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Dada Knows Best: Growing up “Surreal” with Dr. Seuss

Philip Nel

Placing Dr. Seuss—the pen name of Theodor Seuss Geisel—in the company of Dadaists and Surrealists may seem a curious idea to some. Geisel (1904–1991) is best known as the author of roughly forty-seven children’s books, but dada and surrealism are best known as part of a philosophical-artistic movement in twentieth-century art—the historical avant-garde. Although their images were later embraced by advertisers,¹ most surrealists and dadaists maintained an oppositional role with respect to mass culture; indeed, most were sympathetic with socialists and communists. Seuss, on the other hand, was a very successful capitalist and very much a part of American mass culture. He became nationally known for his “Quick, Henry, the Flit!” advertising campaigns for Flit bug spray in the 1920s and 1930s, he founded the immediately profitable Beginner Books division of Random House in 1958, and by the time of his death “Dr. Seuss” was a multimillion-dollar industry. But although he profited from mass culture, Geisel did not endorse all of its attendant values. For example, *The Lorax* advocates environmental conservation, *The Sneetches* criticizes anti-Semitism, and the *Butter Battle Book* agitates against nuclear proliferation not because addressing these topics would sell more books but because Seuss wished to provoke his readers into rethinking the dominant beliefs of their society.

Highlighting the connection between Dr. Seuss and the twentieth-century avant-garde calls our attention to his role as a cultural critic. It is this essay’s contention that Geisel’s work draws on what Andreas Huyssen has called “the original iconoclastic and subversive thrust of the historical avant-garde” (*After the Great Divide* 3), a movement initiated by the dadaists in the second decade of the twentieth century. The term *historical avant-garde* is, in Peter Bürger’s words, an attempt to “re-integrate art into the life process” in order to engender in the audience a “critical cognition of reality” (50). Aware that “reality” is itself shaped by ideology, Seuss is a successful example of an artist

who—in the tradition of the historical avant-garde—tried to shake his audience out of their habits of thought and cause them to rethink their assumptions.

We need to be reminded of this aspect of Seuss because recent “Seuss” works—books patterned on those of Seuss but written by others—have transformed him from a subversive force into a moralist who supports the status quo. Seuss’s tales have always contained morals, but they have delivered these morals by raising questions and by provoking their readers. Recent books patterned on Seuss have done exactly the opposite. For example, take the first offspring of Nickelodeon’s “Wubbulous World of Dr. Seuss,” a work called *The Song of the Zubble-Wump* (1996). Originally an episode of the show and now a book, this new story uses Seuss’s characters and some ersatz Seussian rhymes to tell an overtly moralistic story unlike any the original Doctor ever wrote. In fact, Seuss’s first published children’s book, *To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, rejected by twenty-seven publishers before Vanguard Press took it on in 1937, was rejected precisely because editors thought it lacked “moral or message” and contained nothing that would help in “transforming children into good citizens” (Geisel, quoted in Morgan and Morgan 81). *The Song of the Zubble-Wump*, however, seems intent on turning Seuss into William Bennett; as a result, morals and messages take center stage. The once-iconoclastic Cat in the Hat arrives to deliver a line about the gift of life, an overtly religious reference that Geisel would never have permitted.² The Cat in the Hat rescues a Zubble-Wump egg from the Grinch and solemnly tells us, “That egg is a miracle.” The Cat also delivers a lecture to the Grinch and to a little girl–muppet named Megan, who has broken the egg while trying to wrest it from the Grinch. This in turn prompts Megan—apparently to prove that she has learned her lesson—to offer us a speech about sharing that concludes with “amen.” This scene is ridiculous: the Cat is an anarchist, not a moralist.³ His persona does become less rambunctious in the later books, but he is always more interested in challenging the rules than in laying down the law. Original Seuss books offer not “amens” but questions to provoke the reader.⁴

As a way of debunking this imaginatively stale, *Book of Virtues* version of Dr. Seuss, this essay revives the subversive Seuss in the following four ways. The first section looks at the stylistic similarities between Dr. Seuss’s paintings and those of the twentieth-century avant-garde, arguing that Seuss shares their criticisms of the artistic establishment.

Using a comparison between the work of the Belgian surrealist René Magritte and Dr. Seuss's *The Butter Battle Book*, section two illustrates how Seuss uses ambiguity as a way of challenging his audience; that is, lack of resolution in Seuss's work interpellates readers into an active critical role and invites them to take up the more rebellious sentiments of the narrative. The third section locates Seuss in the tradition of English surrealists such as Herbert Read, who looked, as Seuss did, to Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll as literary antecedents. Drawing on nonsense literature's close association with the avant-garde, Seuss's work reveals the "rational" adult world as unsound and encourages his readers to do the same. The concluding section examines the effects of the recent merchandising frenzy (of which *Zubble-Wump* is a part) in light of postmodernity: some critics contend that capitalist culture has co-opted the avant-garde, but Seuss's work demonstrates the possibilities of ideology critique in a "postmodern" era.⁵ While the new Seuss book—which was written by Jim Henson Productions—exemplifies pastiche in a Jamesonian sense, a recent Seuss exhibit in New York used pastiche to critical ends and offered some hope for the survival of Seuss's avant-garde edge in the mass market.

"The Joyous Leaping of Uncanned Salmon": A Dadaist at Heart

One might say that the avant-garde moved in just down the street from Theodor Seuss Geisel: in late 1936, just before Seuss's first "children's book," *To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, was published, the Museum of Modern Art launched *Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism*, the first major American exhibition of surrealist art. It stayed at MoMA into 1937, after which it toured the country. For those who did not visit *Fantastic Art* during its national tour, the American media did its best to bring the experience to them. The exhibition prompted a *New Yorker* cover and cartoons in January 1937, mentions in *The New York Times*, several stories in *Life* magazine, and newsreels from both Paramount and Universal that were shown in theaters nationwide (Marquis 173). Although the popular press seized on the entertainment value of the works, many in the artistic community took the work seriously, and, as Martica Sawin and others have shown, MoMA's *Fantastic Art* show marked the beginning of surrealism as a widely felt influence in American art.⁶ In the later 1930s and early 1940s, New York would become a veritable beachhead for the European avant-garde when they fled from Hitler's armies to live in



Figure 1. Dr. Seuss: *Untitled*. © 1995, Dr. Seuss Enterprises. Reproduced by permission of Random House, Inc.

exile in America (Sawin ix–xv). Some returned after World War II, but some remained, and their presence made an impact—political and aesthetic—on American artists. As Meyer Schapiro, a neighbor and friend to many of the surrealists-in-exile, said, “It wasn’t automatism that the Americans learned from the Surrealists, but how to be heroic” (Sawin ix). Although it may not be fair to argue that Dr. Seuss was influenced by the European avant-garde’s heroism, it is not hard to imagine that, as a painter and cartoonist living in New York from 1928 through 1942, Seuss felt the influence of this new artistic presence. *PM*, the pro-labor New York newspaper in which Seuss published several hundred political cartoons during 1941 and 1942, ran several stories on the exiled avant-garde during this same period, including drawings by André Breton and other surrealists. And, as an artist whose lifelong interest in art produced not only original paintings but a television special on modern art,⁷ it seems likely that Seuss would have been interested in visiting such widely reviewed and discussed shows.



Figure 2. Kurt Seligmann: *Life Goes On* (1942). © The MIT Press. Present whereabouts unknown. Reproduced from Martica Sawin's *Surrealism in Exile* (The MIT Press, 1995), p. 198.

When Seuss's paintings were published in *The Secret Art of Dr. Seuss* in 1995, many were struck by the echoes of cubism, surrealism, and dada in his work, influences that probably date to this period in his life. At the opening of an exhibition of his paintings in 1976, a television reporter asked Geisel, "Do you associate yourself with any of your characters?" He answered, "Yes, especially the devious ones" (Morgan and Morgan 232). It is appropriate that Dr. Seuss should speak of deviousness at an exhibition of his artwork, because his art draws on the avant-garde. Titles such as *The Rather Odd Myopic Woman Riding Piggyback on One of Helen's Many Cats* and *The Joyous Leaping of Uncanned Salmon* resemble titles of dadaist work, and some of these works are as disturbing as anything produced by the Dadaists and the Surrealists.⁸ In one untitled work that explores the effects of sadism on women,⁹ sadism seems to be complicit with industry and with men in military uniforms, but—like many surrealist works—the painting creates an analogy while stopping short of indicating precisely *what* the analogy means (see figure 1). That said, industry and the military seem likely targets. Indeed, the tendency of the creatures in this painting to metamorphose into other objects—often into machines—

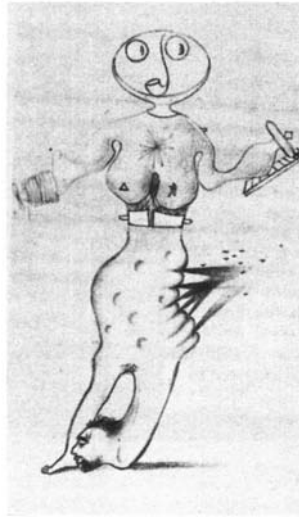


Figure 3. Jacques Hérold, André Breton, Yves Tanguy, and Victor Brauner: *Exquisite Corpse* (1934). © 1999 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. © 1999 Estate of Yves Tanguy / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

recalls Kurt Seligmann's *Life Goes On* (1942), as well as some of the *Exquisite Corpse* experiments by André Breton and his surrealist group (figures 2 and 3). Or consider the oppressively angular, geometric shapes of Seuss's *Minor Cat in a High-Yield Emerald Mine* (undated). The images in this painting share a stylistic similarity with Oscar Domínguez's *Nostalgia for Space* (1939) (figures 4 and 5).

In addition to the stylistic and titular similarities of his work with theirs, Geisel, like the Surrealists, valued the unschooled artist and held "high art" in a certain contempt (as shown by his "Escarobus" hoax, described in the following paragraph). André Breton and others sought out those whose talents had not been "corrupted" by formal artistic training (self-taught artists such as Yves Tanguy), claiming that the absence of training helps liberate the artist from bourgeois assumptions. Although such a position clearly idealizes the "untutored" as a space free of ideological constraints, Breton nonetheless has a point. Inasmuch as adherence to artistic norms indicates an acceptance of the ideological assumptions behind those norms, the self-taught artist may be more open to new experiences. As Breton writes in *Surrealism and Painting* (1928), "experience itself has been



Figure 4. Oscar Domínguez: *Nostalgia for Space* (1939). Oil on canvas, 28³/₄ × 36¹/₈" (73 × 91.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Peggy Guggenheim. Photograph © 1999 Museum of Modern Art, New York.

assigned limits. It inhabits a cage increasingly difficult to coax it out of" (Nadeau 80n). Echoing Breton's idea that formal training inhibits artistic development, Geisel said:

If I'd gone to art school I'd never have been successful. In fact, I did attend one art class in high school. And at one point during the class I turned the painting I was working on upside down—I didn't exactly know what I was doing, but actually I was checking the balance: If something is wrong with the composition upside down, there's something wrong with it the other way. And the teacher said, "Theodor, real artists don't turn their paintings upside down." It's the only reason I went on—to prove that teacher wrong. (Cott 18)

And at least in the case of *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940), Geisel's openness to unusual experience proved him right. As he recalls, "a sketch

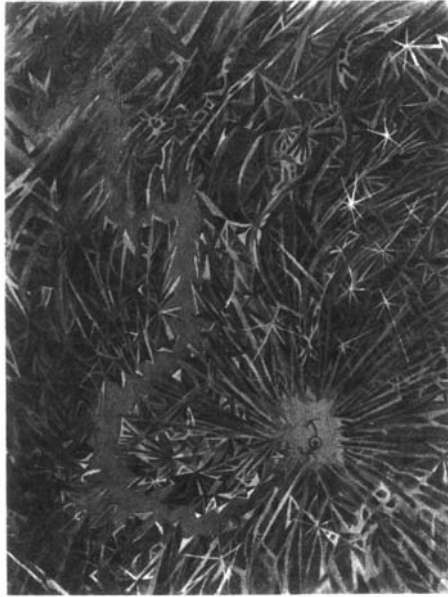


Figure 5. Dr. Seuss: *Minor Cat in a High-Yield Emerald Mine*. Copyright © 1995, Dr. Seuss Enterprises. Reproduced by permission of Random House, Inc.

of an elephant . . . happened to fall on top of a sketch of a tree.” When he asked himself, “An elephant in a tree! What’s he doing here?” (Hopkins 113), the story of *Horton* began.

In addition to a willingness to embrace accident, Geisel, like the dadaists, was openly skeptical of the artistic establishment. He no doubt would have been amused by Duchamp’s urinal, submitted under the title of “Fountain” for the 1917 Independents Exhibition in New York, and the scandalized public’s response to it. Geisel’s provocations may not have been quite so public, but he did challenge accepted notions of high modernist art. For example, in apparent accord with the German dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck’s claim that “art . . . , regarded from a serious point of view, is a large-scale swindle” (Motherwell 43), Geisel created a moderate-scale swindle as a way of proving exactly this point. Indeed, the story of Geisel’s hoax is a classic example of his playfully antagonistic attitude toward the art establishment. In the mid-1950s, not long after moving to La Jolla, California, Edward Longstreth, a friend of Geisel’s and a patron of

the La Jolla Museum of Art, “launched into a condescending lecture about modern art one evening.” Geisel rebelled by tricking his friend into buying some work of “the great Mexican modernist,” Escarobus—a fictional painter whom Geisel invented on the spot. Geisel claimed to have five Escarobuses and let slip that he intended to sell them in order to get the money to Escarobus to help him pay his back taxes. Longstreth took the bait, and Geisel “stayed up most of the night creating the world’s first Escarobus,” which—as Judith and Neil Morgan describe it in their biography of Seuss—sounds like a parody of the sort of modernist work revered at the time: “[Geisel] peeled the wood off a soft pencil, scraped the lead lengthwise across art paper, dipped small hunks of bread in the vodka he was drinking, and dragged the soggy bread across the paper. Next he painted [Lady] Godivas on the smudges, bisecting and trisecting them so that it was impossible to tell that they were naked ladies” (142–43). Later that week, he sold the painting to Longstreth for five hundred dollars. Longstreth was so impressed that he offered to buy the rest.¹⁰ As Geisel said to *New Yorker* writer E. J. Kahn several years later, “That experience made me suspect that a lot of modern art is malarkey. If I can do it myself, it can’t be any good” (Kahn 53).

Geisel’s hoax worked on two levels: in one sense, it fooled the self-proclaimed expert on modern art. In a larger sense, his hoax showed that standards of aesthetic quality rest more on the critic’s habits of perceiving than on anything inherent in the work; that is, by creating a painting that appeared to conform to conventions of great modern art, Geisel ridiculed the notion of a category of “great modern art.” Congruent with the goals of the avant-garde, Geisel mocked the notion of taste on which high art depends. In his “Escarobus” challenge, he demonstrated a principle articulated by Marcel Duchamp in an interview conducted in 1956: “Repeat the same thing long enough and it becomes taste. . . . [G]ood or bad is of no importance because it is always good for some people and bad for others. Quality is not important, it is always taste” (Duchamp 134).

Calculated Ambiguity: How Seuss and Magritte Provoke the Audience

By the time of Geisel’s prank in the mid-1950s, tastes had changed and the works of surrealism and dada had been canonized as high art. Although acceptance by mainstream culture may minimize the original works’ subversiveness, such acceptance does not necessarily

neutralize the subversive potential of the avant-garde techniques that these works introduced. In fact, long after the works of the original historical avant-garde became museum pieces, the goals of the surrealists and the dadaists continued to inspire generations of artists to create art that challenged the social and political mores of the day. For, in addition to the goal of challenging canons of taste, the historical avant-garde wished to challenge habits of thought, to make their audience rethink its assumptions about the world. One way to achieve this effect was to create an ambiguous image—“an image that resists any explication and that simultaneously resists indifference,” as René Magritte has said of his paintings (Torczyner 126). Like Magritte, Geisel consciously harnessed the power of the ambiguous as a way of provoking his readers. As he once said of his compositional technique, he enjoyed approaching a book “with a situation or conflict and then [I] write myself into an impossible position so there is no [apparent] way of ending [the book]” (Morgan and Morgan 128–29).

As an illustration of the power of the ambiguous image, let us look at three works by Seuss and one by Magritte: a Seuss cartoon from 1941, a Seuss painting from 1968, Seuss’s *The Butter Battle Book* (1984), and Magritte’s *The Art of Living* (1967). In contrast to a similar image in Seuss’s 1968 painting *Fooling Nobody*, the cartoon, “We Always Were Suckers for Ridiculous Hats” (April 1941), is not at all ambiguous (figure 6). One of the first cartoons Seuss drew for the daily New York newspaper *PM*, this cartoon uses the image of the “Ostrich Bonnet” to argue that Charles Lindbergh’s isolationist stance is akin to sticking one’s head in the ground. To ignore the threat of Hitler is to behave like an ostrich, Seuss tells us. A parallel image cropped up twenty-seven years later in Seuss’s watercolor *Fooling Nobody*, but now the target has changed from Lindbergh to nuclear weapons. The “atom” image that appears in each eye and the year of the painting—1968—suggest that nuclear arms are a likely subject (figure 7). Unlike “Suckers for Ridiculous Hats,” the *Fooling Nobody* image is ambiguous; instead of recognizing a person wearing a false head, the viewer is now unsure who is wearing whom. Both the “bonnet” head and the lower creature’s head appear to be conscious. Unlike the cartoon, the painting does not present a mask that is simply hiding the face.

Fooling Nobody uses juxtaposition to pose a question that it leaves its audience to answer. As Magritte’s paintings often do, Seuss’s watercolor places images in tension but leaves that tension unresolved. In Magritte’s *The Art of Living* (1967), for example, a spherical “head”



Figure 6. Dr. Seuss: “We Always Were Suckers for Ridiculous Hats” (29 April 1941).

floats like a balloon above what appears to be an empty suit of clothes. Is the “head” the “idea” of the “man” below it? Or—since the suit is empty—is the man a figment of the floating head’s imagination? *The Art of Living* does not answer the questions it poses, and neither does *Fooling Nobody*. The latter employs this very sort of juxtaposition to address nuclear anxieties but encourages the anxieties to linger instead of resolving them. If the creature with the atom-shaped eyes is a projection of the lower one, then the atoms may represent the latter’s nuclear anxieties; that is, the lower creature’s apparent calm is—as the title suggests—fooling nobody. If, on the other hand, the lower is a projection of the “puppet” creature above, then the title is ironic, because the apparently calm demeanor of the smaller creature *is* fooling people. On the other hand, *both* beings are visible, and it’s unclear who is the projection of whom or even if “projection” is the case. *Fooling Nobody* oscillates between these figures, posing but refusing to answer its provocative questions. The work forces an unresolved argument onto its audience, demanding a response that we, the viewers, must provide.



Figure 7. Dr. Seuss: *Fooling Nobody* (1968). Copyright © 1995, Dr. Seuss Enterprises. Reproduced by permission of Random House, Inc.

Seuss continued to use ambiguity as a way to address nuclear anxieties in *The Butter Battle Book*. As with *Fooling Nobody*, the book forces the task of resolution onto the audience. Like the battle between the Big-Endians (who open their eggs at the large end) and the Lilliputians (who open theirs at the small end) in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Butter Battle Book* depicts an escalating arms race between Yooks, who butter their bread butter-side up, and Zooks, who butter their bread butter-side down. A Yook grandfather tells his grandson about the increasingly sophisticated weapons that Yooks and Zooks have devised to destroy each other. Their arms race culminates in the "Bitsy Big Boy Boomeroo," a bomb that "can blow all of those Zooks clear to Sala-ma-goo." But when the Yook grandfather arrives at the wall, his longtime enemy Van Itch (a Zook) is there—holding the Zooks' version of the Big Boy Boomeroo. The two stand poised on the wall that divides their nations, each holding a kind of a nuclear bomb over his opponent's side of the wall, threatening to drop it. The unresolved ending mimics a surrealist work by refusing to provide an answer and, instead, forcing the reader to deal with the tension:

"Grandpa!" I shouted. "Be careful! Oh, gee!

Who's going to drop it?"



Figure 8. Dr. Seuss: final page of *The Butter Battle Book* (1984). Copyright © 1984, Theodor S. Geisel and Audrey Geisel. Reproduced by permission of Random House, Inc.

Will you . . . ? Or will he . . . ?”

“Be patient,” said Grandpa. “We’ll see.

“We will see . . .”

And with that, the book ends (figure 8).

But the tension continues for the reader—especially for the reader in 1984, the year of the book’s publication. Although the years 1989 to 1991 saw the end of the Cold War, in the first half of the 1980s Cold War tensions rose and the threat of nuclear annihilation seemed very real. In 1984, President Ronald Reagan was investing in nuclear weapons and in the famous Strategic Defense Initiative, popularly known as “Star Wars.” In the previous year, nuclear war came into American living rooms via ABC-TV’s broadcast of *The Day After*, a widely watched movie that depicted America after a nuclear attack. If Seuss’s goal was to draw on these anxieties in order to provoke the public, *The Butter Battle Book* succeeded by inciting much public de-

bate. The *New York Times Book Review* offered praise but also called the book “too close to contemporary international reality for comfort.” The reviewer added, “we want to protest—you can’t leave us hanging like this” (Lifton 37). A self-described “concerned Christian mother” in Texas began an effort to “ban the book and halt future editions.” She wrote to Random House, asking, “How dare a well-respected publishing firm” publish “the most blatant form of brainwashing I have ever encountered?” (Morgan and Morgan 254).

*“An Imagination with a Long Tail,” or, “On Beyond Common Sense”:
The Cat in the Hat and Other Subversives*

Although the *Times* reviewer was correct in saying that *The Butter Battle Book* leaves the reader hanging, the concerned parent went too far in calling the book “brainwashing.” The book’s educational technique is precisely the opposite of brainwashing; instead of attempting to systematically indoctrinate its reader into a system of beliefs, *Butter Battle* delivers its anti-arms race message by questioning the logic of mutually assured destruction. Instead of preaching the virtues of peace, it uses absurdity to reveal a “commonsense” foreign policy as common but not sensible; instead of delivering clear-cut answers, it throws us back on our own imaginative resources to resolve the problem. Although not all of Seuss’s works are as confrontational as *The Butter Battle Book*, many are, and they similarly confront their readers by leaving the ending open. For example, both *Yertle the Turtle* (1958) and *The Lorax* (1971) introduce an element of uncertainty at the end, encouraging the reader to take up the actively critical sentiments of each book.¹¹ Those who assert otherwise seem to be trying to fit Seuss into the “happy ending” that many erroneously expect from children’s literature.¹² In Seuss’s stories, the imagination has power, and the books often end without complete resolution in order to encourage readers to exercise that power.¹³ My thesis in this section is that many of Seuss’s tales emphasize the imagination and deliberately resist narrative closure for two reasons—to interpellate the reader into an active role and to encourage readers to identify with the rebellious elements of the narrative, using their imaginations as a source of strength.

The avant-garde, like Seuss, relies on the irrational or absurd in order to reveal the so-called rational world as a construct. As André Breton and others wrote in 1925, “We make no claim to change the

mores of mankind, but we intend to show the fragility of thought, and on what shifting foundations, what caverns we have built our trembling houses" (Nadeau 240). In order to apply this idea to children's literature, think of Roland Barthes's analysis of toys in *Mythologies* (1957). If, as Barthes argues, toys "prefigure the world of adult functions" (53), preparing the child to accept the constructs of society (such as nuclear proliferation) as "natural" and "normal," then explicitly nonfunctional toys can help children to see the world as a construct, providing a basis from which to challenge it. As Geisel once argued, "If you don't get imagination as a child, you probably never will . . . because it gets knocked out of you by the time you grow up" ("Logical Insanity" 58). Nonsense literature can provide exactly this sort of toy—one that allows the child to imagine alternatives to all of the "things that the adult does not find unusual" (Barthes 53).

Seuss and the English surrealists were both drawn to the nonsensical because such literature can potentially reveal the "natural world" as ideologically determined. For example, noting that "the nonsense verse and tales of [Edward] Lear and Lewis Carroll" have been "described as mad or nonsensical" to encourage us not to take them seriously, the British surrealist Herbert Read called for "a reconsideration of such literature" so that its subversive potential may be better appreciated (Read 55–56).¹⁴ Sixty years after his directive, Celia Catlett Anderson and Marilyn Fain Apseoff offered an analysis of nonsense tales with which Read would likely have been pleased. In *Nonsense Literature for Children*, they argue that nonsense literature has "the heretical mission of . . . teach[ing] the young that the world constructed by their elders is an artificial thing. Nonsense literature uses the spirit of playfulness to rearrange the familiar world. It thereby reveals that the rules we live by are not inevitable" (94). Geisel not only read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when he was young (Bandler 2) and considered himself to be writing in the tradition of nonsense literature,¹⁵ but, I would argue, he embraced the genre's "heretical mission," deploying nonsense to challenge the "sense" of the adult world. Calling himself "subversive as hell," Geisel explained, "I've always had a mistrust of adults" (Cott 28). In that same interview, he went on to indicate that his children's books offer a way of subversively expressing that mistrust. As he put it, "children's literature as I write it and as I see it is . . . satirizing the mores and habits of the world" (29).¹⁶

Seussian satirizing begins with language itself, offering a perfect occasion to critique power as well. Foucault has argued that children

learn the structures of language and power simultaneously; so, while learning to speak, a child absorbs the basic knowledge of how society works. What better place to challenge knowledge-power than with a child's earliest experience with the printed word—the alphabet? Lear's many nonsense alphabets introduce this idea into children's literature, and Seuss's *On Beyond Zebra!* goes beyond mocking spelling (as Lear does) to challenging the alphabet itself. The narrator invents letters beyond Z, allowing both narrator and reader to discover creatures not visible to those who restrict themselves to the conventional English alphabet. In the story, increased awareness of the world depends on expanding the alphabet, suggesting that experience is confined by the structures of language. The narrator's remark, "In the places I go there are things that I see / That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z," recalls Breton's comment in *Surrealism and Painting* (1928) that "experience itself has been assigned limits" (Nadeau 80n). The narrator reveals these limits as artificially prescribed, pointing to "things beyond Z that most people don't know" and encouraging the reader to explore too. The book concludes with an unnamed letter and asks, "what do you think we should call this one, anyhow?" This open-ended question prompts the book's readers to challenge the limits imposed on experience and to imagine for themselves.

Perhaps the most famous of Seuss's open endings occurs in *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). Like Magritte's *Human Condition* paintings, *The Cat in the Hat* questions the relation between "real" and "imaginary" and by refusing to answer this question interpellates the reader into an active critical role. Magritte's *Human Condition 1* (1933) challenges the viewer to rethink the relation between experience and representations of experience (figure 9). Seuss similarly challenges the reader; at the conclusion of *The Cat in the Hat*, the narrator asks, "What would you do / If your mother asked you?" (figure 10). Should the children describe an actual experience that their mother will think they imagined, or an imagined experience that she will accept as actual? In other words, should they lie or tell the truth? Like Magritte, Seuss withholds any answer in order to provoke his audience into solving the puzzle themselves.

A brief comparison with Crockett Johnson's *A Picture for Harold's Room* (1960) shows how open-ended Seuss truly is. Johnson goes as far as Seuss in challenging the boundary between imaginary and real worlds; unlike *The Cat* or Magritte's *The Human Condition*, however, *A Picture for Harold's Room* maintains a clear boundary between the two



Figure 9. René Magritte: *The Human Condition I* (1933). Gift of the Collectors Committee, © 1998 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

by using a frame to separate the imaginary from the real. In the story, Harold draws an unframed picture and enters it. While he stays at the horizon of his picture, he is a giant in his world; but in the process of drawing train tracks towards the front of the picture, an inattention to perspective renders him a midget—smaller than a mouse or a bird. In order to resolve his problem, he simply declares, “This is only a picture!,” crosses out his picture, and announces, “I am not big or little. I am my usual size” (54–56). At the end of the story Harold draws a *framed* picture on the wall of his room, resolving the tension between the real and the imaginary worlds by providing a stable boundary between them (figure 11). There is no such frame in *The Cat in the Hat*: both the Cat and the children’s mother enter and exit through the same door and are part of the same “real” world. Seuss’s conclusion leaves the questions of the narrative still open for discussion after the reader closes the book. Seuss poses a genuine dilemma for a young reader, pitting the desire to be honest against the desire not to get in trouble.

Furthermore, the question at the end of the book reinforces the Cat’s questioning of the existing order, which begins the moment he enters the story. As Geisel told interviewer Jonathan Cott, “*The Cat in the Hat* is a revolt against authority, but it’s ameliorated by the fact that the Cat cleans up everything at the end. It’s revolutionary in that

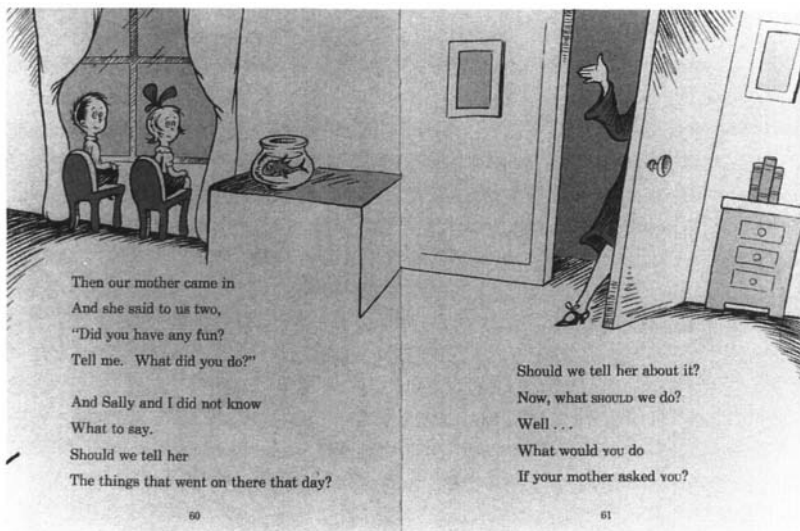


Figure 10. Dr. Seuss: final pages of *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). TM and copyright © 1957, 1985, Dr. Seuss Enterprises. Reproduced by permission of Random House, Inc.

it goes as far as Kerensky and then stops. It doesn't go quite as far as Lenin" (Cott 28). *The Cat* doesn't go as far as Lenin, but it did go far enough to alarm some parents and has been credited with killing the "Dick and Jane" readers. Although children would no doubt agree with Anna Quindlen that "the murder of Dick and Jane . . . was a mercy killing of the highest order" (19), their elders did not. As Geisel's biographers note, the fact that the Cat's "boisterous rampage in the absence of adults went unpunished . . . alarm[ed] some of the school establishment who felt safer with Dick and Jane and considered the Cat a 'trickster hero'" (Morgan and Morgan 171). Perhaps sharing this sentiment, schools initially resisted buying *The Cat in the Hat*.¹⁷ Although the book may not be revolutionary in a Leninist sense, its anarchistic spirit is nonetheless close to dada. Like the dadaists before him, the Cat is a rebel whose political philosophy, such as it is, seems to be based primarily on rejecting the current order.

Evidence that Dr. Seuss endorsed the Cat's rebellious spirit can be found in the author's identification with the Cat. Not only did he make the Cat the symbol for his Beginner Books series and use the Cat as a narrator in later works such as *The Cat in the Hat Song-book* (1967) and *The Cat's Quizzer* (1976), but, just prior to writing the

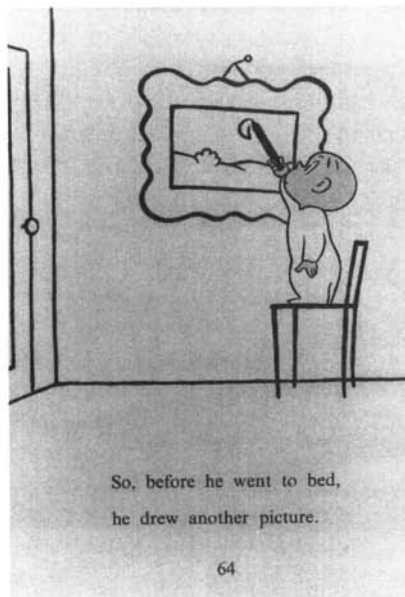
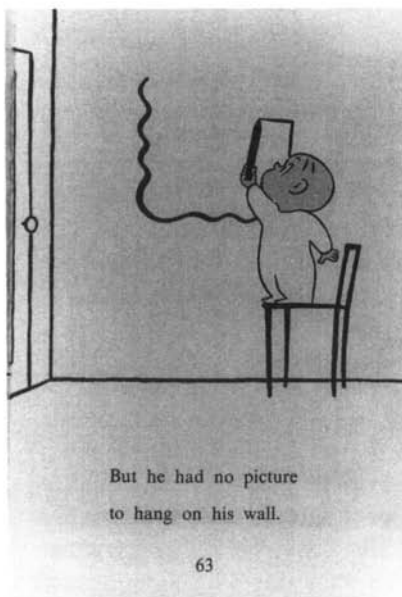
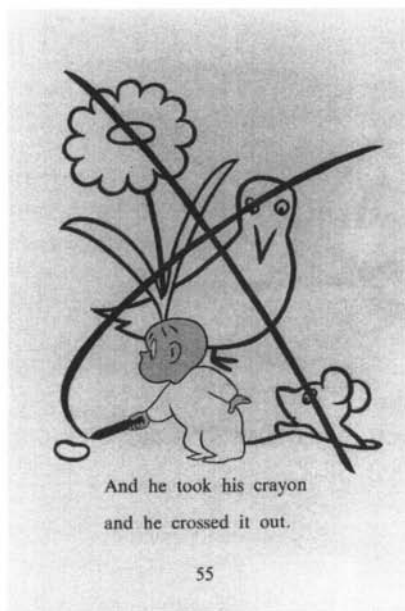
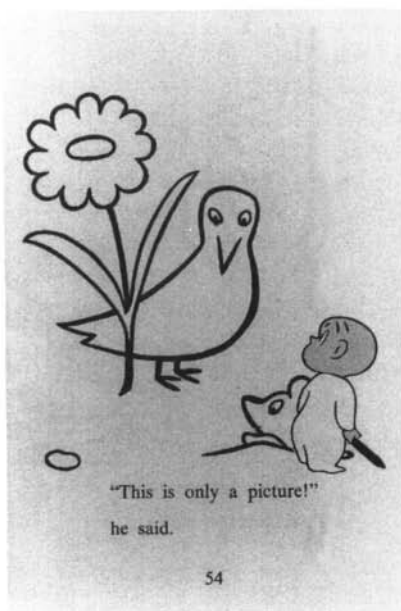


Figure 11. Crockett Johnson: pages 54–55 and 63–64 from *A Picture for Harold's Room* (1960). Copyright © 1960 by Crockett Johnson. Copyright © renewed 1988 by Ruth Krauss Johnson. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

sequel to *The Cat* in 1958, Geisel drew a picture of himself as the Cat in the Hat (figures 12 and 13) to accompany an article in *The Saturday Evening Post* of July 6, 1957. The caption read "Self-portrait, by Dr. Seuss." The imaginative conflation of Cat and author emphasizes Dr. Seuss's kinship with his alter ego, and suggests that the Cat shares some of his creator's values.

Although nonsense books such as *On Beyond Zebra!* do reveal experience as a construct and *The Cat in the Hat* does challenge domestic order, it is important to note that nonsense works are not ideology-proof. The surrealists tended to idealize nonsense, the unconscious, and all things irrational as neutral spaces from which to reveal and skewer social norms; however, such an idea seems a bit naïve, for these spaces are neither magically beyond ideology nor entirely defined by it. That is, although it would seem reductive to say that the irrational merely replicates ideological structures, nonsensical thinking is not ideologically immune either. If we leave behind the idea of an ideology-free space and instead think of nonsense and the illogical as providing the reader with the cognitive tools with which to build a critique of ideology, then nonsense literature becomes critically viable. For example, as *Fox in Socks* (1965) shows how the meanings of words shift according to their context, so a child could come to understand that the world's accepted truths may only be true in certain contexts. For example, the fox's stacks of bricks, chicks, blocks, and boxes have one effect when stacked on the ground and another (more painful) effect when stacked on top of the character Knox. A benign stack on one page becomes a potentially harmful stack on the next. Also, by placing common items in uncommon places, the book provides an opportunity to ask what words such as *common* and *uncommon* mean. Magritte once said of his paintings, "If the spectator finds that my paintings are a kind of defiance of 'common sense,' he realizes something obvious. I want nevertheless to add that for me the world is a defiance of common sense" (Gablik 14). Seuss's works open the door for children to ask questions of their world and explore the ways in which it often does defy common sense.

Given Seuss's challenges to common sense, the critic George Bodmer's claim that books such as these merely "reflect the anti-didactic mood of our time" and question "our ability to learn and to teach" (115) falls a bit short of the mark. The books do teach and are didactic, but, instead of delivering a lecture to their readers, Seuss's works teach by encouraging subversive thoughts and behaviors. In her book



Figure 12. Dr. Seuss: "Self-portrait" (1957). Self-portrait by Dr. Seuss by gracious consent of Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P.

Dr. Seuss, Ruth MacDonald claims, "Though Dr. Spock's permissive parenting has frequently been credited with spurring the youthful rebellion of the 1960s, Dr. Seuss might equally be given credit, since he demonstrates a kind of permissiveness with language" (MacDonald 169). MacDonald's connection between Seuss and the revolts of the 1960s offers us an opportunity to explore the ways in which Seuss's nonsense work both challenges and is implicated in the ideologies it critiques. As a case in point, consider *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* (1958).

Starring the anarchic Cat in the Hat and featuring twenty-six increasingly smaller cats lettered A through Z, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* offers another variation on the nonsense alphabet theme. A closer look, however, suggests that the work may be an antecedent to *The Butter Battle Book* or the painting *Fooling Nobody* because the "Voom" coming from beneath the smallest cat's hat resembles atomic energy. Like the dual threats of radiation and Communist infiltration (prevalent during the 1950s, when the book was composed), a growing pink stain is pervasive and real but lingers just beyond the control of the narrator. In this sense, the stain suggests a "red menace" growing out of control, threatening the American values of home and family represented by the two children (Sally and the narrator). Living in La Jolla, California, a mere one hundred miles south

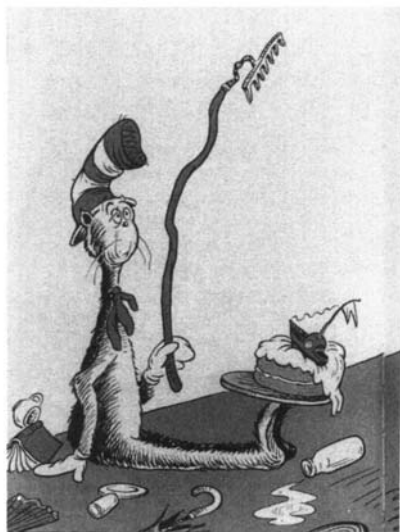


Figure 13. Dr. Seuss: The Cat in the Hat, from *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). TM and copyright © 1957, 1985, Dr. Seuss Enterprises. Reproduced by permission of Random House, Inc.

of Hollywood, and having worked in film himself, Geisel would no doubt have been familiar with the “Hollywood Ten,” alleged Communists in the film industry whom the House Committee on Un-American Activities sent to federal prison in 1947. Other incidents contributing to the climate of hysteria and fear of alleged subversives in the 1950s were, of course, the witch hunts (1950–54) led by Senator Joseph McCarthy and Congressman Richard Nixon and the widely publicized Hiss-Chambers case (1948–50), in which *Time* magazine’s Whittaker Chambers accused the State Department’s Alger Hiss of being a Communist spy. So, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*’s representation of the spreading red stain across the landscape certainly echoes the fears of the times. When, at book’s end, the Voom arrives like an atomic bomb to clean away the threat of subversion, Seuss seems to be representing but not critiquing anti-Communist paranoia.

Although the pink stain and the Voom clearly locate the book in the context of the anti-Soviet mood of America in the ’50s, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* does not endorse such paranoia. True to the radical nature he has shown in *The Cat in the Hat*, the Cat deliberately inverts the dominant logic of the day in order to challenge it. In-

stead of containing the symbolic “red menace,” he deliberately, even merrily, spreads it everywhere. Like a dadaist, the Cat uses paradox and chance to shake Sally and the narrator out of their habitual perception of the world. What Suzi Gablik has said of Magritte’s paintings applies to the Cat: he makes “a systematic attempt to disrupt any dogmatic view of the physical world” by means of the “conceptual paradox” (112). As Magritte balances a glass of water on top of an umbrella in *Hegel’s Holiday* (1954), the Cat balances a fishbowl full of water (and fish) in *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). In *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, the Cat again employs this sort of paradoxical logic, eating cake in the bathtub and “cleaning” up the pink ink by spreading it around. (Indeed, he seems to “clean” by becoming an abstract expressionist: the Cat paints with a dress, with shoes—and little cat C spreads pink paint with a fan.) The Cat’s paradoxical response to the children’s growing fear of the spreading pink ink conveys an implicit criticism of anti-Communist paranoia. Their increasing anxiety prompts the Cat to keep spreading the ink and, in another paradox, spreading the ink actually leads to cleaning it up. The Cat’s alphabet of increasingly smaller cats finally leads him to the Voom (under little cat Z’s hat) that will clean the pink ink away.

Though the Voom has “the power of the atomic bomb” (MacDonald 129) in the swiftness with which it erases the “reds,” it differs from the bomb in one very significant aspect: the characteristic of annihilation has been withdrawn from it. Whereas the Voom’s historical referent is clearly an atom bomb, Seuss’s depiction partakes of Magritte’s “modification,” in which “a property normally associated with an object is withdrawn”—as in Magritte’s *The Battle of the Argonne* (1959), in which gravity is removed from a rock, allowing it to float (Gablik 129). The power of atomic destruction has been removed from the Voom: although it at first appears to have destroyed pink ink, cats and all, the Voom has in fact merely relocated them under the Cat’s hat. As the Cat explains to the bewildered children immediately after the Voom has “clean[ed] up the snow” (and everything else), “That Voom blew my little cats / Back in my hat” (59, 61). He adds, gesturing to his hat, “if you ever / Have spots, now and then, I will be very happy / To come here again” (61), indicating that Voom, little cats, and all are now back under his hat and suggesting that their containment is very temporary. In response to both the Voom and the Cat’s promise to return, the children’s faces express a mixture of grateful surprise and worried disbelief, reinforcing the sense that

peace has returned only for the moment. As he does in many of his works, Seuss ends the book without completely resolving it, requiring the audience to take an active role in providing resolution.¹⁸

The atomic subtext of *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* shows that Seuss's nonsense functions in a manner similar to the historical avant-garde's use of nonsense and the irrational: the devices render the work both complicit with and critical of the world in which it is written. If children learn the structures of power as they acquire language, then deconstructing language can have a liberating effect—a potential challenge to the structures of power that language bears. Seuss's works license the imagination as a realm in which one can at least *imagine* another world—if not actually realize that world.¹⁹ Mary Lystad has said of *The Cat in the Hat*, “The message is clear—if the world is bleak, change it, create a new world!” (201). And as Bodmer says of *The Butter Battle Book*, “If the world is to be saved, . . . it is only through leaps of imagination” (116). By providing the imaginative impetus to change the world, Dr. Seuss encourages children to subvert dominant modes of socialization. In this sense, Seuss's books go beyond the conventional definition of nonsense literature, which uses absurdity to reveal reality as a construct but less frequently indicts society at large. Whether Seuss's works have this effect on children is beyond the scope of this inquiry, but it is clear that children are drawn to the power of imagination that Seuss's books grant them. As a child once wrote in a letter to Seuss, “Dr. Seuss, you have an imagination with a long tail” (Cott 18).

*Modernism, Postmodernism, and Consumerism:
How Will the Lorax Survive?*

At this point, the astute critic may ask: Since imagination is, as we have seen, always already implicated in the societal structures against which it may rebel, how can imaginative power ever provide an effective critique of the pervasive, even insidious, effects of late capitalist culture? After all, this reasonably skeptical person might continue, even when the historical avant-garde attempted to expose the paradoxical logic of the material world, it ultimately found itself becoming co-opted, marketed as exotic entertainment to that same world. If, instead of offending or provoking, surrealism and dada were transformed into amusement, then what hope does Dr. Seuss's work have of succeeding where the historical avant-garde failed? In

order to develop an answer to these questions, let us turn to La Jolla, California, in 1971, where we find Fredric Jameson writing *Marxism and Form* and Theodor Seuss Geisel writing *The Lorax*. In the former work, Jameson argues that “the development of postindustrial monopoly capitalism has brought with it an increasing occultation of the class structure through techniques of mystification practiced by the media.” He continues, “as a service economy we are henceforth so far removed from the realities of production and work on the world that we inhabit a dream world of artificial stimuli and televised experience” (xvii–xviii). In its way, *The Lorax* addresses similar concerns: it criticizes an ideology of consumption that praises material production while ignoring its material effects. To put this in the terms of the book’s narrative, the Once-ler may be a material success, but his Thneed business destroys the Truffula trees and sends the wildlife into exile, leaving behind a barren, gray urban landscape. *The Lorax* also shows the media’s complicity in mystifying the effects of capitalism: the Once-ler’s “You need a Thneed” advertising campaign successfully convinces the buying public that these worthless pieces of knitted Truffula tufts are actually valuable, while at the same time it diverts attention from the damage done to the environment.

But where Seuss offers a moment of hope at the book’s end (the last Truffula seed, thrown for us to catch, to start again), Jameson despairs. When addressing the role of the avant-garde in offering a critique of capital, Jameson argues that when surrealism was effective it worked because it interacted with a nonindustrial nature, and such a nature no longer exists. In fact, “it is the very memory of nature itself which seems to face obliteration” now (106). But while Jameson is saying that “the objects of Surrealism are gone without a trace” (104) and, anyway, “the *idea* of Surrealism is a more liberating experience than the actual texts” (101), Seuss’s *Lorax* challenges Jameson’s claim. Its critique of capitalism relies less on an idealized nature (though at least the *memory* of nature exists here) than on its open-ended narrative structure and the surreal disembodiment of the Once-ler himself. And, as a kind of surrealist critique of capital, I think the *Lorax* works.

That said, Jameson may yet have the last word. The recent mass commercialization of Seuss threatens to dull his critical edge, to transform “Dr. Seuss” into another Walt Disney, one of many blithe affirmations of consumer culture that dominate America’s cultural landscape. In *Postmodernism* (1991), Jameson again argues that post-industrial capitalism will neutralize attempts to offer resistance. He

offers the postmodernism of his title as proof: as flat, blank parody, it merely reflects the society from which it comes. In contrast to Jameson's bleak view, critics such as Linda Hutcheon, David Harvey, and Andreas Huyssen maintain the possibility of an oppositional postmodern—a postmodern that *can* offer a critique. And, at least in the versions of Harvey and Huyssen, the avant-garde has a role to play here. It is the radical politics of the avant-garde, suppressed in definitions of high modernism, to which postmodernists return in order to counteract the effects of affirmative culture.

Geisel is an appropriate figure to place in this debate. Not only does his life (1904–1991) span the years of the modern and the postmodern, but he always had a foot in each camp. That is, he was a modernist in both “high modern” and “avant-garde” terms and a postmodernist inasmuch as his work follows the legacy of the avant-garde. Much of this essay has investigated Geisel's investment in avant-garde techniques, but now let us turn for a moment to the idea of Geisel as a “high modernist” author. Geisel originally began publishing cartoons under his mother's maiden name—Seuss—because he was saving his surname—Geisel—for the “Great American Novel” he would someday write. Evidence suggests that this novel would have been high modernist in form. Ruth MacDonald's description of it as “an unpublished manuscript of a virtually undecipherable, stream-of-consciousness novel written in his mid-twenties” (3) suggests the complexity of a work by Faulkner or Joyce. Add to the case for Seuss-as-high-modernist that his attention to form is legendary. For example, the revising and rewriting of *The Cat in the Hat* took him about a year. Geisel credited his editor, Saxe Commins—who also edited Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Eugene O'Neill—with stressing the importance of form (Steinberg 87; Morgan and Morgan 138). Perhaps as a testament to Geisel's success at mastering formal qualities for which high modernism has been praised, the modernist critic Hugh Kenner wrote a tribute in Seussian verse (“Ode to Dr. Seuss,” 1991).

To return to the question posed by Seuss's location in the history of modernity and postmodernity: Will the ongoing marketing bonanza diminish the avant-garde energies in Dr. Seuss's work? If the new Dr. Seuss books based on the Nickelodeon television show are any indication, the answer has to be yes. *The Song of the Zubble-Wump* (1996), for example, has tamed the wily Cat in the Hat, turning him into a moralizing preacher; instead of the provocative questions we have come to expect from Dr. Seuss, the book offers amens. In this respect,

The Song of the Zubble-Wump recalls Jameson's comments on pastiche: "it is a neutral practice of . . . mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse" (*Postmodernism* 17). Although pastiche can be affirmative or critical, *Zubble-Wump* is pastiche in the former, more Jamesonian, sense. The book brings in Horton to help save the Zubble-Wump egg, the Grinch to play the role of the villain, and the Cat in the Hat to be the book's moral center. Whatever adversarial roles these characters played in the books written by Geisel, their edges have been dulled for *Zubble-Wump*. The edginess that marks Seuss's style is missing, as is the malleability of the moral universe of Seuss's books.

By *malleability* I mean that these books suggest a certain instability in the moral world: instead of good and evil or black and white, Seuss's characters are more complex, inhabiting a world of better and worse, perhaps—but a world that has many shades of gray. For example, the Once-ler changes his mind about industry's effects on the environment, but only after his industry has already destroyed it. On one hand, he changes too late; on the other, he does change, which suggests possibilities for other changes in the future. In *The Song of the Zubble-Wump*, however, moral instability has been banished. Here, the Grinch—who, oddly, resembles a cross between *Sesame Street*'s Grover and Oscar the Grouch—is the villain: "That Grinch is all broken, that Grinch is all bent. / His heart's full of hurt and his soul is cement," Megan's grandfather tells her. On the contrary, as Geisel has said of the Grinch, he "is the Hero of Christmas. Sure . . . he starts out as a villain, but it's not how you start out that counts. It's what you are at the finish" (Morgan and Morgan 276). Like Dickens's Scrooge, the point of Seuss's Grinch is that he has within him the capacity to change. *Zubble-Wump* denies the possibility of any ambiguity in the Grinch's character. The Grinch thwarts the plans of the good guys, and at the story's end the narrative promises us that the evil Grinch will be back once again: "But you all know the Grinch / He'll be back / before long." Ambiguity animates Seuss's work and enables his reader to see the inconsistencies and contradictions of the world. *Zubble-Wump*, however, merely reflects a staid, bourgeois status quo.

Whereas this new book moralizes instead of provoking, "Seuss!"—a recent exhibit at the Children's Museum of Manhattan—used pastiche to provoke the imagination.²⁰ Unlike the *Zubble-Wump* travesty, the "Seuss!" exhibit was not part of a corporate tie-in to Seuss Enterprises; rather, the curators of the museum (which has produced many

literature-based exhibitions for children) had long wanted to present an exhibition on Dr. Seuss. The museum's executive director, Andrew Ackerman, explained, "We would always ask ourselves, 'If we had a choice to do any books at all, what would they be?' It always came down to Dr. Seuss" (Graeber C1). In contrast to the first publication from the Wubbulous World of Dr. Seuss series, "Seuss!" provoked thought instead of pronouncing morals, opened children's minds instead of lecturing to them. Using characters and situations from a variety of Seuss's works, the exhibit encouraged active engagement on the part of its visitors. As the critic Brian Sutton-Smith has said of Seuss's books, this exhibit encouraged "flexibility and possibility" because "flexibility of thinking . . . [is] what mental development is about these days" (Cott 14).

In one part of the exhibit, there were cylinders "decorated with Seussian creatures holding a letter," followed by "a word root like 'up' or 'all' or 'at.'" When children spun the cylinders, they formed new words (Graeber C26). Using chance to create new words or sentences was a favorite game of the surrealists. In this game—known as "The Exquisite Corpse"—each person would add words (starting with an article and an adjective, then a noun, and so on) to make random sentences such as "The exquisite corpse shall drink the new wine" (Brotchie 25). The cylinders in the "Seuss!" exhibit may have had the liberating effect that surrealists found in nonsense: by showing children how language works, "random" sentences gave them the power to experiment. Another portion of the exhibit reproduced some of Seuss's drafts in order to show children the art of revision. Ackerman explains, "Children often get frustrated if they can't do something perfectly, so it's a big relief to know that even the best artists used drafts." The same space included a place for visitors to "do some creative experimentation, devising new characters by combining pieces in the shape of Seussian animals' heads and bodies" (Graeber 26). Again, the exhibit used Seuss's work as Seuss would have wished—to empower children to use language and their imaginations.

Power over language and imagination may not enable a child to challenge all of the world's faulty logic, but it does provide a starting point. In providing this starting point, "Seuss!" achieved what Geisel wanted children's museums to accomplish. As dada and fluxus artists wanted to break down the boundary between art and audience, so Geisel wished to break down the boundary between exhibit and visitor. As E. J. Kahn tells us, in 1955 Geisel "wrote and acted in an

'Omnibus' television show devoted to an imaginary Seuss Museum. It differed from the general run of museums in that children going through it were not forbidden to touch the displays; on the contrary, the exhibits were all marked 'Do Touch.'" Seuss explained, "I want a museum that will have a real, operable printing press alongside a shelf of books, and blocks of wood and chisels alongside woodcuts, so that children can watch and work at the same time" (Kahn 80). With Geisel's help, by 1967, one wing of La Jolla's Museum of Art had been devoted to an interactive museum, the philosophy of which seems to have been "Do Touch." As a *Newsweek* article reported, "grade-school kids excitedly picked through piles of Barbie-doll heads, eyeballs, limbs, and torsos for parts to build an abstract model of a city. Elsewhere, they lugged \$2,100 movie cameras about to film the summertime activity at the museum" ("Logical Insanity" 58). "Seuss!" and Seuss's own museum ideas develop a kind of avant-garde for kids.

At this point, it is too early to say which version of Seuss will predominate—the one with avant-garde leanings, as exemplified by the "Seuss!" exhibit, or the affirmative pastiche, as represented by *The Song of the Zubble-Wump*. Let us hope for the former version, because exhibits such as "Seuss!" and books such as *The Cat in the Hat* can give children some of the cognitive tools necessary for questioning the world in which they live. Although Dr. Seuss's books are didactic, they teach not by delivering a lecture to their readers but by encouraging subversive thoughts and behaviors. If children learn the structures of power as they acquire language, then deconstructing language can have a liberating effect by offering a potential challenge to the structures of power that language bears. Seuss's works license the imagination as a realm in which one can at least *imagine* another world, if not actually realize that world. By providing the impetus to change the world, Dr. Seuss encouraged children to subvert dominant modes of socialization. And it is this skeptical, imaginative version of Dr. Seuss—and not the William Bennett-style "Moralist in a Hat"—that present and future generations of children will need to meet.

Notes

1. Witness, e.g., Microsoft's recent "Where do you want to go today?" commercial; among the images that drift by during the thirty-second advertisement is René Magritte's bowler-hatted man. The image recurs in Magritte's work, but the best-known example is, perhaps, *The Man in the Bowler Hat* (1964), in which a dove flies in front of the face of a man in a bowler hat. The figure also appears in *The Musings of the Soli-*

tary Walker (1926–27), *In the Land of Night* (1928), *The Song of the Violet* (1951), *Siren Song* (1952), *Golconda* (1953), *The Poet Rewarded* (1956), *The Ready-Made Bouquet* (1957), *The Month of the Grape Harvest* (1959), *The Good Faith* (1962), *The Son of Man* (1964), *The Open Door* (1965), *Decalomania* (1966), and many others—including photographs of Magritte himself (he often wore a bowler hat). The Microsoft commercial was not the first time Magritte was appropriated by commercial culture. Corporate use of Magritte's images goes back at least to 1951, when designer William Golden appropriated Magritte's *The False Mirror* (1928) for the CBS "eye" logo: although now merely a silhouette of its original version, at that time the CBS logo featured blue sky and clouds behind the pupil of an eye—exactly as in Magritte's painting. Indeed, in December 1963, Magritte wrote his lawyer and friend Harry Torczyner that he was considering legal action against CBS: "Columbia Broadcasting has registered the image as a 'trademark,' and I think it was inspired by 'Le Faux Miroir.' I have already collected all the documentation on the presence of 'Le Faux Miroir' in the United States since 1936, whereas the trademark only dates from 1952! 'Le Faux Miroir' was reproduced in the 1936 catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art (1936 Exhibition of Dada and Fantastic Art) and on view to the New York public at that time (logically, the logo's designer, who died in 1959, must have seen it!)" (Magritte and Torczyner 93).

2. For example, when writing *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* he worked hard to avoid "sound[ing] like a second-rate preacher or some biblical truism" (quoted in Morgan and Morgan 159). Tish Rabe and David Stephen Cohen (who wrote the script of *Zubble-Wump*), however, seem less concerned.

3. As Tim Wolf suggests in "Imagination, Rejection, and Rescue: Recurrent Themes in Dr. Seuss," Seuss consistently associated cats with the imaginative and the anarchic. Wolf notes the appropriateness of having "Patrol Cats" (as opposed to dogs) as guardians of "the roots of childlike imagination" in *The King's Stilts* (1939): "To defend our childlike imagination and joy, Seuss seems to say, we must be like cats toward society, not dogs. (This may also look forward to the anarchistic Cat in the Hat saving two children from a dull adult-ruled afternoon.)" (149).

4. Unfortunately, *Zubble-Wump* seems to be the beginning of a trend in Seuss marketing. *Seuss-isms: Wise and Witty Prescriptions for Living from the Good Doctor* (1997) transforms Seuss from a figure who encourages the questioning of authority into a moralist who affirms the status quo. The small book takes Seussian verses out of context and transforms them into homilies for living. For example, whereas *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* addresses both hope and despair, *Seuss-isms* includes only the more hopeful verses.

5. Although Geisel once said, "I'd rather go into the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the writer who refused the most money per word," after his death the hypercommercialization of Dr. Seuss began. Seuss's characters now appear on boxer shorts, t-shirts, and hats by Esprit; Universal City in Orlando is building a twenty-five-acre Seuss theme park in Orlando, Florida; and Steven Spielberg is developing a *Cat in the Hat* movie (Smith B1). During his life, Geisel restricted the marketing of his work to books and a few television specials. In their biography, *Dr. Seuss and Mr. Geisel*, Judith and Neil Morgan write of several occasions on which Geisel resisted attempts to market his work. Once Robert L. Bernstein, then sales manager at Random House, suggested many "promotional ideas, including 'Cat's pajamas' in all sizes, but Ted resisted. He was wary of anything—product franchising, most of all—that might cheapen the Dr. Seuss image" (161). Another time Geisel "set up a sculpting studio next to the pool house in La Jolla and created the Cat, Horton and four 'Seuss multi-beasts'—one named Roscoe—to be marketed as self-assembly polyethylene kits for the March toy show in 1959. But no one else's version of a Dr. Seuss creature satisfied Ted," and so the creatures were never made (164).

6. Sawin's *Surrealism in Exile* (1995) traces the influence of the exiled avant-garde on American artists and posits the period (1937–45) as a crucial hinge between the Euro-

pean dada and surrealism of the first half of the century and the artistic movements that followed, such as abstract expressionism and pop art.

7. The Morgans report, "Ted had written a script about modern art for a half-hour Ford Foundation television workshop in the *Excursion* series, and it was broadcast live over NBC on Sunday afternoon, January 31 [1954]. Burgess Meredith was the host, and [Hans] Conreid was cast opposite Ted as an art connoisseur" (145–46).

8. As Jon Agee notes in his review of *The Secret Art of Dr. Seuss* in the *Los Angeles Times* (3 December 1995), "A couple of strange, hallucinogenic landscapes recall the paintings of Max Ernst or Yves Tanguy—except that in each case, somewhere in the scene, there's a cat. Surrealism, even Cubism, is apparent, as in the fractured perspective of a city where a feline detective pursues its quarry. The titles of the paintings ('The Rather Odd Myopic Woman Riding Piggyback on One of Helen's Many Cats') are comparable to those of the Dadaists."

9. A sensitivity to gender has never been one of the surrealists' strong points (see especially Helena Lewis's *The Politics of Surrealism* 71–76). Although Geisel has been rightly criticized for his books' treatment of women—as in Alison Lurie's essay "The Cabinet of Dr. Seuss" (1990)—he never quite approaches the levels of misogyny in, say, some of Salvador Dalí's work. That said, the topic of Seuss and gender should not be ignored. To give a sense of the debate, here is the evidence, both critical of and in defense of Seuss. Lurie points out "the almost total lack of female protagonists" and adds that "when little girls appear they play silent, secondary roles" (51). She also cites the vain female characters Gertrude McFuzz in the story of that name (from *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories*, 1958) and the bird Mayzie in *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940). Finally, Lurie notes that, in "The Glunk That Got Thunk" (a story included in *I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today!*, 1969), a little girl thinks up a dangerous Glunk, which her brother must then unthink. Lurie's conclusion, however—"Moral: Women have weak minds; they must not be ambitious even in imagination" (52)—seems a bit strong, based on just one story. For example, in the posthumously published *Daisy-Head Mayzie* (1994), a little girl named Mayzie McGrew grows a flower on her head. If we take the flower as a metaphorical imagination, the problem is then not the fact that she has ideas but rather that Finagle the Agent exploits them for commercial gain. Also, I think it would be fair to argue that many of Seuss's young protagonists are more "everychild" figures than specifically gendered as male or female children. Geisel's response to Lurie was to note that most of his characters are animals, "and if she can identify their sex, I'll remember her in my will" (Morgan and Morgan 286).

10. According to the Morgans, Geisel would have sold them but his wife Helen prevented him (143).

11. In *Yertle*, a small turtle named Mack topples Yertle, a dictator who, Seuss says, "is Adolf Hitler" (Sadler 249). Mack undoes the hierarchical power structure that enables Yertle to dominate the other turtles, but the book does not conclude with the finality of "they all lived happily ever after." Instead, the book concludes, "And today the great Yertle, that Marvelous he, / Is King of the Mud. That is all he can see. / And turtles, of course . . . all the turtles are free. / As turtles and, *maybe*, all creatures should be" (my emphasis). When asked, "Why 'maybe' and not 'surely'?" Geisel responded, "I qualified that . . . in order to avoid sounding too didactic or like a preacher on a platform. And I wanted other persons, to say 'surely' in their minds instead of my having to say it" (Cott 28). In other words, the *maybe* introduces an element of doubt that compels the reader to respond in the affirmative. *The Lorax* (1971), which tackles the problem of corporate exploitation of the environment, effects a similar response with the word *unless*. Told in the flashback format of *The Butter Battle Book*, *The Lorax* uses the character of the Once-ler to dramatize the negative effects that industry has had on the ecosystem. *The Lorax* concludes with a sense of urgency directed toward the reader: repentant ex-industrialist Once-ler tosses the last Truffula Seed to the narrator (identified only as

"you" in the text). The book concludes with the seed in transit, about to land in "your" hands. As the Once-ler realizes, "UNLESS some like you / cares a whole awful lot, / nothing is going to get better."

12. Another critic claims that, at the end of each Seuss book, "[t]here is an abrupt return to simple diction, and a simple, realistic illustration implicitly declares that Seuss's protagonist was only fantasizing" (Lurie 50). But in Seuss's stories, there is no such thing as "only fantasizing"; on the contrary, his books consistently depict the imagination as a powerful force.

13. A series of Seuss's stories involve a young protagonist telling an increasingly outrageous story and conclude by framing the narrative. His first, *To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937) follows this pattern, as does *McElligot's Pool* (1947), *Scrambled Eggs Super!* (1953), *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950), and *If I Ran the Circus* (1956). But even here the narrative frame often (though not always) leaves either an element of doubt or simply a weak sense of closure. For instance, in *Mulberry Street*, the momentum that Marco's tale has developed over the preceding forty pages is not effectively checked by the sudden decision not to tell his father about it. The cumulative effect of Marco's imaginative enterprise outweighs his two-line disclaimer that he saw only "a plain horse and wagon" on Mulberry Street. Similarly, by the conclusion of *If I Ran the Circus*, Morris McGurk's idea for a circus has begun to startle Mr. Sneelock, the owner of the store behind which the proposed circus would take place. When we first see Sneelock, he remains calm, smoking his pipe—and because he enters Morris's imagination as calm he remains that way throughout the tale. But during Morris's imagined circus, Sneelock's role becomes more and more dangerous: being lassoed by a Wily Walloo, having a crab apple shot off his head by a blindfolded bowman, skiing on Roller-Skate-Skis through Stickle-Bush trees, standing in the mouth of a Spotted Atrocious, wrestling a Grizzly-Ghastly, and diving into a goldfish bowl. At the end of the tale, when we reenter the world outside Morris's story, Sneelock's eyes are suddenly wide open, suggesting that the imagined feats of "brave Sneelock" have rattled him a bit.

14. In the same essay, first published as the introduction to *Surrealism* (1936, including essays by André Breton and Paul Eulard) and later in Read's *The Philosophy of Modern Art* (1953), Read argues, "From our point of view, Lear is a better poet than Tennyson; Lewis Carroll has affinities with Shakespeare" (56). As Paul C. Ray's *The Surrealist Movement in England* (1971) suggests, the English surrealists looked to Carroll (1832–98) and Lear (1812–88) as literary ancestors because their techniques seemed allied with the surrealist goal of "discredit[ing] conventional reality" (28). In fact, even though the French surrealists considered Lautréamont to be their primary literary influence, they too were interested in the work of Carroll and Lear: Louis Aragon translated Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark* into French, and Breton saw in Carroll's work a project that intersected with his own (Ray 60).

15. At a writers' conference at Salt Lake City in July 1949, Geisel told the assembled students that he placed his work in the company of nonsense literature: "In the realm of nonsense, there are Mother Goose, (Edward) Lear, Lewis (Carroll), P. L. Travers and Dr. Seuss" (Morgan and Morgan 123–24). Others have noted Seuss's link to the nonsensical, too. The writer and critic Jonathan Cott has suggested Lear as a possible antecedent for Seuss's "fantastical-looking animals and composite beasts" (11), and, perhaps sensing Carroll's influence, the author of an article on Seuss's political cartoons called the piece "Malice in Wonderland" (*Newsweek* 9 Feb. 1942: 58–89).

16. Children's literature as children write and see it shares this characteristic with Seuss's work. As Iona and Peter Opie's collection of traditional rhymes shows, children often use nonsense as a way of criticizing the adult world. The Opies' *I Saw Esau*, published in 1947 and reprinted in 1992 with illustrations by Maurice Sendak, contains many apparently nonsensical (and often rhymed) challenges to authority.

17. The book was sold in bookstores through Random House and to schools

through Houghton Mifflin. The Morgans report that the "Random House trade edition quickly outran Houghton Mifflin's school edition, averaging sales at the start of about twelve thousand copies a month and rising rapidly." They speculate that the Random House edition may have sold more because "spurred by playground word-of-mouth, children nagged their parents to buy it" (156).

18. The ambiguous note on which *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* ends mirrors Geisel's conflicted relation with the idea of atomic power. On one hand, his interest inspired him to use atomic energy in an early film script. While working for the army's film division at what they called "Fort Fox" in January 1945, he was assigned "to write a film spurring postwar troops to help avoid a third world war." Inspired by a brief story in *The New York Times* that claimed that if the energy from a glass of water could be harnessed, "it could blow up half the world," Geisel "drafted a film treatment that warned of the potential threat of devastating explosions." Afraid that his film script would expose the Manhattan Project (of which Geisel knew nothing), a colonel in Washington ordered him to burn his source—and the film was never made (Morgan and Morgan 115). On the other hand, Geisel was very sympathetic toward the Japanese and troubled by the destruction wrought by the American atomic bombs. His film for American troops in defeated Japan was deemed too sympathetic toward the Japanese people, so RKO pictures edited it to fit the official U.S. position. As MacDonald points out, "Dr. Seuss clearly found the Japanese admirable and America's relations with them worthy of preservation in spite of public pressure in the United States to the contrary" (75). Seuss's trip to Japan in 1953 inspired *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954) and its message that "a person's a person no matter how small" (Morgan and Morgan 144–45). The book, which Seuss dedicated to his "Great Friend," Kyoto professor Mitsugi Nakamura, defends the rights of Whos against the threat of total annihilation of their world.

19. For an opposing view, see Michael Steig's Freudian reading of *I Wish That I Had Duck Feet* in his essay "Dr. Seuss's Attack on Imagination." He calls it "a form of (possibly unintended) propaganda for conformity" (140). Although Steig admits that the message of conformity is "possibly unintended," it seems important to consider *Duck Feet* in the context of not only the rest of Seuss's work but of children's literature as a whole. *Duck Feet* (one of many Geisel works written under a pseudonym other than "Dr. Seuss") engages children's imagination at least as much as other books for young readers and does not fit the category of propaganda.

20. The exhibit opened on February 14, 1997, and closed on February 28, 1999.

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