theories and methodologies

Dr. Seuss in Ted Geisel's Never-Never Land

DONALD E. PEASE

LIKE MANY OTHER SUBSCRIBERS TO *PMLA* AND MOST OF THE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN MY LITERATURE CLASSES, I FIRST LEARNED THAT READING could be a pleasure when I discovered Dr. Seuss's children's books. *The Cat in the Hat* implanted the desire to learn how to read in an entire generation of baby boomers. Dr. Seuss (the literary identity of Theodor Seuss Geisel) helped millions of children learn to read, and his books planted the seeds for a more caring, open, and creative culture.

I became personally indebted to Dr. Seuss when I was awarded the Ted and Helen Geisel Third Century Professorship in the Humanities at Dartmouth. But he did not become a subject of my research until 2008, when an editor at Oxford University Press invited me to write an interpretive biography entitled *Theodor SEUSS Geisel* for Oxford's series Lives and Legacies. I organized my psychobiography, detailing the relation between Geisel's life and Dr. Seuss's art, around a decisive turning point. Before the publication of *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* in 1937, Geisel had achieved fame as the creator of trenchant anti-Prohibition satires, slapstick burlesques, political cartoons, surrealist sculptures, and zany advertisements with the tagline "Quick, Henry, the Flit!" for the Standard Oil Corporation. *Mulberry Street* marked a change in his mode of artistic production. The composition of this children's book enabled Geisel to coordinate the disparate forms of comic activity to which he had given tentative expression during the preceding twenty years and to initiate his transformation from an artist tycoon of Madison Avenue into a world-renowned author of children's books.

Mulberry Street was the first of a four-book cycle of children's books set in Springfield, Massachusetts. Since previous biographies lacked an explanation of Geisel's decision to devote himself fully to the production of children's books, I tried to show the crucial role that the Springfield cycle played in altering his art and his practical understanding of the world. Individually and collectively, these works functioned as a transitional object: they undid Geisel's attachments to adult satire and confirmed his commitment to children's

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verse fantasy. In this essay, I will take this idea a step further by arguing that *Mulberry Street* configured the foundational fantasy underpinning Geisel's children's books.

Questioned about the origins of his art, Geisel designated the reserves of emotional memory from his boyhood experiences in Springfield as the impetus: "Why write about Never-Never lands that you've never seen—when all around—you have a Real Never-Never Land that you know about and understand?"[1] Springfield was the town in which Geisel was born and the point of departure for the creation of a second world through which he came to terms with traumatizing childhood experiences.

Theodor Seuss Geisel was born of German parents in 1904, the scion of a wealthy brewing family. His father, Theodor Robert Geisel (known as T. R.) was a businessman and disciplinarian. His mother, Henrietta Seuss Geisel (also called Nettie), was the first person to recognize her son's talents. Ted's relationship with his parents turned on their differing reactions to his art. T. R. criticized his son's drawings for their mismatched and exaggerated features, but Nettie refused to allow T. R. to erase the doodles that Ted had drawn on his bedroom walls, providing the first adult confirmation of the value of his artwork. Geisel attested to the profound effect of his mother's behavior on his art when he remarked that "more than anyone else" his mother was responsible "for the rhythms in which I write and the urgency with which I do it" (Morgan and Morgan 7). Geisel's pseudonym subtracted the patronymic and the personal from *Henrietta Seuss Geisel* so as to connect with the figure of Mother Seuss, who affirmed his art when he was a child.

Before Ted reached his tenth birthday, his family suffered a dramatic change in status, resulting from the anti-German prejudice of World War I. After the war broke out, in 1914, Geisel's German identity became a negative principle, the quicklime in which the family's reputation dissolved. Ted endured verbal abuse and threats of physical violence as he traveled to and from school each day. Schoolmates yelled, "Hun!" "Drunken Kaiser!" and, more ominously, "Kill the Kaiser's Kid!" as they threw rocks and brickbats at Ted and his sister, Marnie. Geisel's memories of his childhood would later oscillate between recollections of the privileged security that derived from his paternal grandfather's status in Springfield society and the anxiety he experienced as the target of anti-German prejudice.

However much the Geisels suffered during World War I, the prominence that they enjoyed during the first ten years of Ted's life did not entirely disintegrate until the Eighteenth Amendment, banning the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcohol, passed into law on 16 January 1919. Before Prohibition, Ted's father was general manager and president of the family business. After Prohibition closed the doors of the Springfield Brewing Company, T. R. retreated to his room for six years, where Ted frequently overheard him cursing, "'S.O.B., S.O.B.' over and over."[2]

Geisel's attitude toward the emotional memories sedimented in childhood defined the contours of his art. Before devoting his immense talents exclusively to the creation of children's books in 1954, Geisel enjoyed spectacular success working as a political satirist and magazine editor, advertising agency artist, wartime propagandist, and Oscar-winning film director and producer, all under the name Dr. Seuss.[3] The majority of the work he published under Dr. Seuss's signature was conditioned by his need to master the forces of social derogation that had been directed against his family. Dr. Seuss turned the sources of Geisel's humiliation into targets of ridicule. His arts of satire and caricature converted Geisel's experiential losses—of the family brewery and of a sense of belonging to an extended German American family—into the gains of comic pleasure.

The adversities in Geisel's childhood influenced the development of his art as Dr. Seuss.

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Geisel's artistic career under the name Dr. Seuss can be divided into three phases. From 1921 to 1933, he set his gifts of satire, caricature, and parody against the organized hypocrisy of Prohibition. From 1933 to 1947, he deployed political satire, caricature, and invective to release lingering memories of the anti-German prejudices from his childhood. Having taken revenge on the forces that had humiliated him, he returned to the pleasures of childhood as a children's book writer from 1947 until his death in 1991.

And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street altered the trajectory of Geisel's artistic career. By composing this street-smart fantasy, Geisel installed the imaginative terrain he needed to recover his relation to the "Real Never-Never Land" of his childhood. He began writing the story when a storm broke out during his voyage home from Germany on board the luxury ocean liner SS *Kungsholm* in 1936. Geisel's fear that he would not survive the trip released the ingrained psychic memory of classmates screaming, "Kill the Kaiser's Kid!" and pelting him with brickbats on his way home from school. *Mulberry Street* intertwined Geisel's adult anxieties during a dangerous Atlantic crossing with the child protagonist Marco's emotional turmoil on his walk home. The story opens with a scene of paternal instruction. Marco's father directs the boy to report what he observes on his way to and from school along Mulberry Street but prohibits him from exercising his penchant for exaggeration:

> When I leave home to walk to school
> Dad always says to me
> "Marco keep your eyelids up
> And see what you can see."
>
> But when I tell him where I've been
> And what I think I've seen
> He looks at me and sternly says,
> "Your eyesight's much too keen.
>
> Stop telling such outlandish tales
> Stop turning minnows into whales."

Despite his father's order, Marco finds it impossible to suppress his need to replace what he sees with more impressive variations. The first sight that crosses Marco's field of vision is a broken-down wagon drawn by a bedraggled horse. Since "that's nothing to tell of, that won't do, of course," he installs a series of increasingly spectacular substitutes for this drab street scene and concludes with the image of a "rajah with rubies perched high on a throne" atop a blue elephant, flanked on both sides by giraffes, and a motorcycle police escort. This extravagant circus caravan transports a huge brass brand and trailer past the aldermen's and mayor's reviewing platform, as two men pour confetti on the entourage from the wings of an airplane.

Marco's improbable tableau dramatizes his motive. Each replacement of the disappointingly ordinary facts of Mulberry Street life with a more gratifying vista allows Marco to postpone the anticipated humiliation of the book's concluding scene:

> There was so much to tell I JUST COULDN'T BEGIN!
> Dad looked at me sharply and pulled at his chin.
> He frowned at me sternly from there in his seat,
> "Was there nothing to look at . . . no people to greet?
> Did *nothing* excite you or make your heart beat?"
> "Nothing," I said, growing red as a beet,
> "But a plain horse and wagon on Mulberry Street."

Marco's story emerges out of the pressure that his father's opening prohibition imposed. His visual fantasy releases that pressure into the increasingly extravagant contours through which his story unfolds. The rhythmic anapestic tetrameter (modeled on that of *The Night before Christmas*) in Geisel's ear-grabbing couplets is, like the drawings, unfailingly funny. It harnesses the sights Marco thinks he sees with his wild, irrepressible

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need for the Mulberry Street he wants to walk along. In gratifying this need, Marco has also managed to obey his father's command to "see what you can see." But he has carried it out on the Mulberry Street he imagines seeing. The visual acuity his father wants from him is evidenced in Marco's detailed observations of the street's workaday operations. His knowledge of the measures needed to prevent a traffic jam at the intersection of Mulberry and Bliss, the protocols of a mayoral greeting, and the rank and file of a police escort would surely have made his father proud. Each spectacle Marco imagines seeing along Mulberry Street also reminds him of the difference between the story he wants to tell and the report his dad wants to hear.

However, Marco's mode of address directs his story not at his father but at implied interlocutors who know how to find pleasure in his departures from verisimilitude. Marco's readers differ from his father in that they want to believe in the make-believe that Marco creates. All his digressions are pervaded by an excess of pleasure. His elation derives from his conversion of his father's restriction into the impetus for adding visual embellishments to each of the increasingly spectacular street scenes unfolding before his readers' eyes.

The circus parade at the center of Marco's story recalls Geisel's fondest boyhood memories. Another aspect of this tale brought Geisel into touch with his family's deepest anxieties. In Marco's story, the town appears to be in the throes of self-theatricalizing enjoyment. Marco needs to believe that Springfield is going places and that his story stands at the center of the dynamism propelling it. In seeing what the father prohibits him from seeing, Marco is telling his dad to be no more satisfied with a drab horse-and-buggy town than Marco is. By composing a story "that no one can beat," Marco wants to arouse in his father the need to go out and make something more of Mulberry Street. Marco's story recomposes his father's bottled-up competitive drives. Paradoxically, he cannot successfully connect with this paternal desire without evading his father's prohibition.

Geisel reentered his fragmented childhood through the intervention of a persona, Dr. Seuss, whom he invented as an adult. *Mulberry Street* did not merely return Geisel to his Springfield childhood but also enabled him to return home by adding figures that his childhood world lacked. After World War I, the neighbors' anti-German sentiments made the Geisel family feel unwelcome on Mulberry Street. Prohibition took away the family's livelihood. Marco's story added a feeling of unconditional hospitality to Geisel's Mulberry Street neighborhood and installed resources for fun no one could take away. In so doing, Dr. Seuss's story endowed Geisel's past with a viable future.

But Geisel's first children's book did not succeed in releasing him from the psychic memory of the indignities he suffered during World War I. The political cartoons he produced for the Popular Front newspaper *PM* from 1940 to 1943 drew on what remained of his real rage at the twin antagonists of his youth: American nativism and German authoritarianism. In *Know Your Enemy: Germany*, a series of documentaries that he created with Frank Capra at Fort Fox from 1943 to 1945, Geisel took control of the anti-German prejudice that had bedeviled his childhood. By producing this hate-filled propaganda, he was exorcising what remained of the specter of German authoritarianism.

After 1945 Geisel wanted to get the war mentality out of his psyche and out of America's consciousness. In writing literature for children, Geisel aspired to release his aesthetic from the logics of invective and ridicule to which it had been tethered. But first he had to return to the psychic and material history embedded in *Mulberry Street*.

Three of the eight children's books Geisel produced between 1947 and 1958 (*McElligot's Pool* [1947], *If I Ran the Zoo* [1950], and *If I*

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Ran the Circus [1958]) drew on his Springfield memories. The continuing hold of those memories on his art reflects the fact that, as in his first children's book, he remained embroiled in wartime psychology. Marco's home lacks the capacity to make him feel as if he belongs there. The exaltation generated by what Marco sees along Mulberry Street contrasts with the feelings of humiliation and anger that accompany his inability to communicate his story to his father. It is only while he is in transit between home and school that Marco succeeds in liberating himself from his father's rebuke.

Mulberry Street bears psychic traces of these oppressive memories, and each of the subsequent stories Geisel wrote about Springfield includes restagings of this origin story. *McElligot's Pool*, *If I Ran the Zoo*, and *If I Ran the Circus* are all set in the mythic Springfield of his childhood, and these stories, along with *Mulberry Street*, constitute what I call Dr. Seuss's Springfield cycle. These stories present variations on Marco's compulsive need to enlarge on his life until he works through the traumatic primal scene—his inability to communicate his vision to his father—that inaugurated the compulsion.

All the other child protagonists in the Springfield cycle differ from Marco (and Geisel) in that each child aspires to communicate what he sees to an adult. The Marco of Mulberry Street expects his readers to do what his father will not—namely, make believe that Marco can turn "minnows into whales." The Marco of *McElligot's Pool*, who literally turns minnows into whales, accomplishes what Marco of Mulberry Street cannot. *McElligot's Pool* concludes with a farmer who looks on with dumbfounded credulity in the final panel as Marco explains, "And that's why I think / That I'm not such a fool / When I sit here and fish in McElligot's Pool."

McElligot's Pool was the first children's book Geisel wrote after World War II. He published it in 1947 with a dedication to his father: "The world's greatest authority on Blackfish, Fiddlercrabs and Deegel Trout." *Deegel trout* refers to trout his father once purchased at the Deegel hatchery yet claimed as his catch, on the sole occasion Geisel could remember when T. R. practiced tale spinning, for which his son became famous. The dedication rewrites Geisel's childhood: it secures the contact between him and T. R. missing from the communications between Marco and his dad.

When Marco's father asks him if there were any persons to greet on Mulberry Street, the question draws on Geisel's recollection of the derision directed against his family during World War I. But in *If I Ran the Zoo*, Gerald McGrew measures the success of his imagined role as superintendent of the zoo in the accolades he receives from the townspeople:

> They'll be so surprised they'll all swallow their gum.
> They'll ask, when they see my strange animals come,
> "Where *do* you suppose he gets things like that from?"
> *Then* people will say, "Now I like that boy heaps.
> His New Zoo, McGrew Zoo, is growing by leaps."

As the first of Geisel's children's books in which a child narrator transports an adult into a fantasy, *If I Ran the Circus*, the last story in the Springfield cycle, brings the saga full circle. Marco in *Mulberry Street* fantasizes a circus parade to replace the drab scenery along Mulberry Street. But Morris McGurk uses his imagination to recast a dispirited store owner named Mr. Sneelock, who resembles the bedraggled horse-cart driver Marco sees on Mulberry Street, as the main attraction at his Circus McGurkus. Unlike Marco, who serves as the target of his father's feelings of humiliation, Morris transposes Mr. Sneelock's lack of self-worth into the impetus for transposing the junkyard behind Mr. Sneelock's modest store into the "most wonderful spot" for "The Circus McGurkus! The World's Greatest Show / On the face of the earth, or wherever you go!"

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Dr. Seuss's turning away from the aggressive political satire of his wartime propaganda was also a turning away from the inhibitions and constraints imposed on Ted by his father. Before he could relieve Marco of red-faced shame and humiliation, Dr. Seuss had to change the relationship between Ted and T. R. The dedication he inscribes in *If I Ran the Circus* reads, "This Book Is For My Dad / Big Ted of Springfield / The Finest Man I'll Ever Know." The Dad to whom Dr. Seuss refers includes Marco's father as well as Geisel's. Just as Morris McGurk's circus redeems Mr. Sneelock's social standing, so Dr. Seuss's dedication of this circus of a book to "Big Ted of Springfield" metaphorically redeems the Geisel family's reputation in the eyes of their Springfield neighbors and supplies a salutation through which Marco and his father can restore their bond. With the publication of this story, Dr. Seuss brings T. R. out of the back room where Ted overheard him "saying 'S.O.B., S.O.B.' over and over" and celebrates this real-life prototype of Marco's father as the finest man his son would ever know.

In composing *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* in 1937, Dr. Seuss returned to the "Real Never-Never Land" of Geisel's childhood, but before he could wholly inhabit that place, he had to erase that hostile environment. In the children's books he wrote about Springfield after 1947, he reconstructed Geisel's lived history by inventing spaces that eradicated the conditions that had motivated his Springfield neighbors' hostility. Dr. Seuss's postwar children's books changed Geisel's Springfield childhood into a real Never-Never Land where anti-German prejudice never had to happen and where the Geisel family business never had to close.

Notes

1. This line appears in Geisel's notes for seminars and lectures on children's books that he gave at the University of Utah Writing Seminar in 1947 (Notes, box 19, fold 6).

2. "When I was young, I used to go to the zoo a lot, and when I returned I would try to draw the animals. You see my father, among other things, ran a zoo in Springfield. He was a guy who became president of a Springfield brewery the day Prohibition was declared (this was wartime prohibition). So he became very cynical and sat for days in the living room saying 'S.O.B., S.O.B.' over and over—he didn't know what to do with himself" (Geisel, qtd. in Cott 110).

3. In fact, Geisel's work received three Oscars: in 1947 for the remake of *Your Job in Germany* entitled *Hitler Lives*, in 1947 for the adaptation of *Know Your Enemy: Japan* entitled *Design for Death*, and in 1950 for the animated short *Gerald McBoing Boing*.

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