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Ethos in Steig's and Sendak's Picture Books: The Connected and the Lonely Child

ELLEN HANDLER SPITZ

There was the child, listening to everything . . .

—Yasunari Kawabata¹

Introduction

Picture-book characters spring to life in both verbal and visual registers. Moving about the page before our eyes as well as speaking and acting in their respective stories, they often make a long-lasting impact on children. Pictures and words, moreover, may overlap but are never commensurate; like the words and notes of a song, they mean and evoke differently even while being experienced together. This brief essay considers a small selection of works by two distinguished twentieth-century American authors-artists: William Steig (1907-2003) and Maurice Sendak (b. 1928). It argues that, with their artful words and pictures, Steig and Sendak construct very different—even contrasting—visions of childhood. By “ethos” in this context I mean to suggest a vision of what a child is, a sense of what it means both to be a child and to address one. Such visions differ not only through the ages and from one culture and locale to another but also from one author-artist of the same period and locale to another. Invited to speak on Sendak's and Steig's respective works at meetings scheduled just a week apart in New York City during the winter of 2007, I found in these paired invitations a fortuitous opportunity to juxtapose several of their works and thereby discover some arresting contrasts and formulate the following readings.²

First, a word on the topic of methodology. Nearly one hundred years have elapsed since Freud published his celebrated-*cum*-notorious foray into psychobiography with *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*,³ wherein shards of circumstantial biographical evidence were laid out in seductive mosaic patterns secured with a grout of ingenious speculation. Despite subsequent decades of critical reflection, Freud's method soldiers on nonetheless as a *modus operandi* in the psychological interpretation of art and literature.⁴ By bracketing a small selection of Steig's and Sendak's works here and limiting myself to extracting a tentative underlying ethos from them, I am

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taking the position that to write psychologically one need not mention or exploit a creator's personal life. This essay points gently toward psychological approaches that ask what we can see when we look carefully at the pages of works. What can we find when we share children's books with children? Why, for example, has Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* sold over seventeen million copies (and its Amazon rank last time I checked was around 145, which means that only 144 other books in the United States were selling more copies at that particular moment), whereas his later work *Outside Over There*—a book that apparently figures prominently in his personal life—comes nowhere close?⁵ While market figures do not correlate flawlessly with children's actual preferences (adults, not children, are the buyers), I would aver that, in this case, they do reflect the success and beloved status of *Where the Wild Things Are*, since the figures tally with additional facts: the book continues to appeal in its fifth decade post publication; it is known and has been translated worldwide, dramatized, and set to music⁶; and its characters have been fashioned into ubiquitous stuffed toys. On the other hand, in my (limited) experience, young children seem to find *Outside Over There* unsettling, unintelligible, even "creepy" and often have trouble sitting still through a full rendition. Some adults, on the other hand, praise that book as poetic and admire its more complex art. Such discrepancies in reception deserve our attention; they hint at fallow fertile fields lying over the rainbow, far beyond the much-plowed tracts of authorial psychobiography. This essay gestures casually toward those fields.

The Connected Child

"My dear Deborah," said Doctor De Soto, "you must have been reading my mind."⁷

Let's begin with William Steig, who is best known for his *New Yorker* cartoons. His work for children extends back to 1968,⁸ however, when he was already a man in his sixties. Setting aside the notion of *trauma*, which has been mentioned in connection with his work but does not seem a salubrious approach to Steig,⁹ either to his published work or to his unpublished work (to wit, his drawings for *Hansel and Gretel*, exhibited in the Metropolitan Opera Gallery in fall 2007, which betray scarcely a trace of darkness or pain despite the terror of that story), I wish to note a milder and more sanguine theme. This theme, which is virtually ubiquitous, concerns a child or a child surrogate (Steig works mainly with animal characters) who ventures forth, encounters danger, endures loneliness, and then finally comes to a salutary resolution. Dominant throughout Steig's work, this motif plays out in many if not most of his picture books. When we reflect, however, on children's literature more generally, we soon realize that it is a theme that pervades the pages of nearly all significant stories designed for children. Its

omnipresence—with manifold permutations—even in far-flung folk tales, coming-of-age myths, fairy stories, nursery rhymes, and so on makes sense, for what we have here, *tout court*, is but the quintessential back-and-forth narrative of growing up: *Hansel and Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Gingerbread Man*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Story of Babar*, *The Runaway Bunny*, *Where the Wild Things Are*; the list goes on, and Steig finds himself in good company. On some level, children's books *must* be about this, must they not? About separation, striking out on one's own, meeting challenges, learning to cope, longing for home, missing what one had or was, or missing what one wishes one had or once was. Steig's treatments of this familiar theme are, however, unique, and especially so on account of their benignity.

Poring over my own set of Steig's picture books, I have come to feel that, while this apart-together, lost-and-found theme certainly matters, we should not miss another related one that matters even more—more because I want to claim it as the theme that stamps Steig's subject matter as exceptional in the canon. What William Steig has to offer in his winsome, playful, lighthearted tales and images is the motif, visually represented and often repeated, of *conjugal and familial love*—that is to say, of human relatedness and affection, especially of love as conveyed through visualizations of physical tenderness and fealty. Time and again, Steig focuses on the enduring bonds that underpin a young child's sense of security and welfare in the world, and he models for his child reader adult relations that are intimate, mutual, sustaining, and vital. For me, it is *this* theme that Steig offers par excellence to his child audience—and it is rare. For where else do we find it? Scarcely, if *ever*, in the works of such luminaries as Beatrix Potter, Margaret Wise Brown, A. A. Milne, Dr. Seuss, Maurice Sendak, and Chris Van Allsberg—all of whom are masterful at depicting the child alone with private fantasies.

Let's attend to Steig's narrative plots: frequently, they are illogical. They tend to rely on spontaneous, highly whimsical, artificial *deus ex machina* scenarios and solutions. When we ask how these plots are resolved, the answer turns out, more often than not, to be happenstance. Yet if we probe further and search the *pictures*, what we discover is something else, for this artist's greatest gifts, I would aver, lie not in plot-making but in visual inventiveness and wit, in the crafting of exquisitely detailed scenarios, and in an almost uncanny grasp of the signifying aspects of *gesture*. How gracefully he choreographs his cast of characters! Just think of all those Steigian quadrupeds gleefully rising to assume vertical postures. How precisely he mimes surprise and jubilation, puzzlement and dejection, concentration and wonder. His haptic sense of bodily expressiveness constitutes one of his greatest talents as a draftsman. His plot devices, on the contrary, can be so transparent that the world he creates is one of random occurrence and startling unpredictability. Of course, one might argue that just such unpredictability mirrors the world according to certain adult perspectives, but, for many

children, it fails to work well, especially for children who have a penchant for asking *why* and *how* and who prefer stories that imbed a logical structure such that if they pay heed they can discover the thread and use their ingenuity to learn about causality.¹⁰

In Steig's acknowledged masterpiece *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*,¹¹ a hungry lion appears out of the blue for no reason other than to satisfy the exigencies of plot. (This is very different, we might notice, from the hungry lion who appears suddenly in Sendak's *Pierre*¹² just at the moment when the protagonist's parents have left him alone after he has been insolent and disobedient; *that* lion comes into being quite clearly as a metaphor for both the child's and the parents' incompletely enacted aggression.) By contrast, when Sylvester—Steig's protagonist donkey—needs to be terrified into unreason, he is astonished by a lion who seems bizarrely out of place and spectacularly nonmetaphoric. Sylvester, frightened out of his wits, makes his necessary mistake and metamorphoses into a rock (a transformation that might remind a few literary-minded parents of the ancient tale of Lucius who, by an equally foolish wish, gets himself transformed into a donkey in *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius¹³; Lucius, of course, does not become a rock). Later on in Sylvester's story, again for no apparent reason other than that of achieving narrative closure, the magic pebble that caused all the trouble is suddenly placed right on top of Sylvester-*qua*-rock, a lucky move that permits Sylvester to recoup his former donkey shape and thus gives Steig his means of concluding the story with satisfaction and pleasure.

Let's look more deeply. From the beginning of this book, Steig has taken extraordinary pains to render the most affectionate images of Sylvester's family. If we focus on these images, starting with a cozy family triad on page one, we come to realize that it is precisely *the loving relations* within Sylvester's family and not fate alone that subtly motivate the happy ending of this story. Love stands in, as it were, for the work of a causally charted plot. In *Sylvester*, after the transformed donkey has vanished and been gone for nearly a year, his parents head off to the countryside on a picnic to try to console themselves and start afresh. Spying the magic pebble on the ground, Sylvester's father immediately imagines how much his lost son would have admired it. It is for *this* reason that he picks the pebble up: he is *thinking* of his son, remembering what his hobbies were, filled with longing for him, a longing that has not abated during the child's extended absence. And Sylvester's mother, missing him fully as much, uncannily intuitively his unseen presence by means of that preternatural sixth sense possessed by certain mothers. Thus, the dénouement—Sylvester's return—comes about not by means of luck or fate alone but on account of the bonds of memory, care, and devotion. To grasp this, however, we must focus on the pictures. Steig illustrates it unforgettably on the page where the parents' picnic foods tumble off Sylvester's back as he startlingly morphs from a rock back to a donkey again: how filled with joy they all are, the father's hooves raised in amazed

delight! And the book's final page presents what may be the most touching reunion in all picture-book art. On a lumpy couch that turns out, not accidentally, to be the very color (red) of his ill-fated magic pebble, Sylvester cuddles with both parents, their hooves embracing, everyone's eyes closed in blissful contentment. Touching, not seeing, is given priority in this scene.

A propos of coincidence in Steig, here are some further examples: In *Brave Irene*¹⁴ a lost party dress, blown away by stormy gusts, winds up, purely by luck, plastered to a tree that conveniently stands in front of the palace of the *very* duchess who needs to wear it that *very* night. Similarly, in *Doctor De Soto Goes to Africa* a nasty "bad guy" monkey abruptly appears without any warning in the middle of the night to kidnap the title character, a little mouse dentist named Doctor De Soto. Not only has there been no foreshadowing of this distressing event, but the scary character subsequently vanishes without a trace, unchastised for his wickedness. In *The Toy Brother*¹⁵ two boys make mischief in their parents' absence—mischief also involving a metamorphosis—and their dilemma, too, is resolved by chance, although when the parents return, the boys are filled with hope that their alchemist father will find a solution to their plight, a hope that proves vain until fate intervenes. In each of these cases, when we look closely at Steig's artwork we see that, beyond mere happenstance, it is the enduring bonds of love among the characters that make the difference and enable the happy endings. In Steig's world events do not often occur for rational reasons, nor do they often get righted by dint of virtue, cleverness, or bravery (as in the great European fairy tales).

In Steig's world, you cannot do much to prepare specifically for life nor save yourself by acting according to moral precepts as you are urged explicitly to do by Aesop and la Fontaine. If you are a voiceless immobile rock, or if you are inexplicably locked up in a covered birdcage in the middle of a forest, or reduced to the size of a small doll by a magic potion, there is little you can do. Yet things turn out well because, for Steig, the real plot engine is interpersonal connectedness. And this, I propose, is what we can take from his art as ethos. Steig teaches children that, well, sure: a "bad guy" might pop up suddenly (in the form of a lion, monkey, or whatever), but what we have to count on—beyond the efficacy of reason or moral rectitude—is the ever-present reliability of our loved ones, their devotion to one another, and their enduring ties with us.

In *Doctor De Soto Goes to Africa* and *Brave Irene*, what finally mobilizes the beleaguered characters to act is fear of never seeing their loved ones again: Doctor de Soto yearns to be reunited with his wife, and Irene with her ailing mother. In both instances, Steig portrays the way in which helpless yearning flips over into assertion and then gets channeled into adaptive action. I want to emphasize that, in the De Soto series, the love that matters principally is that between the two members of the conjugal couple—a special kind of

love that is of utmost importance for children's sense of security. In keeping with his joy in bodily expressiveness, Steig paints his mouse couple, for example, in countless poses that animate their affection: they hug and kiss and comfort each other, hold hands, link arms, and, above all, dance, prance, and cavort with one another in contagious merriment! Thus, feelings of tenderness and warmth in his work reveal themselves physically, in terms that all young children are particularly disposed to relish and to comprehend.

Steig's color also contributes a crucial element psychologically. Partial to subtle chromatic relations and a pastel palette, Steig limns warm domestic interiors replete with Matisse-like patterned fabrics, and he favors outdoor spaces that, even in the direst moments of his stories, tame their accompanying texts. Irene, for example, fears nighttime in the blizzard, yet the colors that surround her, rose and tan and grey, never deepen to a terrifying pitch black. Similarly, Steig draws his "bad guys" with whimsy and touches of silliness. The hungry suffering fox in *Doctor De Soto*,¹⁶ for example, resembles a natty fop with striped pants, red vest, checked shirt, tie, and cane; he is a dandy whose costume later changes into a purple jacket with a yellow vest and a zany red flower on its lapel.

Open, airy, and light, Steig's compositions provide plenty of space to breathe. Even as the temporarily incarcerated mouse dentist (*Doctor De Soto Goes to Africa*) walks pensively in circles in his pajamas inside his darkened bird cage prison, Steig's unframed drawing subtly implies a sense of potential freedom: the unboundedness of the image conveys a visual message of hope. Steig's genius lies in such details. How playful he is! After all, what can you do if you have three African elephants in your plot and you need to distinguish them visually on the page? You simply give one eyeglasses and paint another one's toenails blue. In terms of language, you honor and delight your child readers by providing a diet of verbal treats with phrases like "an ill-bred pachyderm with a preposterous schnozzola," or "a frolicsome fandango." You offer up a world in which the wind "yodels," the rain "ceases," and children undergo "transmogrification." And throughout this Steigian cosmos, with its ever-inventive combinations of fanciful yet seriously thoughtful words and pictures, the prevailing ethos is one of attachment and connection. It is a delectable world in which children are welcome to tap into natural fears of danger and separation from loved ones but never without the tacit assumption that they will not remain disconnected for long. Steig's picture-book world is one in which children and adults can live affectionately together.

The Lonely Child

The ice thing only dripped and stared,
And Ida mad knew goblins had been there.¹⁷

To commune with others, to try to understand them, to feel they can understand us in noncasual, nonsimplistic ways is one of life's most precious gifts. It is, furthermore, a notion not unrelated, as I have tried to show, to certain works by William Steig, nor to three illustrated children's books by Maurice Sendak that he has deemed a trilogy. These books, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*,¹⁸ and *Outside Over There*, differ profoundly from the books we have just been considering, for Sendak scripts and draws child characters who experience the reverse of what I have just described: that is, they do not commune with others and they do not try to understand anyone else. Like many characters found in the pages of Hans Christian Andersen—the little match girl, the little mermaid, the ugly duckling—each of the child characters in these Sendak stories is profoundly alone. Max, Mickey, and Ida, the Sendak protagonists in these books, respectively—unlike Carroll's Alice, who persistently struggles despite repeated frustration and failure to make contact with others and to extract meaning from their nonsensical utterances—seek no opportunities to communicate. At the end of their respective stories, despite superficial verbal disclaimers, they remain mentally isolated and apart. None of them, when the book covers are closed, has been believably reinserted into an interpersonal context. We observe no reattachment. Moreover, it is clear that Max, Mickey, and Ida are portrayed at the start of their respective stories as momentarily misunderstood, unrecognized, and insufficiently well-loved. Isolation of the protagonist can thus be seen as a dominant ethos here.

It is this sharing of psychological motif that permits me to agree that the three books in which these characters appear might be called a trilogy, for otherwise, both aesthetically and in their ability to reach children, they are ill-matched. Nearly twenty years elapsed between the publication of the first book and the third, and, even on cursory examination, it is patent that *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sendak's *chef d'oeuvre*, surpasses the others on artistic grounds, that is to say, in terms of its unity of overall conception. Consider its stunning play with format and design in which the shifting borders of page layout boldly mirror the child's entrance into and withdrawal from his imaginary world;¹⁹ its clarity of vision and of affect; its instant over all legibility; its taut construction of plot; its simplicity versus the bewildering complexity of the others; its tapping into longstanding literary traditions in the history of children's literature (one thinks of *Robinson Crusoe* and then not only of *Treasure Island* but of the related stream of boys' adventure stories of the nineteenth century involving islands, ships, and cannibals); its consequent transcendence, therefore, of the merely personal and private. In such ways and others, *Where the Wild Things Are* distinguishes itself from *In the Night Kitchen* and even more from *Outside Over There*. The three books have never been published together as a packaged set as have, for example, the four small books that constitute Sendak's *Nutshell Library*, which were conceived initially as an ensemble.

Yet, despite their aesthetic differences and their widely divergent capacities to appeal to young children, the three picture books do bear consideration together here because of their similar construction of the child. Each story begins with a child who suffers from the emotional unavailability of one or more parents. Max's mother is angry at him for his naughtiness and immediately sends him to his room without his supper; Mickey's parents are asleep in their own room and unavailable when he becomes upset and hears the "racket" that angers him; Ida's father is away at sea, and her depressed mother ignores both her and a baby sister. By beginning this way each time, Sendak gives himself plenty of company, for he is scarcely unique in representing children who are anguished because of parents who cannot or will not respond to their offspring's needs for understanding, affection, nurturance, and protection. When we grasp the metaphors, we see that the history of children's literature teems with such figures—with ill-treated child victims and their absent mothers and fathers. Think of all the deceased birth mothers, weak-willed cipher fathers, spiteful step-mothers, maltreated younger sons, and cruelly punished daughters. As with Steig, what Sendak does with it is truly his own, but the theme is hoary, as well it should be. No child, as Margaret S. Mahler and D. W. Winnicott have written, can grow up with perfectly attuned parents; nor would such a situation, even if possible, be wholesome.²⁰

An element I find unique in Sendak—and it is an element that surfaced with poignant clarity while I was focusing simultaneously on the work of Steig—appears in the form of a lacuna, a void. Children, after all, develop and expand in their emotional lives partly through a wondrous fluidity of identification.²¹ They develop emotionally through what might be called a kind of primal empathy and polymorphous relatedness that, as we mature and the cultural gates lock into place (as in, that's *our* flag, *his* religion, *her* team, *their* values, etc.), we gradually lose. Multiple identifications seem, however, to come naturally to children, and in Steig's books—and also in those of Tomie di Paola, another giant of the American picture-book genre, and in the work of Russell and Lillian Hoban, just to name one or two other author-artists—child characters arrive on stage, as it were, embedded solidly in worlds that contain others. These others, like themselves, live, breathe, and also, importantly, feel, think, and react. Both the protagonists and their child readers are thus brought into contact with these others and with their different means of expressing consciousness and subjectivity. An example appears in the deceptively obvious title of one of the Hoban books, *A Birthday for Frances*,²² which, it turns out surprisingly, is not a story about Frances's birthday at all but about her sister Gloria's. The title character Frances, however, learns in the course of the plot about her own and other people's feelings, as do the children who hear and see this picture book. Such embeddedness, which I have pointed out in Steig's oeuvre, constitutes a powerful learning device in a children's book: it extends children's comprehension of other minds

and evokes the practice of empathy. Stunningly, there is nothing of this in Sendak's trilogy.

In each book of the alleged trilogy, Sendak limits the child protagonist's sensibility so that he or she remains solely within a private world of fantasy and never finds, or is given the wherewithal to find, a solution that leads beyond to relationships of mutuality with others or to community. Sendak's children, in these books, need never make sense of or negotiate with *anybody else*. They remain within their own heads from start to finish. Even in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and in *The Runaway Bunny*,²³ classic picture books in which little boy-surrogates feel urges to disobey and to escape from their respective mothers, the characters are implanted firmly in a rich intersubjective soil with meaningful dialogue across the furrows of gender and generation. Neither protagonist of those books is emotionally detached or deracinated. In Aesop's *Fables*, the fairy tales, and *Arabian Nights*, this is likewise mostly the case. Characters have fantasies, yes, but they emerge from them, and using sympathy, ingenuity, and courage, they come to grips with and spar with the psyches of others. Not in Sendak's books, however.

After enacting what child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein²⁴ would have called their fantasies of manic triumph, Sendak's child characters receive the boon of gratuitous happy endings, but one wonders how believable these happy endings are. For, in fact, no matter how well fantasy serves in the short run, it can never provide more than a temporary escape from, rather than a solution to, the complex and arduous business of life itself. *On recule pour mieux sauter*, as the French say, except that Sendak's child characters in these three books are all *reculent* without *sauter*. They do nothing more than retreat into the private worlds that give them transitory pleasure—when that—and delusions of grandeur.

Angry at his invisible offstage mother for punishing him, Max triumphs in his fantasy on the island of wild things, but he differs from a comparable little boy in Colette's libretto for Ravel's 1925 opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, who, similarly, has a tantrum after being reproved by his mother.²⁵ In fantasy, all the furniture and objects in this child's space grow larger and larger until, in the fray, a squirrel gets harmed, and the angry boy stops being angry as he takes pity on the creature. As Colette's boy bandages the animal's paw and his rage subsides, the fantasy dissipates: objects shrink back to their normal size and fall into their proper places. Sensitive to the feelings of a creature *outside his own head*, this boy acts in a kind and loving way. Max, after his orgy, simply becomes exhausted. Hungry and tired, he wants to be cared for. Like the unnamed Boy in Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*,²⁶ he has wants and needs but can neither give back nor offer thanks. Psychically isolated, he experiences neither remorse nor gratitude.

In Mickey's case (*In the Night Kitchen*), alone at night and feeling angry at mysterious noises over which he has no control and being left out of whatever is going on, he does not seek reattachment to others. He differs from

child characters who scheme to reinsert themselves into the family circle (one might think of Ping²⁷—in the classic picture book of that name—an adventurous duck left behind on the shore of the Yangtze River in China and separated from his family, who manages at the price of a spanking to be reunited with them on their houseboat). Mickey is out to prove he can go it alone. First he sheds his clothes and takes pleasure in his body, and then in a suit of dough he flies off in his one-seater airplane, triumphantly leaving everybody else far below. Molding the bread dough into a propeller stick that, when he manipulates it, takes him high up in the make-believe sky far beyond everyone who has ignored him (his parents) or mistaken him (the bakers), he finds his own milk, disposes of it as he pleases, and controls the rest of his own story.

With regard to Ida (*Outside Over There*), her strange and disquieting tale features faceless goblins who kidnap babies; a child turned to ice who then apparently melts away; an infant wedding with broken eggshells strewn about; an oversized German shepherd dog with gleaming white teeth; and a host of baffling, apparently disconnected, images that have, however, important personal meanings vis-à-vis their author. Looking carefully and thoughtfully at the pictures, one little boy came up with a worry about the story's end. Because his own relatives travel a lot, he knows that letters and cards can sometimes take a long time to get where they have been sent. Noting that Ida's papa is away at sea and pointing to a ship with two flags in the background at the beginning of the story, he asks: Is this Ida's papa's ship? But, he then notices: Look at that thunder and lightning storm a few pages later. He shows me how, after the storm, the two-flag sailing ship vanishes. Tossed by waves and struck by lightning, it apparently sinks. For many pages we see no more boats, and then, when we do see one again, it is, as the little boy says, "different-looking." This one doesn't have two flags and therefore must be another ship—not the papa's. In the end, a letter arrives from papa. But, worries this thoughtful child, wasn't Ida's papa drowned? How can we tell he wasn't onboard when his boat went down in the storm? Maybe the letter was sent from a port somewhere before that? Maybe Ida's papa will never come back, in spite of the letter. This is a reading that certainly complicates any notion of a happy ending. I would add, apropos, that, in any case, by asking little Ida to take care of her mother and baby sister, her papa's letter certainly seems to point to continuing absence and to a long-deferred return. As overall comment, one might simply add that, just as Max *sails* away, and Mickey *flies* away, so Ida *turns* away and vanishes out a window.

When each Sendak fantasy ends, we are told that things are fine now. Dinner is still hot even though you and your mother have not reestablished any direct communication. You are carefree and dry in your bed even though you have no clue what it was that woke you up, upset you, and kept you awake. Your papa loves you still, even though it is not certain he is alive

and his letter has charged you to take care of your mom and baby sister for an indefinite period of time. Turning to the images that accompany these apparently reassuring texts, we note that, in each case, the child protagonist remains alone. In the final picture of Max, he has food but not his mother's arms or smile. On the last page of Mickey's book, he appears self-satisfied and smug; enclosed in a solar circle, an aureole, hand on his hip, he hugs his bottle to himself. Ida, in profile, fondling strands of her own hair, wears an ambiguous distracted expression as she hears she must be responsible for baby and mother. Sad, hurt, angry, retaliatory, but also brave and imaginative, these children do not learn anything about their own grievances nor about the interpersonal consequences of their feelings and acts. No one comes to life in their stories but themselves. Unlike the world of Steig, where each and every character—elephants, mice, even “bad guys”—are endowed with hopes, wishes, hurts, disappointments, and fears and thus enlarge the range of their child readers' sensibilities, Sendak's children inhabit a vacuum that, as we go from Max to Mickey to Ida, becomes increasingly obtuse, freakish, and unintelligible.

Yet, at the close of this essay, I wish to temper my own interpretation. For, when all is said and done, there is a profound sense in which every child, from time to time, perceives herself or himself to be alone—an outsider, a victim—and feels the need to retreat into some sort of a private space, some refuge far away from others. Maurice Sendak, in perceiving and capturing this authentic facet of childhood, manages to recreate in his picture books a powerful representation of this state of mind. He evokes children's often well-hidden but inescapable feelings of being misperceived, overlooked, and estranged, and, in doing so, he offers them a precious boon. Indeed, Sendak does not leave his child readers alone. He leaves his *protagonists* alone. This, however, may serve to show some members of his child audience how well he grasps what *they* are sometimes feeling. Thus, Sendak—like Steig, albeit in dramatically different ways—empowers them to feel less lonely and to know that they are not wholly disconnected or lost. And this, after all, is what literature, whether for children or for adults, is at least partly about.

NOTES

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1. The epigraph is from Yasunari Kawabata, *Thousand Cranes*, trans. Edward Seidensticker (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1958), 19.
2. Because the following reflections arose while preparing lectures for psychoanalytic venues in New York City, I wish to seize the moment to pay tribute to a

- distinguished child psychoanalyst, the late Dr. Paulina Kernberg (1935-2006), under whose tutelage I studied theories of play and child development. Gifted with a rare and, indeed, an almost magical *entrée* into the inner worlds of children, Dr. Kernberg was a teacher *par excellence*; many insights vouchsafed me, if they are of any value, are traceable to her exemplary pedagogy.
3. Sigmund Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, Standard Edition (1910), 11:59-137. Among others, see my argument in E. H. Spitz, *Art and Psyche: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Aesthetics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
 4. For a forthcoming psychobiographical study of William Steig's children's books, see Susan Scheffel, "The Children's Books of William Steig: A Creative Representation of Early Separation and Resiliency," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, vol. 63 (in press); also, Robert Gottlieb, "Maurice Sendak's Trilogy: Disappointment, Fury, and Transformation through Art" (unpublished lecture given December 11, 2007, at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute). In my view, recalcitrant critical problems continue to trouble psychobiography, a thorough discussion of which exceeds the scope of the present essay. In brief, while intimate biographical details may appear explanatory when juxtaposed with aspects of an artist's work, such connections—made outside the sphere of clinical practice—are necessarily speculative, cannot be reliably demonstrated, and are thus open to reasonable doubt.
 5. Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Maurice Sendak, *Outside Over There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). For a detailed description by Sendak of his personal relationship with *Outside Over There*, see *Changelings: Children's Stories Lost and Found*, Occasional Papers of the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, no. 5 (Berkeley: University of California, 1996).
 6. See the opera, score by Oliver Knussen, libretto by Sendak (1980).
 7. William Steig, *Doctor De Soto Goes to Africa* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
 8. For a recent overview of Steig's oeuvre, see Robert Cottingham, et al., *The Art of William Steig* (New York: Jewish Museum, 2007), a catalog published in connection with a retrospective exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York City.
 9. See Scheffel, "The Children's Books of William Steig."
 10. For a fine discussion of children's intense fascination with philosophical questions, see Gareth B. Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
 11. William Steig, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969).
 12. Maurice Sendak, *Pierre*, in *The Nutshell Library* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962). See also my discussion in E. H. Spitz, *Inside Picture Books* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 136-41.
 13. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. William Adlington (London: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 1996).
 14. William Steig, *Brave Irene* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986).
 15. William Steig, *The Toy Brother* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1996).
 16. William Steig, *Doctor De Soto* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982).
 17. Sendak, *Outside Over There*.
 18. Maurice Sendak, *In the Night Kitchen* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).
 19. See my analysis in Spitz, *Inside Picture Books*, 23-36.
 20. Margaret S. Mahler, *On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation* (New York: International Universities Press, 1968); and D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971).
 21. E. H. Spitz, "Empathy, Sympathy, Aesthetics, and Childhood," in *American Imago* 64, no. 4 (2008): 243-57.
 22. Russell and Lillian Hoban, *A Birthday for Frances* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968). See discussion in E. H. Spitz, *The Brightening Glance: Imagination and Childhood* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 186-188.

23. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (London: Frederick Warne, 1902); and Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd, *The Runaway Bunny* (New York: Harper and Row, 1942).
24. Melanie Klein, *The Psychoanalysis of Children* (1932; reprint, London: Hogarth Press, 1975).
25. See discussion under the entry for "Melanie Klein" in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
26. Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree* (New York: Harper Collins, 1964). See also my discussion in *Inside Picture Books*, 142-144.
27. Marjorie Flack and Kurt Wiese, *The Story about Ping* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).