

Romantic and Jewish Images of Childhood in Maurice Sendak's *Dear Mili*

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer

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Imagining the world of the child may lead to sensitive exploration of juvenile thinking, but it may also serve largely as a pretext for propagating adult ideas. Whatever the case, the status of the child as an outsider on the margins of adult activity can provide inspiration for an artist aiming at critique or reinterpretation of the status quo. Romantic images of childhood had a major influence on the development of twentieth-century Jewish children's literature in Europe and the United States. Writers in every period and in different milieus arrived at their own interpretation of child figures depending on their specific assumptions and priorities. Among the most widely documented assumptions is the Romantic myth of the child unspoiled by civilisation, whose purity stands in contrast to corruption. Other texts have represented the child as enigma, making the child figure a symbol of otherness. As a counter-reaction to the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement was important for the development of children's literature for four main reasons: the early Romantics created an image of childhood contrary to the ideas of the Enlightenment; in the late Romantic period, children's literature was classified into traditional genres like folk tales, legends and nursery rhymes; the moral tale favoured during the Enlightenment was

replaced by fairy tales as the main genre of Romantic children's literature; and new literary children's characters were developed. The Romantic discussion on the importance of the child always refers to the nature of mankind. The reference to the child serves to demonstrate that the child has a soul, dreams, an unconscious, imagination, religion, and proximity to nature — a closeness that the Enlightenment denied to mankind. This means that the Romantic discourse on childhood has inherently topical potential. Childhood is a cipher for freedom from duties and work, which are contrasted with the purity of children's play and the child's absorption in the moment. Within the scope of an aesthetic movement that aims at "poeticisation of the world", the Romantics stylised childhood into a literary and historical-philosophical cipher of high symbolic value.

One of the best-known Jewish children's authors whose work has been influenced by Romantic thought is the American Jewish illustrator Maurice Sendak, who won international acclaim for his canonical picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). Sendak's grandfathers were rabbis in Zembrova, a small Polish town not far from Bialystok. While most of his Polish relatives were killed by the Nazis, Sendak's parents, Philip Sendak and Sadie Schindler, who immigrated to the United States in the 1920s, survived. They lived in Brooklyn, where Sendak (born in 1928) spent his childhood in poor circumstances. The Yiddish tales told by his grandmother and the religious instruction by his

grandfather helped him to develop a close relationship to Jewish religion and traditions.

As scholars such as Selma Lanes and Amy Sonheim have shown, Sendak refers clearly to his Jewish roots and the tragic story of his ancestors in several picture books, such as *The Sign on Rosie's Door* (1960), *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993), and *Brundibar* (2002). Sendak's deep insight into Jewish history and customs emerges in his highly sensitive illustrations for *Zlateh the Goat* (1966), the first children's book by the Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer. Moreover, in some of his picture books, such as *Outside Over There* (1981) or *Dear Mili* (1988), Sendak interweaves complex allusions to Romantic art and literature that clearly demonstrate the intertextual and intervisual links to Romanticism.

The original text of *Dear Mili* was based on a legend retold by Wilhelm Grimm, the German linguist and fairy tale collector. Although *Dear Mili* does not tell the story of a Jewish child, in what follows I shall use a detailed analysis of the picture book version to show that Sendak connects both Romantic and Jewish images of childhood. *Dear Mili* demonstrates precisely the extent to which the project of writing about Jewish children is influenced by elements of Romantic thought such as proximity to nature, the child as symbol of hope, the contrast between imagination and education, and the new concept of the "strange child". In *Dear Mili*, Sendak's picture book under examination here, a

concerted effort to inhabit the otherness of the child is integral to examining the otherness of the Jew.

Before focusing on Sendak's illustrations and his interpretation of the story, we shall briefly indicate the origin and importance of the original work. Wilhelm Grimm wrote the story in the 1820s for a seven-year old girl called Mili. Ludwig Denecke, the Grimm specialist and founder of the Grimm Museum in Kassel, has established that Mili was the pet name of Amalie von Zuydwyck, whose parents belonged to a circle known as the Bökendorfer Kreis. The circle included the renowned writer Annette von Droste-Hülshoff as well as distinguished members of the Westphalian aristocracy who were profoundly interested in folk literature and supported the Grimm brothers' work on their fairy tale collection *Children's and Household Tales (Kinder- und Hausmärchen, 1812-1815)*. *Dear Mili* takes the form of a letter addressed to Mili in which Wilhelm Grimm says he will tell the girl an old legend from bygone days. The letter serves as a framework for the story that follows. After concluding his narration of the legend, however, Grimm fails to pick up the initial thread again by rounding off his letter with personal comments on the story, or by signing off with greetings. Although Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm appended ten legends for children to the 1819 edition of *Children's and Household Tales*, the legend narrated in *Dear Mili* was never published during the author's lifetime. It remained undetected until 1974, when American auctioneers offered the manuscript for 7,000 dollars. Through various channels,

the famous antiquarian bookseller Justin G. Schiller eventually acquired it for sale at a reserve price of 26,000 dollars in 1983. Maurice Sendak, a regular customer of Schiller's, was fascinated by the tale and convinced his publisher, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, to buy it. (Rumour has it that the final price paid for the manuscript was 45,000 dollars.) The media soon hailed the discovery of a new work by Wilhelm Grimm, and in 1983 the *New York Times* published a lengthy front-page article on the subject by Edwin McDowell. Sendak had already illustrated a selection of Grimm's fairy tales in 1973 under the title *The Juniper Tree and Other Tales from Grimm*. He started negotiating with the publisher for *Dear Mili*, and insisted on illustrating the first edition, which was published in 1988 (see Dinges 1991, 134ff.). Sendak took more than three years to complete the illustrations for his *Dear Mili* picture book. It was an instant success and was translated into several languages. Sendak asserted in interviews that although the story had a historical background (the Thirty Years' War), it still had an enduring meaning for present-day readers. He was referring to the Second World War and the persecution of the Jews.

What makes the "Dear Mili" legend so powerful and fascinating, and gives it such a timeless character? It tells the story of a widow who lives with her only surviving daughter in a small village after all her other children have died. The idyllic life of the mother and daughter is suddenly disturbed by the outbreak of war. To hide her daughter from the soldiers roaming the district, the mother sends her into the woods with provisions, telling her to return after three

days. Accompanied by an invisible angel, the terrified girl finally finds sanctuary in an old cottage among the trees. The old white-bearded man who lives in the cottage shelters the girl and looks after her. The narrator tells the reader that the old man is St. Joseph himself, but the girl does not recognise him. She plays with the now-visible angel, who resembles her in everything except the colour of her hair. After three days, St. Joseph sends the girl home. He gives her a red rosebud as a farewell present, promising they will meet again when the rose is in bloom. She arrives at her mother's house, where an old woman is sitting on the bench. The woman recognizes the little girl as the beloved daughter for whom she has been waiting thirty years. She had believed that wild beasts had torn her to pieces years ago. But whereas the little girl has remained unaltered in age and appearance all this time, everything else has changed. Her once-beautiful mother has become an old, nearly blind woman with deep wrinkles on her face. Next morning, the mother and daughter are found dead by the villagers. Between them is the rose — in full bloom.

Sendak transformed this melancholy legend into a fascinating picture book comprising 18 double-page spreads. His illustrations are always on the recto page, while the text is printed on the verso page. The exceptions are three double spreads each with a single picture across both pages and no text at all. Sendak employs a graphic style with tiny lines that highlight the three-dimensional quality of the illustrations. Broken swathes of colour ranging from yellow to green and brown dominate the colour scheme. What is striking is the

pale red of the dresses worn by the girl and her mother. The colour tones and the stylised clothes are reminiscent of garments from the late Romantic or even Biedermeier period, and recall paintings by Philipp Otto Runge and Caspar David Friedrich. These two painters influenced several of Sendak's picture books (Tabbert 1987, 18); their effect on *Dear Mili* is largely evident in the depiction of nature. In particular, the menacing forest and the Paradise-like garden with flowers and trees in blossom are based on images from Runge and Friedrich. Moreover, the precise botanical drawings of plants and the arrangement of flowers and small animals are inspired by Baroque still life pictures, while Sendak's depiction of St. Joseph's hut recalls Renaissance paintings that portray saintly hermits in their study, such as Albrecht Dürer's "St. Jerome in his cabin" (1521, National Museum of Antique Arts, Lisbon). The sequence of pictures combines idyllic scenes with illustrations highlighting the menacing atmosphere of war. Although no soldiers are visible in the pictures, the threat is evoked by portraying the transformation of nature. The pictures in the first double spread showing a peaceful atmosphere are dominated by yellow flowers and green bushes and trees that seem to protect mother and child, while those in the ninth double spread depict St. Joseph and the little girl in the safety of the hut. Other pages, however, show leafless trees with big spreading roots and branches like bony arms with claws. In these scenes, a dark-grey sky and huge birds as big as the girl underline the weirdness of nature; unlike the idyllic scenes, they are far from friendly and peaceful. But the impact of the threat is

softened by a guardian angel that accompanies the girl. At first the angel is visible only to the viewer; the child seems unaware of its presence. The following sequence of pictures shows the angel gradually growing from an infant putto to a figure the same size as the girl. When Mili finally reaches St. Joseph's hut, the angel disappears — which underlines that the girl is safe now. During the time the girl spends in the woods, it begins to dawn on the reader that she has died there and gone to heaven. This idea is enhanced by the depiction of the girl, who is seen either from behind or in profile. Moreover, the girl's eyes are often closed or half-closed: she does not look at the viewer, but is most often shown gazing dreamily into the distance. Just four pictures portray her with her eyes wide open: in the scenes when she is listening intently to advice from her mother and from St. Joseph, on her first meeting with the angel, and on her arrival at her mother's cottage.

The angel appears again when Joseph sends the girl into the woods to gather berries and fruits. Here the angel is not naked anymore; she is wearing a red dress and her wings are gone. She now resembles the girl's twin sister, differing only in hair colour; in contrast to the girl's dark hair, the angel is blonde. Surprisingly, the angel is now visible to the girl, who has been longing for a playmate. In the following double spreads, the angel and the girl are always shown together. The angel also accompanies the girl on her return to the village.

The description and qualities of the girl and her guardian angel obviously refer to the Romantic motif of the "strange child" or "eternal child" created by

E.T.A. Hoffmann in his children's fairy tale, *Das fremde Kind* (*The Strange Child*, 1817). Hoffman's story has been translated into almost every European language, and has had an enduring influence on the development of Romantic children's literature in England, France, Sweden and Russia – to name but a few countries. Although the motif of the strange child had already featured in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship*, 1795/96), Novalis' *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* (*The Disciples of Sais*, 1802) and Ludwig Tieck's *Die Elfen* (*The Elves*, 1812), it was Hoffmann who recognised the significance of this motif and explored its complexity, adding a new facet to the Romantic image of childhood (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2008, 190ff.).

The strange child is unusual for several reasons: its mysterious background (it comes from the kingdom of fairies, which is inaccessible to ordinary people), its family situation (it has lost its father), and its loneliness. The strange child also has remarkable magical qualities: it can fly, and it can understand the language of nature. Hoffmann's description of its appearance — "the face of the sweetest child brightly illuminated by the sun" — brings it close to the tradition of the Romantic genius, enhanced by the attributes of being able to fly and having a melodic voice. Further aspects relate to the specific details of the strange child's age and name. The child has no name of its own, and is addressed either as "strange child" or "dear child". As offspring of a fairy queen, it can even be immortal and ageless.

Another aspect that strikes the reader is a division into three areas of life: the strange child's sanctuary, its immediate surroundings, and the distant, hostile world. The contrast between education and play is also characteristic of this motif. The strange child never goes to school. Learning by rote at school, which suppresses a child's imagination, is counterposed to the life of play in the strange child's sanctuary. Hoffmann's fairy tale articulates an attempt to focus discussion on the opposition between childhood and adulthood. Another characteristic feature of the strange child is that it is unable to grow up and become an adult: it remains at the stage of eternal childhood. Whereas in children's literature the strange child becomes estranged from ordinary children by its release from temporality and its immortality, equivalent characters in adult literature are snatched from their friends by early death.

The characteristic qualities of Hoffmann's "strange child" also apply to *Dear Mili*: the girl has lost her father, she has no proper name, and her age is not specified in the text (Sendak portrays her as a little girl aged around seven). Three different spheres of life are discernable: the girl's sanctuary (St. Joseph's hut), the immediate surroundings (a Paradise-like garden), and the hostile world (a village threatened by war and a dark forest as frontier between the two spheres). As regards the girl's appearance, Sendak's pictures emphasise her sweetness from the start (whereas the text gives no physical description of her). Although she does not possess magical abilities, her remarkable similarity to the

guardian angel (whom Sendak portrays with wings in the early pictures in his book) underlines that the girl is special. Like the angel, she is a representation of the Romantic image of the child as genius, distinguished by her proximity to nature and to God, which is emphasised by her having St. Joseph as her protector, as well as by her pious prayers and deep religious faith.

The girl does not grow up during her thirty years in the woods. As long as she lives with St. Joseph and the angel she seems to be ageless, even immortal. The situation changes when she returns to her village. Although she remains a little girl in contrast to her aged mother, she still dies the same night. The reader is left to ponder the cause of this sudden death. In my view, the girl's death points to the imperilled idea of eternal childhood. While in the sanctuary (= heaven) the girl is protected against the hostile world and is able to remain in the state of eternal childhood. But when she crosses the threshold between the sanctuary and the outside world and returns home, she is confronted with change, age, loss and sadness, and forced abruptly to leave the childhood state behind. Her sudden death gainsays the magical power of the "strange child" or "eternal child". When the character representing the "strange child" makes contact with the "real" world dominated by adult authority and perpetual change, she either has to retreat to her sanctuary or accept growing up. As the latter option is impossible, the child has to die, like the girl in *Dear Mili*.

In Sendak's picture book version, the partly overt and partly hidden references to Romantic images of childhood are just one aspect. On closer

examination the viewer lights on several pictorial messages incongruent with Romanticism or the historical background of the Thirty Year's War. Three double spreads in particular are distinguished from the other illustrations by unexpected details that refer to Jewish history and traditions. There is nothing in the text corresponding to these references; they are Sendak's additions, and they achieve a new level of meaning.

In the fifth double spread, the recto page shows the girl sitting down to rest on a big root. She has lost her red shoes, her hair ribbon is undone and her hair hangs loose. With her right elbow propped on her knee, she is gazing dreamily at some roots and stones on the ground depicted on the verso page. Her back rests against a tree trunk shaped like an old man or a troll. This weird configuration is presented from behind, with only the ear visible and part of the face in profile. The guardian angel lies asleep between this shape and the girl. Although the forest and the tree trunk look menacing, the girl seems to be safe because of the angel. Looking closer, the viewer detects a bridge hidden among the oversized roots of the trees on the verso page. Eight people — men, women, and children — identifiable as Jews by their clothing and the yellow star, are crossing the bridge. The background shows a stone wall and a watchtower, symbolising Auschwitz concentration camp. Examining the foreground closely, we realise that the roots and dry branches under the bridge resemble human bones. Juxtaposing the verso and recto pages reveals the hidden narrative in this picture book referring to the Nazi regime's persecution and murder of Jews.

While the Jewish children shown on the verso page are threatened by a cruel death, the little girl seems to have been saved. Nonetheless, it is clear from the girl's encounter with St. Joseph and the angel in the Paradise-like sanctuary that she is doomed as well. She stays in heaven for thirty years until St. Joseph sends her back to her mother for a single day. Thus, the Jewish people on the verso page and the little girl on the recto page are intertwined by the prevision of her death. Both the innocent Jewish children and the strange girl — despite all her goodness, hard work and obedience — are doomed to die.

The eleventh double-page spread in Sendak's *Dear Mili* is dominated by the girl's first meeting with her guardian angel, who resembles her and is dressed similarly. The angel is on her knees in the hollow of a tumba, a huge Jewish monument based on a famous tombstone in the Jewish cemetery in Prague. Lions' heads with open mouths are engraved in the stone in the frames beside the angel. Above the angel's head are floral ornaments and a medallion decorated with a fish. Between the ornaments and the fish is a small border with Hebrew lettering. The monument is crowned by a lion's head with closed mouth and eyes. The beast's stylised paws are resting on a sphere. This obviously symbolises the Lion of Judah. Behind and beside this monument we can see three other tombstones, partly covered by plants and bushes. One tombstone is decorated with the figure of a lion with its right forepaw touching a sphere. The little girl, however, ignores these strange surroundings; she is looking aghast at the angel with blonde hair.

In the next double spread, the girl and the angel are standing on a lawn, arm in arm with their backs to the viewer. They are looking towards a big tree with green leaves, and a bunch of bluebells. Surprisingly, they do not seem to notice the strange building and people on the verso page, nor the Jewish tombstones beside them with the Hebrew writing and Star of David. The gutter is filled with a huge fire lily that connects the scenes on the verso and recto pages. St. Joseph emerges in the left-hand corner in the foreground, plucking the red rosebud that he will give the girl as a farewell present. The ruins of a church dominate the background. Nine children are gathered between a tree and a column of the church. They are looking intently at a man who is lying in the grass waving a baton in the air. He also has his back to the viewer, but his red tailcoat, knee breeches, white stockings, black shoes and grey-and-white wig in a long plait recalls the Rococo period. Readers familiar with Sendak's picture book *Outside over There* will recognise the conductor portrayed here as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Sendak was a great admirer of Mozart's music. In contrast to this figure, the nine children are dressed in plain modern clothes in blue, brown, orange and green. One boy standing on the left is naked from the waist up. Unlike the other children, who are kneeling or standing, he is pretending to play an invisible violin. The kneeling girl on the right-hand side is a portrait of Anne Frank. This implies that the children are Jews and make up a choir conducted by a Mozart-like figure. This odd combination demands an explanation: maybe Sendak is referring to the ghetto of Theresienstadt (Terezin)

where the Nazis imprisoned Jews. The Nazis tried to present Theresienstadt to the international public as a showcase ghetto, and tolerated or even fostered the Jewish prisoners' artistic activities there. The captive Jews set up orchestras, choirs, theatre groups and painting classes for adults and children. One example is the famous children's opera *Brundibar*, with music by Hans Krása and libretto by Adolf Hoffmeister, which was performed fifty times by children in Theresienstadt from September 1943 until September 1944, when the Nazis closed down the ghetto and deported the Jews to Auschwitz or other camps. Sendak was obviously familiar with this opera: he published a picture book of *Brundibar* in 2002, with a new text by Tony Kushner. The reference to the children's opera is one possible interpretation of the scene depicted in *Dear Mili*. Maybe the children belonged to the group of people pictured in the fifth double spread crossing the wooden bridge leading to the concentration camp. The children were murdered by the Nazis, and they have joined Mozart, St. Joseph, the little girl and the angel in the hereafter. The Christian heaven alluded to in Wilhelm Grimm's legend is thus transformed into a place open to non-Christians as well. Particularly in this picture, Sendak reveals his utopian idea of peaceful cohabitation of Christians and Jews, although this is presented as possible not in the present but only in the hereafter. St. Joseph represents the link between the two religions because he was actually a Jew. As Christ's foster father he was canonised as a Christian saint by the Catholic Church, obscuring his Jewish heritage.

As we can see, Sendak uses a combination of two historical events to convey powerful messages through the images and between the lines of his picture book: the Thirty Years' War and the Shoah. A Christian legend from the Romantic period that tells of the perils of war and a child's salvation thanks to a holy man and a guardian angel is transformed into a timeless parable about the perpetual menace to children from war, persecution, violence and loneliness. By juxtaposing Romantic images of childhood (notably the motif of the "strange child") with the Shoah, *Dear Mili* works in multiple dimensions that transcend the meaning of the original story. Because of its fairytale character, the legend lends itself to supplementary interpretations, which Sendak achieves solely through his illustrations without changing or adapting the original text.

In fact, the child is presented as the source of an alternative vision, an ability to see in a different way. Otherness is an unavoidable issue that impinges at some level on every depiction of children in literary works. After all, no adult can speak authoritatively in the name of childhood or with a child's voice, because an adult cannot fully enter and represent the consciousness of a child. Fictional portrayals of childhood often reveal less about the nature and behaviour of children than about images and values imposed on children by adult narrators (see Nodelman 2008).

Whatever the case, our analysis of Sendak's *Dear Mili* has revealed the impact of Romantic and Jewish images of childhood on the conception of this picture book. The implication is clear that Jewish children's literature is not

exclusively influenced by the pedagogy of the Enlightenment or the Haskalah, as is often claimed. This points towards a new field of study: investigation of the influence of Romantic images of childhood on the development of international Jewish children's literature from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. Sendak's picture book is just one outstanding example. Echoes of the Romantic image of childhood can be seen in many Jewish children's books, from Sholem Aleichem's *Motle Pejssi dem chassans* (*Mottel, the Cantor's Son*, 1922) to Janusz Korczak's fairy tale romance *Król Macius Perwszy* (*King Macius*, 1923), Lev Kassil's Russian schooldays novel *Konduit i Švambranija* (*Conduct in Svambrania*, 1935) and Setta Cohn-Richters girl's story *Miriam's Wundergarten* (*Mirjam's Wondergarden*, 1935). The list continues with the children's novels by Hildegard Kaeser (*Mimff der Junge, der auszog, das Fürchten zu lernen* — *Mimff, the boy, who is afraid of nothing*, 1941), Uri Orlev (*Hayalei oferet* — *The Lead Soldiers*, 1956) and Amos Oz (*Sumchi*, 1978), as well as the picture books by Tom Seidmann-Freud (*Die Fischreise – The Fish Journey*, 1923) and William Steig (*Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, 1969). Even in contemporary children's literature, the fascination of the Romantic images of childhood has in no way diminished. We can see evidence of this in works like the autobiographical children's books by Ruth Almog (*Me'il katan* — *An Angel made of Paper*, 1993), Shoshana Rabinovici (*Pztaim shelo higlidu* — *Thanks to My Mother*, 1991) and Chaim Potok (*Zebra*, 1998). All these books demonstrate the extent to which Romantic thought has influenced and continues to influence

the project of writing for children (see Kümmerling-Meibauer 2005a and 2005b).

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