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A door to the unknown: crossing boundaries through picturebook art

Summary

This paper engages with the question of the ethical implications of, and artistic imagination in picture-books. The analysis relies on two visual narratives confronting the theme of cultural difference. The juxtaposition of the two books that share the themes of visiting and hosting, of confronting otherness, and of cultural prejudice indicates differences in their narrative and artistic potential. The analysis of formal strategies in *Jemmy Button* by Jennifer Uman and Valerio Vidali and in *Eric* by Shaun Tan serves to point out the role of artistic imagination and narrative wisdom in creating visual literature.

Key words: artistic imagination, encounter, ethically engaged narratives, hospitality, otherness

Słowa kluczowe: wyobraźnia artystyczna, spotkanie, etyczny wymiar dzieła, gościnność, inność

Introduction

In discussions on the diverse narrative functions and formal properties of picturebooks, there is one aspect that may, because of its elusiveness, escape the attention of many parents, educators, and other readers. A picturebook can mesmerise its readers with its stunning illustrations, or it can be remembered for its captivating storyline. There are also picturebooks that may not possess any of these qualities, yet their impact for some reason is more lasting and more visceral, so that some of them are likely to become our lifelong spiritual companions, even if encountered only once. What is arguably key here is the artistic sensibility of the authors and imaginative visions of life embedded in some literary works. It is well-known that literature has the power of transporting its readers into alternate worlds; some works, however, create an imaginary, hospitable space where the readers can, through their vicarious experience of the book's microcosm, move beyond the comfort of the expected and the familiar, and refine their ethical judgement. The fusion of artistic ingeniousness and the narrative power to challenge and bewilder can be a truly rewarding experience.

The same criteria that we apply to define good literature also distinguish some picture-books as original and thought-provoking examples of visual literature. Such works induce the affective engagement of their readers through the density of the narrative style: the

artistry and vividness of (visual) language and the hidden meanders of sense that open up new horizons of thought for the reader. Mary Midgley writes about such literary works, that they “they supply the language in which our imaginative visions are most immediately articulated, the medium through which we usually get our first impression of them” (2006: 52). Such books have the power to immerse the reader in the unknown and offer the joy of the unpredictable. They “cultivate our ability to see and care about particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are: to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new; to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them; to wait for the outcome, and to be bewildered – to wait and float and be actively passive” (Nussbaum 1990: 184).

How a story is told is inextricably bound up with what it says; the form, instead of merely affecting the content, in fact is an integral part of the message. It is through the organic connection between form and content, through the artists’ ability to wisely choose the composition and other artistic means of expression, that these works of art refine understanding and affect readers lastingly. Martha Nussbaum calls for seeing literary works as indispensable sources of philosophical enquiry. In her view, fundamental truths about human existence cannot be fully grasped if uttered in a language that denies the meanings it communicates, if the writer’s style is devoid of emotions and is not in itself evidence of the ethical approaches advocated by the author (Nussbaum 1990: 5–7). As literature addresses crucial existential concerns relying on particular means of expression that shape understanding in a unique way, its role extends beyond the intellectual realm and instead must be interwoven with the deepest senses of human lives. As Nussbaum puts it: “[o]ur actual relation to the books we love is already messy, complex, erotic. We do ‘read for life’, bringing to the literary texts we love (as to texts admittedly philosophical) our pressing questions and perplexities, searching for images of what we might do and be, and holding this up against the images we draw from our knowledge of other conceptions: literary, philosophical, and religious” (1990: 29).

Cross-cultural encounters in two contemporary picturebooks

The words “stranger”, “outsider”, “foreigner”, and “other” often connote distance, although Ryszard Kapuściński reminds us of the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid’s observation regarding human mentality in ancient Greece, where any vagabond and a poor passer-by was welcome as a potentially divine being (Kapuściński 2004: 32). The connotations of the word “guest”, and “visitor” are indeed ambiguous, as they comprise curiosity, respect, but also suspicion of the unknown. The Greek word “xenos” means a visitor, and despite its equivocal connotations in ancient Greece “xenos”, as a potential god in disguise, was to be welcome as a guest friend who deserved respect and kindness (Filek 2004: 44–45). The present study offers a discussion of the ethical potential of literature that deals with themes of migration, cross-cultural encounters and of crossing (emotional) boundaries. In both narratives, the underlying theme is the urge to respond with compassion to the experience of the Other. Such narratives undoubtedly are indispensable in the educational process;

in an increasingly multicultural world literature that embraces the unknown appears to be even more pertinent. Still, in their pursuit to “embrace the unknown” only some books transcend the plot formulae and through them foster imagination and unbiased curiosity.

The two narratives under discussion, *Eric* (2010) by Shaun Tan and *Jemmy Button: The Boy that Darwin Returned Home* (2012) by Jennifer Uman and Valerio Vidali, were created by artists whose work has been published and recognised worldwide. Shaun Tan is an Australian author of illustrated books that enjoy international fame. They have been widely translated and received numerous literary awards, including the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2011. Tan is known not only as an author and illustrator, but notably also as a concept artist and director: in 2011 he won an Academy Award for the animated film adaptation of his book *The Lost Thing*. The art of the Italian illustrator Valerio Vidali received recognition in international competitions and exhibitions during the Children’s Book Fair of Bologna, in Portugal and Korea. Jennifer Uman, who cooperated with Vidali in their work on *Jemmy Button*, made her debut in the role of picturebook artist. Their picturebook received a CJ Picture Book Award in 2012, and it won a New York Times Best Illustrated Book award in 2013.

The biographies of the artists also indicate that the theme of cultural difference chosen for the books is not coincidental, as the motifs of travelling, of intercultural encounters and their emotional and psychological aspects emerge from their personal experience. Shaun Tan admits that as a result of his background, themes of migration, alienation, and belonging have haunted him. He is part-Chinese, Malaysian, Irish and English, who grew up in Perth, in Western Australia (Tan d: par. 4). Tan has been known for exploring these themes in his other works, most notably in his distinguished wordless work *The Arrival*. The artistic tandem of Jennifer Uman and Valerio Vidali worked together on illustrating their book despite the geographical distance between them, and despite their inability to communicate in each other’s native language.

In both narratives, the theme of otherness and an ambiguous visit is shared, and a sense of the indeterminacy of meaning palpable and intense. The close reading of both reveals, however, that the apparent thematic analogies make differences in the artistic approach more apparent. While the theme and form of a given artwork may be intriguing to the readers, it does not guarantee narrative and emotional depth. Stories that possess emotional and ethical strength combine the artistry of form with an imaginative story. The artists must be aware of the importance of the organic relation between all the elements of the work’s structure. When employed skilfully, the form and the content, often deceptively simple, merge imperceptibly, leaving the readers in a state of awe. A patient and contemplative, thoughtful and rigorous reading can be a truly rewarding, ethically transformative experience.

The narrative structure in both picturebooks abounds in visual and verbal hints of the newcomers’ vulnerability, the hosts’ (unintended) prejudice and indifference, and the missed opportunities for a truly meaningful, transformative dialogue. The artists draw on aesthetic modes that disturbingly emphasise the visitors’ sense of otherness and their childlike status in the new environment, even though the newcomer in each story is ap-

parently very much welcome. Although both stories evoke compassion for the visitors by means of the metaphorical rendering of the illustrations, and both rely on a sense of indeterminacy emanating from the form and content, the artistic and ethical implications of the indeterminacy remain very different in each case.

Jemmy Button

As the authors explain in the peritext, the story in *Jemmy Button*, a picturebook published by Templar, is based on historical sources. In fictionalised form, it reconstructs events that took place in the early nineteenth century, when a boy named Orundellico was abducted from the coast of Tierra del Fuego and came to Europe with an expedition of European scientists. On his arrival in England his life radically changed: the boy was expected to adopt a European way of living, he was given a new name: Jemmy Button, learned English manners and the English language. As Jemmy's "visit" was in fact part of an experiment, the ultimate goal of which was to "spread civilisation" in colonised lands, he was taken back to his homeland after a year. Among the people who accompanied Jemmy in his voyage from Europe was Charles Darwin, whose aim was to identify the effects of the experiment on the spot.

Both the verbal and visual text appear to effectively capture Jemmy's perspective on the events. When the "visitors" come, they are visualised as flat, cut-out figures resembling giant black insects. The verbal story, written by the illustrators' friend after the illustrations for the book had been created, takes the form of a tale told through a third-person omniscient narrator. The story starts with the words: "Once, long ago, on a faraway island there was a boy. Some nights he climbed to the tallest branch of the tallest tree to look at the stars. He listened to the lap of the waves and imagined what it would be like to live in the world on the other side of the ocean." The native boy's perspective is hinted at by the use of comparisons referring to nature, the only environment hitherto familiar to him, which makes the contrast between his home environment and the new surroundings even sharper.

Perhaps inspired by the classic children's picturebook, the visual narrative schema echoes Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, a visual story of a boy's (imaginative) journey into the wilderness. Scenery from the beginning of the story returns in the final double spreads; a linear visual story presents the boy's journey to the east (to the right) and his return to the west (to the left). The story starts and ends with an image of Jemmy portrayed from a distance, contemplating the world as he sits on top of a tree, surrounded by a starry night sky. The first illustration probably implies anticipation, with the boy gazing at the moon, the other suggestively captures the boy's farewell to England, as his head is turned towards the ship sailing back to Europe. The illustration that visualises the voyage metaphorically depicts his feelings by contrasting a minute white ship that hosts him with the mass of dark water that carries him to the unknown land. Jemmy's vulnerability is also accentuated by strategies of visual weight: in most illustrations Jemmy is situated on the left side of the double spread, which in Sendak's book also functions as an illustration of Max's psychic state and encourages the readers to empathise with the character (Nodelman 1988: 136).

This symbolic nature-culture dichotomy is made clear through the use of colour, texture, and visual metaphors. The contrasts between the two worlds become evident, e.g. owing to the technique of collage in visual depictions of England juxtaposed with the use of oil in the illustrations of the island and the sea. The cut-out elements used to represent English culture – masses of people, rows of buildings, or shop windows – symbolise an orderly, uniform, friendly yet somehow impoverished, indifferent “civilisation”. In contrast, the “wilderness” is imagined through painterly, vivid colours. Jemmy’s place of birth, his natural habitat, and the ocean – an extension of his natural surroundings – are marked with strokes of the artist’s brush, having a more {sensual?} sensory appeal and thus connoting authenticity, spontaneity, and freedom (or lack of restraints).

The artists convey Jemmy’s sense of isolation and vulnerability portraying him naked among the elegantly dressed English people, and making visual analogies between the bodies of Jemmy and those of pets of the English. The boy’s status of stranger is consistently and explicitly marked by the difference of colour: the pinkiness of Jemmy’s body, the fleshiness and beastliness of his hand and face, his somewhat empty facial expression are contrasted with an anonymous, undifferentiated, elegantly dressed yet often faceless and greyish mass of English people. The exception is a female companion, whose silhouette is painted with a different colour – a possible hint of empathy on her part. The reddish face of the indigenous boy dressed in elegant English outfits reminds the viewer of the unnaturalness of his situation, and emphasises that the process of “civilising” is in fact superficial, that it is only a masquerade.

Orundellico’s story reconstructed in the picturebook is intriguing because of its theme, but conceptually it restates the familiar, both as a visual story and in the interplay between word and image. Because of their naivety, the visual means of expression can not compete with the *finesse* and perceptual depth of Sendak’s use of visual detail and his masterful, nuanced play between the image and the text.¹ The other potential problem has to do with sensitivity to historical truth and with the question of whether this particular story can be told in the form of a tale devoid of its social and political situatedness. As the story progresses, the readers learn that Jemmy misses the island and one day realises that “he must return home”. The narrative thus implies that Jemmy’s stay in England was an innocuous visit, and that his homesickness made him go back where he really belonged. A moustache grown on Jemmy’s face, a metonymic representation of his transformative experience, suggests that the experience has left a mark on the boy, but the story remains enigmatic about the nature of the emotional impact the experience had on Jemmy.

Valerio Vidali and Jennifer Uman admit that they deliberately abstained from moral judgement when creating the narrative. However disconcerting this may sound, they were motivated by their desire to tell the story of Jemmy’s experience, both in the context of cultural violence and adventure (Vidali b). As a consequence, the moments of evasion be-

¹ A comprehensive discussion on different narrative aspects of Sendak’s work is offered by Perry Nodelman in the consecutive chapters of his book. See Nodelman P. (1988), *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children’s Picture Books*. The University of Georgia Press.

come conspicuous, challenging the credibility of the account. There is a sense of a missed opportunity to tell a meaningful story about different incarnations of displacement and symbolic violence, disguised as the will to meet, teach, and enlighten. Instead, the story apparently encourages reductive judgements: in the final illustration Jemmy still looks like a child, although he has grown a moustache. On a symbolic level his indigenous identity has been left intact; the civilising mission has proved a failure. If we try to make sense of the story as a critique of colonialism, Jemmy's moustached and hairy head juxtaposed with the rest of his body, imagined as a somewhat plump, hairless and pink mass of flesh, through its grotesque effect undermines the reasonableness of such a reading.

In their attempt to universalise Orundellico's story, the authors seem to unconsciously perpetuate the colonisers' perspective on the events. By using the visual metaphor of the fleshy body signifying wildness, lack of civilisation, and lack of voice, by calling the Europeans "visitors" who "invite" the boy to Europe and become his "friends" without a hint of irony, the authors dangerously oscillate, if not trespass over the border between remaining neutral (which they intended to do) and inadvertently adhering to the rhetoric of the colonisers.

The reciprocal emotional distance between Jemmy and the English people is emphasised consistently throughout the book, which was intended as a tribute to Jemmy and as a narrative evoking compassion. The illustrators planned to "talk about the nostalgia and restlessness experienced by someone who has changed dramatically and is trapped between two worlds and two different ways of being" (Vidali b). Yet, even though the boy's homesickness is continuously emphasised, the rhetoric of both the image and text turns out to be emotionally and conceptually problematic. The front cover informs the readers that it is a story about "the boy that Darwin returned home". Curiously enough, Darwin is not featured in the narrative, while the illustrations imply that Jemmy returns to the island unaccompanied. More importantly, however, the use of syntax, which confers the role of Jemmy's benevolent patriarchal guardian on the absent Charles Darwin, as well as the belittling reference "boy" symbolically establishes a cultural hierarchy in the relation between Orundellico and his European hosts. The linguistic strategy in the title evokes the memory of England's colonial past without openly questioning it, and thus becomes, perhaps unintentionally, a racially charged statement. Similarly, it is somewhat doubtful where Jemmy's "home" is, after a year of life in Europe. The moral ambivalence of the experiment – curiously and regrettably – is not hinted at in the narrative.

The visual metaphors in the book may be admired for their explicitness, but their ethical implications are doubtful. Jemmy's body, likened through its pink nakedness to bodies of pets belonging to the English, effectively captures his vulnerability in the unknown environment, yet the metaphor is double-edged: it unproblematically fuses a visual declaration of criticism of the insensitivity of the host culture with a glaring spectacle of racial difference. In a similar vein, although Jemmy's face juxtaposed with the faceless figures of his hosts is meant to "humanise" him, the chosen visual conventions bestow upon his face the status of a blank slate. An implication of Jemmy's racial inferiority, perhaps in spite of the artists' intentions, lurks on the pages of the narrative.

Eric

Shaun Tan's picturebook *Eric* was first published in Australia as part of the collection *Tales from Outer Suburbia* in 2008, and then as a separate small size hardback in 2010 by Allen & Unwin. In the UK it was published in both formats by Templar.² Its plot features the visit of a guest from abroad, but despite the realistic and matter-of-fact tone of the text, the book instantly introduces fantastical elements in the illustrations. The very beginning makes the readers alert because the expectations fostered by reading the first lines of the text are by no means commensurate with what can be seen. The homodiegetic narrator, the host, introduces Eric as a foreign-exchange student with somewhat unconventional habits. The accompanying pictures reveal a mysterious reality in which an alien-like miniature leafy creature comes to the house carrying a peanut instead of a suitcase and chooses to sleep in a cup.

The seemingly simple storyline becomes a pretext to explore not only the relationship between the newcomer and his hosts, but also existential dilemmas of a more general character. *Eric* has a nuanced, undefinitive plotline, which provokes both an immediate response and contemplation that comes with re-readings. The pervasive sense of discomfort arising from the ironic incongruence between the text and the image is one of the strategies subtly signifying the underlying theme of the book. Visual humour is another crucial device that destabilises the text: for example, when the text tells us in a matter-of-fact tone that Eric is studying in the library, the picture portrays him deciphering the characters in a book that he has to stand on. Eric brings chaos and a sense of uncertainty into the life of his hosts, but this uncertainty, expressed metaphorically through the indefinable body and surprising behaviours of the eponymous character, is not threatening – what is more, the visual narrative implies that it can be easily embraced.

As Eric is portrayed as an indeterminate, delicate, two-eyed little creature without a mouth, perhaps an alien, perhaps a child, he connotes otherness in its many incarnations. His physical difference and unconventional interests – especially his appreciation for “small things” – might imply a subtle critique of consumer society and middle class values: an obsession with neatness, normalcy, and possessions as status indicators. The artist's defiance against social pressure to conform is a theme that haunts his other works, and in *Eric* it seems to be a central theme. Indicators of an implicit praise of nonconformity are embedded in the form of the narrative and the characterisation of the eponymous character. The choice of monochrome pencil drawings brings to mind a sense of gentleness and modesty, as opposed to the flashy opulence of western consumer societies.

This, however, would not exhaust the potential of the narrative, which, if read through the prism of ethics, reveals more narrative tropes. Just as the format of the picturebook is tellingly inconspicuous, so Eric himself is small yet somehow significant, so that his presence makes his hosts more attentive. The urge to learn attentiveness and, by extension, readiness to welcome the unfamiliar – is arguably one of the powerful implicit themes of

² While I am aware of the links between individual stories, my analysis focuses exclusively on *Eric*, first because a discussion on the collection as a whole deserves a separate analysis which would not lie within the scope of this paper, and second because *Eric* functions as an independent picturebook.

Eric. The formal features of the book also encourage attentive reading, as seemingly insignificant visual details add substantial meaning to the story. The dot above the “i” in Eric’s name which is moved to the left and does not quite fit there implies, just as Eric himself, that the superficial order we try to impose on the world is an illusion. *Eric*’s plotline suggests that destabilising, non-definitive aspects of life are inevitable and natural.

The presence of multilayered metaphors, the indeterminacy of the plot, and the power of the understatement turn *Eric* into a fascinating, open-ended work.³ The use of even apparently insignificant chunks of language and visual details is never accidental. The verbal text abounds in understatements, for example when the narrator recalls the family’s problem with pronouncing the student’s real name. The hosts address the guest as “Eric” at his request. The consent is mutual, but the awareness of both parties that the name is just a temporary arrangement of convenience signals the potential moment of tension and remains the unspoken other of the text, a telling sign of barriers in the mind. The narrator becomes the implied author’s mouthpiece, highlighting the family’s parochialism and complacency. The words repeated by the narrator’s mother: “it must be a cultural thing” as a reaction to Eric’s behaviour suggest distance, helplessness, and anxiety, as the Other destabilises the *status quo* of the hosts’ so far orderly lives and, by his very presence, unintentionally questions values they hold dear.

The narrative perspective mediated through image and word is equally complex and ethically engaged. Whatever we learn from the text is filtered through the host’s mind, yet in the illustrations the narrator is assigned the role of a follower of Eric’s curious gaze at the hitherto familiar world. Paradoxically, it is Eric who becomes the narrator’s guide in an environment that is explored by both of them like an alien territory. Although it is unacknowledged in the text, the way the narrator (and the reader) glances at Eric reveals an emotional closeness: seeing Eric through the lens of the narrator’s eyes feels as if we crouched or leaned towards him. We see him through close-ups, in front of us, we maintain the eye-contact with him. The will to have a dialogue, to experience partnership and friendly intimacy, while not articulated in the text, reveals itself in the illustrations as a form of unacknowledged desire to cross boundaries. Similarly, Eric’s delicate, leafy, shaky figure drawn in pencil may appear physically fragile, but his gestures are spontaneous and friendly, while his body language signifies curiosity, energy, and readiness to learn the unknown world around him. The choice of perspective makes his enthusiasm contagious.

Amazingly, the compact form of the narrative condenses meaning to an extent that within the narrative of hope it is able to accommodate space for darker emotions. Like Pandora’s box, the encounter suddenly releases an avalanche of ambivalent feelings in the

³ Making this remark I am indirectly indebted to the thought-provoking article on Shaun Tan’s *The Red Tree* by Andrea Schwenke-Wyile, who analyses Tan’s work in relation to Roland Barthes’ concept of the writerly text. See “Perceiving *The Red Tree*: Narrative Repair, Writerly Metaphor, and Sensible Anarchy.” *Telling Children’s Stories: Narrative Theory and Children’s Literature* (2011), Ed. Mike Cadden, University of Nebraska Press, pp. 120–139.

hosts. The narrative voice betrays itself: curiosity and the will to be a good host struggle with somewhat judgemental and prejudiced attitudes. *Eric* captures that sense of a crisis perfectly. Yet, by making the readers empathise with the visitor, the narrative encourages them to challenge those preconceived notions. Owing to the points of indeterminacy embedded in the narrative, the readers are offered an opportunity to question powerful cultural stereotypes. Eric's interest in things that go unnoticed by many adults does not automatically turn him into a child or a childish adult. As a metaphor of childhood, the narrative asserts that children's concerns may have more significance than many adults grant them. The narrator may not be as authoritative and objective as s/he sees herself; the emotional adult within her turns out to be very fragile. The declared concern over the guest is a thin disguise for aloofness, portrayed with ironic distance by the narrator's older self: "for once I would be a local expert, a fountain of interesting facts and opinions". The ironic clash of perspectives of the narrator and his self from the past is also visible in the way the host reports his past negative reaction to Eric's interest in things discovered on the ground: "I might have found this a little exasperating, but I kept thinking about what Mum had said, about the cultural thing. Then I didn't mind so much."



Fig. 1. Tan S. (2010), *Eric*. Crows Nest, N.S.W., Allen & Unwin

Eric perfectly illustrates Martha Nussbaum's point about literature's organic relation between the form and the content, whose uniqueness creates a meaningful imaginary space that could not be expressed in the same way in a different narrative form. In *Eric* the dialogism detected between the form and the content of the book expresses itself through the subtle, harmonious, symbiotic, ethical relationship between the verbal and visual text. Even if their juxtaposition reveals gaps and incongruencies, they are interwoven with meanings of the narrative as a whole.

The thoughtful interaction of the visual and verbal mode conveys meanings that have an exceptionally expressive power. For example, it may seem that the host's perspective on the events is the only one, yet there are two voices telling the story. On one of the spreads the pictures silently narrate Eric's questions, which puzzle the host to such an extent that he does not articulate them in words. Perhaps Eric has been symbolically silenced by the verbal narrator, or perhaps the pictures represent the host's memories, or moments when he pauses to relive the memory of the experience. Interestingly, the multifaceted relationship between text and image resembles a harmonious interchange: the illustrations appear when verbal descriptions would have to be too specific, or lengthy, or would spoil the fun of reading the visually narrated fantasy. They also have a dramatic function: the poignant sense of emptiness after Eric's sudden departure (on a leaf flying through the window) is represented by an isolated image on a white background of his plate with a peanut on it that constructs a pause in the narrative. The image, stylised into a still life, metaphorically speaks of a belated realisation of Eric's precious presence. The symbolic connotations of *nature morte* convention seem to be accurate, as the everyday objects acquire a special significance in the illustration, being a painful reminder of Eric's absence to those abandoned.

Eric's parting gift is a tangible sign of his physical presence, of his artistry to transform an environment unfamiliar (and potentially hostile) to him. It can be read as a kind of epiphany, perhaps even an intervention of a metaphysical force. Before the family discovers it, the narrator mentions the discomfort, a sense of "something unfinished, unresolved". The overflow of emotions is reflected in a sudden metafictional address to the reader; the narrator emotionally insists: "go and see for yourself". The final illustration in the form of a double spread, the only one in the story and the only one in colour, is a powerful wordless statement about the long-term reverberations of the encounter.⁴ With the ending there comes an illumination, and, perhaps somewhat belated, sense of metaphysical and lasting connection between the visitor and the hosts. The gift that Eric leaves in the pantry can be read as a symbol of a bond that is represented as having a material, organic form. The Other regains the voice, as we finally have access to his own words and handwriting in the form of the sincere *thank you* note. The past reverberates in the present; encounters are permanently imprinted on our lives.

⁴ There are subtle differences between the original story's layout design and artwork as it appeared in *Tales from Outer Suburbia* and its small-sized edition. The illustrations in this article come from: Shaun Tan (2010), *Eric*, Allen & Unwin Sydney.



Fig. 2. Tan S. (2010), *Eric*. Crows Nest, N.S.W., Allen & Unwin

The encounter with Eric on the spreads of the book feels genuinely and surprisingly physical. Perhaps it is so because “[t]he line of charcoal, pencil, and pen is an expressive and emotional line and so is a model crafted by human hand” (Pallasmaa 2009: 100). The appeal to the sense of touch, so striking in the illustrations, although never alluded to in the text, has a symbolic dimension, silently advocating the need for physical closeness and for crossing boundaries. It is visible through its associations with nature – leaves and flowers; through the choice of shapes and objects, such as the oblong shape and the pleasantly rough texture of the peanut which Eric brings as his suitcase; or through organic shapes of containers with radiant flower-like plants (it is noteworthy that the seemingly redundant objects have become vessels of new life). The frames of the delicately drawn images are almost non-existent; their nebulosity remains integrated with the whiteness of the background. The technique of cross-hatching and hatching evoke a pleasant sense of natural texture, whereas Eric’s fantastical status is undermined by a sense of materiality denoted by the constant presence of his shadow in subsequent illustrations. Finally, we could perhaps also assume an intentionally created sense of intimacy between the readers and the artist; as every line is palpable evidence of the creative process, it can be argued that the works that make this process explicit “invite the viewer/user to touch the hand of the maker” (Pallasmaa 2009: 104).

The artist’s choice to use pencil in order to depict the imaginary encounter, as well as his decisions concerning the visual characterisation of Eric have ethical implications. As contemporary consumer culture floods its viewers with images which are easily consumable and thus erase the memory of the labour involved in artistic traditions based on

craftsmanship, the cultivation of art that is grounded in the lived world appears even more crucial (Pallasmaa 2009: 20–21). *Eric*'s narrative strategies are inspired by the embodied experience of the world. They express the essence of Pallasmaa's call for "an educational change concerning the significance of the sensory realm (...) in order to enable us to re-discover ourselves as complete physical and mental beings, to fully utilise our capacities, and to make us less vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation" (2009: 21).

If the readers use their perceptive powers carefully, they will see the nostalgic subtext of *Eric*, the subtle, indefinite interplay of the narrator's younger and older selves. The readers never learn the narrator's age, gender, or name, or the time span between the visit and the moment of storytelling; they can only assume that the narrator is no longer a child. There are two clues in the text, which starts with the words: "some years ago..." and ends with "after all these years". The visual convention of the illustrations resembles sequences from a dream, or shots from an old movie. The narrator's memories imagined in the illustrations are thus confronted with the perspective of the person reconstructing the events verbally years later. What is striking is the contrast between a sense of an authentic emotional bond between the narrator and *Eric* palpable in the illustrations, and the older narrator's refusal to articulate that intimacy. The text censors the emotions expressed in the illustrations, as if the older narrator was trying to suppress these memories, or was not able to speak about them. *Eric*'s gift was an impulse to change, but perhaps with time old habits would return. However, the unidentified longing for authenticity and beauty, no matter how fleeting, is reflected in the metaphor of the leaf, in the meticulous pencil drawings, and in the unexpectedly painful parting.

Shaun Tan's art challenges expectations and transforms seeing. It accentuates hospitality in its most humane incarnations; gestures of giving asylum and providing care pervade his works. His picturebook *The Lost Thing* is a case in point, but other stories in *Tales from Outer Suburbia* also allude to this ethical call through a story about the social usefulness of the mysterious water buffalo residing on a vacant lot or the hilarious instruction on how to make a pet for oneself, which between the lines voices concern for abandoned animals. It reverberates in its most dramatic form in the nightmarish short story about the rescue of the nine turtles. It also celebrates harmonious co-existence in the humorous finale, featuring a metafictional address to the reader in the form of a handwritten greeting from the "Tuesday Afternoon Reading Group" – a group of fantastical creatures of various shapes and sizes and a girl, sitting side by side and glancing at the reader from the accompanying illustration.

In his notes on the origins of *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, Tan remarks: "all of the stories in *Suburbia* are the products of 'homeless' sketchbook doodles and half-articulated ideas – those that I have found especially intriguing, or accidentally poetic in some way" (Tan a: par. 3). His book thus becomes a hospitable space, a haven for bizarre creatures that populate his illustrations and for seemingly disconnected ideas or sketches. Each is developed into a "tale" that can live its own independent life – in the way *Eric* does. When "invited" to form a volume, however, they become a polyphonic, evocative, artistic vision that speaks more forcefully through its cumulative affective power.

Discussion

The differences between the picturebooks' form, their implications, and the meaning-making potential of both the texts and illustrations situate them within a wider discussion of visual literature's aesthetic, emotional and ethical dimensions. From my perspective as a literary scholar, what can be decisive with respect to the educational value of each book is its emotional and ethical message, or lack of one. *Jemmy Button* reports the boy's voyage to the other side of the globe without offering an ethical reflection on the events. The picturebook's potential merit – the evocation of a real, intriguing story from a distant past – is conveyed in a way that is historically disputable. *Eric*, on the other hand, focuses on the psychological and emotional aspects of the encounter. It offers a dialogical vision, conveying the perspective of both the narrator and Eric through the intricate, imaginative play between the textual and the visual narration. The story's formal simplicity, which makes it perfectly accessible to very young readers, is deceptive, as the book develops an ethically engaged commentary whose many layers can be appreciated by readers at any age.

The authors of *Jemmy Button* have reduced historical context to the minimum, perhaps to make sure that the story has a universal appeal or in an effort to ennoble their work by evoking associations with fairy tales. Yet, because it is not an invented story, but a retelling of real events, a certain sense of the inaccuracy of representation is palpable to historically informed readers. The structure of both verbal and visual narration contains meaningful gaps which result in a sanitised and simplified version of history. Another potential problem is the credibility of the psychological portrayal of the Fuegian boy. The narration remains silent about Orundellico's real status and instead attributes agency to him, implying that it was his wish first to explore the world, and later to return to his homeland, which is a somewhat romanticised perspective.⁵ The authors have clearly intended to abstain from judging past attitudes and actions by today's standards, but the attempt at neutrality cannot escape moral implications.

Although the picturebooks were inspired by real encounters and real experiences, both, rather strikingly, avoid providing the readers with factual or descriptive detail. In *Eric*, however, the scarcity of information allows the readers to focus on the complexity of the emotional dimension of the situation. The narration reflects the narrator's psychological condition and mirrors those emotions that (s)he is ready to articulate. Other emotions, most probably those which are more difficult to verbalise, as well as the implicitly expressed perspective of the guest, are conveyed in the illustrations.

As its aesthetic qualities are on a par with its ethical sensibility, *Eric* may function as a model picturebook in artistic education. Shaun Tan communicates the essence of his story through the refined relation between the text and the illustrations. As a whole, they poignantly speak about the plethora of the often contradictory emotions that accompany

⁵ Information about the circumstances of the boy's voyage to England and the reasons for his return is available, for example, in Jonathan Duffy and Megan Lane. *The "hostages" that sailed with Darwin*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/4429006.stm (12.09.2016).

(human) encounters. Asked about the audience of his books, the artist answers: “perhaps the best answer I can give is this: anyone who reads and looks. That is, anyone who is curious, who enjoys strangeness, mystery, and oddity, who likes asking questions and using their imagination, and is prepared to devote time and attention accordingly” (Tan c: par. 20). *Eric*, although told by apparently simple means, can be appreciated by all kinds of readers for its subtle treatment of the universal theme and for the unity between aesthetics and ethics.

Whether read as part of a collection or as an independent work, *Eric* certainly is a story with transformative potential. The book invites many readings: the visitor can be a metaphor of any living creature whose presence is initially treated as an invasion of familiar order and secure space. It represents a force that introduces the element of the unknown, the unpredictable – and preciously refreshing – into a stabilised (or perhaps stagnated) existence. In a more esoteric sense, *Eric* may stand for the metaphysical space of the other within the self – perhaps an internal voice that urges one to refine one’s ethical judgements, perhaps a divine element within the soul. The story of this unexpectedly affective encounter and the open, indeterminate structure of Tan’s work imply that crucial truths about life may be unveiled gradually. His metaphors and understatement subtly, if effectively, communicate ethical imperatives: an attentive gaze which sees through appearances, harmonious coexistence with the surrounding material world, and readiness to invite others into our lives. Encounters can be risky; we are bound to change – but change, if accompanied by empathy, care and responsibility, can be promising and enriching.

Inspired by P.B. Shelley, Mary Midgley writes about poets as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” who offer “forceful visions” to other people (2006: 51). Picturebooks which create such forceful visions have enormous power. The ingenious interaction of image and text in such books invites the reader to embark on a journey, to go where the artist has already been. In a genuinely hospitable gesture, the artist shares with readers the experience of “places and continents which one has never visited before, or whose existence was unknown prior to having been guided there by the work of one’s own hand and imagination, and one’s combined attitude of hesitation and curiosity” (Pallasmaa 2009: 112).

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