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Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard

Power, Food, and Eating in Maurice Sendak and Henrik Drescher: *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, and *The Boy Who Ate Around*

A child lives in a world where giant adults seem to have no other purpose than limiting the child's options. This relationship is contentious at its core and can be best exemplified by the meal, particularly when the giant adult says something like, "You will eat everything that is on your plate," to the frustrated child, who would probably prefer to eat anything but what is on his plate.

Is it any wonder, then, that excess is a key element to childhood fantasy? To become large, larger than one's parents. To become monstrous, beyond adult control. To reject the food on one's plate. To eat something else, anything else, everything else, anywhere else but at the table. To reject parental food. To feel revulsion, then act on it, in spite of the taboos. To eat and eat and eat. To binge. To gorge. To jettison all control and eat monstrously. To eat all that the eye can desire, far beyond the capacity of giant adults, and then to vomit it all up afterward—barf it, hurl it, ralph it—and feel good about oneself. To become a horror to adults, a protean, monstrous child. This child overcomes the imposed limits of the giant adults through a display of sheer excess and, for the moment, tips the balance of power in his or her favor.

Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen* are good examples of the relationship between limitation, excess, and

Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*

the child's imagination. After being confined to his room because he had acted too wild, Max imagines a land—far, far away—which he populates with oversized monsters. The excessive energy that Max's mother would contain breaks out in another form, Wild Things, whom Max learns to tame before he returns to the cozy comfort of home. In *In the Night Kitchen*, Mickey has been put to bed. He is supposed to go to sleep, but he has a worried mind. He does not know how breakfast is made, but he wants to know, badly. Yet he has no way to learn, and he is in bed, and he is supposed to go to sleep, so he is stuck. Mickey's recourse, like Max's, is a dream of excess. In Mickey's surreal food fantasy, the food is larger than life, becoming the cityscape of his dream, and his quest for the milk succeeds only once Mickey has happily traversed this realm of oversized foodstuffs, a world much larger and more complex than that of his bedroom.

Maurice Sendak, *In the Night Kitchen*

Henrik Drescher, *The Boy Who Ate Around*

Yet, for both Max and Mickey, the liberating potential of excess is limited, because their reveries occur in the safe, nonconfrontational spaces of their bedrooms and dream worlds. They do not subvert the limitations of the giant adult world through the sheer power of their excesses. For us, Henrik Drescher's Rabelaisian picture book, *The Boy Who Ate Around*, may be the best example of the struggle between the child and the adult world. It is a book that effectively combines the excesses of monstrosity and food and produces a monstrous, protean child who can do more than dream. Mo, Drescher's boy hero, does not want to eat what is on his plate, but this is not the story of a little boy sent to his room in punishment who then dreams a self-fulfilling fantasy meant to assuage his frustrations. Rather, Mo pursues his fantasy—his excesses—at the dinner table in front of his parents. Mo does not want to eat what is on his plate, so he begins to eat around it, starting with his parents. Mo does not stop until he has eaten the entire world, which he accomplishes by transforming himself into a series of ever larger, more ravenous monsters. The child's appetite is monstrous, and he can eat more than any adult, once liberated from the constraints of table and plate. Once Mo is full to bursting in his last monstrous transformation, he regurgitates the world, as it was, and returns to the table with his parents, a very different and more powerful little boy than when he sat at the table at the beginning of the book, whereupon he negotiates the contents of future meals. He takes on the giant adults at their own game at the most constricted and highly charged locus of socialization in the home, the dinner table. For Mo, excesses are not merely to be imagined. Rather, they are an active means to power and self-realization, to resolve the contentious relation between adult and child in favor of the child.

Background

Speaking of the children's literature of the first two-thirds of this century, Anne Scott MacLeod notes fictional worlds stabilized and de-

Anne Scott MacLeod,
"An End to Innocence,"
p. 106

John Cech, *Angels and
Wild Things*, p. 130

Sally Allen McNall,
"American Children's
Literature, 1800-
Present," p. 409

limited by family and community, producing a literature that "breathed forth serenity . . . [and] conveyed a steady certainty about the reliability of love, the essential goodness of human nature, and the rational connection between cause and effect" (p. 106). Looking to explain the cultural milieu that gave rise to *Where the Wild Things Are*, John Cech offers a more nuanced vision of postwar children's literature. He explains that "throughout the 1950s" there was a movement "toward a more open, psychologically sensitive kind of children's book" (p. 130). He then invokes Sally Allen McNall, for whom "the dream life" of postwar American culture had been

enlarged to attribute worthiness to everyone, in an upsurge of conviction in the myth of social mobility, and in the value of tolerance. . . . The image of the family became more democratic, while children became simultaneously more daring and more sensible. (p. 409)

For such a rosy point of view, the world is stable and secure, a place where the child's anger and frustration can be heard and resolved—a psychological Eden for well-adjusted children and their parents.

But a world of such tolerance did not come into being without some resistance. When *Where the Wild Things Are* was published in 1963, the book's appreciation of wildness, chaos, anarchy, unmitigated fantasy, freedom, and unregulated behavior instigated controversy. Max's behavior bursts beyond the boundaries of rational behavior in the climactic scene of the book, the "rumpus." Words disappear, no longer framing the scene; instead, the moon presides over lunatic behavior, where Max rules "as the most wild thing of all," and the voice of reason—culturally accepted norms of behavior—utters not a peep for three double-spread pictures. As Cech puts it,

With regards to the conventions of children's books, *Where the Wild Things Are* crossed a number of unmarked but nevertheless carefully tended boundaries. Most strikingly, it broke a taboo against the expression of the powerful emotions of childhood—whether they were explosions of anger or sudden journeys into fantasy—that were normally kept away from picture books. (p. 110)

Selma Lanes, *The Art of
Maurice Sendak*, p.
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Many who first read *Where the Wild Things Are* in the 1960s condemned such free-form behavior, fearing that once you let the repressed out of the bag it would never recede. Thus, in their view, it was not a book "to be left where a sensitive child might come upon it at twilight" (Lanes, p. 104). This fear suspects that the moral and behavioral safety checks that Sendak includes at the end of the text would fail to inhibit the unfettered libidos of the children who read the book. Such adults feared for the child, but behind that concern they feared for themselves, feared the book, the child who read it, and the emotions unleashed by the reading. Such adults suffered from a rather unsophisticated form of repression.

Nowadays, of course, we have adopted a subtler, smarter, more tolerant reading, culling out the paranoia (or perhaps only repressing it) by privileging Sendak's checks in order to create a more balanced interpretation of the book: The child can have his/her libidinal flings—they are even seen as natural and healthy—but, with the proper guidance, these flings need not threaten parental authority. Bruno Bettelheim may be the most famous of the revisionists, first attacking Sendak's monsters, then welcoming them (Lanes, p. 104; Cech, pp. 111–112). But it is Sendak himself, as child psychologist, who best neutralizes the power of his wild things:

To master these forces, children turn to fantasy: that imagined world where disturbing emotional situations are solved to their satisfaction. Through fantasy, Max, the hero of my book, discharges his anger against his mother, and returns to the real world sleepy, hungry, and at peace with himself. (*Caldecott and Co.*, p. 151)

Maurice Sendak,
Caldecott and Co., p.
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Once the story is made safe for the world to consume, adults can read *Where the Wild Things Are* with an easy mind, for the book offers a fantasy life adults are willing to allow and even approve of because it does not threaten their authority over their children. Moreover, Max's fantasy resolves into soporific obedience. What better way to assure the adult world that the child's emotional life is not a threat?

Even before Max's reverie¹ begins, his mother has circumscribed its limits by sewing the wolf suit for Max and naming him a "Wild Thing." Her signification of him reduces him to a safe representation of the libidinal energy that is bubbling out of him, for she has embedded Max and his reverie in a text that immediately subordinates and co-opts Max's emotions, conscious and unconscious, to her control. It is her words and the fabric she has sewn that are absorbed into Max's imagination to become the fantastic embodiment of his frustration, anger, and energy. As much as Max may fabricate his own story, his mother has fabricated his identity as storyteller. Thus, Max's fantasy is not some free flight of fancy, but one whose ascent and descent—rising action, cli(Max), and denouement—are subtly delimited, perhaps even predictable. The mother makes Max into a comprehensible kind of "Wild Thing," one that she can handle. From the beginning of the book, Max remains subjected to his mother's power, and he never has a chance of gaining a share in the constitution of the family's social order. It is this chain of signifying events that makes *Where the Wild Things Are* acceptable to most parents, because it gives them the illusion of controlling all aspects of their children's physical and imaginative lives. Moreover, Sendak's book is the perfect product of the rosy world described above, one where there is tolerance but limited democracy.

These containment strategies fail to recognize a child's capacity to take a more democratic role in the family; that is, they are blind to a world where the child does not merely express frustration and anger but can actually exert some influence on the form and disposition of the family. To extend the potential of the history we have delineated—that is, a more democratic family and a powerful child—we would like to suggest Henrik Drescher's *The Boy Who Ate Around* (1994) as representative. Mo takes a bite of his dinner and feels "like throwing it all up, right there on the dinner table, but he was polite and didn't. Instead, he decided to eat around it." Mo eats the entire world, except what is on his plate, metamorphosing as he eats into a series of ever larger, fantastic monsters. In the end, Mo hangs from the moon, lonely and depressed and suffering from gas. All that is left of the world are the hated string beans and cheese soufflé that Mo, once again, cannot avoid, but he finally takes direct action against the despised meal, kicking the plate out of the frame of the illustration and into the cosmos. Having effected that one significant change, regurgitated the world, and become a boy again, Mo now knows the kind of power that he can wield and negotiates with his parents to put an end to string beans and cheese soufflés for dinner.

Food: Locus of Socialization and Revulsion

When a man is small, he loves and hates food with a ferocity which soon dims. At six years old his very bowels will heave when such a dish as creamed carrots or cold tapioca appears before him. His throat will close, and spots of nausea and rage swim in his vision. It is hard later to remember why, but at the time there is no pose in his disgust. He cannot eat; he says, "To hell with it!"

—M. F. K. Fisher, from *The Art of Eating*, p. 7

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not want to assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since that food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself.

—Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, pp. 2–3

Mary Douglas,
"Deciphering a Meal,"
p. 61

The functions of food, as well as the rituals of eating and the rituals of the table, are compact metaphors for the power struggle inherent to family dynamics. Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in "Deciphering a Meal," sees food as a code, and "the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. . . . The message [will be] about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries" (p. 61). For her, a meal is a highly structured event, whose boundary "distinguishes order, bounds it, and separates it from disorder" (p. 70). Echoing Douglas, but transforming food from ordered ritual into text, James Brown, in the introduction to *Fictional Meals and Their Function in the French Novel, 1789-1848*, states that, "Food is no longer viewed as sustenance alone; it acquires a semiotic status and becomes a highly motivated social sign" (p. 8). As with Douglas, for Brown food becomes a more powerful social symbol when it is placed within the structure of the meal and table:

Just as the mother serves as the infant's first introduction to the world, so the table becomes the locus of his initiation into society . . . and eating figures as an act of identification with one's compatriots and adherence to their values. Society maintains and perpetuates itself at the table: eating is a form of apprenticeship by which the child acquires the customs, manners, and beliefs of his fellow countrymen. (p. 16)

Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food*, p. 17

Finally, within this already highly determined realm, taste develops. For Stephen Mennell, in *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, "Tastes in food, like tastes in music, literature or the visual arts, are socially shaped, and the major forces which have shaped them are religions, classes and nations" (p. 17). Thus, if food is a code—that is, if food is material out of which a code is rendered—then the meal and table represent the larger macro-level social forces that constitute the significance of the food, while taste is the individual's internalized analog for those forces. Within this well-fortified eating space, there are only acceptable behaviors and "good" food; outside the fortifications, "anything goes" (Douglas, p. 79).

M. F. K. Fisher, *The Art of Eating*, pp. 628-629

The power of the meal and table is serious, as M. F. K. Fisher discovered. In her chapter "J Is for Juvenile Dining," she writes of how she introduced her daughter to solid food. Fisher chose a food that she thought was "pappy pabulum," yet her daughter did not react blandly:

Quite aside from my innate conviction that she is unusually subtle and sensitive, I considered her at that moment undeniably *normal*, and felt that I was watching a kind of cosmic initiation to what, if I had anything to say about it, would be a lifetime of enjoyment of the pleasures of the table. I was depressed, then, to see such a thorough, bone-shak-

ing, flesh-creeping shudder flash through her wee frame when the spoonful of puréed green beans touched her tongue, as I had known before only in the tragicomic picture of a hung-over bindlestiff downing his morning shot of red-eye. She shook from top to toe in a real throe of revulsion. Then she looked at me, and speculation grew in her wide gaze. . . .

I know that when I brought the dish back to my babe she opened her mouth, poker-faced, and ate everything with only a faint sigh to show her helplessness. (pp. 628-629)

Fisher hopes for an easy initiation, that her daughter will get the “message” and integrate herself deeper within acceptable social norms by eating the puréed green beans, for only by acceding to that taste can the daughter be included in the meal and, thus, by analogy, society. The daughter’s initial reaction, though, marks the difficulty of this “cosmic initiation,” for she has not yet developed the “taste” that would allow her to integrate into the realm of social food and thereby take her proper place at table. Instead, she feels revulsion, her eyes question, and she initially places herself outside the ritual space that her mother has prepared for her. But the code embedded in the green beans is strong, and Fisher’s daughter surrenders to it, suddenly developing a taste for the beans—that is, opening her mouth and ingesting them—which gains her entrance to the realm delineated by the code.

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*

The table may be a powerful vortex for socialization, but, as we see in the epigraphs from Fisher and Kristeva, there may be a more elemental force that can counter its monolithic draw:

People’s dislikes in food may take many forms—from a mild distaste which may be set aside if it would cause embarrassment to one’s host at dinner, all the way through to feelings of overwhelming repugnance and revulsion at the very thought of eating a particular food. (Mennell, p. 291)

The revulsion M. F. K. Fisher’s daughter feels at the puréed green beans is not strong enough for her to escape the world of acceptable “taste” that her mother would have her enter. Fisher’s small man, quoted above, unlike her daughter, though, rejects food with a “ferocity” that is visceral: “His throat will close, and spots of nausea and rage swim in his vision” (p. 7). He is purely reactive and unself-conscious, and he gives no quarter. With him, there is no room for accommodation or compromise, and he excludes himself from the signifying net cast by the “creamed carrots or cold tapioca.”

Kristeva’s presentation of food loathing parallels closely the reactions of Fisher’s small man, but Kristeva speaks from the first-person singular and details more closely the visceral experience of revulsion. For Fisher’s small man, revulsion allows him to escape the social code embedded in the taste that disgusts him. Kristeva’s revulsion is much

stronger, though. She does not merely reject the loathed food that "the mother and father . . . proffer," nor does she just reject generally the larger social codes symbolized by food and parents; rather, her revulsion results in the radical rejection of not only the signifying regime but the very act of signification. She rejects the self as well as all the pronouns from which a self can be constructed, because all the terms that can be applied to "her" revolt "her": "But since that food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (p. 2). Kristeva's food loathing is not a simple shudder of disgust, a physiological sign of reticence to be felt and overcome before one enters a wider social milieu; rather, her viscera have the power to move out of the presignifying physical realm to assault the most elemental, abstract, and generative forms upon which all social codes, all signifying regimes, depend. Kristeva's nausea may initially be a simple means to establish an "I" independent from parental and social expectations, but it quickly overwhelms any such scheme and follows its inexorable course, not merely escaping meaning but obliterating even its possibility.

We will situate our analysis of Drescher and Sendak within the range bracketed by the table and revulsion, that is, between the constitution of food as fully encoded and the expulsion of food as wholly dis-encoded. The ritualized space of the table is the norm, and Kristeva's nausea is its antithesis. Sendak's protagonists Max and Mickey are conventionally table-bound, whereas the gargantuan binge and purge of Drescher's Mo results in a mirror image of Kristeva's food loathing.

Max and Mickey: Beholden to Food

Geraldine De Luca,
"Exploring the Levels of
Childhood," pp. 12-13

When Max as Wild Thing comes careening down the stairs, fork in hand, his mouth is wide open. He is a would-be monstrous eater, who has targeted the family dog and his mother for consumption: "I'll eat you up." As Geraldine De Luca notes:

Eating, a favorite subject of Sendak's, and a common source of sensual pleasure in children's books, is here the vehicle through which Max reveals his aggressions. (pp. 12-13)

But the rebellion of one page has been vanquished by the next, for Max is banished to his room. *He is also banished from the table.* His mother has excluded him, and he is not allowed to taint the sacred space of dinner with his wildness. Thus, from the very beginning, Max's power is neutralized. Moreover, in his room Max's mind may be liberated enough for him to imagine himself as a monster in a land of monsters, but Max does not eat in the land of the Wild Things. For De Luca, "Max may rule the wild things but they are not giving him any-

thing to eat" (p. 13). There is no table in his reverie, no locus where Max could be socialized by the Wild Things, or where, in his imagination, Max might socialize the Wild Things. Max is only the leader of a light-hearted rumpus. He does not threaten a violent takeover. He does not eat up the monsters; rather, they threaten to eat him up with affection. Max disciplines the Wild Things by sending them to bed without dinner, as he himself has been disciplined, and thus puts himself in a position that parallels parental authority. His disciplinary action might seem to make him head encoder in the land of the Wild Things, but it actually allows him to separate himself from the monstrous society. Rather than being bound to the world of his reverie, Max escapes being "ingested" by the monsters, circumventing monstrous socialization so that he can then sail away and avoid becoming a permanent resident of the land of the Wild Things. Even though he participates in the rumpus, Max remains distant from the subject of his reverie—he never quite belongs—and the threats and tensions of his confrontation with his mother are sublimated. There are limits to Max's imagination. Thus, when Max comes back to himself, he and his room can be easily reclaimed by the warm food, because "Max needs someone unlike himself to 'love him best of all' and cook his supper, regardless of the compromise to his freedom" (De Luca, p. 13). Earlier, when Max begins his reverie, the table in his room has only a plant on it. Only at the end, when he is spent, does food appear on the table, thereby symbolically including Max in the family once more.

Food is much more fundamental as a theme in *In the Night Kitchen*. Mickey's initial anger and frustration result from feeling excluded from the process of food production. Mickey aggressively pursues food throughout the book, and correlatively he is also much more bound by the food's social code. From the beginning, Mickey wants to break beyond the limited space of the child—bordered by his room, parents, and home—to become part of the larger world. Mickey is not satisfied with merely partaking of bread at breakfast. And he not only wants to know about the mysterious processes that put bread on the table, but he would also integrate himself into those processes, make himself necessary to their successful realization. Here, Mickey's demystification does not represent a challenge to the social order but signifies a deeper inclusion of Mickey in that order.

Correlatively, Mickey achieves integration through a process of negotiation, whereby he learns, matures, and becomes empowered within the status quo. Perhaps the most poignant, as well as short-lived, conflict of *In the Night Kitchen* is whether Mickey becomes an actor in the social organization or, once he has fallen in the dough, a reified and anonymous material, the stuff for someone else's product. But

Mickey quickly extracts himself from the dough—"I'm not the milk, and the milk's not me. I'm Mickey!"—and he becomes a self-proclaimed mover and shaker, an individual upon whom the cookie-cutter Oliver Hardy bakers depend, for Mickey provides the milk for the bread which, thereby, preserves the sanctity of the breakfast table.

By becoming a hero, Mickey puts a human face on the industrial world of food production. On the back page, Sendak renders Mickey as a product label, yet he is not just one more commodity in a book full of commodities but their savior. Through personal intervention, Mickey prevents an alienated and anonymous process from going awry, demonstrating that the forces which give rise to the social codes we act out (for example, the breakfast table) *cannot be fully automated* and always depend upon human agency. Because Mickey has fun mucking around in the dough and with the baking process from which children are traditionally excluded, his participation in the forbidden, giant adult world makes Mickey a heroic figure to child readers of the book.

Revulsion and Appetite: Complementary Paths to Discovery and Empowerment

In *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen*, the rituals of food master the savage, angry child, but such is not the case in Drescher's *The Boy Who Ate Around*, for Mo, the protagonist, learns to negotiate the sacred space of the table. At the beginning of the book, the status quo of the table is not only untouched but is, in an odd way, preserved. Mo, unlike Max, has not been behaving horribly. He is being good, that is, the conventionally repressed and obedient child. But his parents put before him string beans and a cheese soufflé that look to Mo like "lizard guts and bullfrog heads." Mo does not want to rebel, and he seems to have been taught the value of not embarrassing himself and ruining dinner, so rather than being impolite and vomiting on the spot—that is, doing what he really feels like—Mo "politely" eats around the plate of unacceptable food. Mo acts rationally rather than libidinally, so, unlike Kristeva or Fisher's little man, he avoids the typical result of revulsion. Ironically, Mo's monstrous fantasy builds out of this moment of repression, when all the values he has internalized about dinner table etiquette automatically kick in. Mo may be reacting to generalized patterns of acceptable behavior when he begins to eat around, but the resultant fantasy, unlike Max's, is oddly untouched by parental influence and signification. Mo's obedience acts as a mask, a defensive shield, behind which his imagination is freer and more powerful because it has not been circumscribed by his parents, as Max's imagination has by his mother or Mickey's by commodity culture.

Once faced with the string beans and cheese soufflé, Mo embarks upon a reverie of avoidance, which, paradoxically, opens him up to a broader realm of experience. He does not want revulsion to get the better of him, so he does everything he can to give a wide berth to this loathsome food. Mo is not the recalcitrant child who, generally, will not eat what is put before him; and, in the reverie, with the exception of the two foods that are *put* before him, Mo eats everything else. He develops a Rabelaisian appetite, eating his parents, house, neighbors, school, math teacher, best friend, the First Family, the United States, and the rest of the world. By gorging himself, Mo hits upon a crafty, if paradoxical, scheme: By bingeing on everything else, Mo avoids eating the string beans and cheese soufflé. There are several collateral outcomes to Mo's strategy. By the end of his rampage, Mo's tastes are truly worldly (for example, "For a midnight snack he rolled South America up in Africa, swallowing them whole like an enchilada"), for he has partaken of *almost* everything. And in that *almost*, Mo pursues a learning experience of Gargantuan excess.

In her chapter "Pity the Blind in Palate," M. F. K. Fisher characterizes the development of taste:

Almost all people are born unconscious of the nuances of flavor. Many die so. . . . Others never taste because they are stupid, or, more often, because they have never been taught to search for differentiations of flavor. (p. 57)

By giving Mo string beans and cheese soufflé, his parents were doing right by family and society by developing their son's palate, thereby drawing him deeper into the normative realm of acceptable tastes. In other words, they are mainstreaming their child. And although their attempt may have failed, it is not because Mo is stupid. He is a smart, adventurous kid, and just pursues his own course toward other "nuances of flavor." And as Mo ingests foods and experiences more tastes, he also swallows their codes. But he is not subjugated by them. His monstrous appetite neutralizes their force. Instead, he dominates them, acting as *bricoleur*, mixing and matching, creating new gustatory and signifying combinations.

Unlike in *Where the Wild Things Are*, in *The Boy Who Ate Around* monstrosity is not the sublimation of eating but its privileging, as well as the realization of the rebellious power of the act, free of social instruction. We can chart this difference in the impetus and content of the reveries. Max's transgression ("I'll eat you up")—the moment of greatest libidinal freedom in the book—is strangely absent from his reverie, whose focus has been displaced onto Max's anger and frustration at his mother. Max performs an act of self-censorship. His original transgression—threatened cannibalism—is far too fundamental a vio-

lation of acceptable forms of eating for him to dwell on. What if Max ate the Wild Things to become, truly, the wildest thing of all? Such a reverie might not be a simple, cathartic experience that would leave Max tired and obedient. Rather, cannibalism—monstrous eating—might offer lessons that could seriously challenge family dynamics upon Max's return to conventional space/time.

If the reverie reinforced rather than sublimated Max's "I'll eat you up" behavior, and Max returned to real time feeling empowered rather than exhausted, the end of *Where the Wild Things Are* would be very different (Max unleashed rather than tamed). For Mo's reverie, there is neither displacement nor sublimation of its original cause; eating/avoidance is its central trope. The cheese soufflé and string beans are present throughout the fantasy, a constant reminder of Mo's revulsion and the primary impetus for him to keep eating around—a different kind of therapeutic regimen. At the climax of the book, Mo, in the guise of a tyrannosaurus rat, is left hanging from the moon, alone with the plate of string beans and cheese soufflé. He is powerful enough to eat everything on earth, and the earth itself as well. He can make everything disappear. But he remains frustrated and powerless before the ever-present string beans and soufflé, which on every page witness his gargantuan acts of consumption, without ever being consumed themselves, of course. Finally, he confronts them, triumphantly swatting them away "whirling into space."

Like Mickey, Mo learns how to make his way through the world, learns something about problem solving, and successfully effects the desired change, ridding his world of what has been bothering him. On the other hand, Max's world does not change; only the positions are shifted. Max enters the land of the Wild Things and learns something about wielding adult authority. He disciplines the Wild Things, getting them in shape to behave properly during the parade-like rumpus, a well-ordered release of libidinal energy for which Max is the grand marshal. Yet Max realizes, even as disciplinarian, that his authority cannot quite dominate the monsters, who would eat him up with affection. Max learns that the ordered existence he has created out of the reverie can be all too easily threatened, just as he threatened the household order by menacing the family dog with a fork and disputing his mother's authority. The reverie gives Max a dose of his own medicine, and, in the end, he is humbled by his own transgression, whereas Mo and Mickey are empowered by theirs.

Fundamental to Mo's eating/avoidance strategy is monstrosity. For Sendak, Mickey can pursue his heroic course as an essentialist. Naked or clothed only in dough, Mickey not only never has to forfeit his "I," but in saving the day he celebrates himself ("I'm Mickey!"). Max's

monstrosity is no more than a simple wolf suit, which never masks Max's face; we never lose sight of the fact that he is a boy playing pretend. Mo eats around because it is the mildest of avoidance strategies, the least offensive to his parents because it offers no outright rejection. The one flaw: As long as the cheese soufflé and string beans are present, Mo must eat around. So, out of necessity, he develops an enormous appetite.

But for Mo to continue eating, he cannot remain a little boy. His ever larger and more hideous metamorphoses are, thus, the corollary to his increasingly monstrous appetite. Moreover, Mo is never just a little boy in a monster suit. He becomes the monsters, and it is not until the end of the book that the much changed "original" Mo returns, at least in physical form, climbing out of his tyrannosaurus rat suit. As Mo pursues his gluttonous path, he becomes a monstrous *bricoleur*, eating more and more of the world and its codes. Mo's "I" is, inexorably, affected by what he ingests. All that otherness cannot help but change him, no matter that he dominates it. By refusing to eat the cheese soufflé and string beans, Mo would preserve his autonomy and self-control. By developing an appetite, he pursues the same end:

Appetite attests to, and even comes to symbolize, the space between subject and object, between "me" and the "world": by eating, man ingests and incorporates the world-object. . . . In Freudian terms appetite is equivalent to the specific desire to reduce and annihilate, if only temporarily, the space between "me" and the "world." (Brown, p. 12)

If Mo can annihilate the world, subordinate all the codes until the world becomes Mo, he will never have to eat another loathsome food. But if ingesting the world is a learning experience, if the world is to be incorporated into the self, then there is no way of maintaining "me" as an autonomous, unchanging, essential entity. Mickey can remain Mickey, because his identity is defined by the commodity society which has produced him, and his only desire is to find his niche in that society; Mickey does not want to alter his identity radically but merely to clarify it within the status quo. By the last of his monstrous metamorphoses, Mo finds himself inexorably changed—all because he did not want to eat what had been put before him—but an essential fact of the world has not changed: The cheese soufflé and string beans are still present. So at the height of Mo's metamorphoses—at his most transformed, most other—he finally realizes the power to change the one fact about his world that he would banish, and he kicks away the loathsome dish of food.

Now having finally vanquished everything, including the source of his frustration, Mo feels "tired and lonesome," like Max in the land of the Wild Things after the rumpus. Unlike Max, however, Mo independently

makes the choice to return to his family and the world, whereas Max surrenders his reverie when summoned by parental forgiveness, as represented by the warm plate of food. At the height of his power, Mo has confronted his demon, but to reach that zenith he has rid himself of everything else as well, an unintended side effect. After all, by eating around Mo did not mean to destroy the world and all of humanity, so he decides to disgorge everything and everyone that he has ingested, pouring "out all that was in the huge belly." In spite of Mo's gustatory *bricolage*—the mixing and matching of the world's peoples and geographies—Mo does not regurgitate a radically altered world: It is merely missing the cheese soufflé and string beans.

Mo's actions also avoid Kristeva's revulsion, which is physiological and inexorable, a response that overwhelms and silences the mind. Mo is too canny to allow for revulsion. "Eating around" is, thus, a rational act, which results in the opposite of Kristeva's nausea. Mo ingests codes rather than expels them. His body becomes an expansive receptacle for "me" and "other" as well as all other signifying regimes. Mo avoids losing *himself*, but the boundaries of that self are radically altered as he pursues all the courses of his meal. As receptacle, Mo becomes a hybrid, Freudian melange where self and otherness become co-familiars. Moreover, when Mo expels the world, he does not blow chunks, throwing up the world pell mell. Rather, on the penultimate two-page spread, Mo experiences his last transformation. He throws open the hinged head of the tyrannosaurus rat and exits the monster, returning to the story again as a little boy, but a little boy who is much changed, more confident and powerful.

Suddenly the most ravenous and monstrous of Mo's transformations becomes nothing more than an oversized costume, which Mo then tips on end to pour out the contents of its belly. So, Mo the human being—not Mo the tyrannosaurus rat—is the agent for the salvation and re-creation of the world. Moreover, by reconstituting the world, Mo autonomously situates *himself* in that world (that is, he is not merely *put* there by others). He thereby gains a salutary sense of freedom, for Mo is no longer dependent on his parents for his existence. In a sense, Mo is like any good hero figure after a trial. Upon the resolution of his epic confrontation with the string beans and cheese soufflé, which, coincidentally, also resolved the fate of the world, Mo now has a better sense of who he is and what he can do. Like Mickey, Mo asserts his independence as an individual, but he is more savvy and self-possessed, because he is not as dependent as Mickey is on larger, more powerful social forces for the definition of his identity.

There is a much stronger sense of democracy, of an egalitarian order, in *The Boy Who Ate Around* than in Sendak's two books. Even though

Mo may feel lonely and repentant and long for his family at the end of his fantasy, such feelings are not disempowering because he never loses his presence of mind, his sensibility (that is, his awareness of the world around him). The bottom line is that Mo's fantasy teaches him that he has the power to negotiate the social order in which he finds himself, for that fantasy deals directly with Mo's immediate world, as well as the world at large. Max may rule his island universe of strange creatures and libidinal satisfaction—may have even learned that his desires can be satisfied—but he does not bring that experience back home after the dream. Ironically, that satisfaction and the subsequent solitude create a clean break between reverie and real world, whereas at the end of *The Boy Who Ate Around* the fantastic and the real have merged. Mo has become a savvy, pragmatic child and can apply what he has learned. Needing human companionship, he returns from the moon with an agenda and redefines the sacred space of the table. As the concluding act of monstrosity, Mo regurgitates his parents,

who were *very* happy to see their little rascal again. It was decided that string beans and cheese soufflé were off the menu forever. Then they picked up Mo's best friend, Theo, and went downtown for banana splits.

After being eaten and then tossed back into the world, Mo's parents seem to be more than willing to ignore Mo's transgressions—that is, there is no possibility that parental anger and authority will assert themselves in this last page of the book. As with Max, labeled by his mother as a “wild thing,” Mo's parents label him a “rascal.” But their efforts are too little, too late. Mo is now too powerful to be disempowered by a simple act of signification/encoding, and in the final passage Drescher draws Mo of equal size with his parents, a physical manifestation of their equal stature. He is now in a position to negotiate. In his reverie, Mo as tyrannosaurus rat boots the loathed food, but in real time the string beans and cheese soufflé are banished through consensus: “It was decided.” Mo is feeling his power, and the decision is veiled in the garb of democracy, after which a slightly enlarged community of familiars joins Mo on his territory, downtown, to eat his preferred food, banana splits. Max returns from his reverie exhausted and docile, but Mo's hyperbolic reverie has taught him how to problem solve in the real world and make a small change (not to overstate his power) in his environment.

Food and its associate codes and rituals are powerful social tools that can be used to create, maintain, or modify realms of inclusion and exclusion. Initially, Mickey is in danger of being baked into the anonymous material of commodity culture, but instead of being baked he becomes supplier to the cooks. And Mo uses the act of eating to radically remake the world, yet he changes the world only slightly.

These characters learn to master a food's signifying regimes rather than be mastered by them. Conversely, for Max, food is a tool through which he is mastered, and mastered expertly enough to feel wholly satisfied. Like Max, M. F. K. Fisher's daughter is mastered by her mother's well-staged feeding ritual, but the moment is ruined by her shudder of revulsion, her self-conscious effort to swallow, and her tragic capitulation to "taste." Socialization triumphs, but not without an obvious sacrifice that clearly delineates the schism between self and society. Finally, with Kristeva and Fisher's little man, only revulsion can escape all the codes and rituals associated with food by displacing attention away from the food and onto itself, a pure emotional state, beyond signification and socialization, making moot the whole issue of mastered/mastery.

As we reviewed texts for this paper, we were amazed at how small a part revulsion plays in children's literature. Characters like Max and Mickey never eat, so they never risk even the possibility of a pure, physiological rejection of food. Conversely, consideration of the table may lead Mo, inexorably, to a myriad of violations, but once he reaches his gargantuan extreme and exiles the loathsome string beans and cheese soufflé from the picture, the table returns as the secure, if slightly modified, center of family and community life.

When we began this project, we considered *The Boy Who Ate Around* as a carnivalesque response to *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen*. Compared to Drescher, Sendak's work seems circumspect. Max's wildness is delimited, sublimated, displaced, and lightened. His frustration and anger are easily contained and diffused and not particularly dangerous. Neither are Mickey's anger and frustration dangerous, because he just wants to be another Sunshine Baker. Mo, on the other hand, falls into gargantuan excess and quickly becomes dangerous. He is a polite boy who suddenly runs amok. Neither parental nor social mechanisms rein him in. Mo's reverie does not involve a safe, distant, imaginary fantasyland but invokes Armageddon. Mo is the independent agent who restores the world: He is not guided by adult good sense. Mo can take on some authority himself and change the family; not all authority resides in the parents. The form of the family is no longer based on purely hierarchical authority but is negotiable. Yet, for all the gargantuan excess, very little changes. As Mary Douglas notes, food and its associate extensions are powerful tools of socialization, imbued with structural, civilizing codes that cannot be ignored. Mo's appetite merely demonstrates that those codes are malleable.

Note

1. We use the word "reverie" rather than "dream" based on the reasoning of William F. Toupence, who, in his article on *In the Night Kitchen*, using Bachelard and archetypal criticism, claims that

the subject engaged in reverie is free of unconscious repression. Unlike the situation of the nocturnal dream, the subject of reverie is capable of piloting his/her own journey. Above all, reverie can be spoken. It communicates by means of poetic word-images that transcend whatever torment the author went through in producing them. (p. 92)

Toupençe's description of reverie fits well Max, Mickey, and Mo's willful fantasy experiences. They do not dream, for they direct their fantasies.

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