

***Common Ground for Children and Adults:
Picturebooks for Philosophers of All Ages***

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Many authors and illustrators are providing common ground for children and adults in “children’s books” that deal with complex philosophical subjects. “Stories that Address the Big Questions” in crossover fiction was the subject of a paper I gave at an international congress organized by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon in 2009. However, many crossover picturebooks, even those suitable for very young children, also deal with the big questions.¹ The first picturebook to come to mind is undoubtedly Wolf Erlbruch’s appositely titled *La grande question* (English trans., *The Big Question*, 2003), in which twenty-one different characters answer, from their particular perspective, the ultimate existential question concerning the meaning of life.² This Bologna Ragazzi Award-winning picturebook targeted a crossover audience from its inception, as it was published by Christian Bruel’s innovative publishing house Éditions Être, with the assistance of the Conseil Général du Val-de-Marne, as the annual gift to children born in that department in 2004; as a gift for newborns, it obviously addressed their parents as well. Young and old alike are called upon to answer the metaphysical question. The entirely blank doublespread that follows the last answer, given by the mother, provides a meditative space in which readers can reflect on their own answer to the big question. A subsequent page is also blank except for the narrator-author’s words encouraging readers to return to the question as they grow up. This is followed by two pages in the standard Seyès ruling of all French school notebook paper, where readers are intended to record and date their personal answers to the “Big Question” over time. Picturebook artists such as Erlbruch emphasize the continuum between children’s and adults’ life experiences and philosophical concerns.

Serge Bloch evokes this continuum masterfully in the illustrations of *Moi, j’attends...* (English trans., *I Can’t Wait*, 2005) by using a simple red thread or red yarn strand that accompanies readers throughout the entire book. The front cover of the book, which is issued by the innovative small French publishing house, Éditions Sarbacane, is presented as a letter sent by

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at “The Child and the Book” Conference held at the Faculty of Education in Cambridge, 30 March-1 April 2012. I have already examined the question of death in the paper “Breaking the Ultimate Taboo: Death in Picturebooks,” delivered at the IRSCS Congress in Brisbane in 2011, and in the chapter devoted to “Picturebooks with Cross-Generational Themes” in *Crossover Picturebooks: A Genre for All Ages*, pp. 249-272. See also Maija-Liisa Harju’s article “Encouraging grand conversations: Using crossover picture books to open up new dialogues for death education.”

² Only the duck, who prefigures the protagonist of *Ente, Tod und Tulpe* (English trans., *Duck, Death and the Tulip*), has no answer to the question that is never actually formulated in the narrative.

the author Davide Cali and the illustrator Serge Bloch to the caricatural child pictured in the envelope window who represents Everychild. Unfortunately, the suspension points in the original title, which evokes the continual state of waiting, were eliminated in the English translation. The English edition also loses the clever word play on the final page that converts the conventional tag “Fin” (End) to “Fil” (Thread), implying a continuation as the red thread trails off ready to continue the story on the blank page opposite. The red thread that draws readers into the book on the bottom right-hand corner is actually being pulled by the young narrator who is waiting “...to grow up.” The red thread assumes different roles throughout the book, from the cord in a theatre queue to the umbilical cord, but essentially it is the path or journey of life, as the final cover indicates clearly with the words “au fil de la vie...” translated in the English edition as “the thread of life.” As the protagonist-narrator grows, he waits for love, the whistle of the train that will take him away to war, the end of the war, marriage, a baby, for his children to grow up, and so forth. As his wife lies dying in a hospital bed, the frayed yarn that connects the couple is almost broken and in the next it is rolled up in the shape of a tire on the back of the hearse as the protagonist and his two grown sons follow, their heads bowed in grief. But life continues and in the final picture of the protagonist, he awaits the arrival of his first grandchild, or as the English translation puts it, “a new beginning.” Despite, or perhaps because of, the simplicity of Cali and Bloch’s narrative, their picturebook offers a profound reflection on life for anyone who opens this book-letter.

Publishers in many countries are bringing out picturebooks whose existential subjects are thought-provoking for children and adults alike. It is now more widely acknowledged that readers of all ages struggle with metaphysical concerns and ask the big questions. In 2010, Eva Zoller Morf, a Swiss expert on philosophy for children, published a book with the subtitle *Grosse Fragen für kleine Philosophen und Philosophinnen* (Big questions for small philosophers), which documents the reactions of children to the picturebooks she uses as a starting point for philosophical discussions around questions such as: Where was I before I was born? What happens when I’m dead? Why am I alive? Many of these picturebooks also appeal to “big” philosophers. In the late 1980s, Philippe and Martine Delerm proposed a project titled “Les petites philosophies” (Little philosophies), composed of Philippe’s philosophical reflections on Martine’s delicate images, to the pioneering French publisher Ipomée, whose deeply philosophical books had always appealed to adults as well as children. When the unusual book was finally published by Seuil,

under the title *Fragiles*, in 2001, it was a huge success, selling more than 100,000 copies, many of which were bought by and for adults.

The creators of wordless picturebooks understand that readers of all ages experience metaphysical concerns and they do not hesitate to address them in books accessible to very young children. In fact, they have been doing so for decades. In Mitsumaso Anno's first journey book *Tabi no ehon* (My journey; English trans., *Anno's Journey*), published in 1977, the Japanese author-illustrator offers a poetic meditation on life in a pictorial form that engages young and old alike. From the bird's eye view of the artist-philosopher, readers witness life in all its stages, as people of all ages participate in the entire gamut of human activity: children at play, a young couple being married, adults at work, an older couple praying, someone's grave being prepared. The artist-philosopher's viewpoint is not that of the silent, solitary traveller on horseback who journeys through Anno's historical yet mythical landscapes. According to the artist, this journeyer in a strange land believes "that he has learned many things, but, in actual fact, he sees almost nothing," remaining oblivious to the people and the life that goes on all around him (Anno 56-57). This philosophical dimension undoubtedly appeals to adults, but many young readers will also notice that the lone rider never engages with the teeming life around him.

The French author-illustrator Katy Couprie offers an unusual philosophical perspective in her wordless picturebook *Anima*, published in 1991 by Le Sourire qui mord, the first publishing house founded by the controversial, pioneering publisher Christian Bruel in order to break down the barrier between child and adult readers. The large accordion format picturebook is a unique philosophical bestiary that brings together predators and prey "to thwart . . . creation." The artist's predilection for the spiral, which manifests itself in the aesthetically curled tails of lemur, chameleon, monkey, rodent, possum, and lizard, as well as the trunks of elephants, has a philosophical significance as an ancient symbol of life's journey. A solitary, stationary pelican faces the oncoming stampede and brings the last elephant to a screeching stop, thus forcing the entire moving mass to a sudden halt in the middle of the final doublespread. According to Couprie, the only animal that is in open opposition to the rest is the pelican, who has stepped back to adopt "a philosophic attitude" (Couprie 1992). His motionless figure occupies only the bottom left corner of an otherwise blank white page that effectively evokes the sudden strange stillness and quiet. In a more subtle manner than Erlbruch, Couprie encourages readers to engage in their own philosophic reflections at the end of her book. The calm is prolonged by a final, completely blank

doublespread, which offers a contemplative space in which readers are invited to adopt the reflective attitude of her pelican-philosopher.

In another wordless picturebook that originally constituted a long mural depicting a fantastic underwater scene, Dorte Karrebæk tells a story of life in the womb. It was not until the artist finished the long artwork at the origin of *Hvad mon der sker?* (Wonder what will happen? 1997) that she realized it had been inspired by the philosophical works of P. D. Ouspensky and G. I. Gurdjieff. They claim that the most interesting time of life is the period prior to birth when we go from fish-like creature to human being. The little yellow fish that readers follow through the strange world of grotesque creatures portrays the foetus prior to birth. *Hvad mon der sker?* presents a story of survival in a frightening world of predators. The Japanese picturebook artist Seizo Tashima also tells a tale about the drama of survival, but in a realistic rather than a fantastic world. *Tobe batta* (Fly Grasshopper! 1988) is an allegorical tale about a grasshopper's struggle for survival in a predatory world where his life is constantly under threat. The large format of the picturebook emphasizes the vulnerability of the little grasshopper in a vast, hostile environment. Tashima, who received the eleventh Nippon Award for Picture Books for *Tobe batta* in 1988, is greatly appreciated by readers of all ages, but the book is addressed to children ages four and up. Tashima's crossover appeal is largely due to his sensitive awareness of nature and the manner in which he portrays it. The natural world is brought to life in the bold, energetic brush work of illustrations made from "mud paints" that the illustrator mixes from natural materials. He depicts a terrifying, dog-eat-dog world in which the little grasshopper is surrounded by the shredded corpses of other grasshoppers half-devoured by predatory insects. When the timid grasshopper finally overcomes his fear and dares to take a large leap out into the open, he learns that he has wings and his life is changed forever. Like the illustrator of *Hvad mon der sker?*, Tashima offers a message of promise, hope, and empowerment for the defenceless and vulnerable in their journey through life.

Life's journey is the subject of the highly innovative, almost wordless picturebook *Dedans les gens* (Inside people), which the French illustrator Nicole Claveloux published with Le Sourire qui mord in 1993. Christian Bruel was perhaps thinking of Claveloux's book when he wrote on the first page of their 1994 catalogue that a book is ultimately about "life," life that can sometimes be "crunched between baby teeth and wisdom teeth..." The protagonist is one of Claveloux's signature, ageless baby characters, who, in this unusual book, portrays an actor on the stage of life.

The artist seems to have been inspired by Shakespeare's oft-quoted monologue: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts." The brief prologue to the otherwise silent drama, which unfolds in fifty-eight small format pages, tells readers that the protagonist advances on the Theatre of the World followed by all his "forgotten roles." While the protagonist believes he is "improvising," the prologue's anonymous author informs readers that in actual fact "old figures" meddle in his acting. These past roles follow him in the form of haunting, Bosch-like creatures. The last small image depicts the first five characters of the grotesque procession walking in the opposite direction, as if they have come full circle at the end of a lifetime, although the protagonist is still portrayed as a baby. The prologue establishes the philosophical nature of Claveloux's extraordinary picturebook, in which the baby/actor portrays Everyman on life's journey.

Contemporary picturebook artists are not the only ones to present philosophical topics in books published for a young audience. In 1919, the French painter and illustrator Édy Legrand published the ground-breaking picturebook *Macao et Cosmage* (Macao and Cosmage), with the decidedly philosophical subtitle "ou L'expérience du bonheur" (or The experience of happiness). The large, square book, which contains fifty-four full-page engravings coloured by hand in the *pochoir* process, was the first picturebook for children published by the Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française or NRF (later known as Gallimard), and it is one of the great forerunners of the contemporary picturebook. Macao and Cosmage, a white man and a Black woman, live on a utopian island unspoiled by civilization. When the outside world discovers their paradisiacal island, Macao is initially seduced by the promises of progress, but he is ultimately disillusioned. The philosophical message introduced in the subtitle is encapsulated in the final line of the foreword: "The only mystery in life is penetrated when one knows where one's happiness lies." Under a pure, calm sky at the end of the book, an elderly Macao gazes at what remains of the former paradise and finally "experiences happiness." The book nonetheless ends on a pessimistic note, as the narrator addresses the child reader directly to tell her that Macao "was a wise man" but the governor, who had predicted the relentless march of civilization and progress, "was right!"

The wisdom of the human race is also questioned in *Homo Sapiens?*, an artists' book published in 1965 by the Swiss artist Warja Lavater. Her distinctive accordion books, which tell stories by means of an abstract visual code, were innovative and expensive works intended for adults, but they were often appropriated by children and they can be found in the collection of the

International Youth Library in Munich. The pictorial code of *Homo Sapiens?* depicts abstract concepts ranging from “Sensation” to “Aesthetics.” Unlike the majority of Lavater’s folded stories, whose only text is a legend, *Homo Sapiens?* begins with a doublefold of hand-printed text, which the artist perhaps deemed necessary in light of the highly abstract topic. The statement “Homo Sapiens will always be Homo Sapiens” is turned into a question with the addition of: “Sapiens? Sapiens?” Lavater questions ironically the aptness of the Latin term meaning “knowing man” or “wise man” for the human race that invented and now fears “mass production.” The symbol for homo sapiens, which is conspicuously absent from the legend, appears in the bottom right hand corner of the initial doublefold in the form of a rather derisory squiggly line. *Homo Sapiens?* is one of several accordion books that Lavater devotes to philosophical reflections. In 1963, she published the standing book *Leidenschaft und Vernunft* (Passion and reason), which was reissued, in 1985, by the French publisher Adrien Maeght under the title *Passion et raison*. In this book, the pictorial symbols represent the abstract concepts of passion and reason. Passion is symbolized by red forms, most notably by a chaotic red line, while reason is represented by an orderly blue square. The artist depicts the shifting interaction of the two forces until a third entity is created: a red square representing “essence.” In 1985, the French publisher Adrien Maeght reissued it under the title *Passion et raison* and, three years later, they brought out Lavater’s *Ergo*, another *imagerie* directly inspired by philosophy. *Ergo* (1988) is a pictorial reflection on the consequences of René Descartes’s argument “Je pense donc je suis,” which became a foundational element of Western philosophy.

A number of picturebook artists are inspired by specific philosophical worldviews. The powerful picturebook *Yappari Okami* (I am a wolf, after all), published by the Japanese author-illustrator Maki Sasaki in 1973, evokes reminiscences of Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger*. The wolf protagonist is an outsider; although he engages in a search for his own kind, he is ultimately forced to accept the fact that he is alone. Sasaki is also a comics artist, and this is evident in the illustrations, which are sometimes divided into frames. As the wolf wanders in search of his own kind, doublespreads team with various animals that are usually the prey of wolves: rabbits, goats, pigs, and deer, all of which belong to communities from which he is excluded. With the arrival of the wolf, the rabbits around Bunny House run for shelter, the goat-monks file quickly into their church, the pigs swarming in the market rush off, and the deer in the park vanish. There is very little text, but in several frames, a speech bubble contains the wolf’s explosive “ke,” which he

repeats every time he fails to make friends. By uttering this extremely impolite exclamation, which could be translated as “the hell with it,” the wolf breaks one of the most important unwritten rules in Japanese society, that of maintaining harmony in our relations with others. This refusal to conform to social conventions reminds us of Camus’s protagonist, Meursault. The black featureless silhouette of the wolf, which sets him apart from the otherwise colourful world, emphasizes his difference as well as his anonymity and lack of identity. His final “encounter” with others portrays him clearly as the outsider: the lonely black wolf stands staring through a window into a cozy, old-fashioned interior where a family of anthropomorphic bulls is eating dinner. The philosophical content and the clever intertextual visual details in *Yappari Okami* appeal strongly to an adult audience. The illustration is a clever allusion to *The Story of Ferdinand*, the timeless 1936 children’s classic by American author Munro Leaf and illustrator Robert Lawson, about a bull that would rather smell flowers than fight in bullfights. It seems these bulls also prefer to smell the roses, as a bouquet of flowers sits conspicuously on a table in the foreground of the illustration. Despite the picture hanging on the wall of Ferdinand holding a daisy in his mouth, it is likely only adult readers will decode the allusion. Released nine months before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, *The Story of Ferdinand* was seen by many supporters of Francisco Franco as a pacifist book and it became a target of the right wing, banned in many countries. The lonely wolf ends up lying down in the cemetery among tombstones that bear names such as Elvis, Ringo Starr, and Edward Lear, but even there he seems to be an outsider.

There is a strong existential slant to the French picturebook *Rien n’est trop beau pour les amis de Zorro* (Nothing is too good for Zorro’s friends), which Christian Bruel published in 1995 in the same small format as Claveloux’s *Dedans les gens*. The simple but effective artwork by the Algerian-born illustrator Zaven Paré is reminiscent of rock paintings, highlighting the timeless nature of humankind’s metaphysical reflections. Through the eyes of a herd of cows, bearing allegorical names such as Valiant, Mischievous, Boastful, Naïve, Passionate, Mournful, The Old One, and The Dark One, Bruel engages in a philosophical reflection on life and death. The enigmatic text recounts their reactions to the death of the legendary cow Zorro (undoubtedly taken to the abattoir) and their desire to understand the concept of death. Despite the fact that they know very little about the “other” they have lost, the cows are grievously distressed by this bereavement because it forces them to confront their own mortality. The animals’ reactions to death mirror those of human beings in a tenderly humorous manner. They are unable to find the “words” to express

their “grief” (39). One cow rejects the use of the euphemism “disparu” (“disappeared” in the sense of “departed”), asserting that Zorro is “dead” (35). Another describes the cows’ first encounter with death in existential terms: “The end makes us foolish, packed flank against flank... / ...each with his death. And unable to do anything” (30-31). The cows’ prise de conscience is suggested by the infinite blue space of a doublespread that is empty except for the words: “Never more. Forever” (32-33). This void is portrayed even more strikingly on the following empty white page, which bears only the page number. Despite its small format and minimalist images, this fifty-eight page picturebook provides a challenging, thought-provoking reading experience for all ages.

The cow’s ruminations on life and death evoke those of Duck and Death in Erlbruch’s *Ente, Tod und Tulle*. As the two protagonists reflect on the afterlife, Duck recounts the various views held by her fellow ducks. Human philosophical and religious beliefs, which Death calls “amazing stories,” are thus transposed into the world of ducks: the idea of becoming an angel or being roasted in a place deep in the earth. Death’s apparent lack of knowledge about what happens after death surprises Duck, but readers sense he simply does not attach any importance to philosophical or religious views. Life and death are simple truths. In a tree top, a metaphor for the wide perspective Duck is now able to adopt (she sees her small world—that of the pond—as it will be after her death), the two engage in a simple, metaphysical discussion of death. Duck and Death, their heads protruding above the foliage, engage in a dialogue like two philosophers.

Like Sasaki’s *Yappari Okami* and Bruel’s *Rien n’est trop beau pour les amies de Zorro*, many picturebooks since the 1970s offer philosophical fables for all ages. A classic from the German-speaking world is Jörg Steiner and Jörg Müller’s *Die Kanincheninsel* (English trans., *Rabbit Island*), published in 1977. They collaborated often on books that all deal with essential issues of concern to everyone: identity, liberty, and the meaning of life. *Die Kanincheninsel* is another Everyman story, in which the protagonists are not cows or wolves, but rabbits. A large grey rabbit and a small brown rabbit escape from the “rabbit factory,” but freedom proves to be dangerous and the larger rabbit finally decides to return to the confined security of the factory. It is a multilayered story about the risks of achieving freedom and the fear of the unknown. Müller’s detailed illustrations contrast the drab, grey factory environment with the harmonious, colourful landscapes of nature. The English translation of *Rabbit Island* won the Mildred L. Batchelder Award for an outstanding translated book for children in 1979. On one level, it is a children’s adventure story; on another, it is a multi-layered, thought-provoking philosophical fable about life.

Such multilevel works, which appeal to “readers at opposite poles of sophistication: a child at one end of the scale, a metaphysician at the other,” constitute the highest summits of world literature, in the eyes of the French author Michel Tournier (Tournier 1988, 157). The internationally acclaimed novelist, who has also been hugely successful as a children’s author, became a writer only because he was forced to abandon a career in philosophy when he failed the *agrégation* (a competitive examination for teachers in France). All of Tournier’s writing, whether for adults or children, is profoundly philosophical. The author would like to have taught philosophy to ten-year-olds, but he claims that is what he is “trying to do in [his] books for children” (Zeldin 43). The brief tale *Pierrot ou les secrets de la nuit* (English trans., “Pierrot, or The Secrets of the Night”), published in 1979, has been described by its author both as “an ontological treatise that has all the appearance of a children’s tale” and as “metaphysics for ten-year-olds” (Koster 150; Blume 7). Because of its appeal to readers at both ends of the spectrum, young children as well as cultured adults, Tournier places this philosophical tale for children at the pinnacle of his art and claims he would gladly give up all his other works for these few pages (see Beckett 1997, 284; “Writing” 34).³ Although it was first published as a picturebook, with illustrations by Danièle Bour, and won the prize for best foreign book at the Leipzig Fair, *Pierrot* was subsequently published in a short story collection for older readers, *Sept contes* (Seven tales, 1984), as well as in a short story collection for adults, *Le Médianoche amoureux* (English trans., *The Midnight Love Feast*) in 1989. The tale features three characters from the *commedia dell’arte*, which Tournier transposes to a French village setting: Pierrot becomes a baker, Colombine a laundress, and Arlequin a house painter. It is a simple story, based on the eternal love triangle, for which Tournier claims to provide “the philosophical structure” (Beckett 1997, 270). The author explains that through the “little dolls” from Italian theatre, two metaphysical worldviews clash: “Great echoes resound in these childish spokespersons. It’s Goethe and Newton divided on the theory of colours, it’s Parmenides versus Heraclitus” (Tournier 1979, 19). In 1993, the author told me that the opposition of Pierrot’s substantial colours and Arlequin’s superficial colours demonstrates an important part of Spinoza’s theory of substance and accident (Beckett 1997, 270). Although Tournier acknowledges that the child does not know this, he is convinced that “he senses

³ Tournier repeatedly and emphatically denies writing for children, despite the fact that he considers young readers the ultimate arbiters of a successful literary work. For more information on Michel Tournier as a crossover author, see Beckett 1997, 119-168; Beckett 2009, 49-50, 82-83, 97-98.

it, and he understands it in his own manner” (Tournier 1979, 19). Using a simple game of oppositions: black and white/colour, day/night, summer/winter, sun/moon, speech/writing, a game accessible to very young children, *Pierrot* presents the fundamental moral and philosophical ideas of the writer-philosopher. Like Tournier’s *Pierrot, ou les secrets de la nuit*, the picturebooks examined in this paper appeal to readers of all ages because they create the common ground, the philosophical space that Maija-Liisa Harju termed “the crossover continuum,” a space in which readers of all ages can meet to share their common experience and metaphysical concerns (Harju 2007).

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