

Stealing a Bad Feed in the Night Kitchen

LOUIS ROTHSCHILD

An idea of a man engaged in domestic cooking is part of a masculine prototype found in the Louisiana cultural landscape of my childhood. This was fortunate as my father relished cooking. I have considered his love congruent with cultural norms found in pots of jambalaya stirred with a canoe paddle and the grilling of meat. Those dishes are limited to an outdoor cookery that is coded masculine across several cultures. Upon reappraisal, I see that my father's love of domestic cookery crossed a gendered and topographic gap. It occurred indoors as well as outdoors. That migration could be considered transgressive as it pre-dated a leading edge of feminist cultural change in which gender plasticity helped forge identities such as *foodie*. In a flexible foodie present, my father's culinary attachment is now part of my own deep joy found in cooking and eating both indoors and out. I have pre-adolescent, childhood memories of hot sandwiches made by my father that I enjoyed, and there is gratitude that in youth my brother and I were not only confronted with complexity in regard to pride, desire and gender roles, but also challenged to eat salads with our nightly meal. Despite (and because of) the mysteries of intergenerational cultural transmission, my foodie inheritance did not arrive conflict free.

One consequence of having a father who was quite attached to his kitchen was a sense of missing out on so called *junk food* from other kitchens. Desire at first knew not trespass. However, awareness of my parents' preference for food prepared by my father, as justification for their justifiable resistance to junk food, helped form a wish that eating forbidden food would transmit a sense of freedom (Sutton, 2008). Through the articulation of my desire, junk food quickly marked the existence of a differentiated appetite and co-created a burden in the holding and letting go that accompanies separation and individuation.

Development brought some predictable challenges to transgressive desire in the domestic sphere. I recall a sense of guilt when successful in the acquisition of junk food, especially when its procurement required ordering it *to go* while standing with a parent whose particular appetite hovered law-like, pointing back to a domestic kitchen and family meal. In those moments, my

outdoor prize, contrasted with dishes prepared by my father, became troubled, as though I stood outside of the law or in exile *Before the Law* (Kafka, 1948). Far from feeling liberated, I felt I was trespassing in another's garden as the distinction between inside and outside became cumbersome if not confused. Dependent upon a gardener, I wanted to hide, lest I be cast out for seeking a way out.

My pre-teen desire took an inward turn, and like a heterodox bar mitzvah boy in search of rehabilitation and reunion I began to study law through an unofficial audit of my family's kitchen pantry. There I ruminated on cans of chili through an angry pessimism that marked damage to my faith in familial support. These factory-produced chili cans appeared to me as evidence that the law of the hearth was one of culinary injustice and hypocrisy regarding junk food and the outside. These factory-made cans of chili became a gateway to an unresolved, festering monologue searching for an exchange.

Previously, I had asked my father for a chili dog (also known as bangers or wieners) from some sort of diner-like establishment, and was told that the hot dogs were better at home. The calculus did not square for me then, and the more I searched, the more I perseverated on my father's 'know no'. With conviction, my internal dialogue became: 'canned chili cannot supersede diner chili'. Thinking in food, I felt (but was unable to articulate) that this entanglement was about more than food, as I resisted the 'no' I had heard. Although bangers, like all food, could exist in a transitional space (Winnicott, 1971/2005) between public and private, my hot dogs had become a concrete object unable to contain what some have called *father hunger* (Herzog, 2001). Years later (Rothschild, 2016), I have considered that the first Oedipal problem is blindness or a lack of recognition and that some mis-attunement fosters growth; but then, I simply knew estrangement and its discontents. This essay then is about undigested food-thoughts persisting rock like, surviving destruction like a transcendent object - and paradoxically aiding digestion (see Eigen, 2001).

Little did I know that a hot dog would become my rock, when one day at the market I discovered a styrofoam tray wrapped in clear plastic holding several skewered hot dogs fried in corn batter. Had the skewers piercing the center of edible phallic meat created an attractive spoiling, fit for

repetition? Of my childhood Kleinian predilections I am not certain, but these skewered dogs made it into the family basket with little debate regarding 'envy and gratitude' (Klein, 1957/1975). To this would-be psychoanalytic legal scholar who sees Talmudic links between animal sacrifice and linguistic prayer, the issue that allowed this exception was that the grocery store was not a restaurant.

It felt significant that these skewered and fried bangers were not shipped to the store, but made on premises. Such thinking made the chili cans in the pantry more problematic, but like the junk food in the shopping cart, my shaky thought transmitted hope of deliverance from and in exile. Sadly, few if any of these weiners were to make it to a family meal. I recall mostly eating these alone, after hours as a late night snack probably a year or two after my bar mitzvah. I have no idea over how many weeks my solitary eating persisted. However, in concert with my appetite causing this snack to dwindle from the freezer in the kitchen, new corn battered hot dogs were purchased in a silent exchange. For several weeks hope persisted: I ate at our kitchen table as though freedom might be waiting in the next nocturnal bite.

One night, midway through my benediction, I could not eat another banger. Had I flown too close to the sun, accepting sacrifice without recognition of the offering? My hope fell into a bad feed as I wondered if my continued consumption would lead my father to continue to purchase this junked food that had failed to deliver. With lost hope, I became invested in a question or prayer of differentiation: would he notice if I stopped eating?

In that moment of my refusal, the silent cry of withdrawal marked a disassociated hope and quite possibly faith in a new process that could lead to being heard and felt. However, in that moment, I was stuck in a passive position: the emptiness found in a loss of appetite, with its unheard cry, is not quite a transitional object and is also more than a simple failure to create transitional objects (Green, 1999). In the breakdown of frankfurter play, horror became an unbearable that was bearable (Green, 2005). My refusal of the hotdog offering became a communication that there had been a failure or breakdown of creative capacities; this was perhaps also a call for help in the work of creation. My attempt to cling to the basic security system of the family meal was shattering in and through the faith needed to fight catastrophe with catastrophe (Eigen, 1986). Although such a

breakdown (or break in) may create new developmental openings, working with what had been taken in was indigestible or too challenging. Bion (1992) suggests that digestion may take years and that artists and scientists may be of digestive help to one who is unable to conduct similar dream work. In my present reverie on shattering appetite, loss and indigestion, aid comes in the form of refractions present in the art of the American writer and illustrator of books for children, Maurice Sendak.

On turning the table

In the Night Kitchen (Sendak, 1970) is a story that upon publication was banned by some libraries, schools, and bookstores over controversy regarding the depiction of a child's penis (Roth, 2009). The book followed the publication of Sendak's most famous work, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). Sendak was born in Brooklyn to Polish Jewish immigrant parents. His father told him stories of Eastern European shtetl life during his youth while he was bedridden due to illness (Roth, 2009). His childhood was also affected by the loss of family members in the holocaust; and his knowledge of the 1932 kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby terrified him (Inskeep, 2006). Before his death in 2012, Sendak was candid that his art was based on experiences with his parents and relatives (Roiphe, 2016).

At the beginning of *In the Night Kitchen*, a young boy named Mickey dreams of being woken by a noise. He falls naked through the floor boards of his bedroom into a kitchen where the noise originated due to the presence of three male bakers, each of whom has a moustache similar to Hitler's. The bakers (considered an expression of Sendak's internalized fear of the Holocaust (Roth, 2009)) proceed to mix Mickey into their batter. Mickey manages to break out of the batter after being put into an oven, and exclaims to these chefs that he is not milk but is a person. The chef closest to Mickey has a finger over his own mouth, as though he is asking Mickey to quietly collude with being dehumanized and baked into a cake.

Dressed in cake batter, Mickey jumps into bread dough which he kneads into a Lindbergh-like toy biplane (Roth, 2009), reversing his fortune or 'turning the tables' by flying away to safety. The chefs complain in response to his declaration of independence and his continuing to turn his

position into one of advantage. Mickey tells them that he can obtain milk his way. Sendak refers to Mickey as a milkman who next dives into a milk bottle, becomes naked again, and exclaims that he is in the milk and that the milk is in him. From the top of the jar, he pours milk for the now happy chefs who bake a new cake. Next, Mickey returns to his bed where he falls asleep in his pajamas. Sendak ends his story with a picture of Mickey heroically holding a milk jar surrounded by an explanation that this story depicts why we are able to have cake each morning.

In Sendak's story of Mickey's dream, the first offering of food is one of cannibalism in which a separate human existence is denied, thereby creating conditions in which loss would not have to be encountered (Khan, 1979). As this is a dream about differentiation and creativity, we could well consider that the three chefs are a single paternal figure. Through protest, Mickey demands an affirmation of a humanized mutuality that leads to a rapprochement with these chefs, in which a different and palpable meal is co-created. Mickey can return to bed and sleep soundly as the multi-headed monster is transformed.

The ability to turn a nightmare into a happy ending is not always present. Prometheus and Ulysses are each punished for making a forbidden journey (Shengold, 1991). Sendak's work may then be read as a recipe that finding an affirming recognition alters the warp of work with what is negative, or of working with disadvantage. Mickey is a potent person who can be held by, hold, and provide milk. However, becoming a milkman based on a felt lack or threat may simultaneously disavow his doughy softness and maternal needs (Eigen 1993/2004; Rothschild, 2009).

Facing something empty and violent that is called nourishment is no simple matter. Rigidity may be expected when faced with the possibility of an unthinkable agony (cf. Winnicott, 1989 as cited in Eigen, 1999) in which it is possible to feel chained like Prometheus without having journeyed anywhere. For Mickey, the journey and the process of investing in a journey is most important. His putative need to return to bed seems to be outweighed by his impulse to creatively work with the predicament in which he finds himself. Sendak I imagine also marveled at the manner in which Mickey shatters and flourishes. Mickey is eloquent in his response to disadvantage and is fortunate that the chefs are in fact transformed. His external bi-plane transitional object may be compared to my external quiet that, stuck in a narrative of loss, displaced the power of creative activity

through rejecting what was offered. In large part due to Mickey's creative use of autonomy, Sendak's *Night Kitchen* is different than the night kitchen I encountered. Also faced with a negative predicament, Mickey musters a playful faith in uncertainty that is capable of fostering joyful appreciation of a shared endeavor. To situate this distinction somewhat differently, Mickey's play possesses a process orientation that is divested of a clear goal, and that play may be compared to my withdrawal of an overt investment in the uncertainty that is required to creatively participate in processes (Green, 1999).

Negative capability

In a letter written to his brother in December of 1817, Keats (2014: 79) considers Shakespeare to be an exemplar of a man of achievement who is to be distinguished from a man of power due to possession of a negative capability which Keats defines as the capacity to tolerate uncertainty without reaching for fact or reason. Bion (1991) links literature and physics by calling Keats's negativity an uncertainty principle. In real life, working with such a principle demands much: a fear of letting go - one that interferes with living with (and in) rhythms of distinctions and mergers - may be unexpectedly encountered, just as it was in my childhood night kitchen. Such a fear has been compared to a fear of total incontinence and a fear of finding that a work is not as beautiful as what had been imagined (Eigen, 1993/2004). An interpretive line that follows such a thought would suggest something like: 'my silence following refusal may well have been linked to concern that I might not have been able to transform my night kitchen, as Mickey did his own'.

Sendak shows that in the challenge of bearing uncertainty, Mickey is able to find creative work in airplane construction and in being a milkman. Mickey wards off being trapped in a lacking reality by breaking with a cannibalistic fact, thereby creating a fictional or transitional reality that allows him to turn the proverbial tables. My silent refusal of food linked to hope was a silence in which I also felt trapped, defeated, or eaten from the inside. Then, I lacked the capacity to overtly transform a disadvantageous present into an advantage, as Mickey does. Although significant differences exist regarding overt relational strategy for both the character of my teen self and that of Mickey, a shared belief in producing satisfaction through eventual recognition guided our acts away from a nightmarish ending in 'hallucination' (Green, 1999). However, my strategy, which turned an

overt cry for recognition inward, may be understood as more symptomatic, as shown in my depressive tolerance of delayed or lost recognition.

Sendak has created a children's character that is willing to break with certain annihilation to risk the journey to find a creative moment consistent with Winnicott's idea of a transitional experiencing that faces and shapes the uncanny. Ferenczi (1933/1980) similarly noted that it takes a wise baby to recognize a wise baby, and as a wise baby Sendak offers digestive aid for those who are stuck, by telling a story of what one wise baby can do, so that others may find a faith in uncertainty that is needed in order to work creatively with pain.

Every hungry infant hallucinates a breast/apple, and, having been cast out of Eden, must continually re-find it (Shengold, 1991). Sendak's story of an idealized boy ends with an idealized theme of eternal happiness. Wisdom demonstrates that knowledge of continual loss following eating may be continually re-worked. Such a stance is the heart of negative capability in which Keats referred to the use of a half truth that is a recognition and acceptance that one does not know everything and that entering uncertainty with faith is the source of creativity. For the fortunate who find digestive processes through and in their own work, with help, or through a combination of help and their own efforts, a knowledge is found that is the knowledge of Ferenczi's wise baby or a Keatsian genius who forsakes power. Keeping faith with the idea that damaged bonds help us to grow (Eigen, 2001), our falls and recoveries may be at their best when experienced as partial half truths so that creative work with uncertainty might continue.

Louis Rothschild, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Providence, Rhode Island USA maintains a private practice in psychoanalytic-psychotherapy where he also provides supervision. Having published several articles, book chapters, and book reviews, he presently focuses on traumatic ruptures and repairs in father/son dyads.

References

Bion, W. R. (1992) F. Bion (Ed.) *Cogitations*. London: Karnac Books.

- Bion, W. R. (1991) *A memoir of the future*. London: Karnac Books.
- Eigen, M. (1986) *The psychotic core*. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson.
- Eigen, M. (1999) *Toxic nourishment*. London: Karnac Books.
- Eigen, M. (2001) *Damaged bonds*. London: Karnac Books.
- Eigen, M. (1993/2004) A. Phillips (Ed.) *The electrified tightrope*. London: Karnac Books.
- Ferenczi, S. (1933/1980) Child analysis in the analysis of adults. In M. Balint (Ed.), E. Mosbacher (Trans.): *Final contributions to the problems and methods of psycho-analysis*, pp. 126-142. New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Green, A. (1999) A. Weller (Trans.) *The work of the negative*. London: Free Association Books.
- Green, A. (2005) *Play and reflection in Donald Winnicott's writings: The Donald Winnicott Memorial Lecture given by Andre Green*. London: Karnac.
- Herzog, J. M. (2001) *Father Hunger: Explorations with adults and children*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Inskeep, S. (2006) Why Maurice Sendak Puts Kid Characters in Danger. *Morning Edition*. NPR, September 26. <http://www.npr.org/2006/09/26/6139979/why-maurice-sendak-puts-kid-characters-in-danger>, accessed February 23, 2017.
- Kafka, F. (1948) *The Metamorphosis, the penal colony, and other stories*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
- Keats, J. (2014) J. Barnard (Ed.) *Selected letters*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Khan, M. M. R. (1979) *Alienation in perversions*. New York, NY: International Universities Press.
- Klein, M. (1957/1975) Envy and Gratitude. *Envy and gratitude and other works 1946-1963*, M.M.R. Khan (Ed.), pp. 176-235. New York: The Free Press.
- Roiphe, K. (2016) *The Violet Hour Great Writers at the End*. New York, NY: Dial Press.
- Roth, M. (2009) Maurice Sendak. *Patheos*, October 16. <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Maurice-Sendak>, accessed February 23, 2017.
- Rothschild, L. (2009) Finding a father: Repetition, difference, and fantasy in Finding Nemo. In

Louis Rothschild Stealing a Bad Feed in the Night Kitchen

- B. Reis & R. Grossmark (Eds.) *Heterosexual masculinities: Contemporary perspectives from psychoanalytic gender theory*, pp. 217-230. New York, NY: Routledge - Taylor & Francis Group.
- Rothschild, L. (2016) Coercive elements and the threat of child sacrifice: *The Lego Movie*. In R. Garrett, T. Jensen & A. Voela: *We Need to Talk About Family: Essays on Neoliberalism, The Family and Popular Culture*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 353 - 369.
- Sendak, M. (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Sendak, M. (1970) *In the night kitchen*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Shengold, L. (1991) 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?' *Reflections on sex, narcissism, symbolism, and murder: From everything to nothing*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sutton, D. (2008) A tale of Easter ovens: Food and collective memory. *Social research: An international quarterly of the social sciences*, 75(1), 157-180.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1989) The psychology of madness: A contribution from Psycho-Analysis. In C. Winnicott, R. Shepherd, M. Davis (Eds.) *D. W. Winnicott: Psychoanalytic Explorations*, pp. 119-129. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1971/2005) *Playing and reality*. London & New York: Routledge.