by, she realizes that everyone belongs to his own time, and that the very purpose of the time shift has been to make her strong enough to face her own reality. At one point, Rose suddenly feels that she longs for "home," that strange farm in Ontario, and the strange half-crazy family she lives with. This is the beginning of her acceptance of her own situation. The chapter in which she comes back to her own chronotope is called "Home." The memory of the primary time, the sense of belonging to it, which at the beginning seemed a primitive device and a concession to more traditional fantasy, suddenly appears in a new light. Rose's journey is not an escape into a world of dreams and ghosts, but a journey home, towards a full and conscious awareness of her present reality.

The author never mentions directly that Rose is in love with Will, but we are offered a glimpse of her anguish at realizing that Will and Susan married after the adventure was. However, the novel suggests a budding friendship in her own time. She is also able to reflect on her father, dead since she was three-years old, and therefore on her own identity.

There is no evidence of her having been to the past, except during the Christmas dinner episode – a humorous afterplay rather than an indispensable part of the narrative. Many fantasy authors indeed put some kind of evidence in the story, such as Penelope's clothes smelling of herbs from the garden in the past, in *A traveller in time*. Obviously, Janet Lunn does not think that her readers need such evidence. Thus, again, Rose's adventures in the past may be interpreted – for instance, by a psychoanalytically-oriented critic – as a journey into her own mind, a therapeutical investigation of her sorrow for her lost

grandmother and of her conflict with the new surroundings. Most probably, young readers do not apply this interpretation; but the implication is that the new fantasy novelist does not use time shift primarily in order to create an exciting adventure or present history in an amusing form, even if the reader does indeed get a vivid picture of life during and after the American Civil War – and not of the anonymous great battles but of the everyday life of ordinary people. The story is about a young person in our own time and world, about her inner problems with which many a young reader will easily identify. The consequences of Rose's experience are all the more evident as compared to Penelope in *A traveller in time*, who tells the whole story long after the events, and who still bears her maiden name. Her involvement with the past and her impossible love for Francis Babington have broken Penelope, so that she is never able to reconcile with her own time. Rose, like Abigail in *Playing Beatie Bow*, has developed in a positive direction, and the open ending is a promise to the reader that Rose's life has acquired a meaning.

Seen thus, as belonging to the recent trend in English-language fantasy, *The root cellar* privileges the character's psychological development, making it more important than magical events or the creation of a secondary world. In doing so, this contemporary fantasy reflects cultural changes which have directed much interest to the inner and social forces affecting human development. The result is a fantasy which has gripping impact on the young reader, and works in a way similar to many realistic young adult novels.

The intertextual method highlights interesting features in *The root cellar* where the comparative method might only have stated that motifs, figures and images from previous texts have been used, presumably under the influence of earlier authors. Intertextuality focuses its attention on all the features of texts – new innovation, variations, and tried-and-true patterns – and examines the way in which they are in "dialogue" with each other and the readers. Comparativism not only shortchanges a particular text or author, but also it fails to examine the infinite possibility in patterns of fantasy. Novels like *The root cellar*, analyzed with proper instruments, show that the fantasy genre is vital and able to produce new and original texts.

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