Getting to Solla Sollew: The Existential Politics of Dr. Seuss

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In early 1986, there appeared in the world a book of forty-two (unnumbered) pages, written in rhythmically repetitive and meticulously rhymed simplistic verse which some would call doggerel. Every page is illustrated in bright colors, with large and fanciful cartoon characters. One is a friendly, sympathetic goldfish named Norval. The story is about the awful experience of going to the doctor for a checkup, but the experience is made less threatening through the author's mode of silly exaggeration.

This format and story line suggest a children's book, one fairly typical of the genre. In fact, however, the book is You're Only Old Once, by Theodore Seuss Geisel, also and usually known as Dr. Seuss, and its intended audience is grown-ups, especially the elderly. However improbable the idea of writing a children's book for grown-ups, on March 8, 1987, the book celebrated a full year on the New York Times Best Seller List. As recently as February 22, 1987, it was number four on the list.

This success should not be surprising. Dr. Seuss merely employed the form that has over the past fifty years made him one of the most successful writers of children's literature in the history of the English language, ranking him with such as Lewis Carroll or Beatrix Potter. He has sold more than one hundred million books. What worked for his elderly audience has been working for children all along.

What the snobbish may dismiss as Dr. Seuss's doggerel is an incessant, bouncy anapestic rhythm punctuated by lively, memorable rhymes. In opposition to the conventional—indeed, hegemonic—iambic voice, his metric triplets offer the power of a more primal chant which quickly draws the reader in with its relentless repetition. Moreover, what seems to be the silly whimsy of his books—the made-up words, the outlandish creatures and machines—carries an empowering message. Seuss is a smasher of conventional boundaries. He invents his own words, defying the language/nonsense boundary; he invents his own creatures, defying the human/animal boundary; he is unceasingly sarcastic and satirical yet profoundly serious, ultimately defying the boundary between what is serious and what is absurd.

This form reaches the powerless, such as small children and old people, who are expected to be passive and are objectified through their nonconsensual submission to authority. For such readers (or, listeners, in the case of the children), the books offer a discourse of resistance; they are accessible, easily consumed, and utterly irreverent. Their suggestion that categories need not be taken for granted is empowering to those who are told they have no choice, that that's the way things are, that "life is like that."

The amazing success of You're Only Old Once is an obvious tribute to the magic of Dr. Seuss. For those of us familiar with the magic, it was no surprise. We knew that there was something special and appealing in the children's books, not just in the cuteness of the lines but in their at-least-as-serious-as-funny treatment of underlying themes and issues. We wrote this essay to offer our sense, through the lens of our now aging yet still resolute 1960s political consciousness, of the profoundly existential political world of Dr. Seuss.

Empowerment is the core theme in Dr. Seuss, for with all of his irreverent nonsense he offers readers a space within which they can search for both identity and virtue, free from the oppressive force of authority and orthodoxy. Seuss develops this theme with surprising richness and complexity. Described thematically (rather than chronologically), he starts by exploring the child's struggle to achieve identity in the family, with its conventional norms of behavior and its demand for passive compliance with authority. Seuss moves from there to a description of the need for authentic, existential struggle in the world generally. He then explores quite specific forms of oppression in the modern world—hierarchy, racism, environmental devastation, and militarism—and all the suffocating ideological forms which are used to justify them. Finally, Seuss suggests the possibility of moral and political transformation. This transformation requires the creation of new selves, liberated from orthodox assumptions about scientific truth, gender, and the limited range of moral.

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choice in the world. So transformed, we might even become open to the experience of forming an authentic community, in which virtue and authority are no longer at odds with each other, but reunited in new conditions of freedom.

In our world, especially in its public realm, we experience authority as disconnected from virtue. Virtue means the possibility of living a moral life; authority is what obliges us to conform to social or, more exactly, legal norms. Virtue, for most of us, means personal morality that is subjective and privatized. Authority means the state or one of its disciplinary agents. There have been times in our history, however, when it was imagined that virtue and authority might reside in the same place. Such was the claim of medieval monarchy, which supposes itself divinely sanctioned. In contrast, the modern secular state merely enforces an aggregate of subjective political choices. There remains, however, one realm in our contemporary experience where the two still purport to be united: the role of the parent. To empower children in their own quest for virtue inevitably means subverting the role of the parent. Therefore, a description of Dr. Seuss's work properly starts with his lively family psychodrama, The Cat in the Hat.

In The Cat in the Hat, with the simple elegance of a 220-word vocabulary, Seuss depicts in powerful symbolic form the core childhood dilemma of identity and authority within the family. The (nameless) narrator is a boy—the archetypal male child seeking to define himself in relation to his mother and also in relation to both conventional morality and his own chaotic, anarchic impulses. Thus the book is quite specifically about boyhood, and the male quest for self-definition in the nuclear family of the 1950s, when mother was the most powerful repressive presence in the family and the most immediate representative of convention. (It is a testament to the power of gender in that culture—and also in the traditional Freudian version of childhood—that The Cat in the Hat would be a very different book if written about a girl.)

At the start of the book the narrator and his sister, Sally, are alone and bored at home on a cold, rainy day, accompanied only by their fish in a bowl, when a loud bump suddenly announces the unexpected arrival of the slyly grinning Cat in the Hat. This cat promises "lots of good fun that is funny," and quickly dismisses the fish's strident objection that the children must not let the cat in when their mother is away:

But our fish said, "No! No! Make that cat go away! Tell that Cat in the Hat you do NOT want to play. He should not be here. He should not be about. He should not be here when your mother is out!"

The cat insists that the children should "Have no fear!" and repeats his promise that "we can have lots of good fun ... " This he then demonstrates with his first game, a complex juggling trick that begins with the fish being tossed high in the air. After this balancing act collapses, the fish once again scolds the cat and orders him out. The cat refuses to leave, instead summoning two nameless things from a red box, thing one and thing two, who are strange, soulless, golem-like creatures resplendent in their perfect amorality. Once released, the things enter into a chaotic frenzy of unrestrained play. Like demon spirits from an animalistic id, the things run wild, wreaking havoc and even violating the absent mother's most intimate realm:

On the string of one kite
We saw mother's new gown!
That are pink, white and red.
Then we saw one kite bump
On the bed of her bed!

Just as the children are becoming nervous at the extent of the destruction, the fish, quaking with fear, announces that mother is home. Finally frightened, the narrator seizes the things and orders the cat to take them away. As the fish laments the awesome mess left in the house, the cat returns with a magic machine and restores order. When mother does return, and asks what the children did, they are uncertain what to tell her. Then, in the last two lines of the book, another voice asks us all a dreadful question: "What would you do if your mother asked you?"

Dr. Seuss pushes beyond conventional liberal cliché to offer a more radical version of both the problems and the likelihood of their eventual solution.

The children are thus confronted with powerful cultural images. The fish, with his incessant scolding, articulates all the socially constructed norms defining what good little children should do, norms which parents systematically and unreflectively instill in their children. Drawing on old Christian symbolism (the fish was an ancient sign of Christianity), Dr. Seuss portrays the fish
as a kind of ever-nagging super-ego, the embodiment of utterly conventionalized morality. Thus, as if under seige by Nietzsche himself, the fish scolds, frets, chas-tises, and tries to induce anxious fear of authority, but unlike the cat, he can attract the children with no independent power of his own, and his demands are designed to make the children utterly passive. The fish would have them just, "sit, sit, sit, sit." Therefore, Dr. Seuss is merciless in his mockery of the fish and the conventionality the fish represents. In the hands of the cat (his natural predator) the fish is subjected to mad-cap, slapstick violence—he is balanced on the cat's umbrella, dropped into a teapot, and dangled from the lines of a kite.

With all of his elaborate (and not always successful) juggling tricks, the cat seems to act as a kind of mediator: However irreverent, he complies with social norms at least enough to avoid dreaded punishment (he does clean up his mess), while at the same time retaining his utter commitment to having fun. Unlike the accomodationalist ego of Freudian imagery, however, the cat is more liberator than integrator, too much a fierce deconstructor of norms to be content with mere balancing. With his magical, prescientific technology and his offer of unrestrained fun without accountability, he is the most destabilizing character in the story.

The cat has long served in Western culture as an embodiment of magical, even satanic forces. Here the cat carries on that tradition by demonstrating to the boy narrator a possibility of powerful action in the world, action unconstrained by the fish's fearful anxiety and obsession with propriety.

I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew also explores the theme of action and self-definition, but here the arena of struggle is the world at large, beyond the family, where a young hero—again, a nameless male narrator—must forge his identity in the face of "a sea of troubles." In a text that resonates with the classic Man's Fate, by Malraux, Seuss suggests that neither utopian self-delusion nor foolish escapism can neutralize the need for day-to-day existential struggle. Solla Sollew is a parable of innocence and experience, of paradise lost and never regained. Its nameless protagonist starts out "real happy and carefree and young," in a place where "nothing, not anything went wrong." By the second page, however, this poor lad has already stubbed his toe and sprained his main tailbone. Now having experienced trouble for the first time, he tries to persuade himself that if he keeps his eyes straight ahead, he'll "keep out of trouble forever." He quickly learns, however, that it is foolish to think that one can overcome troubles by merely looking out for them (i. e., by passive avoidance). Whatever direction you're looking in, our poor hero discovers, they'll get you from another one, as in rapid succession various troubles bite his tail, sting his neck, and chew on his toes.

Mightily discouraged, the gullible protagonist is taken in by the promise of utopian escapism, as a chap driving a one-wheeler, camel-pulled wubble pledges to deliver him to the "City of Solla Sollew; / On the banks of the beautiful River Wab-Hoo, / Where they never have troubles! At least, very few." At that point our happy pilgrim jumps aboard for his brief (as he anticipates) trip to the Promised Land. The journey proves perilous, however, as nature and society both reveal a dark and sinister side. Disease soon strikes the camel, so that the once stalwart puller must now be pulled along a steep and tortuous path. Before long the bedraggled hero finds himself doing all the pulling while his supposedly generous wubble-owning companion rides beside the camel.

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At this point, in a single page that works as well as anything Marx ever wrote on the subject, Dr. Seuss provides a scathing critique of the division of labor as an ideology of meritorocratic hierarchy that legitimizes oppression through the pretense of mental superiority. Discovering that he has been doing all the pulling, the weary hero comments, "This is rather unfair." In response, the wubble owner condescendingly explains, "Don't you stew. I am doing my share. / This is called teamwork. / I furnish the brains. / You furnish the muscles, the aches and the pains . . . " Then true to his word the wubble owner "sat and he worked with his brain and his tongue / And he bossed me around just because I was young. / He told me go left. Then he told me go right. / And that's what he told me all day and all night."

The next illusion to be shattered is the one of technological dependability. Leaving the wubble owner and the sick camel behind, the young pilgrim tries to take the "Happy Way Bus," which supposedly leaves at exactly "4:42, and will take you directly to Solla Sollew." As it turns out, however, at the bus stop is a sign cheerfully announcing that the 4:42 is no longer running, and then adding "But I wish you a most pleasant journey by feet. / Signed / Bus Line President, Horace P. Sweet."

Technological breakdown is followed by natural disaster as the "Midwinter Jicker" pours down torrential
rain. Our hero floats about aimlessly for twelve days without toothpaste or soap and concedes that he had almost given up hope. At that point he seems to be rescued by a powerful helping hand, but he barely has a chance to say Thank you, my friend before he discovers that his friend is really the fascist-looking General Genghis Kahn Schmitz, who impresses him to serve as the lowliest soldier in his army. The General promises (as we remember being promised so often during the Vietnam War) that the glorious moment of victory is near! Nevertheless, the enemy Poozers of Pompelmoose Pass turn out to be far more numerous than expected, and the general finally orders his troops to retreat with the not-so-comforting explanation: This happens in war every now and again. Sometimes you are winners. Sometimes you are losers. We never can win against so many Poozers..."

Left to confront the Poozers alone, the protagonist is saved only because he falls down a vent into a strange, surrealistic, bird-filled underground tunnel, composed of mundane, everyday details of modern life, like bikes, ladders, bottles, campaign signs, and garbage. He becomes a lonely figure struggling upstream against a pressing flow of disconnected, seeping materiality.

Narrowly escaping once again, our hero emerges from below, astonished to discover that he is in front of the door leading to Solla Sollew. With utopia only a step away, he unfortunately learns that exception has become the rule: There are, indeed, almost no troubles in Solla Sollew, but the one little trouble currently in residence is not effectively barring entry through the single available door. Like other idealist visions of perfection, Solla Sollew remains for our pilgrim only imaginary, never real.

Horton finds he must stake his epistemological ground against mockery, humiliation, and physical abuse in order to save what he has started to recognize as a voice of real community.

The hero now reaches a moment of existential choice. Declining an opportunity to journey to yet another Promised Land where there are not just few, but no troubles, he chooses instead to go back to where the troubles all began—but not in a spirit of meekness, passivity or resignation. As he recognizes, "I know I'll have troubles. I'll maybe get bit..." But, in the best tradition of Mao and Che Guevera, he also realizes what one must do in the face of troubles:

"But I've bought a big hat. I'm all ready, you see. Now my troubles are going to have troubles with me!"

While I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew is a story about existential struggle in general, four of Dr. Seuss's books have dealt with familiar and quite specific social issues: Illegitimate hierarchy, racism, ecology, and the arms race. In each, however, Dr. Seuss pushes beyond conventional liberal cliche to offer a more radical version of both the problems and the likelihood of their eventual solution.

One of Dr. Seuss's earliest and most obviously political stories was Yertle the Turtle, written in 1950. Its central theme is hierarchy, which is depicted with stark, corrosive simplicity. Yertle is the turtle king who constructs his throne by requiring his subjects to stack themselves in an ever-higher pile. The weight on the turtles below becomes heavier and heavier as Yertle feeds his arrogant, fantasy rulership of all he can see. Only Mack, the plainest and lowliest of the subjects, dares to voice his opposition: "Your majesty, please... I don't like to complain, but down here below, we are feeling great pain. / I know, on top you are seeing great sights, but down at the bottom we, too, should have rights."

Finally becoming indignant when he sees the moon rising higher than himself, Yertle announces that he will stack his subjects all the way to heaven. At that point, when the pain becomes unbearable, Mack becomes a little bit mad, and does a plain little thing: he burps, and that burp tumbles the whole precarious pile of turtles. Yertle takes a nose dive and is returned to his proper station—resituated in the pond, he is mockingly called king of the mud, while all the other turtles are free. As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be.

In Yertle, and in later stories as well, Seuss ruthlessly exposes the artificiality of hierarchy. Oppression is not just evil—it is petty and pointless as well, serving nothing except the self-important delusions of those who rule. As Yertle rises up and his field of vision expands, he proudly (and ludicrously) proclaims:

"All mine! Oh, the things I now rule! I'm king of a cow! And I'm king of a mule! I'm king of a horse! And, what's more, beyond that! I'm king of a blueberry bush and a cat! I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh, marvelous me! I'm Yertle the Turtle!"
Since Yertle's authority is premised on deluded conscious-
ness alone, submission to his oppression is therefore
not an act of political necessity, but one of exaggerated
fear, so that the oppressed are essentially complicit in
their own oppression. The turtles trembled with fear
when Yertle "bellowed and brayed" out his orders, and
they obeyed. As it turns out, however, they are not
nearly as powerless as they felt, for only one slight,
whimsical act of opposition is enough to send Yertle's
whole structure toppling. The scene at the end is one
of joyful frolic, as the turtles happily cavort together in
the pond. While Yertle scowls out from under his
crown of mud, the others play in a state of anarchic but
companionable pleasure.

_Yertle the Turtle_ provides an important lesson about
surplus powerlessness, but Mack's burp might have been _too_ easy—a single, slight, contemptuous gesture
is sufficient to topple oppression and transform the
turtle world into utopia. Nevertheless, in dealing with
specific social issues Dr. Seuss became increasingly
unwilling to suggest that solutions were easy; as time
went on there was a mounting pessimism in his work,
combined, however, with a greater sense of urgency in
the call for committed moral action.

_The Sneetches_, written in 1953, a year before _Brown v. Board of Education_, is an indictment of racism. In
the story Seuss mocks the way in which culturally
constructed otherness becomes the basis for oppres-
sion. Despite his mocking tone, however, Seuss also
recognizes how deeply embedded the construct of
otherness is in our culture.

_The Sneetches_ opens by describing a society whose
central, organizing principle is domination and subor-
dination based on a supposedly important and natural
physical difference: some Sneetches have little stars on
their bellies, while others do not. Those with stars
maintain their social domination through a process of
systematic exclusion:

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly
Sneetches
Would brag, We're the best kind of Sneetch on the
beaches
With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and
they'd snort
We'll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!
...
When the Star-Belly Sneetches had frankfurter roasts
Or picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts,
They never invited the Plain-Belly Sneetches

*Which is not to suggest that Dr. Seuss is perfect on the question
of racism. In _If I Ran the Zoo_ (1950), he failed to rise above his
generation, depicting both Asians and Africans with racially stereo-
typic caricature.

They left them out cold, in the dark of the beaches.
They kept them away. Never let them come near.
And that's how they treated them year after year.

By itself, this description ridicules the insidious social
practices based on racism. Dr. Seuss's analysis goes one
step further, however. Seuss is not only sensitive to the
unjustified self-importance of the excloders, but sensi-
tive as well to its effects on its victims. He understands
that the experience of exclusion can push victims to the
point of wanting to take on the norms and values of
their oppressors, so that they try to deny their own
identities in order to pass as dominators. It is that
psychic reality of racism, and cultural domination in
general, which provides Seuss with a point of departure
for a critique that is far more radical than the conven-
tional liberal denunciation of racism as simply not
rational or nice.

**Seuss has, in effect, aligned himself with the anti-authoritarian cat, in order to give children the space they need to make more morally affirm-
itive choices.**

In fact, Dr. Seuss introduces a third party who repre-
sents a class whose interests might well be served by the
perpetuation of racism. In his story, the key charac-
ter is Sylvester McMonkey McBean, a predatory and
exploitative entrepreneur who plays skillfully on the
fears and anxieties of the Sneetch victims who are
captured up in the racist world view of their oppressors.

For three dollars each, McBean, with a very large
machine, transforms the Sneetches without stars into
creatures indistinguishable from their former oppres-
sors. Confronted with the abolition of physical differ-
ence, the original Star-Belly Sneetches desperately pro-
claim, "We're still the best Sneetches and they are the
worst, / But now how in the world will we know... / If which kind is what, or the other way round?" McBean,
looking as sleazy as can be, now charging $10 each and
using a fancier machine, removes the stars from the
bellies of the original oppressors. Next, of course,
McBean offers to remove the stars he has sold to the
original victims. As this selling process escalates, the
scene turns into an orgy of capitalist exploitation, with
constant streams of Sneetches paying to enter one ma-
chine to be starred and then to enter another to be
unstarred, while McBean stands grinning in the center,
in front of an ever-growing mountain of cash.

(Continued on p. 113)
The chaos ends when the Sneetches all run out of money, and McBean, with capitalist complacency, laughs as he leaves, noting, "They never will learn. No, you can't teach a Sneetch!"

Nevertheless, The Sneetches ends on a note that is at least slightly hopeful. Having been so fully and relentlessly exploited, the Sneetches manage to achieve a consciousness breakthrough that obliterates the racism of their culture:

But McBean was quite wrong. I'm quite happy to say That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day, The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.

That Sneetch recognition of shared victimization, however, came only after the complete economic destruction of Sneetch society. Having been reduced to common economic powerlessness, the Sneetches finally realize a unitary class consciousness.

Dr. Seuss's book about environmental destruction, The Lorax, is more dark and despairing in mood, with only the slightest glimmer of hope at the end. As in The Sneetches, a prevailing and destructive ideology takes hold and becomes utterly totalizing. In The Lorax, visual imagery intensifies the bleakness of mood, as even the once proud capitalist, now a miserable and guilty hermit, despairs at the wasteland produced by his own pursuit of gain. Colors are dark blues, grays, purples, and browns, and the only visible vegetation is an occasional thin strand of stiff Grickle-grass.

The ideological mainstay demolished by The Lorax is a basic one: Market Freedom. According to conventional wisdom, in a free economy bright entrepreneurs discover novel techniques for fashioning from raw materials new products for the satisfaction of authentic
human needs, which are expressed through choice and exchange on a free market. In Seuss’s account the extraction of raw materials becomes the rape of the natural world, as an entire species of trees (the Truffula Trees) is destroyed, along with the fragile ecosystem of birds, animals, and fish that once depended on it. This destruction is accompanied by the pollution which is the inevitable by-product of manufacture.

Meanwhile, the product whose manufacture requires this wholesale devastation of the environment makes a mockery of the market ideologies of both need and utility. The Thneed, claiming to be everything useful, is in fact nothing but a representation of the artificiality of consumer demand as created and manipulated by the greedy producer. The capitalist at first defensively claims universal utility for his new product (‘A Thneed’s a Fine Something-That-All-People-Need / It’s a shirt. It’s a sock. It’s a bat… You can use it for carpets. For sheets! For sheets! / Or curtains! Or covers or bicycle seats!’) Nevertheless, even he wryly observes after his first sale: “You never can tell what some people will buy.”

Despite this early self-awareness, the capitalist is quickly captured by his own ideological role as acquisitive accumulator, to the point where production, which at least in theory should be a function of rational economic planning, becomes an obsessive and irrational felt necessity. Thus, he at first “felt sad” when the frolicsome, little bear-like creatures, the Bar-ba-loots, were forced to leave because they could not live without Truffula Fruit, although he quickly convinces himself:

“But… business is business
And business must grow… I meant no harm.
I most truly did not.
But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.
I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads.
I biggered my wagons. I biggered the loads
Of the Thneeds I shipped out, I was shipping them
forth
to the South! To the East! To the West! To the North!
I went right on biggering… selling more Thneeds.
And I biggered my money, which everyone needs.”

With capitalist and consumer alike caught up in the totalizing culture of greed, acquisition, and gratification, the possibility of critique from within is remote if not lost. The sole critical voice is that of the Lorax, a wizened elfish being who seems to antedate Judeo-Christian culture and take us back to a world where nature could speak for itself and be heard. Akin to a Druidic spirit, he emerges from a tree to scold the foolish capitalist and by extension any culture which in its self-importance thinks it can stand apart from its
immersion in the interconnectedness of the natural world.

Unlike the capitalist, who uses the traditionally masculine mode of rational analysis to distance himself from his own feelings, the Lorax is unfailingly emotional, engaged and sympathetic. The discourse he uses, while free of and even angry, is always one of empathy, not logic ("My poor swan, why can't they sing a note? / No one can sing who has smog in his throat."); and he consistently speaks not for himself, but for others, for those who are unheard ("I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues ... ") Similarly, the capitalist defines his responsibilities legally, in terms of individual mens rea ("I meant no harm. I most truly did not") and by reference to a protected sphere of private conduct ("Well, I have my rights, sir, and I'm telling you / I intend to go on doing just what I do.") By contrast, the Lorax defines responsibility by the consequences that act have on others, on the whole interconnected community of nature, and he tries to force the capitalist to take personal responsibility for the harm he does when exercising his "rights."

Nevertheless, the Lorax is ignored, and the scene at the end is one of bleak despair. The Lorax departs, leaving nothing but desolation behind him. Even the capitalist retreats into isolation, in a bizarre, aerial, Dickensian hovel, to reflect on the Lorax's last word: "Unless."

That final word represents the core of Seuss's message: There is always choice. No matter how heavy the weight of the past, the possibility of existential, committed action remains. Thus, the final point is one of freedom, not necessity. Even conditions of seeming oppression can be transformed into empowering moral statements and become expressions of genuine commitment. Also, in The Lorax, as in most of Dr. Seuss's work, it is a child, with some link to a natural innocence which can never be completely regained, who is given the final opportunity to act. The capitalist tosses a small seed to a young boy, with the urgent instruction:

"You're in charge of the last of the Truffula Seeds.
And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs.
Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care.
Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air.
Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that back.
Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back."

Dr. Seuss's most pessimistic story is the recent Butter Battle Book, in which Seuss once again uses his favorite political weapon (his "bat," to use the imagery of Solla Sollew), which is mockery. The Butter Battle Book is a bitterly sarcastic history of the arms race, which takes us to the present moment of uncertain dread caused by the threat of nuclear warfare. Dr. Seuss refuses to relieve the tension of that uncertainty: At the end of the story, a boy, afraid of the bomb, shouts out to his bomb-carrying warrior grandfather, "Be careful! Oh Gee! Who's going to drop it? / Will you ...? Or will be ...?"

"Grandfather's only answer is the terrible, "Be patient . . . We'll see! We will see . . ."

Equally terrifying is the extent to which the ideology that justifies the arms race—the ideology of hysterical national moral superiority and contempt for cultural difference—pervades society. With fierce, Swiftian satire, Seuss describes that ideology as transparently foolish at its core. The great difference between the Yooks and the enemy Zooks is the way they spread their butter on their bread, yet this trivial difference forms the basis for a hatred which dominates national life. At the start of the story, the young narrator is carefully instructed by his grandfather:

"It's high time that you know of the terribly horrible thing that Zooks do
In every Zook house and in every Zook town
Every Zook eats his bread with the butter side down! . . ."

Grandpa gritted his teeth.
"So you can't trust a Zook who spreads bread underneath!
Every Zook must be watched! He has kinks in his soul!"

As the Yooks and Zooks absurdly wage war with each other to the point of mutual extinction, the citizens uncritically participate in the patriotic frenzy. The Butter-up Band and the Right-Side-Up Song Girls, singing "Oh be faithful! / Believe in thy butter!" urge the soldiers on. Then, in an especially bleak scene, the Yook citizens are all ordered underground to prepare for war. They dutifully do as they are told, still deeply believing in their country's moral supremacy:

I noticed that every last Yook in our land
was obeying the Chief Yookeroo's grim command
They were all bravely marching with banners aflutter,
down a hole! For their country! And Right-Side-Up Butter!

Closely linked to the ideology of patriotism is the celebration of technological advance, which Seuss exposes as nothing but destructive absurdity. Each new Yook weapon is matched by an equally powerful Zook weapon, as military inventiveness becomes ever more elegantly ridiculous. Thus sling shots are rapidly replaced by elaborate weapons like the Eight-Nozzled, Elephant-Toted Boom Blitz, until finally the bomb—
the Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo—renders all other weaponry obsolete.

While the Yook citizens cheer this process on, the pervasiveness of the nationalist ideology has rendered them essentially passive and unreflecting. The real architects of the arms race are the militarist Chief Yookeroo and his technocratic "Boys in the Back Room." In their dark closet labeled Top-est Secret-est Brain Nest they perform all the seemingly unquestionable, rational mathematical calculations that lead to the most irrational outcome of all—the threat of annihilation. Under the pressure of militarist ideology, political choice has become nothing but passive complicity in this cult of Scientific Expertise and National Superiority.

The terrifying uncertainty at the end of The Butter Battle Book can be interpreted as a call for real choice, a plea for self-willed human action taken to challenge a suffocating and absurdly destructive amoral technocratic society. As other Seuss books illustrate, however, choice is not just defiance and opposition. While Seuss's most obviously political books expose evil, others, ultimately no less political, also explore the meaning of virtue, especially in the form of lived choice in the world. Seuss's early and still popular stories, Horton Hatches the Egg and Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose, provide well-known examples. In each, a routine request for a social favor is transformed into a powerful act of moral choice.

In Horton Hatches the Egg the lazy Mayzie Bird asks Horton the elephant to take a turn sitting on her egg. Horton reluctantly agrees, and while Mayzie flippantly sings out "Toodle-oo" and flies off to Palm Beach, Horton totally commits himself to the transformative task he has undertaken, as expressed in the familiar refrain "I meant what I said and I said what I meant; / An elephant's faithful one hundred per cent."

This commitment proves to be no idle one, as evidenced by the series of trials Horton endures. First is physical pain, as the rains and snows beat down on him; then comes the mockery of his friends, who jeer at the absurdity of an elephant sitting in a tree and trying to hatch an egg. After his friends desert him, Horton must even stare death in the face, when hunters aim their rifles at Horton and he still stays with the nest. Finally comes the harshest trial of all: Horton is turned into a commodity, sold to a circus that hauls him across the country so that crowds of people can pay ten cents apiece to laugh at him.

With Horton, Seuss thus takes the convention of promise keeping and then explores what it would mean if it were taken seriously, as moral obligation. Promises are usually associated with social nicety or self-interested bargaining. Operating within either of those realms, Horton would never be expected to follow through on his promise. Mazie herself defies social norms by never returning, which should relieve Horton of all further obligation; nor could Horton ever be supposed to have foreseen the difficulties he would encounter. To use conventional contract vocabulary, if he were a rational self-maximizer on the market, he would never have assumed the risk that a simple promise to help out could become a mission that would inform every moment of his life.

Promising and contracting always play upon our genuine impulses of niceness and commitment, yet we are never obliged to stake ourselves to the ultimate follow-through. In the ideological realms of both politeness and contracting, there is always an excuse. Horton, however, in the purity of his vision, discovers and seizes the core niceness of promising, making it the basis for an ultimate act of self-realization.

Significantly, that act of self-realization also requires that Horton appropriate a role and identity which, by all conventional assumptions, is utterly female. He must be the nurturing mother. The ridicule of his friends is doubtless directed not just at his size in relation to the tiny nest but also at his womanish behavior. According to the norms of the 1940s and 1950s, only wimpish nerds would act like Horton.

Horton's seeming passivity is intensified by the fact that he must not leave the nest; therefore he stolidly remains in the tree, while others abuse him in the process of acting out their stereotypically masculine roles as hunters and successful entrepreneurs. Paradoxically, however, it is really Horton who has made the active choice, the choice to defy norms in the quest for a virtue rooted in freedom rather than convention.

That Horton has a happy ending is irrelevant, for that ending is wonderfully outside the scope of all rational expectation: As it turns out, the egg hatches and the child within has magically become Horton's own ("It had ears and a tail and a trunk just like his!") Children rejoice at the outcome, yet they and we know that the purity of Horton's commitment was such that results were never the issue.

In Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose Dr. Seuss once again takes niceness beyond the hypocritical realm of politeness, to the point of a seemingly absurd and also burdensome—indeed, life-threatening—commitment. In Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose a variety of pesky, selfish creatures take up residence in Thidwick's antlers. Thidwick longs to be rid of the self-indulgent pests, but that would be wrong. The resident creatures, like yuppie real-estate developers in a gentrified neighborhood, make a mockery of communitarianism when they keep urging others to join them at Thidwick's expense. Then, when Thidwick must swim across the
lake for the moose-moss on which his survival depends, his guests all foolishly vote to keep him on shore, thereby reducing participatory democracy to the mere expression of trivial, short-sighted, self-interest. Even in the face of this destructive pettiness, however, Thidwick feels bound to the obligation (here again a traditionally feminine virtue—hospitality) he has assumed and stays ashore.

As in *Horton Hatches the Egg*, the ending is utterly appropriate, yet wholly outside the scope of Thidwick's expectation. He sheds his antlers, a natural event he did not anticipate, and the oppressively selfish guests confront an equally petty, self-important selfishness, but one that is vastly more powerful: Still on Thidwick's discarded antlers, they end up stuffed and mounted on the Harvard Club wall.

Thus Thidwick, like Horton, makes a powerful statement about the revolutionary possibility of empowerment. Thidwick seizes the very tools of his oppression—i.e., the burden of conventional obligation—and transforms that burden into a self-willed act of moral choice. By the purity of their commitment, both Horton and Thidwick become active, living subjects, not mere playthings of their petty oppressors.

The residents of Thidwick's antlers typify the alienated community of the selfish, atomistic, and self-important. An alternative, the possibility of true community, is offered to us by Dr. Seuss in *Horton Hears a Who*. Unfortunately, within orthodox society the voice of true community can barely be heard. When the ever attentive and protective Horton listens to a faint voice, coming from a mere speck of dust, the other animals start to ridicule him. Passing onto her child the received conventional wisdom, a mother kangaroo announces: *“Why, that speck is as small as the head of a pin. / A person on that . . . Why, there never has been!”*

Thus Horton, whose innocence of spirit gives him access to alternative possibilities, must once again confront the suffocating oppression of orthodoxy, in this case parading as scientific truth about Objective Reality. The orthodoxy is so pervasive that it rules out and denies any alternative discourses, or, as Foucault would call them, “subjugated knowledges.” Thus Horton finds he must stake his epistemological ground against mockery, humiliation, and physical abuse in order to save what he has started to recognize as a voice of real community.

At the end, Horton must call upon the Whos to save themselves by making their collective voice heard. This requires that all the Whos call out together in one loud voice. Nevertheless, one *“young twerp of a Who”* is found self-indulgently bouncing a yo-yo and ignoring the collective effort. Seized by the angry mayor of Whoville, he is forced to give up his individualized pleasure and to join the others in shouting from the highest tower. That one extra shout is the margin of victory for Whoville (“*Their voices were heard! / They rang out clear and clean*”), and the authentic voice of the fully participating community captures and transforms even the mean-spirited mother kangaroo. Horton then cries out triumphantly . . . “They've proved they ARE persons, no matter how small. / And their whole world was saved by the smallest of All!”

In his Christmas story, *The Grinch*, Seuss once again takes up the possibility of authentic community trying to realize itself in a setting of ideological contradiction. The Grinch, a cynical and bitter fifty-three-year-old (notably, Seuss was fifty-three when the book was published) is disgusted with Christmas in all of its crass and materialistic trappings. From the Grinch perspective this materialism is so pervasive as to constitute the whole social meaning of Christmas, and that perception might be said to validate the Grinch's terrorist approach, which is the critical negation of Christmas through theft: Pretending to be Santa Claus, the Grinch sweeps down into Whoville and carries away all the food, presents and decorations associated with Christmas. In this guise of critical negator, the Grinch is a revolutionary hero.

As it turns out, however, the Whos prove themselves to be something other than soulless bearers of social form, for they have fashioned for themselves a Christmas experience that accords with true community life, one that is ultimately indifferent to the commercialized version seized by the Grinch. Thus, even though the Grinch successfully carries away all the material goods of Christmas and leaves Whoville quite bare, the Whos nevertheless come together to experience Christmas as genuine fellowship, something the Grinch's sneering thievery could not take away from them:

*He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming! / IT CAME! / It came without ribbons! It came without tags! / It came without packages, boxes or Bags! . . .*

From the Who perspective, the Grinch, in his mode of critical negation, has been neither hero nor villain, simply a sad and lonely creature cut off by his own cynicism from authentic social being. When the Grinch begins to witness the real fellowship which remains at the core of an otherwise commercialized and commercialized cultural ceremony, a moment of transformation occurs: He becomes, like Thidwick, big-hearted rather than small-hearted (“*... the Grinch's small heart / Drew three sizes that day!*”) and can then join the Whos for their Christmas feast. Notably, this represents no change in the Grinch's rational, intellectual analysis (something the radical religious tradition has always
understood to be ultimately irrelevant), but rather a transformation of spirit and feeling, a new way of perceiving the world which in turn leads to the possibility of community unmediated by social form and category.

With this goal of transformation in mind, it is appropriate to return to the question posed in the last two lines of the Cat in the Hat ("What would you do if your mother asked you?") for that question poses once again the dilemma of virtue's relation to authority. This question is profoundly disturbing to children, for good reason. To choose conventional morality in alliance with authority is to surrender all possibility of existential realization. To be for no other reason than that they tell you to be is not to be at all. On the other hand, children rightly understand the reality of power in the world: Individualized, direct confrontation with authority will surely fail. The child who would defiantly celebrate the cat's visit is doomed to awesome punishment, yet the child who contritely tells the truth forestalls punishment at the price of self-respect. The other choice is to abandon the search for virtue altogether, making a pact with powerful satanic forces in an orgy of joyful self-gratification that will ultimately lead to empty despair.

As starkly presented, those choices are no choices at all. As children instinctively know, what is first needed is some distance, some space—to get authority off one's back long enough to begin to fashion oneself as moral actor in the world, without having to be either a clone of authority and conventional morality or its equally objectified negative mirror image. Books like Yertle the Turtle, The Butter Battle Book, and The Lorax are about the necessity of reclaiming some space in the world, of opening up the way for new possibilities.

But space alone is not enough. So long as that space is filled with selves as we now know them, oppressive hierarchy, and orthodoxy will reassert themselves. Other Dr. Seuss books suggest a different kind of self—a self that without intellectual reflection is caring (Horton), sharing (Thidwick)—or, finally, open to spiritual transformation (Grinch). Children cannot articulate or intellectualize the choice for a different kind of self, but Seuss directs his question to them because, of all people, they alone in their accessibility may be most able to make it. As a writer, with his mocking spirit, Seuss has, in effect, aligned himself with the anti-authoritarian cat, in order to give children the space they need to make more morally affirming choices.

(Continued from p. 46)

**WOMEN IN PARADISE**

hymns and praises, and study Torah. (Emphasis added)

After describing the chamber of Jocheved and Deborah, the passage concludes:

And the chambers of the Matriarchs cannot be described; no one can come into their chambers. Now, dear women, when the souls are together in Paradise, how much joy there is! Therefore, I pray you to praise God with great devotion, and to say your prayers, that you may be worthy to be there with our Mothers.

This remarkable passage differs in a number of significant ways from the original. Three of these changes, in particular, bespeak a different view of women’s spiritual status. First, there is no mention of women’s inferior garments; the whole discussion of garments is simply omitted. Second, the subject matter of women’s study is changed. No longer are women studying the reasons for the commandments they could not perform on earth, and are thus, somehow, still repairing or compensating for the disabilities they suffered as earthly women. Rather, they are simply, in the Yiddish phrase, lernen Toye. This phrase denotes “studying Torah,” which is, of course, the primary religious duty of Jewish men, from which women were excused or excluded. But in Paradise, at least according to “The Three Gates,” women engage in this most holy of activities. (The Yiddish “tales” about the women’s Paradise, incidentally, make this even more explicit. They state that women study Torah “just like men.”) The assertion that women could study Torah, even if only in Paradise, must have seemed quite revolutionary; it was expunged from some later editions of the text, which simply say that Joseph studied Torah in an upper chamber, while the women sang God’s praises below. Third, and perhaps the most striking feature of this text, Bithia and Sarah boldly proclaim their strength and their spiritual power. They express a sense of their own worth in this passage, not just their good fortune in having been the agents of events concerning important men. A fourth change, the expunging of the erotic element from the conclusion of the description, seems characteristic of the popularization of kabbalistic texts. This raises issues I cannot pursue here; however, this passage will be important in establishing the chain of literary transmission between the Zohar and the Ikhbine.

All of these changes occur in a text in Yiddish which was explicitly addressed to women. It makes a certain amount of sense that a work intended for women would portray women as powerful figures, although

8. Part of the reason for the change in terminology may be a simplification for a popular audience. It is possible that women (or non-learned men) could not be assumed to know what the study of ta'amei ha-mitsvot was.