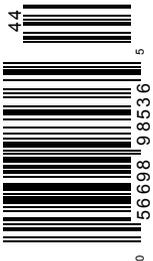


A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE
ISSUE 52 **CELEBRATION**
US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7



LEFTOVERS / BLOOD, LANGUAGE, AND VOOM

YARA FLORES

I take as my text Theodor Seuss "Dr. Seuss" Geisel's 1958 *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, the less-beloved (indeed, frankly somewhat eclipsed) sequel to the author's epochal *The Cat in the Hat* of 1957.¹

Both books center on domestic intrusions by the eponymous trickster-feline in the candy-striped stovepipe chapeau.² In each work, this ambivalent figure insinuates himself—with disconcertingly autistic goodwill, and equally bad judgment—into the latchkey home of a pair of unattended siblings who are forced to confront his disruptive antics. Though apparently without malice, the Cat invariably creates chaos, and the plot dynamics lie both in the children's efforts (primarily those of the male narrator) to reestablish order and in the Cat's own manic-ludic, just-in-time resolutions of the crises for which he is responsible. In the case of the original *Cat in the Hat*, much of the actual trouble is caused by a queer pair of slave-hermaphrodite-clowns named "Thing One" and "Thing Two"; a *deus ex machina* dénouement descends in the form of a snake-handed tractor-octopus-cum-housekeeping-cyborg. *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* is much stranger.

I aim, below, to make a critical intervention in the literature that deals with this vexing latter work, so a close synopsis is in order.³

The tale opens in winter. Sally and her unnamed narrator-brother have been left with a maternal command that they shovel the walk after a heavy snow. The Cat appears (on belled snowshoe-skis) as they are at their chore, and he slips insouciantly into the house, where the children find him eating an entire heavily iced cake in the bathtub (beneath a running shower). The brother enters, orders the Cat to leave, and huffily drains the bath, revealing a heavy reddish stain—presumably of confectionary, though this is never made explicit—ringing the tub.

The whole of *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* centers on the shifting problem of this pink stain, which must be effaced, cleansed, or somehow rendered not-unsightly. This proves very difficult, though not because the ruddy tache is indelible (in the sense of "impossible to remove"), but rather because it is highly labile: lifted from the walls of the tub, the stain transits through the house, appearing sequentially on a dress, a wall, a pair of shoes, a rug, and eventually (persistently) on the sheets of the patriarchal bed.

The agent of these charged translations is, of course, the Cat in the Hat, who, confronting the original stain,

promptly reassures the children that the traces of his bathtub indiscretion can be easily tidied, and blithely sets to the task of wiping down the tub with "MOTHER'S WHITE DRESS" (all caps in original). This bit of bridal regalia emerges besmirched with hymeneal gore, much to the children's dismay. Begged to make clean what he has inappropriately soiled, the Cat laughs heartily and begins to beat the dress against the wall, successfully transferring the blot. "What a mess!" mourns the boy, standing dumbstruck before the incarnating streaks, and the Cat is again charged to address the situation. Reaching for "DAD'S \$10 SHOES," the Cat obligingly smears father's footwear with the residue, leaving the wall pristine. The tainted shoes are in turn wiped on the long rug of the hall, where they leave a series of scuffing footprints (interestingly, the Cat walks the shoes down the hall backwards, wearing them on his hands). These telltale tracks can only be scrubbed off onto, as the Cat explains, "the right kind of bed"—which, conveniently, can be found in "Dad's bedroom." The Cat in the Hat goes to work, and the coverlet is left festooned with a lurid rosy splat.

Here things start to get really weird.

For the first time in the story, the Cat seems genuinely at a loss, as he regards, with pensive dismay, this tintinctured primal scene. "To take spots off THIS bed will be hard," he announces to the children, who look on in a wide-eyed quease.

But all is not lost. Lifting his hat, the Cat promptly reveals a kind of resident cat-homunculus—"Little Cat A"—who will assist in the work at hand. This Cat-in-the-Hat-Mini-Me proceeds to doff his own topper, bringing to light a "Little Cat B." And so on. Ultimately all twenty-six alphabetical cats are brought forth, in sequential diminuendo, through to Z, who is so small as to be invisible to the naked eye.

This surprising invention/discovery of language does not, however, resolve, repair, or explain away the children's catastrophic encounter with the brute fact of originary sexual/procreative violence. On the contrary, the mercurial minions of orthographical semiosis immediately whip up a carnivalesque mayhem. Yes, they export the stain from the bed—spraying it out the door, across the virginal snow, and bespattering the whole neighborhood. But then, as if suddenly incited to corybantic insanity, they fall upon the snow with an assortment of clubs and other weapons ("long rakes," "red bats," "good guns"), slashing and blasting until the entire world presents a charnel horror, deep-dyed by what can only be understood as the giddy-diligent bloodlust of the "blessed rage for order" inherent in language.⁴

It is fair to say, then, that across the slim volume to



this point, the situation has gone from bad, to worse, to primal, to semiotic, to archaeo-archetypal. A private sensual indulgence has led to sexual knowledge per se, and the tracing of that stain—virginal, menstrual, parturitional (for these are all at play)—has unfolded the sublated dramaturgy of heteronormative domesticity. Further delving—the linguistico-discursive pursuit of the *meaning* of these nocturnal mysteries—leads to the inadvertent discovery of nothing less than the terrifying truth about social order itself: to wit, its origin in the primitive total war for access to, and control over, the reproductive power of women’s bodies.

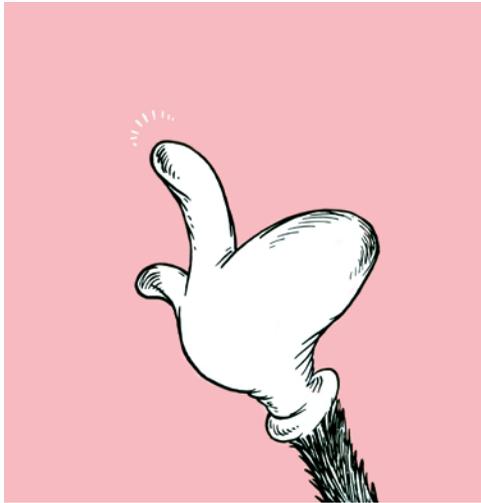
In short, by page fifty-six, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* has come to look like a highly compressed cartoon exposition of *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

It should be said that so blatant an allegory has not gone wholly unremarked. For instance, Naomi Goldenberg’s somewhat reductive “A Feminist,

Psychoanalytic Exegesis of *The Cat in the Hat*” describes in the text a ham-handed male fantasy, in which the secret power of female reproduction is elided through the sophisticated smokescreen of phallogocratic discourse.⁵ And Louis Menand has allowed himself a review of similar themes, going so far as to call *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* “the *Grammatology* of Dr. Seuss.”⁶

One would want to be cautious dismissing that assertion as mere hyperbole, particularly in view of what happens when the reader turns from page fifty-six to page fifty-seven. For it is there that we learn that the ultimate solution to the monstrous, contaminating, pervasive, spreading, primordial *stain-leakage* that has unfolded before the children’s horrified eyes is something under the hat of Little Cat Z. Something, that is to say, beyond/outside language.⁷

⁵“But the cat laughed, ‘Ho! Ho! I can make the spot go. The way I take spots off a dress is just so!’” Drawing and text from Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, 1958.



The Cat calls forth “the Z you can’t see.” Drawing by Dr. Seuss.

It happens this way: the Cat in the Hat, suddenly hieratic, lifts his pointer finger in a dramatically Socratic gesture. He invokes the microscopic Little Cat Z, perched there in silence, and the superlative powers of the mysterious agent/matter/phenomenon that lies beneath this tiniest of hats. We see nothing, and Little Cat Z never speaks. What he secrets in the hatband blackness above his crown is simply “Voom,” we are told.

And Voom is ... Voom:

*Now, don’t ask me what Voom is.
I never will know.*

Voom *vooms*. Of it nothing more can be said.

And voom Voom does. Off comes the last hat, and instantly, up-rushingly, the world is whorled into a vortex of Voom. Everything is obscured. We swoon.

And when we return to the scene? No stain, no blood, no weapons, no chaos, no alphabetical gremlins—only the tidy home perched on a happy hill. Even the snowy walk has been, as if by magic, perfectly plowed and manicured. A cheery bird sits in a tree surveying the goodness. All is right on Earth. Our tale has ended, happily.

The reader will now readily appreciate the force of Menand’s allusion to deconstruction, in that one could certainly do worse than understand Voom as “that which is not a sign.” Here is Menand, wrapping up:

The Voom eradicates the pink queerness of a textuality without boundaries; whiteness is back, though it is now the purity of absence—one wants to say (and, at this point, why not?) of abstinence.⁸

Perhaps.

But can we rest wholly satisfied by the queer-theoretical, vulgar Freudian, or orthodox post-structuralist readings of totipotent Voom?

I believe not.

After all, a world “made white” through a “bathing in blood” surely cannot be properly understood entirely without reference to the sacrificial Christology of Revelation 7:14, where, of course, those emerging from the “great tribulation” have successfully “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Moreover, the superseding and instantaneous cosmic amelioration of a transcendent “Voom” finds no coherent correlative in the discourses of psychoanalysis, Marxism, or deconstruction, whereas the poof-and-save promise of Voomists veritably oozes Judeo-Christian redemptive sentimentality. Do I wish to claim, then, that “Voom” should be understood as “grace,” or that the Cat in the Hat (who, after all, “Comes Back”) offers yet another consumer-culture cod-messiah retailing no-sacrifice salvation? Too simplistic. No more satisfactory than the low-hanging fruit of a satanic Cat, bedecked in his devil’s stripes—the pedophilic feline uncle of the lion that lay down with the Lamb.

None of this will do, quite. The text resists being flattened into either a symptom or a program. In this, at least, it surpasses its critics.

1 The term “epochal” is not used casually. For an orientation to the historical importance of this work—its role in transforming the landscape of childhood in the postwar period—see Donald E. Pease, *Theodor Seuss Geisel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

2 For useful context on this character, see Maria Nikolajeva, “Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Towards a Semiotics of Literary Cats,” *Marvels and Tales*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2009), pp. 248–267.

3 In this brief essay I am obliged to set aside questions of prosody (and, indeed, some very interesting lexical issues) that must be understood as central to any full-scale engagement with the Dr. Seuss *oeuvre*.

4 “Blessed rage for order” is not Dr. Seuss, of course, but Wallace Stevens, from “The Idea of Order at Key West.”

5 Naomi Goldenberg, “A Feminist, Psychoanalytic Exegesis of *The Cat in the Hat*,” a lecture presented at the American Psychological Association, New York City, 14 August 1995.

6 Louis Menand, “Cat People: What Dr. Seuss Taught Us,” *The New Yorker*, 23 & 30 December 2002, pp. 148–154.

7 Staying with Stevens for a moment, one cannot but think of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: “...twisted, stooping, polymathic Z. / He that kneels always on the edge of space.”

8 It should be noted that Menand is here playing out the “Pinko” resonances of the pinkness of the stain, in keeping with his engagement in the larger Cold War context of Dr. Seuss’s work.