

# The importance of the visual text in *Architect of the moon*: Mothers, teapots, *et al.*

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**Résumé:** Dans un examen serré de *Architect of the moon*, M. Steig se concentre sur le processus de signification des détails narratifs, référentiels, iconiques et symboliques du texte visuel et montre comment certaines illustrations singulièrement complexes apportent des résonances riches et inattendues à un texte particulièrement simple.

The picture book in which illustrations add a visual text to the verbal one goes back to the nineteenth century, at least as far back as Randolph Caldecott's parallel graphic narratives to nursery rhymes, which express meanings neither explicit nor, seemingly, implicit in the texts. In contemporary picture books, whether written by one person and illustrated by another, or done entirely by one person, a visual text frequently constitutes something much more than an addition or set of comments: it may change the meaning of the verbal text, and/or supply narrative and semiotic details that are not in that text.

Maurice Sendak's *Outside over there* is an excellent example of an author-illustrated picture book in which the visual text is at least as important as the verbal one, and in which the words make inadequate sense without the pictures. On the other hand, Sendak's illustrations to Wilhelm Grimm's verbal text in *Dear Mili* convert Grimm's meanings by overlaying visual images of the Holocaust upon Grimm's references to the Thirty Years' War, and by stressing the Jewishness of Saint Joseph, among many other innovations. The first of these meanings would have been historically impossible for Grimm even to have imagined, while the second is not in any way implied in his very Christian story.<sup>1</sup>

Among late twentieth-century Canadian picture books, Tim Wynne-Jones and Ian Wallace's *Architect of the moon* stands out as one in which the illustrations are not mere elaborations on the verbal text but actually constitute a substantial part of the book's meanings, including narrative ones, making it a true "visual text." This book seems to have been a genuine collaboration, for although it is possible to imagine the illustrations alone as conveying most of the necessary narrative and symbolic content, it seems more than probable that author Tim Wynne-Jones gave illustrator Ian Wallace at least some instructions.

Like so many contemporary picture books, Wynne-Jones's and Wallace's collaborative creation has few words on its text-pages and a substantial number of significant details in its illustrations. One could say something similar about, for example, the collaborations between Munro Leaf and Robert Lawson, *The*

*story of Ferdinand and Wee Gillis*, though these actually seem less dominated by their illustrations than does *Architect of the moon*. This difference of effect seems to be owing in part to the greater number of words and fuller description of events on each page in Leaf's texts, and in part to the difference between Robert Lawson's black-and-white drawings, with a good deal of white space, and Ian Wallace's watercolour drawings, which totally fill the page. There is no way of knowing—short of interviews—to what extent Wallace was directed by Wynne-Jones as to the content of the illustrations, but given Wallace's attention in his illustrations in his book *The sparrow's song* to visual details both large and small which are not contained or even implied in his own verbal text, it is difficult for me not to feel that the illustrator has, to some degree, shaped through his own inventiveness the ultimate nature of *Architect of the moon*.

In any case, the illustrations do dominate, whoever is responsible for their details.<sup>2</sup> Yet as I will suggest, there is at least a hint in the illustrations that some aspects of the book stem from Wynne-Jones's own childhood.

The verbal text of *Architect of the moon* is so simple without the illustrations that it is somewhat opaque, and it would be a totally different book—indeed hard to imagine existing—without those pictures, which make it both fascinatingly complex and in certain ways mysterious. A plot summary based on the verbal text alone gives little idea of the book's richness: David Finebloom, the "brave block-builder," receives a message from space that the moon is falling apart. After telling his mother not to wait up, he gathers the necessary items, and from his "launch pad" sets off for the disintegrating moon, which he proceeds to rebuild with his blocks: "First the floor of the tranquil sea, then the valleys, hills and mountains. He had brought all the right shapes and all the right colors." When he has finished his work "it was a little rough in places, but who on Earth would notice." He returns home "just in time for breakfast on the porch. A perfect five-minute egg."

I could easily have quoted the whole verbal text in a paragraph, yet the story I have summarized above actually uses fourteen pages of verbal text and fourteen facing ones of illustration, plus an illustrated title page and a final page of illustration without verbal text, which, as I shall suggest, are important to understanding the book's meaning(s); I shall leave those separate illustrations until later, because they relate to the structure of both the entire visual and verbal texts (and as well, incidentally, raise an astronomical problem not uncommon among illustrators).

Apart from the verbal references to David as a "brave block-builder," and the fact that he has brought "all the right shapes and all the right colors" to his task, we find only in the illustrations the exact nature of the actual events taking place in what seems to be a dream fantasy. It becomes apparent in the first illustration accompanied by verbal text that David Finebloom is not only a block-builder but also an enthusiast about space travel; for not only are his block-structures simulacra of spacecraft in position for launching, but there are pictures on his

bedroom walls of a helmeted astronaut and of a multi-stage rocket hurtling through space. He is also wearing what look like green plastic toy eyeglasses, presumably to imitate a pair of goggles, and in the second illustration we see that his teddy-bear has been furnished with a blue pair of such glasses as well—a detail which, along with several others, serves to remind me that David is firmly fixed in childhood and home, however much he may wish to escape.<sup>3</sup> Further, the fact that in this illustration he is doing his block-building on his bed, which seems a rather precarious location for the tall structures, may be more than a hint that the entire story is indeed a dream—though he may be using his bed because of the added altitude they give to his spaceships. We also learn that there are two kinds of blocks—what we normally think of as “building-blocks,” of various shapes and sizes with no decorations, and what are usually called “alphabet-blocks,” all cubes with a different decoration on each of the six sides, one of them, at least, a letter or a number. But more about the significance of such blocks below.

One especially interesting domestic detail is the teapot found in David’s room in the first illustration, which seems to be identical to the one on his mother’s coffee table as she lies on the sofa with blanket and book, and which, most significantly, will form a central part of David’s spaceship, the place where he sits on his way to the moon and back. This to me suggests just how deeply his mother is involved in David’s fantasy or dream.

The two pictures which illustrate David’s laying out his “launch pad” and taking off for space are of particular interest as examples of the ways in which Ian Wallace visually realizes Wynne-Jones’s slimly worded fantasy tale. In the first, David sits on the floor of his room, with the moonlight still streaming through the window. His eyes are closed, as if he is in a trance, and the “activating” of his spaceship looks something like a religious ritual and also somewhat like the “beaming down” from the old Star Trek episodes: he holds an alphabet block in each hand, a “D” in his left and an “F” in his right—the initials of his name. Teddy-bear, toy clown and other playthings are there in the background, but the brightness of the moonbeam causes my eyes to focus on the red wagon full of blocks and on David, as well as the teapot, bucket, green stool, and funnel, all of which will figure in his flight to the moon and his rebuilding of it. All are shimmering and fading at the base, as are David’s legs, as if they are about to be teleported into space.



Figure 1

The second of this pair of illustrations, which faces the text, “Whoosh! He was off,” came as a surprise to me. David is floating with arms and legs akimbo in the sky above his house. His socks and sandals have fallen off and he is surrounded by a whirling circle of the cart, funnel, bucket, stool, and two blocks—now larger than David’s head—which show an “F” and a “5.” These are presumably the same blocks he was holding, one in each hand, with the “D” block now turned to reveal a number which has its place in the visual structure of the spiral-shaped sequence of variously coloured numbers: 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1—surely a countdown to takeoff. In comments he made about an earlier version of this essay, Perry Nodelman mentioned that the “5” also seems to be “taking off”—that is, detaching itself from the block; this would be consistent with the sudden feeling of chaos, which will as suddenly come under control in the next illustration.

In the “take-off” illustration, David is holding the teapot in one hand and its lid in the other (holding on to the mother?); in the next drawing he is riding the fully assembled spaceship, heading toward the moon—seen as a thin circle of light, much brighter on the right side (and containing a few blocks within the circle, which is relevant to an undoubtedly intended ambiguity later in the book about what the moon is). It is as if David, who as I shall suggest, is feeling



Figure 2

somewhat bored and confined in his suburban life, must first in his fantasies create chaos, but quickly change that to order, once the countdown has occurred. The funnel and bucket together form the tip of the spaceship, the teapot the section on which David is sitting, and behind are his red wagon of blocks, with the green three-legged stool as the engine (rather resembling the engine section of the Saturn V rocket used in the flights to the moon, as the funnel and bucket resemble the tip of that rocket).

One prominent detail in this picture is the rooster—a “cock”—on a toy block floating in space to the right of the spaceship; given the phallic shape of the rocket and David’s adventurousness, this seems appropriate. And yet he is sitting on a teapot, which as I have already suggested is a symbol of the mother, making the spaceship itself an interesting combination of the symbolically male and the symbolically female.<sup>4</sup>

David “starts right in,” rebuilding with his blocks the “floor of the tranquil sea, the valleys, hills, and mountains.” At this point we first see him floating in

space, rebuilding the moon with his blocks, while the “F” block floats prominently below him—the initial specifically of the name David has inherited from his father; but juxtaposed to it the maternal symbol of the teapot, also a possible icon of the breast, is floating in such a way as to be in a position to pour something into the bucket.<sup>5</sup> The blocks here show, among other figures, a fir tree, a bat and ball, which I take to be a masculine symbol, the figure of a woman, and a stylized heart, perhaps alluding to love and thus to David’s mother.

In the next picture we see David’s face very close up peering from behind and between two triangular solids, and suddenly, despite the verbal text, there is little or no sense of his being in space—he might well be at home, playing with his building blocks. The triangular—or really, pyramidal—solids recall a number of other such shapes: the roof of David’s house and the others in his subdivision, the fir trees seen on a number of blocks in the picture in which his mother is lying on the couch (actual fir trees are prominent near David’s house in the last illustration with text), and even the similarly green, quite tiny figure of a woman

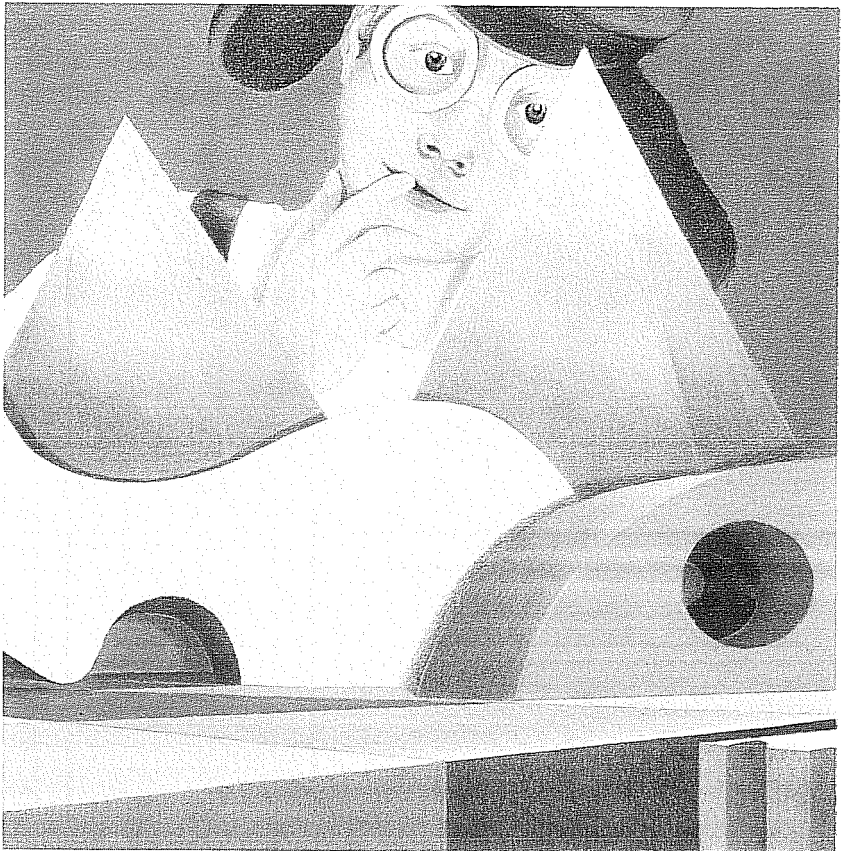


Figure 3

in the blocks in that same illustration. In attempting to find some coherence in Wallace's semiotic system (if it can be called such), I should have to conjecture that these pyramidal blocks recall home, and mother as well, as they are a stylized representation—icons, in semiotic terms—of breasts, something I doubted until a woman friend (a social worker, not a literary critic) immediately said upon looking at this picture, "Those look like breasts."

Significant as well is that each of the two large blocks immediately below these forms has a prominent orifice—again, likely an icon of a part (or two parts?) of a woman, although the form on the left could also be seen as an Arpish portrayal of a woman's torso and buttocks. And this is the only illustration in which David has a finger part-way into, or even anywhere near, his mouth, suggesting thumb-sucking, the substitute for nursing. His face here also looks more puzzled than anywhere else among Wallace's portrayals of him.

Something Perry Nodelman wrote to me after reading the first, much briefer, version of this paper has led me to think it possible that the mother's lying on the couch (before David goes to his "launching pad") is the result of menstrual cramps;<sup>6</sup> and Perry's tentative suggestion that in rebuilding the moon David may be repairing his mother does not seem to me as far-fetched as it initially did—we are, after all, dealing with a book which deals centrally with phases of the moon, which are traditionally associated with menstruation, and his or her mother's "falling apart" might be the conclusion of a child who came upon any direct sign of her period.

In the next plate David continues, floating in space, to add layers of blocks to his foundation; and here we find several interesting decorations on the blocks, most unlikely to be random. The juxtaposition of a mole, a badger, and a toad, all in human dress, strongly suggests episodes from *The wind in the willows*: Badger in a nightshirt is holding up a candle and looking down, perhaps at the point at which Rat and Mole take refuge with him from the dangers of the Wild Wood; Mole is also in a nightshirt and holds a candle; and Toad is clearly in prison, as we can tell by the fact that his leg is chained to a large ball. I would suggest that the first refers to being away from home, as David is—at least in his imagination or dream—the second to being at home and perhaps going to bed, and the third, juxtaposed to the other two, suggests that home in the sublunary world feels at times like a prison to David. (Another animal is less clearly depicted on a block near these, and if it has any connection with *The wind in the willows* it may be a villainous stoat, one of the dangerous creatures in the Wild Wood, which could relate to the dangers—apparent at least in the chaotic "take-off" illustration—of David's trip to the moon.)

I shall not attempt to explicate all of the block-details, either in this illustration or others, but one that seems especially significant is the one David is putting in place: the large "F" (Finebloom) block, which now shows a teddy-bear on its top surface. As David has a teddy-bear in his room, the connection to home seems clear, but in addition, it seems to me that this kind of toy for a male child stands

in for the female doll which he is, in our society, usually not allowed to have—it is, in other words, the closest thing many boys have to icons of babies, and to the extent that one lavishes affection on this toy, one is imitating the role of the mother (I know I used to push mine around in a toy perambulator).

On the other hand, Finebloom, as already mentioned, is his father's name. Can it be insignificant that another of the blocks here shows a football, representing a typically masculine pursuit? Other figures include more pyramidal shapes, in the form of three mountains, but by far the spookiest detail is a pair of toothy red lips curved in a rather exaggerated smile. One might immediately decide that this is an allusion to Carroll's Cheshire Cat, and yet it seems much too human—cats do not have red lips. It occurred to me that it might be a symbol of the vagina dentata fantasy, but I dismissed this as ridiculous; yet who knows, with so many patently sexual symbols in the illustrations (at least as I read them)? If David is, as I think, in part escaping temporarily from home, is he also escaping the sometimes puzzling or frightening things about mothers—breasts, genitals, menstrual periods?

One fairly prominent detail in the illustration with the *Wind in the willows* blocks, the set of four blocks at the lower right corner which spell out "1954," gave me difficulty at first: I was quite sure it was not Sendak's kind of detail representing the author's or illustrator's year of birth (for Sendak, 1928, as included several times in such of his books as *Higglety-pigglety-pop!* and *In the night kitchen*), nor is it a significant year for the history of space-flight: Sputnik was launched in 1957, NASA founded in 1958. Looking up Tim Wynne-Jones's year of birth, 1948, gave me at least a reasonable explanation: in 1954 the author was six years old, which is just about the apparent age of David Finebloom. It is entirely possible that the author himself played with blocks in a similar way and fantasized or dreamed about visiting the moon—perhaps even about helping it to shine again when it was "falling apart."

But perhaps the most significant detail in this picture is the moon—not the moon that David Finebloom is rebuilding with his blocks, but the actual moon itself, approaching the phase of half-moon, situated in the upper right-hand corner, directly above the disproportionately large block with the "F" and the teddy-bear on top. In a way, this is one of the most puzzling sets of details in the entire book: what is David Finebloom rebuilding, if the actual moon is separate from his block-structure? This moon is, as well, seemingly mirrored in several different blocks or sets of blocks, which apparently depict it variously shadowed. This illustration is perhaps most like part of a dream-sequence, in that two different versions of the same thing are seen simultaneously. In the next plate, however, the moon is only a large block-built one in the sky above David, its colours laid out in such a way as to resemble a face (the Man [Woman?] in the Moon, presumably).

The illustration following these last two depicts the actual full moon, as seen from Earth, with David on his spaceship visible in front of it. And it is at this point

that one of the most interesting connections can be made between verbal and visual texts. Wynne-Jones's text for the close-up of the block-built moon as David begins to leave reads,

it was done; it was full. Hurray for David Finebloom!  
It was a little rough in places,  
[next page] but who on Earth would notice.

There is an aspect of life on earth implied in the long-shot illustration of David in front of the moon which has already been implied in one near the beginning of the book; but I did not grasp its significance until I saw this one of David's returning to Earth, and read its verbal text. The earlier illustration shows David's house as one of four identical ones, but the half-question, half-assertion, "who on Earth would notice" takes on a special resonance when one looks at the illustration facing that text and sees the housing subdivision in which David lives: four (but implying more) parallel, straight rows of identically coloured bungalows with identical plantings, the ultimate in sublunary monotony and failure of imagination. Indeed, who on an Earth like this, where everything is the same, would notice if the moon were a little rough? No wonder David has longed to escape into space. I should say that Wallace's use of colour and perspective makes this portrayal of an ordinary suburban housing development quite magically attractive, but I do not feel that undercuts the conceptual point I am making: things in David's life and in that of any happy six-year old are all beautiful, which doesn't mean they can't become boring or feel confining.

In addition, Wallace seems to be making a direct tribute to the Sendak of *In the night kitchen* by showing two buildings with large signs painted on them: the one that seems to refer directly to Sendak's book depicts a large milk-bottle, with the word "MILK" in giant letters (with a much less clear brand-name, perhaps "Molnar's")—and milk is, after all, something one drinks at home, as well as what the infant takes from the mother's breast. The other sign, "STOCKER'S SHOES," seems at first to have no particular significance, only the general one of reminding us of Sendak's New York dream-nighttime; yet below these words in very small numbers is "1948"—the year of birth of the author, Tim Wynne-Jones. This could be as much a tribute to Sendak's illustrative techniques as to the author of *Architect of the moon* himself.

The final page of visual text with facing verbal text shows David and his mother sitting at a table on a covered deck, about to eat their breakfast—which is as the verbal text says and the visual text shows, eggs, yet another maternal symbol. And on the table once again is the "D" block—representing David's given name; but the "F"(inebloom) block is nowhere in sight: may we assume that David, having made use of the first letter of his father's name to repair the moon (perhaps also symbolizing his mother), now has his own individuality reasserted in the form of the initial of his given name? He and his mother are



looking up at a bright, full moon, towards which a telescope on a stand is pointed.

If Sendak's dream-trilogy has been an influence on author and illustrator, it is of some importance to note what a gently conveyed fantasy this one is. David starts out, briefly in a chaotic way, but immediately returns to an orderly one, to put the moon back together, and there is nothing of the extreme emotion of Sendak's three dream books (*Where the wild things are*, *In the night kitchen*, and *Outside over there*), nor is there anything of the jubilation of the second of these: Sendak's Mickey crows "cock-a-doodle-doo," standing on the top of the giant milk-bottle, and his penis is exposed throughout, while the only "cock" in *Architect of the moon* is the fowl depicted on one of David's blocks. There is also the phallic part of the spaceship, but this is merely an icon of the male sexual organ, and is not between David's legs; rather he is sitting on "his mother's pot," if that is not too crude.

What I have suggested is that David's need to escape from an oppressive existence—at least in fantasy—is worked out, except in a single chaotic illustration, in fairly muted ways, though with a wide range of symbols, and David returns docilely to his normal existence. I hesitate—especially as I was born in the United States and have lived in Canada for only twenty-six years—to assert that this says something about the reserved Canadian as opposed to the aggressive American character, but I think the implication is there if one juxtaposes any of Sendak's dream books with Wynne-Jones's and Wallace's, and contrasts the ways in which a boy's anger, annoyance, boredom, or triumph are depicted directly in Sendak and very obliquely by Wynne-Jones and Wallace.

I say "boy" intentionally, however, for Ida in *Outside over there* is far less open about her feelings, and in this respect David resembles her, and perhaps many children of our present time, whose feelings must be shown symbolically (*In the night kitchen*, after all, was published in 1970).

I must turn now to one of the most mysterious, fascinating, and, except in one regard, astronomically correct aspects of the book's time-sequence, as conveyed by the illustrations. The title page contains a small illustration of the lower left-hand corner of a window, upon whose sill we see two building blocks: a cube and a pyramid, both yellow, and through the window in the night sky shines the moon as a very thin crescent. On the book's final page the identical window is shown, but without the blocks and with the moon full in a similarly coloured sky. The message of the first and last parts of visual text is clear: David Finebloom has—in fantasy or reality—rebuilt the moon with his blocks. But a question arises: if this is a fantasy about the waning ("Help! I'm falling apart") and subsequently waxing moon, and yet we also see that the "real" moon has actually gone from crescent to full, can it have taken place in a single night?

The answer is spelled out directly, but ambiguously, in two details, one in the first illustration with verbal text, the other in the last. For in addition to the pictures on the wall which refer to space travel in David's bedroom, there is a

calendar showing the date "Sept 27"; but where David is sitting with his mother at breakfast, looking at the full moon, there just happens to be a page of a calendar under the telescope-stand which reads "Oct 12." This clearly implies that more than two weeks have passed between the opening and the close of the story. I shall make no attempt to explain how this could happen in one night, such as claiming that the entire story is a dream, that the calendar-pages are part of David's fantasies, or that what is really portrayed is a series of David's dreams over a two-week period (least convincing); I prefer to leave this aspect of the book mysterious—a quality provided wholly by the illustrations, whether or not Tim Wynne-Jones instructed Ian Wallace to include such details. But the passage of time certainly does imply that Mrs. Finebloom is over whatever troubles may have put her on the couch under a blanket!

I have here concerned myself primarily with the signifying content of representational, narrative, iconic, and symbolic details in the visual text. But Ian Wallace's artistic techniques add strongly to the atmosphere of the book. Of *The sparrow's song*, written and illustrated by Ian Wallace, which contrasts strongly with *Architect of the moon* in that its illustrations depict a world of day and light, its publisher tells us on the rear flap of the dustjacket that the "original illustrations ... are watercolour paintings on Arches paper." Arches paper has a rough surface which lends a pleasantly grainy quality to Wallace's brightly illustrated daylight book; and I suspect that he has used the same kind of paper to illustrate Tim Wynne-Jones's story, although here the illustrations were done with pastels and coloured pencils. The grainy texture is more visible in the photolithographs contained in the nighttime book, and to many of the illustrations it adds a shimmery, somewhat spooky quality to the depictions of both night skies and to those of moonbeams, which seems particularly appropriate in a book that is, with all its humour, mysterious in more ways than one.

Despite my tolerance of, even my attraction to, ambiguity, I do find it slightly irritating that what must be intended to be a waning moon (for what else could be meant by the moon's falling apart?) is in fact depicted with its thin crescent on the right side, whereas in the northern hemisphere this would in fact be a waxing moon. Such an error has occurred more than once in children's books, including Maurice Sendak's *Dear Mili*, in which the final illustration includes many symbols of aging and death, including leaves turning red and brown, overripe fruit, and a setting sun. The moon, which is a thin crescent, is thus presumably another symbol of the same; but in this instance as well, the crescent is on the right side. Apart from this one seeming error, Ian Wallace is true to the astronomical facts: a waning (falling apart) moon with the amount of remaining crescent shown would take about fifteen or sixteen days to reach the phase of fullness; such a waning moon would appear only in the night sky; and the first appearance of the next full moon would be early in the morning, as at David Finebloom's breakfast. Why artists tend to paint the moon's crescent on the right side even when the moon is clearly—for reasons of symbolic context or story

(the former in *Dear Mili*, the latter in *Architect of the moon*)—a waning one is something I cannot explain. Is it just because the majority of artists are right-handed? (I tried checking this against the moons in illustrations by William Steig, whom I know to be left-handed, but all his moons are full ones!)

No matter in the long run, because Ian Wallace's collaboration with Tim Wynne-Jones has created a book which, though at first seemingly simple, through its combination of verbal with visual text—both of them essential—achieves a highly gratifying level of literary and artistic complexity and interest, and conveys (or arouses) a good deal more than several initial reads-and-looks-through might reveal. The idea of life on Earth as monotonous and confining for an imaginative child, together with the male child's fantasy-need to protect his mother and assert his masculinity, are subtly conveyed by both "texts," giving a feeling of seriousness to what is on the surface a humorous fantasy.

#### NOTES

- 1 These, as well as Sendak's stated identification of "Mili" with Anne Frank (not explicit in the illustrations, but inferable from them), are the artist's own meanings and in no way Grimm's. I have written about *Outside over there* in chapter 11 of my 1989 book, *Stories of reading*, and about *Dear Mili* in a paper read at a 1991 conference.
- 2 I should confess to a bias which tends to make me believe that illustrators exercise a degree of independence from the author—a bias perhaps excessively present in my 1978 book, *Dickens and Phiz*.
- 3 I resist writing about how "we" respond or understand, because I can be sure of no reader's response but my own—except when I teach, or, in this case, receive some important comments from Perry Nodelman. And thus I am not claiming that all the signs and symbols I see were intended by the author or illustrator to mean what I think they might mean.
- 4 I have tried to remain consistent in my use of rudimentary semiotic terms. And thus a "symbol" is a sign connected to what it signifies by convention. An "icon" is a sign that signifies by means of a perceived similarity. I take these definitions from Rancour-Laferriere (2).
- 5 I probably would not have thought of the teapot as a "possible icon of the breast," were I not a Dickensian. I have in mind Mr. Chick's question upon the death of Paul Dombey's mother and his own wife's expressed concern about Paul's nourishment: "'Couldn't something temporary be done with a teapot?'" (*Dombey and Son*, ch 2, 9)
- 6 What Perry actually said to me was that he thinks David is somehow rebuilding his mother in the process of rebuilding the moon. I extrapolated from this.

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