What is Theory, and Why and How We Could, or Should, Use It

—Maria Nikolajeva

Perry Nodelman's overview of the post-theoretical scholarly space reflects the final plenary discussion at the ChLA conference in Winnipeg in June 2005, in which I also had the privilege to participate. Many interesting arguments were given for and against theory, yet Perry's insightful discussion demonstrates that there is still much to consider. In fact, Perry already began this debate ten years ago at the 1995 IRSCL conference in Stockholm, in his keynote paper titled "Fear of Children's Literature: What is Left (or Right) After Theory" (Beckett 3–14). There perhaps have not been as heated deliberations in children's literature studies as those Perry outlines in the *CCL/LCJ* editorial; the scope of opinions, however, has been manifest in many publications and conference presentations.

Perry states quite rightly that, considering the wide-ranging discussions on the demise of theory, "there's surprisingly little agreement about just what theory was before it was over" (3). Since I do not subscribe to "the consensus that we are after theory" (3) and do not share Perry's experience of the time when "there was no theory. There was no need for theory" (6), I believe I have some relatively clear-cut ideas of what theory is and what it can be used for. At least these are the ideas that I am trying to convey to my students and propagate in my research, most recently in a textbook for graduate studies.

Possibly, the very word "theory" has been contaminated recently by undesired connotations in North America. It is certainly not the case in Europe. Besides, it has begun to indicate abstract constructions and arguments never meant to be applied to concrete literary texts; or, as Perry notes, quoting Frederick Jameson, theory supplants philosophy (4). This "metatheory and meta-metatheory" that some critics fear (13–14) is similar perhaps to mathematicians' "beautiful equations"; however, in children's literature

studies, we have always been slightly more pragmatic. The magnitude of Gérard Genette's influential work *Narrative Discourse* lies in that it presents a solid theoretical ground and at the same time shows how to apply it, as emphasized by the subtitle, "An Essay in Method." A theory that cannot be used in concrete text analysis, in close reading, seems to me like a bicycle with square wheels: radical and daring, but hardly functional.

It is therefore necessary to go back to some basic definitions. In the most fundamental sense, theory, in this case literary theory, is the essence of the scholars' position towards their subject, a general attitude toward and framework for the material they are working with. Within the humanities, a theory cannot be right or wrong, it can neither be verified nor disproved, and no theory is better than any other theory. A theory is a set of crucial questions we pose about what we are doing and why we are doing it. We may not be aware of applying a theory (although I believe this awareness is an essential requirement for any scholarly work) or for some reason deny we are doing it, but we cannot approach a literary work without adopting a certain position toward it, since we cannot read a text critically unless we know what kind of questions we should have in mind while reading.

For instance, mimetic theory—not least Marxism, which Perry scrutinizes in his essay—claims that literary texts reflect the society in which they have been created. From this, for instance, social models of fairy-tale analysis emerge; Jack Zipes' work is the best example. Recently, several studies have focused on the depiction of the Holocaust in children's literature (Bosmajian; Kokkola). However, this can be done in different ways. A scholar can consider fictive events in comparison to real events, or analyze the narrative perspective that governs the readers' perception of events, or discuss whether such stories are suitable for a certain audience. Thus we have gone from the level of theory ("Literary texts reflect real life") to the level of method, of analytical tools, where we pose a different set of questions depending on the purpose of our study.

The thesis that literature reflects reality is also the main premise of, for instance, John Stephens's well-known book *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, where the areas of inquiry on which the study is grounded include linguistics, sociolinguistics, speech act theory, and so on. These enable Stephens to pose questions about how texts manipulate their readers' understanding, and the concrete focus of analysis on genre, narrative structure, and other more or less formal issues. He uses analytical implements from narrative theory to investigate how embedded ideology can be revealed. However, ideology is a dimension of a literary text that lies in the tension between the text itself, the reality behind it, the

authors and their intentions or implicit views, and also the readers and their ability to create meaning out of texts. Unless Stephens has positioned himself against the material he works with (that is, adopted a theoretical stance), he would not know what questions to ask. That would be exactly the kind of "pre-theoretical innocence" (Eagleton qtd. in Nodelman 8) that we can expect in undergraduate students, but not among mature scholars.

Northrop Frye, unjustly neglected today, has a radically different attitude toward literature. He does not see it as a reflection of reality, but as a displacement (or corruption) of myth. This general outlook generates a set of analytical tools that enable Frye to propose an original system of genres, showing how particular genres operate with specific narrative patterns and structures, such as upward or downward plot movement, romantic or mimetic characters, and so on. These tools are highly pertinent to children's literature.

Mikhail Bakhtin, who sometimes erroneously is counted among Marxist critics, has presented perhaps the most comprehensive view on the novel as reflecting modern man's thinking, which is not always easy to perceive from his seemingly disconnected studies and fragments. In his seminal work "Epic and Novel" (in *The Dialogic Imagination*), Bakhtin shows the principal difference between the novel as an eclectic, synthetic, multi-layered, multi-voiced, dialogical literary form and the earlier forms that he calls epic; likewise he shows the difference between the character of a novel and the epic hero. Later works highlight the various aspects of the novel, such as its carnivalesque—non-mimetic—nature (*Rabelais and His World*), polyphony (*Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*), language and intertextuality ("Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*), time and space ("Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*), and not least the intricate relationship between the author, the narrator, and the character ("Author and Hero"); the latter long before the notion of narratology was coined. Dialogics, which interrogates a single, fixed subjectivity, precedes by several decades the poststructuralist views on literature, just as carnival as an interpretative strategy precedes the postmodern ideas on the relationship between art and reality.

Since children's literature emerges and becomes established in parallel with the emergence and evolution of the Western novel, Bakhtin's all-embracing theory is highly relevant for our field. Although it offers no easily applicable analytical toolkit, children's literature scholarship has successfully employed and developed Bakhtin's concepts of the carnival and intertextuality (Stephens), heteroglossia and subjectivity (McCallum, Wilkie-Stibbs), passage from epic hero toward modern character (Hourihan), and more.

Among the best recent critical studies of children's literature we find a Canadian one based on Julia Kristeva's theories of literature (Westwater), and two American books based on Michel Foucault (Trites) and Jacques Lacan (Coates). Neither Kristeva, Lacan, nor Foucault offer ready-made implements to deal with literary texts; instead, they suggest a general way of thinking about literary texts which the scholars embrace and from which they mould their own methods and approaches. Similarly, deconstruction as a theory is nothing but bogus unless it can produce efficient working tools to open new dimensions of texts. Most important, deconstruction cannot be opposed to earlier theoretical stances as a simple "affirmation of the multiplicity of meanings" (Payne qtd. in Nodelman 7) and hence legitimacy of arbitrary interpretations. No theory is the ultimate answer. To criticize a specific theory for not offering answers to all questions is ridiculous.

I started my scholarly career as a structuralist, because, with my background in a totalitarian country, it was the farthest a scholar of literature could go away from ideologically biased analyses imposed by the authorities. I soon discovered narratology, grown out of structuralism, as a more sophisticated critical method allowing a deeper probing into textual structures as well as showing how narrative patterns can manipulate readers, that is, carry a powerful ideological potential. So much for freedom from ideology! My present theoretical framework is heterology ("discourse on the Other," a term coined, as far as I know, by Michel de Certeau), an umbrella concept for several critical positions dealing with power and inequality generated by the difference in gender, age, nationhood, race, and so on. From this general standpoint, I use analytical tools offered by narratology to examine exactly how texts are constructed in order to confirm or subvert existing power structures.

In our particular area of inquiry, the "children's-literature-specific theory," that Peter Hunt sought as early as the 1980s, we need, in addition to our general attitude toward literature, to position ourselves in relation to the subject of the texts we are dealing with, the child and childhood. We have witnessed a number of such critical positions, which, whatever our concrete judgment may be, are all equally legitimate. Children's literature is the most common educational vehicle; in general criticism we say that literature is an ideological vehicle. Children's literature is a reflection of the status of childhood in the society that produced it (Zornado, Natov, Clark). Children's literature is adult authors' nostalgic memories of their own childhood (Inglis). Children's literature is adult authors' therapeutic treatment of their childhood traumas (Rose). And, not quite unexpectedly: there is no such thing as children's literature. The heterological position views

children's literature as a power instrument exercised by those in power (adults) against the powerless (children and young people).

All our research into children's literature is based on one of these premises (or perhaps some other that I have overlooked), whether or not they are explicitly stated in our scholarship. No "close reading" can be done without these basic stances. Unless we position ourselves in a theoretical field, as well as establish ourselves in relationship to previous research, we keep reinventing the wheel. Any literary text, even a very short picture-book text containing a few dozen words, is sufficiently complex to allow a multitude of scholarly positions, and no literary analysis can ever be comprehensive, since new theoretical issues can always be brought forward. From these, we can go further and pose questions concerning ideology, structure, reader appeal, or whatever may be the focus of our interest.

We can never get beyond, or after, or past theory until we have answered the major questions about our subject, such as "What is literature?", "What is a child?", "What is childhood?", "How can a child's experience be conveyed by an adult author?", which is unlikely to be achieved. Otherwise we can just as well start doing something else. Yet I fully agree with Perry in his discovery that "we in children's literature studies may know something—or at least be in a position to know something—that other scholars don't" (17). This makes the effort worthwhile—at least for me. Further, as I see daily in my professional work when I recommend confused students of general literature to read Roberta Trites, Robyn McCallum, or Rod McGillis, children's-literature-specific theory can enlighten what Perry calls the "sclerotic," minds of our contemptuous colleagues.

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