



**Picture Book as Personal Journey:
A Kristevan Reading of Peter Sís's *Tibet: Through the Red Box***
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Tibet: Through the Red Box is about a boy's anguish at his father's unexplained disappearance and his attempt as a grown man not only to accept, but also to celebrate that traumatic absence, which became an extraordinary journey full of magical adventures. The bereft son coping with the absence of his father is a key thematic, structural, and psychological motif in narratives as diverse as *The Odyssey*, *The Secret Garden*, and *The Glass Menagerie*. But Peter Sís brings a special poignancy to the peculiar combination of angst and adoration, competition and identification, that marks such father-son relationships. Through shifting text-image interactions in this semi-autobiographical picture book, Sís captures the process of growing up—not only from child to adult, but also, specifically, from boy to man—by overcoming the trauma of paternal absence. What gives *Tibet* its unusual depth, however, is that, even as it tells this tale of love and healing, it seems to interrogate whether a complete and unequivocal triumph over past trauma

is possible. Though Sís says about *Tibet* that “One part of the story is what I knew and believed in as a child, the other part is what I understand now as an adult” (“Iron Curtain”), the picture book itself seems to delight in thwarting the complacency of complete “understanding.” There is a persistent indeterminacy in Sís's book that complicates its therapeutic teleology of transforming childhood experience into adult understanding.

Sís's picture book is fruitfully read through Julia Kristeva's ideas about the psychological mechanisms underlying the process of “growing up,” especially because her theory explores the aesthetic manifestations of symbolic and semiotic realms. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva discusses modernist poetry as a discourse marked by the dialectic between symbolic and semiotic modalities. Her paradigm of poetic language as an aesthetic construct that allows the play of primal psychological forces offers new ways of approaching Sís's picture-book art. In his book, Peter

Sís celebrates his father's marvelous adventures in Tibet while trying to come to terms with the paralyzing pain he suffered because of his father's unexplained absence. Reworking his father's Tibetan diary and the stories he told upon his return, Sís creates a layered picture-book narrative that captures the psychological processes underlying loss and suggests the ambiguous possibilities of self-healing in complex text-image relations that resonate with Kristeva's theoretical terms.

Peter Sís's father, Vladimir Sís, is a well-known Czech filmmaker who was sent to China in the 1950s by the Czech government, ostensibly to teach the Chinese photography, but actually to film the construction of a highway that would allow China to invade Tibet. Along with a few companions, Vladimir Sís was separated from his Chinese hosts after a massive landslide. Unable to find his way back, he wandered the land for almost a year and a half, ultimately meeting the Dalai Lama, who was still a child. While Vladimir Sís was lost in a foreign land, having unexpected but not entirely undesirable adventures, Peter, who was barely four at the time, waited at home trying to cope with his father's inexplicable disappearance. The book itself was written at another distressing moment in Sís's life, when his father was diagnosed with prostate cancer and the spectre of paternal disappearance seems to loom large once again.

Most reviews and analyses of the book have focused on the political contexts or the theatrical

aspects of *Tibet*.¹ But the work also deserves a closer consideration of its psychological dimensions, for, as Sís confesses about *Tibet*, "That's probably the toughest, hardest book I created just because, without thinking about it, I got very close, closest, to my personal life" (Teichner). Significantly, in employing an iconotextual aesthetic (incorporating both visual and verbal signs) that stresses the unknowable and enigmatic, Sís refuses the easy reassurances offered by many children's books about problems solved and difficulties overcome.

Kristeva's ideas, which straddle psychological and artistic realms, are useful for understanding Sís's artistic rendering of childhood pain. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva notes that the trials of infancy and childhood do not disappear forever once they are over. Similar crises in later life "awaken echoes of old traumas," replicating the patterns of childhood psychological responses (181). Indeed, even the normative pattern of "growing up" is a process fraught with pain and risk. According to Kristeva, the arc of human psychological development means the separation from the wholeness of the semiotic, experienced as *jouissance*, and entry into the realm of language and society through a process which includes the fragmentation of earlier psychic plenitude into coherent and distinct units, into object and subject, into presence and absence. "Language learning" and, by extension, a child's entry into the symbolic, says Kristeva, "can therefore be thought of as an acute and dramatic confrontation between positing-separating-


identifying and the motility of the semiotic *chora*" (*Revolution* 42).² The inchoate fullness of neonatal psychic drives and pulsions, associated with the maternal body, must be broken up and differentiated into signifiers and absent referents in order for a child to become a speaking subject.

Kristeva's theorization is not only relevant to Sís's iconotextual project of representing childhood angst and adult acceptance, but also has implications for the picture-book genre itself. Kristeva notes that human expression and communication allow for "different modes of articulation" of "non-verbal" elements "constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example)," and linguistic elements, which emerge from the symbolic modality. And it is the "dialectic between them [the semiotic and the symbolic] that determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry etc.) involved" (*Revolution* 34). Thus, according to Kristeva, modernist poetry such as that of Mallarmé allows much play to the semiotic modality, which exerts pressure on rule-bound symbolic language in the form of "Melody, harmony, rhythm, the 'sweet' and 'pleasant' sounds and poetic musicality" (80). Kristeva's notion that the dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic "determines the type of discourse" can be applied to the picture-book genre where images are "non-verbal signifying systems that are constituted exclusively on the basis of the semiotic," while the text is representative of the


symbolic modality in discourse. The applicability of Kristevan theory to picture-book art has been briefly mentioned by William Moebius in a footnote to his essay, "Making the Front Page: Views of Women/ Women's Views in the Picture Book":

[T]he image, preverbal, presymbolic, a fecund and continuous semiotic, accompanies the word, which breaks with the image, singling out, "meaning something," making a pronouncement of limited reference, saying what only symbolic language can say. . . . But the semiotic challenges again and again the finality and authority of the symbolic. (251)

Moebius's notion that the tension between text and image in picture books is like that between symbolic and semiotic modalities can be linked to Kristeva's argument that certain discourses—such as Mallarmé's poetic language—reveal traces of ancient psychological processes. In modernist poetry, the semiotic is visible in "the introduction into the linguistic order of an excess of pleasure marked by the redistribution of phonematic order, morphological structure, even syntax" (*Revolution* 80). Kristeva, in later works, extends the "excess of pleasure" offered by non-linguistic elements not only to "poetic language making free with language code," but also to "music, dancing, painting," all of which have the potential for disruptive semiotic pleasure because they have not



. . . picture books also potentially allow the play of subversive, semiotic pleasure.



been as thoroughly harnessed by dominant symbolization systems. In picture-book discourse, then, images can similarly be seen as sites of pleasure, wholeness, and a deep, unspeakable satisfaction that has been lost during the entry of the subject into the symbolic realm of language. In offering such semiotic sustenance along with symbolic language, the picture book might be seen as a fit genre to facilitate the child's emergence into the literate world. The persistent attraction of the picture book to adults, however, also suggests that such books can be more than a transitional tool in a child's progress into the adult world of words; picture books also potentially allow the play of subversive, semiotic pleasure. In continuing to offer indirect access to that which must be suppressed for proper "growing up," picture books may suggest the incompleteness of the child's emergence into the literate world. Reviewers have persistently categorized *Tibet* as a book that will appeal to readers of all ages (see, for instance, "Forecasts: Fiction"; Wilton; Sutton). Certainly, a picture book like *Tibet*, which resists ageist categorization and appeals to children and adults simultaneously, can be seen as an aesthetic manifestation of the psychical dialectic between symbolic and semiotic that Kristeva theorizes as perpetual and inescapable.

While images in picture books frequently offer a presymbolic joy, it would be reductive to adhere too strictly to the dualism implicit in Moebius's linkage of image with the semiotic and text with the symbolic. As Kristeva's examination of modernist poetry suggests, textual constructs are a fecund field for semiotic resurgences. And, as Moebius's own seminal essay on "Picturebook Codes" illustrates, images can be appropriated by regimes of symbolic discipline, creating meaning through sequential chronology and socially established grammars of visibility. Indeed, picture books may manifest

the unruliness of semiotic pleasure, which Kristeva articulates as the “redistribution” of syntax and linearity, through both visual and verbal fields—for instance, as sensual submergence into colour or uncanny narrative respectively. But, even if we do not align the text too rigidly with the symbolic and images with the semiotic, we can consider the picture book a form that allows the play of these psychical modalities because of its interdependent iconotextual elements. The possibilities for unruly, pleasurable *jouissance* in picture books must be anchored within symbolic signification in order for the books to function as socially recognized artistic constructs. As Kristeva’s analysis of poetic language shows, it is not complete submergence in the semiotic, but the imperfect suppression and eventual infiltration of the semiotic into the texture of the official discourse of symbolic language that leads to the fullest articulation of human complexity and aesthetic excellence.

It is this creative tension between the sporadic re-emergence of the semiotic and the communicative coherence of the symbolic that is at the centre of Sís’s work, and so evocatively concretized in his choice of the cover for *Tibet*. Sís’s picture book has a rather unusual dual cover: a translucent parchment-paper-like dust jacket with fine map-like etching and writing on it, layered over pale, clothbound hardboard that has a colourful image in the centre (see Figures 1 and 2). The crisp whiteness of the top layer carries all the marks that

legitimize a text in the world of readers, publishers, and sellers. In bold lettering, we see the title of the book and the author’s name. The big silver medallion-like sticker announcing that the book has won a Caldecott award confirms the aesthetic credentials of the work. The name of the publisher and the barcode establish the status of the book as a commodity. It is this top layer of the cover that denotes the participation of the book in the symbolic order, naming it and bestowing on it markers of value. But faintly visible underneath is a colourful image—a square with some circles inside. We cannot quite make out what the illustration represents but we assume it is Tibet because all the textual markers tell us so. The title in a bold red font above the half-revealed image and the word *Thibett* superimposed on the bottom seem to name the image and fix its meaning. Our eyes cannot quite make out what the shadowy square of colour visible underneath the white layer actually depicts. So it is with a sort of relief that the reader’s gaze turns to the bright, clear lettering of the author’s name at the bottom of the cover.

Nevertheless, despite the discomfort generated by the shadowy glimpses of the suppressed image, it is the duality of the cover that gives Sís’s book a depth and beauty that is quite unusual. Furthermore, the authority of the symbolic layer—so to say—is not invulnerable or absolute. The fine, white, translucent cover is not held in place by any adhesive. The half-glimpsed illustration just beneath the surface seems to beckon

the reader to pull back the veil of legitimacy and enjoy its colours. And when one does uncover the image beneath, the circles inside the multicoloured square are revealed to form a labyrinth. Inside the labyrinth is a sprawling building or city at the centre—Tibet, perhaps? At the bottom left corner of the maze teeters the small, upside-down figure of a man with a camera about to enter the labyrinth. The journey to “Tibet” is apparently more perilous than the authoritative fonts and confident words of the layer above seemed to suggest. The image is beautiful and draws the viewer in, but the labyrinth leading to the building at the centre also evokes danger. In spite of the dangerous pleasure offered by the illustration, it is significant that, without the explanatory marks imposed upon it by the layer on top, the image seems incomprehensible, sitting nakedly in the middle of the pale cloth-covered hardboard. It almost mysteriously draws the eye, but, shorn of the marks of authorial, artistic, and economic legitimacy, it evokes only silent puzzlement. The pleasure of the semiotic is intense and inexplicable, but, without the rules imposed by the symbolic, it fails as coherent communication. Just as the suppression of the semiotic and abjection of the maternal body are necessary in order to enter the symbolic order and to ensure normative social interaction, so too the preverbal pleasure offered by the image in the cover beneath must be covered by the legitimizing marks of naming. And, conversely, it is the pressure exerted on the bindings of

symbolic authority by the image beneath that heralds the poetic magic of *Tibet*.

The link between artistic form, patterns of psychological emergence into adult individuality, and the lingering trauma of childhood crises is especially relevant to *Tibet*, which juxtaposes symbolic and semiotic elements in order to tell the story of a boy inhibited by paternal absence who is now grown into a father himself. Indeed, Sís’s interest in highlighting the faithful reproduction and continuity of masculine identity through the generations is revealed in the paratextual elements of *Tibet*. Sís’s dedication reads: “From son to father and father to son.” And the importance of patrilinear succession as a portal into *Tibet* is reinforced in the picture on the inside of the back cover. Instead of the traditional author’s picture on the inside flap, *Tibet* carries a photograph of Peter Sís, flanked by his father Vladimir on one side and his son Matej on another. These paratexts of *Tibet* imply that the source of the narrative lies not in the unified, monolithic authorial self but in a chain of patriarchal signification. The book becomes not just the author’s tribute to his father but a passport into that corporate masculine generational identity that connotes the fully socialized and successful male in the symbolic order. It simultaneously facilitates and documents the transformation of “son” to “father.”³

This confident patrilinear frame of *Tibet* is undercut by the endpapers of the book. The endpapers show

silhouettes of two faces—a boy and a man—gazing at each other from diagonally opposite ends of the double spread. As Don Latham has noted, the “gulf between the two faces is drawn to look like the river” (184), and indeed it is the wide space between the faces that dominates the visual image. Among the waves is visible the map of the Indian subcontinent, including Tibet. In other words, in contrast to the male community affirmed in the dedicatory words and the photograph, the endpapers signal separation; father and son on either side of a gulf marked by Tibet. The emotional dissonance between the cover flaps and the endpapers is typical of Sís’s complex narrative strategy in his picture book. Signs of affirmation and healing run parallel with traces of lingering divisions.

In the context of the engagement with the filial dynamic in *Tibet*, it is apt that at the core of Sís’s book are his father’s words. Vladimir Sís kept a diary while he was lost in Tibet, and, when he returned, he told stories about his adventures. The father’s written and oral words are the urtexts, as it were, for Sís’s picture book. *Tibet* alternates the father’s written and verbal narratives with the son’s versions of the stories. It is this act of recovery and rewriting—using both symbolic and semiotic elements—that becomes the vehicle for celebrating the father’s life and healing the pain he once inflicted on the son by his involuntary disappearance.

The interaction between word and image in the first page of the book offers a useful introduction to some

of Sís’s artistic strategies in the following leaves (see Figure 3). The most striking thing in the opening frame is Sís’s use of colour—or rather the lack of it. The overall impression of the page is that of drabness. A thick column of white, barely relieved by a few black words, is sandwiched between two pillars of fine grayish-blue cross-hatching. In the position of visual privilege, a letter peeks out of an ethereally floating envelope drawn in thin blue lines. “Prague, September 19, 1994,” it announces in a font simulating handwriting, “The Red Box is now yours. / Love, Father.” As if in dialogue with these innocuous words, the printed text of the narrator/son appears below: “After all these years, my father is calling me home. / I have to hurry. / I’m back in Prague, in our old house. / Where is everyone?” The columns of blue depict the path the narrator takes to reach home, through the streets of Prague and up the stairs to his father’s study. In contrast to the dreariness of the page is a bright sliver of red in the study. Undeniably attractive and warm, it is clearly the goal of the narrator’s journey.

The contrast between the dismal hues and cheery red is important because, for Sís, painting and colour seem to have a special emotional valence. In an interview, Sís tells Jan Velinger how he reacted when his long-lost father eventually returned from Tibet: “My father stayed nineteen months and he missed two Christmases, (which for me as a four year-old boy was a little traumatic). In fact, when he came back I painted the whole house with my pictures, including the chairs



The Kristevan semiotic, realm of preverbal pleasure and fullness, seems somehow linked to that little box



and light switches" ("Illustrator"). Sís's reminiscence about literally erupting into colour and painting at his father's homecoming after a long absence indicates that drawing and painting are for him a deeply personal, almost visceral, mode of expression. His use of the "fecund and continuous semiotic" of the image to express the unspeakably intense pleasure he felt as a young boy at the return of his father is especially relevant to his aesthetic in *Tibet*. But the sheer pleasure he takes in colourful pictures seems far from a fleeting, whimsical impulse of childhood. In his first idea for a picture book, Sís sought to transform the link between colour and emotional-psychological states into theme and aesthetic form. In an interview with Michael Joseph and Lida Sak, he recounts that the original version of *The Rainbow Rhino* is about a rhinoceros whose nose shines in multicolour splendor when he is happy. But he meets people who "betray him, or don't do what they promise to do," and with each disappointment "one color from his nose disappears, and one color in the book disappears" (133).

The linkage of colour with excitement and hope in *The Rainbow Rhino* provides insight into Sís's use of colour in *Tibet*. The blocks of white and dull blue that open *Tibet* constitute a page from which all jouissance is seemingly sucked out—only the red box can offer the promise of happiness. The red box—a mysterious bequest from the father, a secret legacy the import of which the reader cannot quite comprehend, seems to be the only source of colour, of happiness, that the son seeks. The Kristevan semiotic, realm of preverbal pleasure and fullness, seems somehow linked to that little box, which offers a portal into the world of colour and happiness that the rest of the page-world lacks. The semiotic is, of course, usually linked to the feminine, though here the red box is associated with the father. While Kristeva posits a clear binary lining up maternal/feminine/semiotic against paternal/

masculine/symbolic realms in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she moves away from the gender and parental essentialism in her later work.

Although the box is a crimson hope at the end of the journey, Sís represents the achievement of that goal as uncertain. The first glimpse we get of the narrator is from an unusual perspective, from the back, running up the narrow streets of Prague in the left column and into a long indoor passageway to his father's study in the right-hand image. The son is a small figure drawn in ominous black who races away from us into the world of story, bag in hand and casting a shadow behind him. Diminished by the imposing edifices, confined to narrow channels, the narrator seems beset with dark troubles, which are hinted at most intriguingly by the shadow that dogs his heels. The narrator and his shadow seem to be doubles: both are figures drawn in black hatching; there is nothing much to distinguish between the man and his shadow except perhaps a slight difference in size and density. Sís's portrayal of his narrator as a duality or a divided self visually evokes the split subject of psychological discourse who must repress his semiotic roots in order to forge an identity in the symbolic. But, as Kristeva argues, the repression is never perfect. The subject always remains "in process" (*sujet en procès*). His assimilation in the symbolic order—as confining and tightly channelling as the paths the narrator traverses as he moves up strangely phallic-seeming columns—is always threatened by

the archaic memory of a semiotic time when it was hard to distinguish between self and other. This split subject that is the narrator must pass through many doors, which suggest a crossing of thresholds between distinct spaces, both physical and mental. The trope of doors is one that Sís also uses in *The Three Golden Keys*, in which the protagonist must delve into folk memory to open the doors that will let him enter his home. Similarly, the narrator of *Tibet* must cross many doorways in order to get to the goal that gleams at the end of the journey, the red box. Whether that quest will ever be complete, though, seems equivocal. Sís portrays his narrator's journey using a flat plane and a truncated frontal frame that seriously undermines the perspectival arc of sequential progression, which in turn disrupts the conventional trajectory of a hero's quest. Sís's precarious balance between possible semiotic pleasure and the difficulty of ever accessing it is typical of his artistic technique in *Tibet*: the warmth and promise of the red box is real, but the certainty of reaching the healing it offers is fleeting and unstable.

Significantly, the impetus for the narrator's journey is the summons of his father in the form of a bequest. Aptly, then, the first words in the book are not the son's but the father's. The "actual" narrative of the picture book is not self-generating but a response to the Word of the Father. The placing of the father's words in the centre of the page, above the printed text, conveys the implicit hierarchy in the two narratives. The easy


equation of paternal charge and filial compliance suggested in this first “dialogue” between two voices, however, is not unproblematic. There is a slippage between the two texts that offers a telling clue about the relationship between the two narratives. “The Red Box is now yours” in the father’s letter does not quite translate into “After all of these years, my father is calling me home. / I have to hurry.” The son interprets the father’s bequest and it is his esoteric reinscription of the original text that informs the emotional and narrative thrust of the story. There is not just deference but also an element of appropriation in the thematic dynamic between the two narratives.

Another clue to the nature of the son’s assertion of agency is found in the presentation of the father’s missive. Though placed in a spatially commanding position on the page, the textual authority of the father’s words is diluted because Sís frames it as an image. The communiqué is in the symbolic mode of language, but it is also an illustration of a letter peeking out of an ordinary mail envelope. If, as Moebius suggests, the semiotic mode, privileged in the image, always seems to subvert the authority of the word, then the containment of paternal words and paternal power within an image serves to destabilize conventional power hierarchies.


The detailed exploration of the first page of *Tibet* offers some useful insights into Sís’s artistic strategies and their implications for this book. The harmony and

variation between the father’s voice and that of the son, the narrator’s appropriation and re-presentation of his father’s text as image, the identification of colour with an instinctive, inexplicable pleasure, and the images that are intriguingly evocative of irresolvable psychological anxieties—these are aspects of the author’s art that recur throughout the picture book.

The execution of these strategies—especially the use of colour—can be seen when we turn the page. The colour concentrated in the red box, which beckons the narrator to enter the final door into his father’s study, now seems to have spread and blossomed across the double-page spread. The father’s study is as inviting and full of varied hues as the previous page was dull and drab. It is visually a satisfying image, especially in contrast with the previous page, because there is so much to see—photographs, pictures, statuettes, curios, clocks, exotic knick-knacks, and books are everywhere (see Figure 4). But, though the room offers a plenitude of visual pleasure and thus seems to be a space strongly marked with semiotic trace, it also reveals a strong allegiance to the symbolic, as a realm of order, difference, and patriarchal power. In spite of the eclectic range of objects in the room, the image shows a strong impulse to the organization, categorization, and compartmentalization that is so vital to functioning in the symbolic. The most dominant object in the illustration is a huge chest of drawers whose rectangularity seems to proliferate in desk



The father's study
allows both semiotic
and symbolic play.



drawers, mini-cabinets, a butterfly collection, and a plethora of closed boxes—including, of course, the red box. Also, while the room attests to the father's delight and pleasure in fantastic *objets d'art* that resist mimesis, it also suggests that he is a collector of such items. Thus, along with attunement to the semiotic call, he is very much a participant in the culture of desire and ownership that is the bedrock of symbolic social relations. His butterfly collection, for instance, perfectly reflects a sensibility with access to sources of semiotic pleasure such as hue and tint but also engaged in typical symbolic achievements such as scientific cataloguing and relentless acquisition.

Indeed, in spite of the general cheer of this fascinating room, there is a suggestion of menace: a sword rests on the side of the chest of drawers, a penknife with a sharp blade lies open, a riding crop and a noose-like rope hang on the wall. Overall, Sís's depiction of the study is a masterful representation of the father and what he means for his son. The colourful room full of unexpected and inexplicable pleasure-objects but also stamped with totems of patriarchal power is analogous to Kristeva's notion of poetic language—offering preverbal, indefinable pleasures but contained within linguistic communication. The father's study allows both semiotic and symbolic play. For the son, the study is a place of promise and peril. The most evocative object in the image, in this context, is the big empty chair on the left. Positioned in a spatially pre-eminent spot (because Western readers habitually scan the page from left to right), the chair is clearly a seat of authority. But it is empty, conjuring up poignantly once more the spectre of paternal absence.

The simultaneous evocation of paternal presence and absence implied in the chair is echoed by the text on the double spread. Unlike the privileged positioning of the text in the previous page, the words are now pushed down to the bottom, below the illustration. The text

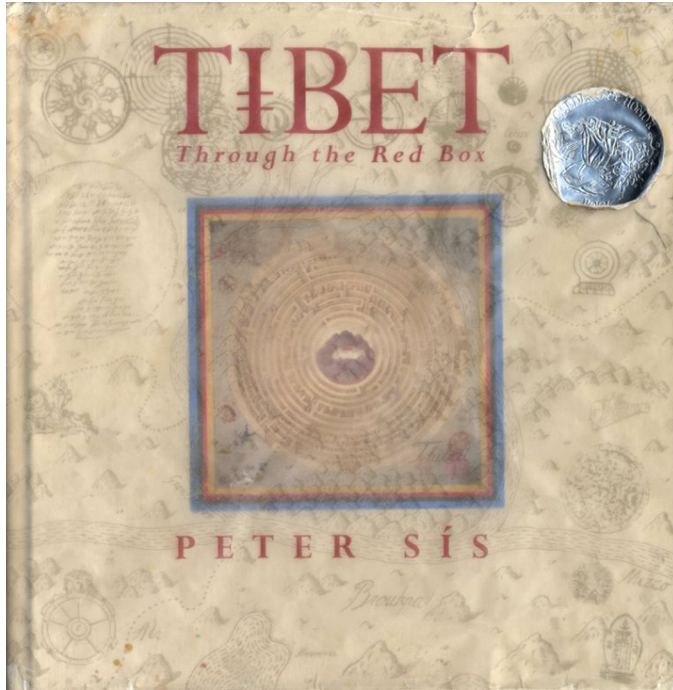


Figure 1. Dust jacket



Figure 2. Clothbound hardboard cover

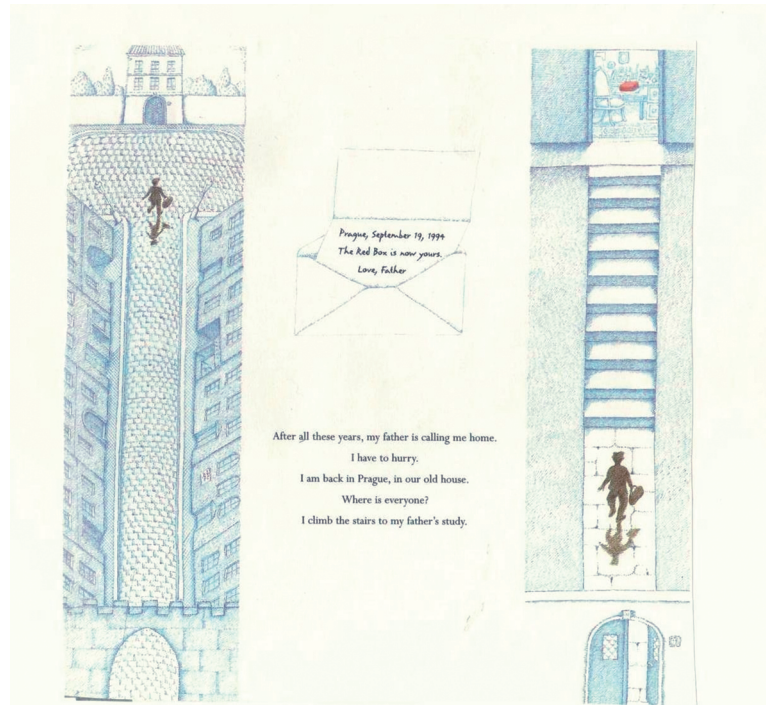


Figure 3. First page



The red box is on the table, waiting.

But I am worried about my father, who is not here.

Figure 4. Second and third pages: the father's study

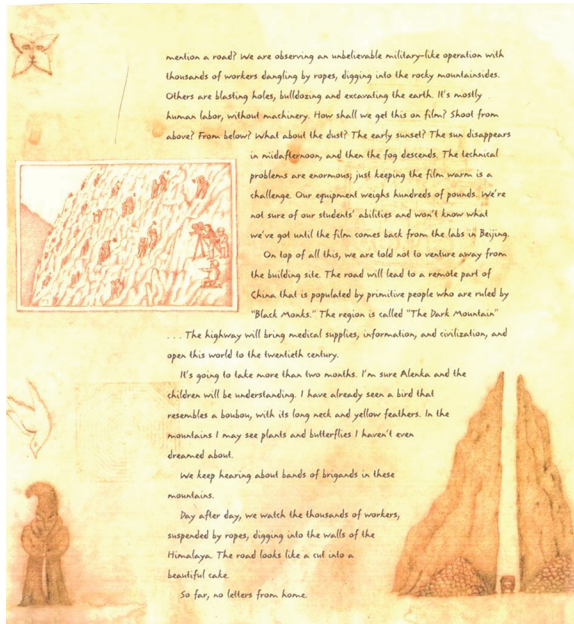


Figure 5. A page presenting an "authentic" reproduction of the father's diary

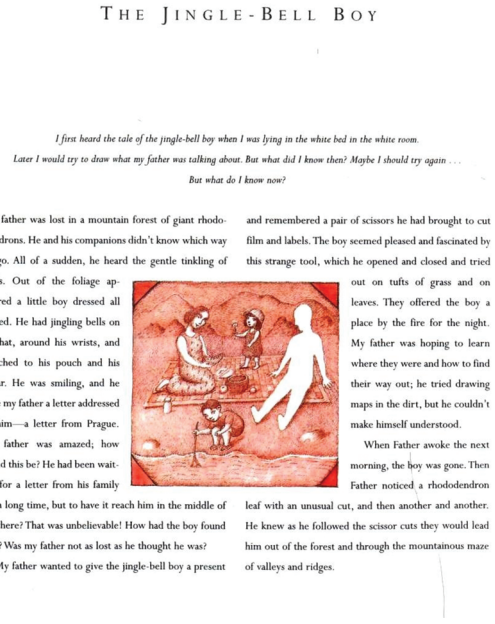


Figure 6. The faux photograph: paternal absence

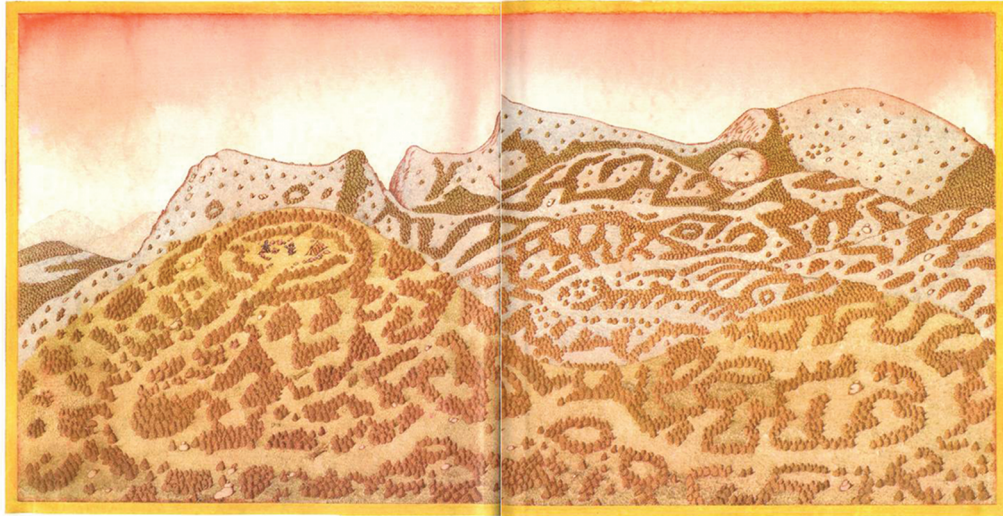


Figure 7. The father and the Jingle-Bell Boy in the rhododendron forest

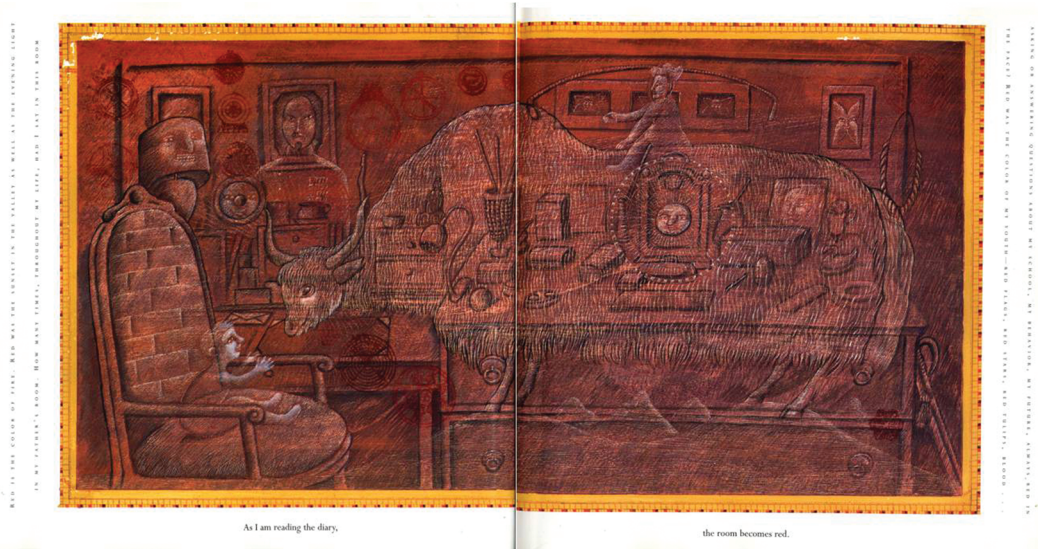


Figure 8. The father's study bathed in crimson light

reads, “The red box is on the table, waiting. / But I am worried about my father who is not here.” The box and the father thus seem linked in a binary of presence and absence where one stands in for the other. The rhythm imposed on the text by the page break and the implied logical link between the two sentences suggests that the box is there because the father is not. Indeed, that is an accurate summation of the situation—for, as we turn the page, we learn that the box contains the father’s diary written during the time he was lost in Tibet. The diary is only present because the father was absent for those long months when he was missing. The corporeality of the father is transformed into textuality.

Closing the door to the father’s study by turning the page, we find the red box, which the narrator has unlocked with “a rusty little key,” open. It is an important moment, that turning of the key: a key is a privilege, it is access to concealed, exclusionary spaces; it can shut out but also let in. All these valences are present in the narrator’s act of turning the key because as a child, he later tells us, he hadn’t been “allowed to touch the box.” In an interview, Sís muses that this was probably because of the pervasive fear in communist Czechoslovakia that the authorities could use anything against you and children might inadvertently let something slip that would alert the secret police (“Public Lives”). While hindsight might explain the taboo on touching the box, the bequest and the access to a hitherto forbidden adult realm conveys

an important emotional milestone in the development to fully empowered masculinity.

Whether or not the key finally does unlock the secrets that replace old grief with new understanding is held in abeyance as the narrative unfolds. The crux at the centre of *Tibet*—as in psychoanalytic therapeutic discourse, especially Kristevan theory—is that to go forward you must first go back. And the red box, which the narrator compares to “an ancient anthill or a grave of memories,” holds out that magical promise of finally healing a childhood wound. The narrator reverently opens it to find “pages and pages of fragile paper covered with faded handwriting and fine drawings and maps blending into the text, all of it barely holding together, like brittle autumn leaves.” Just as the father’s study conveys the simultaneity of semiotic pleasure and symbolic discipline, so too his diary reflects a mutually enriching exchange between these two registers. But even more significant is the artist’s representation of the narrator’s emotions upon finally being allowed to reclaim the lost father through his diary. The following page is covered with what we imagine are pages from the father’s diary in miniature, laid out in neat rows and columns, so that we can see 144 of them at one glance but are unable to read one word. We realize that what we see are pages and pages of writing interspersed with illustrations, but the words themselves are reduced to the status of image. It is a transformation similar to the one we saw in the first page where the father’s words



. . . the father's cryptic bequest on the first page is significant as the prime mover of the son's story but remains subject to the son's reinterpretation



become the image of a letter, except that, in this case, the writing is reduced to the point where it no longer communicates as symbolic discourse. The impact of this move is dual, conveying satisfaction but also implying subversive intent. In life, Sís celebrated the physical return of his father by drawing and painting every visible surface of his home; in the picture book, the textual recovery of the father is also celebrated with illustrational excess.

The link of such a page with imagistic jouissance is clear if we consider the dynamics of the transformation of words, sentences, and pages into an image. Linearity and chronology are essential operations of the symbolic realm both at the micro and macro levels, from the construction of linguistic meaning through alphabets, words, and sentences to the creation of historical, cultural, and ideological metanarratives. Images too have their own interpretative codes and visual grammar. They do, however, have more possibilities of resisting sequentialization, as Sís's image here proves, because they typically have a greater range and freedom in terms of spatial organization on the page. Sís's representation of the written word as image disrupts even conventional visual codes, such as "reading" images from left to right or top to bottom. Instead, this illustration refuses to prioritize any one element over others, spreading out visual details randomly. The semiotic negation of distinction, order, and sequence is very effectively captured in Sís's appropriation of word as image. The father's legacy of words might be received with tremulous joy, but the son reproduces the words in ways that mark them as specifically his.

It is no surprise, then, that the first actual words that seem to emerge out of the box are not the father's but the son's. Just as the father's cryptic bequest on the first page is significant as the prime mover of the son's story but remains subject to the son's reinterpretation, so here

the father's words are important sources of the picture-book discourse but are liable to appropriation and reinscription. When we turn the page, the red box—object of quest, stand-in for father, now stretched across two pages—is overwritten with the narrator's evocative and poignant narrative about the impact of his father's absence on him. It is a story replete with emotional and psychological resonances and begins with the long, happy times shared by father and son before the fateful trip to Tibet. "We played for hours in the magic garden of our house, which was enclosed by a high, safe wall," the narrator reminisces. Sís conceives of the narrator's pre-Tibet life as an enchanted, protected, idealized space of fullness and unbounded love contained within the security of the wall, not unlike Kristeva's spatialization of the womb-like *chora* that concretizes the heterogeneous play of drives or pulsions in the semiotic phase.

Though the *chora* is associated with the experience of the mother's body, the father also has a role in this nurturing world. Unlike the stern Father of the Law, the Kristevan imaginary father embodies love. In *Tales of Love* and *Black Sun*, Kristeva posits this father as a figure who helps the subject to transition from the semiotic to the symbolic with love and guidance instead of the threats that the Lacanian Father of the Law uses. Kristeva, in *Tales of Love*, conceptualizes the "imaginary father" as a "father-mother conglomerate" that corresponds to "an archaic disposition of the

paternal function, preceding the Name, the Symbolic" (138). The destabilization of tight Lacanian binaries between the maternal and paternal through the "imaginary father" is continued in *Black Sun*, where Kristeva no longer posits this loving father as being the reverse of the Father of the Law, but sees both as being different phases of a consolidated identity. The result is that she seems to affirm the psychic structures of the development of a subject—from the plenitude of the semiotic to the fragmentation and linguistic articulation of the symbolic with the help of love—while turning away from the earlier gendered oppositions. As Maria Margaroni writes, the imaginary father "is part of the narcissistic structure that supports the child against the emptiness that results from abjection," and "serves as the initial pole of attraction for the child, a site of primary identification that prepares the ground for his/her subsequent identification with the post-Oedipal symbolic father" (47). Thus, the imaginary father does not coerce the child into giving up semiotic wholeness with the threat of castration but coaxes the child with unbounded love to follow him, as it were, and begin the move into the harsher demands of the symbolic order that will eventually lead to proper socialization and participation in history.

The normative cycles of human development require the gradual emergence of the subject from the protective semiotic cocoon—a process that seems to be progressing well enough for the narrator, who



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occasionally gets to venture beyond the “high, safe wall” when “[s]ometimes my mother let me go with him when he was working on his films.” The salutary equilibrium of a timeless, nurturing magic garden with guided excursions into adult paternal space in the presence of a loving father captures the essence of Kristeva’s theory about the role of the imaginary father.

Sís’s narrative also suggests that, when the father disappears into far-off lands, this benign process is rudely ruptured. The absence results in a disruption in the normative patterns of development. “I grew fast,” remembers the narrator, “perhaps too fast.” There is a problem with his spine. The physical and mental seem intertwined in Sís’s evocative narrative about a son’s traumatized response to the inexplicable hole in his life. The devastating impact of this unsupervised growth is exacerbated when one day he jumps from the high wall of the garden. The leap paralyzes the protagonist. He recalls, “I was in a white bed in a white room and I couldn’t move my arms or legs.” The absence of the father proves paralyzingly traumatic for the son. The magic garden with the high wall connotes a presymbolic state that the narrator must eventually exit. But it is a departure fraught with danger and the potential for pain—especially without the imaginary father’s love to make the entry into the symbolic bearable. Then, the act of growing up can become the equivalent of leaping off the high wall into an abyss of stasis where traces of semiotic pleasure, the means of re-entering the magic garden, are completely blocked up.

If the confinement in the “white room on a white bed” conveys the damming up of preverbal visual pleasure, the physical immobility of the narrator also implies that he remains in an abject state, unable to participate fully in the symbolic order either. Only the father’s return has the power to heal the breach in the protagonist’s psyche. That return is

registered, significantly, in the form of words. One day, the paralyzed boy finds a stranger in his room telling him marvelous stories in “a deep voice.” It is his father. As the father’s words pour over him, he is magically revived. Each story brings back sensation to a different part of his body until, finally, he can feel his father’s kiss on his cheek, “see colors again,” and “walk again.” The power of orality is an important theme in Sís’s work, and here the storytelling-father’s tales function as the antidote to his son’s sickness.⁴

As a child, the narrator responds to his situation in pictures. He tries to capture in his art the stories his father tells of his extraordinary experiences in Tibet: “I would try to draw the things he talked about, things I could hardly imagine.” The attempt to transform his father’s words into images is an important psychological and artistic manoeuvre. It reveals a desire to internalize the father’s experience and somehow participate in the absent father’s life, to share in that which was happening elsewhere while he waited at home, colourless and paralyzed. The narrator’s desire is to salvage meaning from a source that is elusive, never quite within grasp, always deferred: forever absent. And the medium the son adopts for somehow assimilating and then reproducing that moment is that of image. Painting is not only a deeply personal and almost instinctive mode of expression for the narrator, but also one that offers the kind of preverbal, semiotic fullness

that he identifies with his father’s company in the high-walled magic garden.

Tibet is, at one level, a successful repetition of this exercise in a more sophisticated form: an attempt at mastering the trauma of paternal absence, an artistic *fort-da* game, if you will.⁵ But, just as the *fort-da* game remains a fundamentally ambiguous psychological manoeuvre—offering substitutes for the lost beloved object but also in the process reinforcing irreversible separation from it—so *Tibet* seems to highlight the impossibility of closure even as it presents a trajectory of acceptance. Sís’s nuanced and complex artistry in conveying these multiplicities becomes evident when he recreates three of the stories his father told him: “The Jingle-Bell Boy,” “The Valley of the Giants,” and “The Bluest Lake.” Each story is presented in a rhythmic, repetitive pattern fraught with artistic as well as psychological significance. Each narrative unit consists of five specific components. I will focus primarily on “The Jingle-Bell Boy” to consider how the individual elements in each unit function.

The retelling of each adventure begins with an illustration of an old, yellowing, handwritten page, presenting an “authentic” reproduction of the father’s diary (see Figure 5). The use of a font resembling handwritten words not only produces the impression of an “original” text, but is also the closest that typographical symbols can come to the actual physical trace of the corporeal hand moulding the letters on



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the page. Just as the picture book itself begins with the father's written summons, so this newly unearthed paternal urtext posits the father as the source of narrative meaning. The journal is a substitute for the father, a textualized paternal body, in which the father was "present" at the time of his absence for the son. This is the closest the narrator can come to physically recovering the lost father. Sís presents the diary as a blend of words, drawings, maps, faux photographs, and diagrams. The interaction between the verbal and the visual on the diary pages follows no predetermined pattern. There are no clear margins or consistent line lengths. Drawings and photographs of all sizes pop up randomly on the page. Sometimes, the writing curves and sidesteps when there is an image in its way, and sometimes text and illustration intersect. In terms of Moebius's linkage of words with the symbolic and of images with the semiotic, the page conveys an easy negotiation between the two media, another form of Kristevan "poetic language," as it were, that is analogous to the spirit conveyed in Sís's representation of the father's study.

The pages of the diary tell the story of the father's departure from Prague, his arrival in China, and the natural disaster that separates him from his group. But the focus of this section is the father's encounter with a mail-boy in the middle of nowhere. The father has wandered in the thick mountain undergrowth of rhododendrons for four days without the least idea of his location, and is growing increasingly desperate. Suddenly, he sees a boy dressed in red clothes with bells sewn on them, who, contrary to all laws of logic, gives him a letter from his family in Prague. He is a mail-carrier, but his delivery of the letter to the narrator's father seems nothing short of magical and fantastic.

This astonishing incident forms the core of the "The Jingle-Bell Boy." The uncanny content of the story is made even more intriguing in Sís's

absorption and re-presentation of the “facts” in the diary. After reproducing “faithfully” the sacred paternal text in all its handwritten intimacy interspersed with beautiful but doodled drawings, Sís begins a series of negotiations and transpositions of the father’s words. After the diary entry, we turn the page to find on the left side Sís’s adaptation of the Tibetan mandala. Sís’s use of the mandala as an introduction to the son’s retelling of the father’s tale does not merely create the right ambience for a story set in Tibet. Mandalas are objects of ritual meditation and a spatial metaphor for metaphysical space. But, most relevantly, they are portals to enlightenment, doorways through which “special insight is achieved by the voyager either during the progress of the journey or upon arrival at the core” (Walcott 71). Sís’s adaptation of the mandala is apt for the journey initiated by his father’s narrative of the magical mail service. At the centre of the mandala, where the tutelary deity should be, is a tiny boy in red holding a bell. The rest of the geometrical pattern is populated by fantastical figures of volcanoes, dragons, and fire-breathing human faces. The predominant colour in the mandala is red. Typically, mandalas include all primary colours, but, in Sís’s picture book, each narrative moment of the father’s diary is transformed into a particular hue. Red is the colour of the synapse between the father’s Tibetan adventures and the young boy waiting on the other side of the globe. The red of Tibetan mail-boys becomes in the

son’s imagination the crimson of jingling Santas at Christmas—and thus, he begins to make his father’s story his own.


The narrator’s retelling of the tale begins on the next page. The layout of the page and the text-image relations here mark an important psychological and artistic step toward reclaiming the lost father. The title of the story, “The Jingle-Bell Boy,” at the top of the page in bold font, uses stylistic convention to establish authorial ownership of the tale and lay out interpretative parameters for it. The title announces that, however the father’s diary narrated the incident, this particular version belongs to the son, who has the power to name it. Also, this tale, like the rest, has an epigraph that gives us background information: “*I first heard the tale of the jingle-bell boy when I was lying in the white bed in the white room.*” The narrator’s decision to base his retelling of the father’s adventure on recollected oral transmission rather than on the diary is an important step in making the story his own. By choosing a version of his father’s experience that holds the promise of personal fulfillment for him, the narrator begins the process of demythifying the power of the papers in the red box. The contents of the box are an important testament to his father’s achievement, but what matters more to the son is the story as *he* experienced it. The healing power of oral storytelling rescued him from the colourless paralysis of the trauma once, and that is the version he turns to now. Oral narrative, Kristeva

notes, is the form of linguistic discourse with the most possibilities for semiotic play because of its preverbal elements such as “vocal or kinetic rhythm” (*Revolution* 79). The materiality of the diary is important in filling in for the missing corporeality of the father, but much of its power derives from its inaccessibility. And now, finally having been given access to the box, the narrator chooses the oral version as more valuable.


The assertions of authorial power are countered by the positioning of the story-text and the image that goes with it (see Figure 6). The illustration, a faux photograph, is placed at the centre of the page, drawing the eye. The image depicts an idyllic family scene at the beach: the mother opening a picnic basket, a little girl offering her a flower, a small boy in the forefront bending down to poke a stick into the shallow water. But most startling is the figure of the father. The father has been cut out of the picture. Where the father should be, lounging on the mat, relaxed, legs stretched out, there is only a white silhouette. The image is a masterful “present-ation” of paternal absence. And the glaring white gap in the picture echoes that other terrifying whiteness, of the white room, the white bed, the colourlessness of excruciating suppression of the semiotic and shattering entry into the symbolic. But, as if to distract from this gap in the middle of the image, there are rows and rows of words arranged around the picture, cradling it. In Kristeva’s theory, language emerges from the rupture of semiotic completeness;

here, the son’s narrative is inextricably connected to that hole in the picture. Words stand in for the object that is forever lost, signifiers trying to capture that signified through a chain of ever-deferred meaning. The narrator’s storytelling performs a similar function in trying to find the right words that will finally fill in the lack that lurks at the centre of everyday life. But though the story cocoons the image protectively, almost as if ensuring that it does not fall apart altogether, it cannot fill the lack itself. Sís’s format suggests that the father’s story might have returned functionality to the stricken son and kept him from falling apart completely, but the emptiness remains just the same.

If the layout of the page speaks to the narrator’s old wounds and therapeutic words, the story itself is a curious mix of faithfulness and rebellion. The diary entry that precedes the narrator’s retelling ends with the father’s astonishment at receiving a letter from his family when he thought he was lost in an alien land. The narrator begins by repeating in third person the experiences his father has written about in the diary. But then, the narrator moves the plot forward. We learn that the father wants to thank the mail-boy for the letter and presents him with a small pair of scissors. He also questions the boy unsuccessfully about directions to civilization. The language barrier prevents communication, but the next morning the father has a surprise waiting for him. The boy has disappeared in the night, and here and there in the forest there are



The transformation
of the narrative
“fact” . . . muddies
boundaries between
writing and drawing.



whimsical shapes cut into leaves. The father realizes they are signposts on the way out of the forest. He follows the little snips on the leaves and is able to exit the maze-like woods.

From this point forward in the book, leaves with designs cut into them become an authorial signature. On the corners of random pages, small, artfully snipped leaves begin to appear, leading the reader through the book with visual clues, just as the mail-boy helped the father make his way through the forest. The author’s assimilation of the textual detail in the father’s story as image, a visual link, is especially intriguing in the light of the fact that the father’s diary does not mention this fairy-tale-like guidance by the mail-boy. When the diary picks up the narrative, the narrator’s father mentions the scissors he gave the boy and adds, “Next morning he’s gone, but under a stone by the campfire there is an ancient map on bark paper. . . . According to the map the boy left we are in Thibett.” Presumably, then, it is with the help of the map that the father manages to reach civilization, and not by following a trail of snipped leaves.

Is this detail something that the father perhaps added when he told the story to his ailing son? Does the discrepancy arise from the instability of oral narratives as compared to the fixity of textual ones? Or is it a product of the narrator’s imagination? It is impossible to tell. What is most intriguing is Sís’s incorporation of magical, disruptive, and inconclusive elements in the storytelling that subvert the rational chronologies that drive the symbolic realm. Sís’s narrative negotiations of the jingle-bell boy’s adventure also reinforce the limitations of aligning the semiotic solely with the image or the symbolic exclusively with the text. The transformation of the narrative “fact” in the father’s diary into a new magical element in the narrator’s tale and then into the images of whimsically snipped leaves muddies boundaries

between writing and drawing. The “leaf” of the diary on which the father’s pen has etched its experiences morphs into the leaf of a plant inscribed with the son’s esoteric scissor-marks. One kind of script gives way to another; narratives—whether verbal or visual, father’s or son’s—blend together. The narrator’s childhood attempt to draw the stories his father tells now evolves into a more complex refashioning in which clear distinctions between different marks produced by different instruments dissolve. Pen, paintbrush, and scissors create narratives that sometimes run parallel and sometimes intertwine or even contradict each other. The retelling of the father’s tale in a way that highlights gaps, incoherencies, and the impossibility of distinguishing adult “understanding” from childhood belief seems to unburden the narrative from the demand of finding rational resolution for archaic, incomprehensible loss in the symbolic realm.

That freedom seems to translate to a cessation of words as we turn to the first double-spread illustration without any accompanying text in the book. The double spread has a reddish hue to it and shows a mountainous landscape covered with a maze of trees. On the left corner of the otherwise randomly shaped maze, we see two tiny figures inside a circular, garden-like space enclosed by a wall of trees—it is the father and the Jingle-Bell Boy in the rhododendron forest (see Figure 7). The father’s companions, although mentioned both in the diary and in the narrator’s version of the

story, are nowhere to be seen. Also, the circle of trees with a small path leading out of it seems a protective rather than a threatening space. The grown man and the little boy, more shadows than clearly individuated figures, seem to be sharing a companionable moment. The boy, gesturing grandly, is the centre of the man’s attention. The image is truly the son’s story more than the father’s, recreating a mood that resonates with the now-lost *jouissance* of a magic garden. Kristeva, linking infantile semiotic states and adult love or happiness, sees in our primal memories “a feeling of plenitude that would be the prototype of all subsequent experience of *jouissance* and happiness” (*Tales* 142). The double spread, both in its wordless visual abundance and in its evocation of nurturing wholeness, powerfully articulates the healing powers of the semiotic. It is an image that admits no gaps or fragmenting separation, joining father and son, allowing the boy to participate in the lost moments that the diary narrates.

The immersion in the semiotic abundance of the image seems to cover the blank space in the psyche more than the verbal text did. We see the impact of the submergence as we turn the page and are returned to the father’s study in the present, where the narrator sits reading his father’s diary. Words reappear at the bottom of the page: “As I am reading the diary / the room becomes red.” The cryptic text is matched with an image that re-presents the father’s study in a strikingly different way. The distinct outlines and box-

like compartments in the study have lost their specific contours. The red that the narrator associates with the story of the jingle-bell boy seems to overflow the room, which is bathed in crimson light (see Figure 8). The image truly captures the “preverbal, presymbolic, fecund and continuous semiotic” that Moebius mentions. The trauma associated with the blankness of white seems finally to have been covered over. The red study is populated by strange figures: grinning table lamps, glowering goateed faces, butterflies with eyes. A man with a turban rides a yak that seems to walk on a shadowy mountain range. The huge, shaggy, smiling bovine creature superimposed on the father’s angular desk and chest of drawers manifests the dissolution of the father’s symbolic realm into fantasy. The entire image functions, in Kristeva’s words, like “[m]agic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and ‘incomprehensible’ poetry,” which are traces of the repressed semiotic challenging symbolic discourse (*Revolution* 30). The enigmas and inconclusive details of the son’s earlier verbal retelling of the father’s tale spiral into the pervasive “non-sense” of the image that radically challenges symbolic narrative teleologies. If the sensuous sliver of red that the narrator journeys toward in the first drab page of the book symbolizes his quest for understanding and healing, then this immersion in red is the bizarre and overdetermined resolution. Sís’s illustration recreates the symptoms of the semiotic that Kristeva observes in Mallarmé’s

poetic language: an “excess of pleasure marked by the redistribution of phonematic order, morphological structure, even syntax” (*Revolution* 80). The erasure of boundaries, the obfuscation of outlines, the oversaturation of pleasurable red hues, and the challenge to cognitive coherence all mark this moment as symptomatic of semiotic pleasure.

One of the most intriguing changes that we see in the study is that which is wrought upon the father’s chair. The father’s chair, which had earlier been so conspicuously empty, is now occupied by the near-transparent figure of a small boy, arms outstretched toward the cheerful yak. Significantly, the back of the chair now seems to be a brick wall, bringing to mind the wall around the magic garden. The chair, which so poignantly represented the father’s painful absence earlier, now becomes a nurturing seat that cushions the boy. The arms and back of the chair seem to protect him from a fall. The Kristevan imaginary father who had so abruptly disappeared while aiding the narrator’s gradual departure from the magic garden, precipitating the child’s catastrophic and paralyzing exit, seems to be resurrected in this final image, bringing to a close the sequence of textual and visual negotiations in “The Jingle-Bell Boy.”

The chair in the red study not only evokes the return of the absent father, but also suggests its importance for the son. The happy boy nestled in the chair indicates the narrator’s recapture of lost *jouissance*,

but the image also hints at the empowerment the seat facilitates. The son now happily occupies the place of the father, suggesting a successful integration of the previously traumatized narrator into the patrilinear chain. The role of the imaginary father is to ensure the child's safe transition from semiotic wholeness to symbolic fragmentation so that he can follow the normative patterns of socialization and individuation. The son's acquisition of the father's words as a legacy and assimilation of them through uncanny, non-representational images successfully repeat the process that was disrupted long ago.

Unlike the previous moment of semiotic fullness experienced in the wordless double spread, this image of colour-saturated abundance is flanked by the text. Not only does the textual narrative return at the bottom of the page, but also words appear running sideways along the right and left margins of the image, giving the impression that the semiotic fullness of the image is enclosed parenthetically within textual brackets. Sís's layout seems intuitively to echo the Kristevan necessity of containing the profusion of the semiotic realm within the limits imposed by the symbolic. An irreversible retreat into the semiotic connotes a regression from the socialized symbolic world of adult language into aphasia, incoherence, and hallucination. Instead, the ideal to strive for is balance, avoiding either a magnified separation from the nourishing semiotic at the time of entering the symbolic or a refusal to separate from

the *jouissance* of the semiotic altogether, thus placing oneself outside the symbolic order. It is this kind of balance that the final layer of the jingle-bell boy story seems to aim at. Also, significantly, the parenthesis of textual lines is a subjective articulation of the different moods and memories the narrator associates with the colour red: fire, the beautiful sunset, communist flags, the blush caused by his father's reprimands, tulips. Insofar as the text along the sides of the pages is not an addendum, correction, or rewriting of his father's utterances, these are fully and finally the son's words. The evocative arrangement of text and image implies the narrator's coming to terms with the father's absence and overcoming the traumatic lack in the act of creating his own narrative of balanced symbolic and semiotic elements.

With this achievement, the movement of the five-step narrative ritual undergirding *Tibet* is complete: the first step is an "objective" transcription of the father's diary, followed by the second step, a meditative, personalized mandala. The metaphysical spiritual portal leads to the third phase, where the narrator attempts to "write in" the absent father by retelling his stories. The son's versions, however, persistently subvert the authority of the father's words, adding, changing, and reworking details so that inconsistency, enigma, and solipsism proliferate. This subversion of symbolic authority leads the narrator to the fourth step where, in a wordless double spread, the son recreates one narrative moment in his own medium, that



. . . all one can hope
for is a tenuous
equilibrium.



of painting. The impact of the submergence in silent, semiotic pleasure is evident in the final, fifth step, in which the narrator returns to the present, where, instead of a dreadful whiteness, colourful plenitude awaits him. But it is a pleasure that, instead of banishing the symbolic altogether, seems to perform the ultimate healing negotiation by balancing the father's narrative with the son's reception, internalization, and rearticulation of it.

Each of the father's adventures is represented through these layers of subtly changing narrative in which the shifting relationships between word and image articulate a process of emotional and psychological regeneration. The scarlet story of "The Jingle-Bell Boy" is followed by a paean to green in "The Valley of the Giants" and a celebration of cerulean in "The Bluest Lake." Both the stories follow the same pattern as that of "The Jingle-Bell Boy," with similar text-image negotiations and subversive narrative inconsistencies.

But, as we know from previous pages, Sís does not deal in simplistic plots of psychological pain and healing. Instead, there is an eerie doubleness in his narrative where the affirmative strand of therapeutic storytelling and "understanding" of the past is constantly crisscrossed by darker threads that imply that perfect healing and wholeness are never possible; all one can hope for is a tenuous equilibrium. Just as original lack, or loss, can never fully be erased, so too, despite functionality and fulfilling creativity in the symbolic realm, appending a "post" to old traumas is a precarious process at best. The dénouement of Sís's story reiterates the importance of the unsaid, the incomprehensible, and the irrational as sources of possible jouissance as well as potential fragmentation. The final section of the book is focused on the story of "Potala," the Dalai Lama's palace. This section seems to echo the previous narrative units but is quite different from them, functioning as

an artistic resolution to Sís's story.

Like the sections before it, this one has a colour theme—black. Interestingly, Sís dispenses with the traditional tragic connotations of the colour black, conceiving it instead as an antithesis of the dreaded white. It seems an amalgamation of all colours rather than a rejection of them. Black is “the color of night, of magic and shadows, of the unknown. You can project your dreams—or nightmares on to black. Black is the perfect backdrop for the stars and for hope.” Black is the amalgamation of hope and healing with fathomless fears, thus echoing the complex mood of Sís's meditation on the possibilities of completely overcoming old traumas. Sís's choice of black as the reigning mood for this section can also be understood by the somewhat bittersweet conclusion of the father's adventures in Tibet.

At some point during his wanderings in Tibet, through an almost imperceptible process, the father becomes committed to the goal of warning the Dalai Lama about the Chinese government's nefarious motivations in building the road through his country. He realizes the destructive potential of the road and wishes to save the unique beauty of Tibet. “Potala” tells the story of the father's journey to the heart of Tibet, the home of the Dalai Lama. Potala is, we are told, “a magic palace with a thousand rooms—a room for every emotion and heart's desire. There is a room covered with stars, portending the future, and a room with the coffins of the eight-foot tall people of ancient times . . . Potala embodied wisdom

and reason; it dominated the valley, the country, the history of Tibet.” The father hurries through Potala, driven by the need to warn the Dalai Lama, or the “Boy-God-King,” of what “he thought he understood” about the impending danger from the Chinese. But an amazing thing happens to the father inside Potala: “as he rushed through the palace (and I know this only from his hints), he realized that beneath the color and splendor of its rooms, and pictured in minute details and in different aspects, angles, and perspectives, his state of mind was somehow being reflected. It was all there, recorded on these walls, the past and the present.” In the face of Potala's all-encompassing seamless magic, no quest, no strife, no desire remains. This is a fundamentally constitutive moment that cannot be captured in words. As the narrator tells us, “In that short moment, I think my father became who he is today, and in seeing this now, I can understand why he could never clearly write or tell about what he went through in Tibet.” The importance of the narrator's epiphany cannot be overplayed. Not only does the box have no metanarrative that can heal the breach in the son's psyche, but also the climax of the father's adventure is enigmatic and unspeakable. There is irony in the fact that the son claims to “understand” the moment that is resistant to meaning, that he claims to narrate that which is hidden in the unspoken crevices and gaps of his father's words.

Sís's artistry transcends and undercuts this psychological and emotional resolution. In the pages

that follow, the father passes through a red room, “sunrise and sunset, heart of time,” a green room, “square and circular, ear of the earth,” and a blue room, “light and dark, eye of the soul.” Sís depicts each of these rooms through an image with the textual description of the room at the bottom. The images themselves, like the illustrations of the colour-saturated study earlier, are fantastic and magical, enjoyable but not understandable or decodable. What is comprehensible is Sís’s use of rows of war-vehicles—army trucks, tanks, airplanes—as borders for the images of Potala’s magic. The invasion of mysterious Tibet and magical Potala by the dominating, destructive, acquisitive, authoritative Chinese forces seems to embody the suppression of the rich and enriching semiotic by the symbolic realm.⁶ It is a tragic but inevitable moment. The father, in spite of his best intentions, can do little about the threat—and the endless wisdom of Potala itself seems far beyond the need for any naive rescue missions.

After recreating the climax of his father’s adventure in Tibet, the narrator closes the red box, and his father enters the study. For the son, his father is finally back. This time, the return is not just physical but also psychological, although recovery is far from perfect or complete. The father and son go out for a walk and talk. The narrator is “happy to be together again,” and the “sky is full of stars.”

The last image in *Tibet* captures the narrator’s newfound sense of closeness and solidarity with his

father. Our first glimpse of the narrator is as a darkly shadowy, hauntingly split subject; the final vignette repeats the motif with significant differences. As socially functional human subjects, we are all divided selves, as the visual doubling implies. Unlike the earlier undifferentiated darkness of the twin blobs that represented the narrator and his shadow, however, here the rounded, sparsely shaded figures of father and son walking together suggest warmth and companionship. Even more importantly, the shadow they cast is that of a small boy holding the hand of his father. Boy and man, absent and present father, seem united in a bond where the duality between past and present, semiotic and symbolic is no longer fraught or painful. The image also captures the changes in the narrator’s relationship with his father. If we turn the book upside down to look at the shadows, the larger figure of the father seems to be leading the little boy by his hand. The figures of the adult narrator and his father reflect a very different equation. Now, it is the son who seems a step ahead of his elderly father, guiding him gently ahead. In finding the father the little boy lost, the narrator seems to have found his own ability to lead like the father. The cyclic dedicatory statement, “From son to father and father to son,” seems to be borne out in this final image.

In typical Sísese fashion, however, the epilogue complicates this fantasy of perfect father-son reunion. The epilogue for *Tibet* is an extract from Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Gift*, in which the protagonist, Fyodor,

is searching for his father, a famous lepidopterist and explorer who has disappeared somewhere in Tibet. Unlike Sís's narrator, Fyodor never finds his father, and eventually gives up the search. This is a bleak intertextual allusion in an epilogue apparently celebrating the emotional reunion between father and son.⁷

In the final sentences of *Tibet*, Sís on the one hand seems to accept objectively the value of his father's adventures, avowing that "Only now, after I have visited it [Tibet] through the pages of my father's diary, do I realize I should not have wanted him back." On the other hand, there seems to be an implicit awareness that in spite of the father's physical return, at some more profound emotional and metaphysical level, he will always be absent to the son. "Did he ever completely return," wonders the narrator, "Is he still

happy and young somewhere in Tibet?" There is no easy closure, only a tenuous balance between healing acceptance and a perpetual sense of loss.

Margaret Higonnet observes that "a great writer or artist can theorize through his work," so that "what Sís is doing is as productively theoretical and illuminating" in terms of picture-book art as Kristeva's work on psychology. Picture books like *Tibet* are "not 'easy' books in any sense of the word," as Latham says (192). Certainly, there are many moments in *Tibet* where readers cannot quite "make sense" of the illustrational excess, teasing pictorial details, factual inconsistencies in the narrative, and enigmatic plot nuances. Approaching the book from a perspective informed by Kristeva's insights, however, allows us to see its "difficulty" as a manifestation of complex and imperfect psychological negotiations implicit in journeys from loss to healing.

Notes

¹ There is only one scholarly article that analyzes this important picture book in detail, and it examines Sís's use of visionary-adventurer protagonists (see Latham). For reviews touching upon the political content or, rather, lack thereof, see Bernstein, Lasky, and Swenson. In 2004, David Hwang adapted Sís's book into a play for children, which brings to the forefront its political strand about the Chinese invasion of Tibet.

² Also, Kristeva's theory of the abject is a useful lens for young adult novels. See, for instance, Coats and Marchant.

³ Interestingly enough, in Peter Sís's work, female figures are few and far between. Most of the better known of Sís's books focus on male heroic figures, and women are either absent or remain a marginal presence. There are some exceptions, however, such as the Madlenka series and *Ballerina!* which focus on a little girl. The mother in *Ship Ahoy!* is an important figure, but her significance in the son's story is rather unusual in Sís's oeuvre. Sons and fathers, on the other hand, are more common. See, for instance, *The Three Golden Keys*, *The Tree of Life*, and *Play, Mozart, Play!*

⁴ For instance, see Gollapudi on Sís's celebration of the healing power of orality in *A Small Tall Tale from the Far Far North*.

⁵ One of the central moments reflecting a child's use of language to express absence as well as successfully negotiate that lack through words is the *fort-da* phenomenon that Sigmund Freud observes and upon which Jacques Lacan builds. In a self-made game akin to peek-

a-boo, the child removes his favourite toy from sight, saying *fort*, German for "gone." He then brings it back, yelling *da*, "here." Freud considers this game as a means of coping with the mother's increasing absence in the child's life as he grows up. Lacan focuses primarily on the *fort* aspect of the game, seeing it as emblematic of the child's entry into the linguistic realm of the symbolic, where he uses language to negotiate as well as master the idea of absence. In an attempt to achieve mastery over the newfound psychic conceptualization of lack, the child repetitively enacts the loss of a loved object and the pleasure implicit in its return by replacing the object with elementary linguistic signifiers. Sís's picture book can be seen as a means of mastering the trauma of paternal absence.

⁶ It is relevant in this context that Kristeva's first conceptualization of the semiotic and the symbolic was strongly focused on the politically revolutionary potential of semiotic disruption (as evidenced in her title *Revolution in Poetic Language*). Certainly, as an artist, Sís seems instinctively aware of how political discourses, such as the Communist regime he witnessed as a boy, parallel the operation of the symbolic repressing semiotic pleasure. In *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*, Sís's memoir of growing up in Czechoslovakia, when there is a small hiatus in the repressive policies of the State during the "Prague Spring," it is celebrated with a brightly colourful double spread that contrasts sharply with the monochromatic pages before and after. For Sís, an important symptom of oppressive State power is the Czech government's insistence on socialist realism in art, which inhibits his own creativity. Thus, aptly enough, the youth of Prague rebel against the government by painting a wall with bright colours again and again

in spite of police attempts to ensure it remains a pristine white.

⁷ Also, like *Tibet*, *The Gift* has a biographical core to it. Nabokov wrote of Fyodor's quest after his own father was murdered by his political opponents. Significantly, though *The Gift* has many autobiographical echoes, Nabokov completely erases the political activism of his father, so that, as Greenleaf says, "The son rewrote a father uniquely tailored to himself" (142). Nabokov's erasure of his father's important public achievements in his artistic resurrection of the paternal is relevant to Sís's act of recovering and celebrating his absent father. *Tibet* only mentions one source for the author's stories—the direct words of the father to the son, whether written in the diary or narrated to him orally. But Vladimir Sís co-authored and contributed photographs to a book, *Tibetan Art*, by Lumir Jisl, which was translated into English in about 1958 (and which I stumbled upon by chance). The book contains a series of photographs of Tibetan life and art. Though Peter Sís spoke in some detail about the autobiographical source of his book when *Tibet*

was first published, he did not, to my knowledge, mention his father's published book until recently (see, for instance, Teichner). Intriguingly, we can see hints of his father's photographs in the illustrations Sís draws in his book. Especially obvious is the similarity between Sís's double spread of Potala and his father's photograph of it. While it is not surprising that two representations of the same building look similar, the identical perspective makes the resemblance uncanny (Jisl 16). Similarly, other echoes of the father's hidden work are visible in Sís's book, such as the image of the giant carvings of Buddha on the hillside (Jisl 44, 45). I point out these similarities not to detract from Sís's art, but to suggest the very complex and personal dynamics of paternal reclamation underlying *Tibet*. Vladimir Sís's book does not bear directly upon the son's artistic quest because Peter Sís's search is for the intensely intimate father whose disappearance marked him in deeply agonizing ways. *Tibetan Art* represents the Tibet belonging to the public man, while *Tibet: Through the Red Box* represents the magical, intimate, experience that changed the father and ultimately the son.

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