

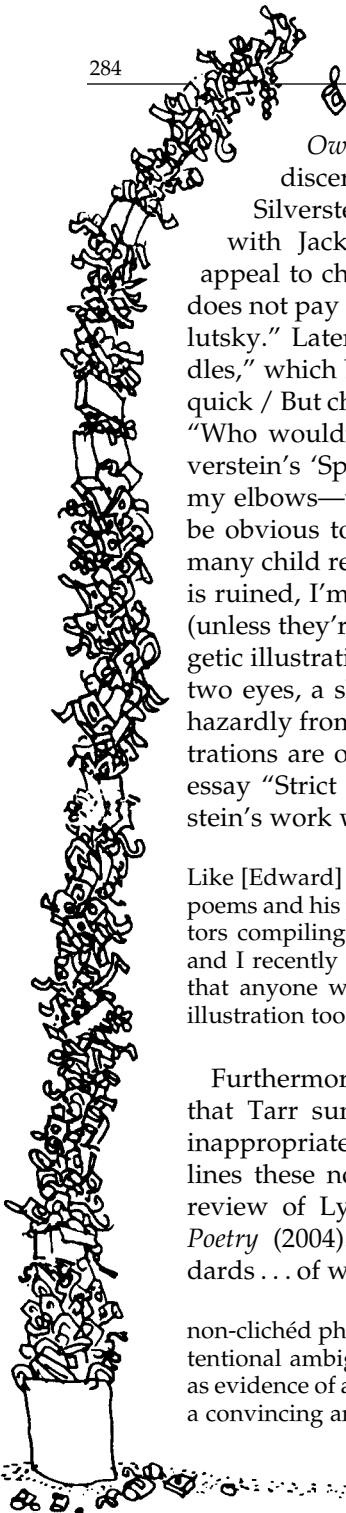
# Reappraising Uncle Shelby

BY JOSEPH T. THOMAS JR.

Few poets are simultaneously as loved and as despised as Shel Silverstein. In the final issue of *Signal*, my friend Richard Flynn laments the popularity of Shel and his “evil twin” Jack Prelutsky. Flynn regrets that Silverstein has become synonymous with American children’s poetry, offering as anecdotal evidence the fact that whenever he mentions that he studies children’s poetry, he’s usually greeted with, “Oh, you mean like Shel Silverstein?” Flynn is right to complain about the way Silverstein eclipses other interesting children’s poets, just as he’s right to complain that Silverstein’s work occupies more than its fair share of shelf space. And, yes, he is also right to complain that Silverstein is often something of a one-note poet. But we shouldn’t dismiss Silverstein out of hand, nor should we dismiss his aesthetic achievement. Shel’s here, and, rest his soul, he’s here to stay—or at least his poetry is—filling up bookstore shelf space, delighting young readers, and providing an easy target for academics.

During Lissa Paul’s children’s poetry panel at the 2004 NCTE conference, Dan Hade reported that he recently asked a well-known children’s poet what might have happened had the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award been around in 1974. Would Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, published that year, have won? After insisting on his affection for Silverstein, the poet in question said flatly that *Where the Sidewalk Ends* would not have won, not if he were making the decision.

Silverstein’s work is often treated this way by the children’s literature wing of what poet Charles Bernstein calls “official verse culture.” The NCTE Award for Poetry for Children has never found its way to Silverstein, nor has the *Signal* Poetry Award, and neither will the first *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry (for which I’m a judge). In her essay “Nonsense Now,” from the March/April 2001 issue of *The Five*



Owls, C. Anita Tarr, a fine reader of poetry with discerning taste, finds several occasions to slight Silverstein's work. In an unfavorable comparison with Jack Prelutsky, she argues, "Silverstein may appeal to children's everyday situations, but he simply does not pay as much attention to each word as does Prelutsky." Later, she quotes X. J. Kennedy's "Italian Noodles," which begins, "Whenever I / Eat ravioli / I fork it quick / But chew it sloli." She asks the rhetorical question, "Who wouldn't rather read ['Italian Noodles'] than Silverstein's 'Spaghetti, spaghetti, all over the place, Up to my elbows—up to my face?'" Although the answer may be obvious to Dr. Tarr, it is probably not so obvious to many child readers, especially when lines like "The party is ruined, I'm terribly worried, / The guests have all left (unless they're all buried)" are underscored with an energetic illustration of a man "buried" in noodles: two arms, two eyes, a shock of hair, and a single foot jutting haphazardly from the mess. Silverstein's poems and his illustrations are of a piece, as Kennedy himself writes in his essay "Strict and Loose Nonsense," which treats Silverstein's work with a great deal of respect:

Like [Edward] Lear . . . Shel Silverstein also has insisted that his poems and his pictures form units not to be put asunder. As editors compiling an illustrated anthology, Dorothy M. Kennedy and I recently had to omit Silverstein because of his insistence that anyone who reprints one of his poems must reprint the illustration too.

Furthermore, the conventional notions of poetic value that Tarr summons in her dismissal of Silverstein are inappropriate to the spirit of his work. Joan Houlihan outlines these notions in a recent and similarly dismissive review of Lyn Hejinian's edition of *The Best American Poetry* (2004). Houlihan argues that these "basic standards . . . of writing in general," include the use of

non-clichéd phrases, . . . of momentum and pacing, lack of unintentional ambiguities and other grammatical problems, as well as evidence of an organizing intelligence, a sense of inevitability, a convincing and/or compelling style and voice and so forth.

Certainly, Silverstein's poetry meets several of these "basic standards," but in regard to "pay[ing] as much attention to each word" as he might, Silverstein does seem a bit remiss. Houlihan opines, "The field of poetry itself [is] built on a tradition of genius, human emotion, and the need to express universal and profound truths through the most powerful and compressed language one is able to wield." Thankfully, Silverstein resists these traditions. The compressed exploration of "universal and profound truths" is not one of his aims. He has a different aesthetic sensibility.

This sensibility is rooted in excess, in surplus, one similar to what Richard Kostelanetz calls "maximal art," which he loosely defines as works that "contain more of the stuff of art than previous art." Kostelanetz looks to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as an example of maximal art, though John Cage's *Europera*, a bricolage of costumes and sounds and even program notes from operas, might be a better example, as might be Cage's *Organ<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP* ("as slow as possible"), a piece that is now being performed in Halberstadt, Germany, a performance that is slated to last 639 years. Silverstein's art is maximal in its sheer volume. Poems such as "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out" revel in excess. The lengthy catalogs of "bacon rinds and chicken bones, / Drippy ends of ice cream cones, / Prune pits, peach pits, orange peel, / Gloppy glumps of cold oatmeal, / Pizza crusts and withered greens, / Soggy beans and tangerines" are at the heart of the poem, not the ostensible didacticism of "always take the garbage out!" However, I'm not just speaking of surplus in his individual, generally short, poems. I speak of the sheer mass of his total output, like Sarah's pile of garbage or that earlier mound of spaghetti, a mass that threatens to bury us. Compare *Where the Sidewalk Ends* to any collection of John Ciardi's children's poetry or to Theodore Roethke's *I Am! Says the Lamb*. Or put all of Valerie Worth's *small poems* next to *A Light in the Attic* alone. There is a cumulative effect to Silverstein's work that is part of its aesthetic: he succeeds by sheer numbers, poem after poem, drawing after drawing, song after song, script after script (yes, he wrote scores of short, comic, often absurdist plays for adults with titles like *Abandon All Hope, Gone to Take a . . .*, and *The Lifeboat Is Sinking*). These works don't exist in isolation; instead, they're all part of the same performance piece, one that, like Cage's, is still under production. (The posthumously published *Runny Babbit* [reviewed in this issue], a collection of versified spoonerisms, is a good example.)



Of course, Silverstein is more than a poet; he is a performance artist, one who has carefully melded his life with his art, crafting and revising his persona as painstakingly as a Robert Lowell might a poem. Silverstein began his career writing for adults, first for the *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, in the early fifties, and later for *Playboy*, his first contribution a small booklet of cartoons appearing in the August 1956 issue (back when he was still "Sheldon"). It was in *Playboy* that Silverstein crafted his darkly avuncular adult persona, "Uncle Shelby," though he used the name in relation to his children's work as well. It's a persona rich in ambiguity and mystery. When he died in 1999, for instance, published obituaries listed his age variously as anywhere between sixty-six and sixty-nine. This persona is evident too in his musical career, which also got its start in the fifties (*Hairy Jazz*, his first album for adults, appeared in 1959). "Don't Give a Dose to the One You Love Most," from the LP *Freakin' at the Freakers Ball* (1969), for example, begins with a spoken dialogue between Silverstein and a young woman, who asks, "Uncle Shelby, did you ever have a dose?" In the context of this song Uncle Shelby has no qualms about answering such personal questions candidly, but in actual interviews he's a bit more laconic, if every bit the irreverent wag. The liner notes to his modestly titled LP *I'm So Good That I Don't Have to Brag!* (1965) features one of Silverstein's few interviews. Highly ironic, it gives a taste of Silverstein's public persona, one strategically opaque about birth dates, romance, artistic ambition, and facial hair (Q: "Why do you have a beard?" A: "I don't have a beard. It's just the light; it plays funny tricks"). Here's a touch more of the interview:

Q: How do you think your present image as world traveler, bawdy singer, etc. combines with your image as a writer of children's books?

A: I don't think about my image.

Q: But if you are a spokesman and leader of your generation with millions of followers, don't you care what they think?

A: I don't speak for anybody but me; I am not a leader. I just want them to let me alone so I can do my thing.

Q: What is your thing?

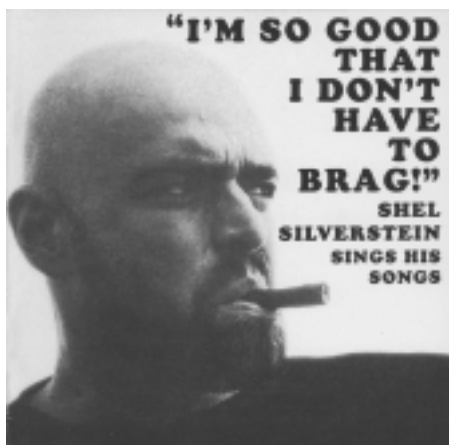
A: I don't know. That depends on the day, the time of day, and what I did yesterday.

Q: Do you admit that your songs and drawings have a certain amount of vulgarity in them?

A: No, but I hope they have a certain amount of realism in them.

Q: Do you shave your head for effect or to be different, or to strike back at the long-haired styles of today?

A: I don't explain my head.



Playing as many “funny tricks” as the light, this persona—and it is a persona—coupled with his diverse and expansive creative output, is key to a good-faith appreciation of Silverstein’s achievement. Seven years before the publication of his first children’s book, and eighteen years before the publication of his first book of children’s poetry, *Playboy* in 1957 was bragging about their “whiskered wit,” characterizing him as a bearded and unpredictable bohemian. Likewise, in *Now Here’s My Plan: A Book of Futilities* (1960), one of Silverstein’s early collections of cartoons, Jean Shepherd’s foreword helps to construct the Silverstein persona that is still with us today, one characterized by blatant contradiction. He writes that Silverstein is

Neanderthalic: stocky, bearded, vaguely stooped, and unbelievably sloppy. Yet there is also a distinct air of imperious Edwardian dignity about him. He has a New Testament face that is strong and hawk-like and that gives the impression that he is about to build an ark. Which is probably true.

Neanderthalic, yet imperious. Old Testament and New. Sloppy, yet an artist. Curiously, Shepard earlier writes that Silverstein “is not for children, of whatever age,” neatly anticipating what is for many the most troubling of contradictions: children’s poet and unrepentant bawd.

His hard-drinking *Freakin’ at the Freakers Ball* persona impinges on his children’s poetry in surprising ways. For instance, the black-and-white photo on the back of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* depicts a glowering poet/artist, face lit from above, his features



*Jacket photos from Where the Sidewalk Ends (left) and The Giving Tree (right).*

shadowed, one bare foot huge in the foreground: he looks more like the Satanist Anton LaVey than most people's conception of a beloved children's poet. The biographical blurb below the picture encourages readers to connect the dots, to link Silverstein's many activities, to see the poems in the light of the persona, to hear him singing "Spaghetti" in the same gravelly voice that sings "I Got Stoned and I Missed It" from the *Freakers Ball* LP. The note reads, "Shel Silverstein is the author of *The Giving Tree* [1964], and many other books of prose and poetry. He also writes songs, draws cartoons, sings, plays the guitar, and has a good time." *The Giving Tree* features a similarly evocative photo, one that prompted an Amazon.com reviewer to write, "I love the book, I just want to know whos [sic] decision it was to put the scariest possible picture of the author on the back cover. When my daughter saw his picture she started to cry."

Another well-known freak—Frank Zappa—might help us better understand Silverstein's approach, and, particularly, how each of his works informs and completes the others. Zappa's first album, with the Mothers of Invention, was *Freak Out!* (1966). Zappa's

notion of a freak was slightly different from Silverstein's (which was unambiguously sexual), Zappa's more directly political:

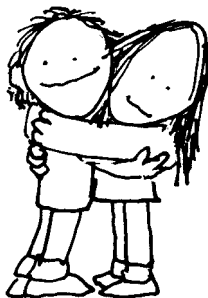
On a personal level, *Freaking Out* is a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole.

Zappa's lyrics are often as sexually suggestive as Silverstein's, if not more so, but it is Zappa's theory of "conceptual continuity" that best illuminates our understanding of Silverstein and his maximal art. As Beat historian and Zappa biographer Barry Miles puts it, Zappa believed that each of his projects was a part of "an overall body of work in which every individual piece is changed, if only slightly, by the addition of each new part." Miles relates Zappa to Jack Kerouac, who "regarded all his novels as one big saga and even announced his intention to one day unify the names of all his characters." Furthermore, Miles roots conceptual continuity in the tradition of "Monet's endless haystacks or waterlilies," arguing that each painting is "a different aspect of the same work, rather than one final statement." Silverstein, then, like Zappa, created a continuity of work inseparable from not only itself but from his public performance of self, which is also a piece of this continuity. In "Frank Zappa as Dadaist," Ben Watson argues that a full appreciation of Zappa involves a "commitment to eking out" his conceptual continuity, which Watson characterizes as "the embedding of cross-references to other records throughout his *oeuvre*." A similar commitment is necessary to fully appreciate Silverstein: one must be willing to read across genres, to put his work for adults beside his work for children, to read his poetry alongside his *Playboy* cartoons.

Silverstein's anti-art stance places him squarely in the Dadaist tradition. Like the Dadaists, he revels in contradiction. His loose, accentual meter is used in the service of nonsense. His short plays resist most conventions of stagecraft—*Thinking Up a New Name for the Act*, for instance, is a four-act, several-minute play employing only the three words *meat*, *and*, and *potatoes*. His success lies not in any one work achieving perfect form but in how each piece—whether poem, play, or drawing, and whether for children or adults—relates to the whole, how each poem changes or extends his continuity of work. Even the seemingly sentimental "Hug o' War" attracts greater complexity when we remember its author is the sex-obsessed lyricist who wrote "Ever Lovin' Machine"

(about the construction of a mechanical, untiring lover). "Hug o' War" reads:

I will not play at tug o'war.  
I'd rather play at hug o'war,  
Where everyone hugs  
Instead of tugs,  
Where everyone giggles  
And rolls on the rug,  
Where everyone kisses,  
And everyone grins,  
And everyone cuddles,  
And everyone wins.



Recently, my colleague Caroline Jones laughingly recalled that even as a child she wondered whether these "rolls on the rug" might be something more akin to an orgiastic roll in the hay than a simple "hug." I missed this possibility for the longest time.

*The Missing Piece* (1976) also illustrates the continuity of his work. Written for children, the picture book involves a Pac-man-like protagonist who rolls around a minimalist, black-and-white countryside, looking for its "missing piece." According to its jacket, the book is a "touchingly told . . . fable that gently probes the nature of quest and fulfillment." Perhaps, but the book also describes Silverstein's playboy lifestyle, one which suggests that the pursuit of life's pleasures is ultimately more fulfilling than a long-term relationship. When our androgynous protagonist finds its "fit," it also finds it can no longer "sing at all" nor "stop / to talk to a worm / or smell a flower" nor pause to allow "a butterfly to land" upon it, as it once was able; and thus it rejects its perfect fit. In addition, Silverstein appears to be having fun reversing (or simply confusing) our expectations, as one could argue that *The Missing Piece* takes the point of view of a woman: the "missing piece" fits into our hero(ine) in an undeniably phallic way. There's no double standard for Silverstein (i.e., the life of pleasure is not just for men), a fact that becomes even clearer when in the sequel the missing piece encounters the suggestively named "Big O" (*The Missing Piece Meets the Big O* [1981]). The "Big O" is suggestive enough, but consider that this is the story of an affable, triangular figure who, after an unsatisfying relationship with a Pac-man shape, comes to terms with the fact that it is unhappy with its current form. Thus it decides to change its shape by force of will, awkwardly rolling itself over and over until its point is worn down and it is transformed into a happy little circle. Now these are chil-



dren's books, but imagine how differently they would be read had they appeared instead in *Playboy*.

Relationships also figure prominently in *The Giving Tree*, his second book for children, as well as in *The Giving Tree's* adult analogue, a four-page cartoon called "I Accept the Challenge." Collected in his 1979 book *Different Dances*, the cartoon begins with a nude woman sitting on a trunk on which the words "Real man wanted" are written. A rather confident (and nude) gentleman approaches the woman and kicks away the trunk, wordlessly offering himself to her. She thereupon whips out a pair of scissors and begins gleefully to cut away the man's appendages until nothing remains but his torso. The cartoon ends as it began, with the woman sitting on a trunk (now recognizable as the man's torso) on which we see, "Real man wanted." This illustration is unmistakably similar to the final image in *The Giving Tree* of an old man sitting on a stump, facing away from us.

More continuity is evident in *Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book: A Primer for Tender Young Minds* (1961), another of Silverstein's adult collections. Originally appearing in *Playboy*, it was published in book form two years before *Lafcadio, the Lion Who Shot Back*, his first children's book (incidentally, *Lafcadio* also appeared first in *Playboy*). Because of his later success as a children's author, the *ABZ Book* was reprinted in 1985 with a slight cover change that highlights the apparent contradiction evident in a children's author who got his start as *Playboy's* "whiskered wit." Though "a primer for tender young minds" still appears on the title page, on the cover a subtitle reads, "A Primer for Adults Only," the back cover insisting, "The notorious early Silverstein classic you *won't* want your children to read." This, of course, is as much of an enticement as it is a warning, using our preconceptions about the innocence of



Illustration from *Different Dances*.  
© 1979 by Shel Silverstein.



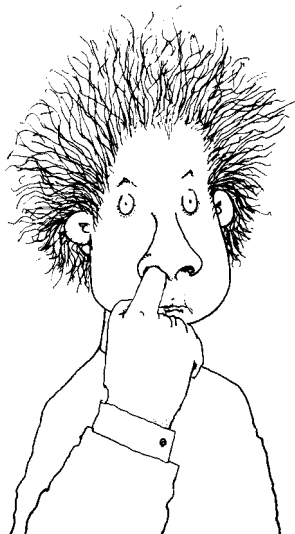
Illustration from *The Giving Tree*.  
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children's writers to titillate and intrigue. Although I'm unsure how much Silverstein himself had to do with this note, it helps to propagate Silverstein's persona, tying the children's author back to the playboy who authored such gems as "Quaaludes Again" and "I Love My Right Hand," songs that sound much more like the dirty rhymes children often recite on the playground than many of the poems Silverstein wrote with an actual child audience in mind.

This somewhat perverse Uncle Shelby persona does rear its ugly (and outrageously funny and bald) head in his children's work, despite his editors' best efforts. For instance, in the print version of *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, the poem "Stone Telling," which explains how a well-tossed rock can indicate whether or not a window is open, reads:

How do we tell if a window is open?  
Just throw a stone at it.  
Does it make a noise?  
It doesn't?  
Well, it was open.  
Now let's try another . . .  
*CRASH!*  
It wasn't.

Falling a little flat on the page, it comes alive when Silverstein performs it on his 1984, Grammy award-winning LP version of



the book. Here, the poem ends with surprisingly strong language: "Now let's try another . . . / *CRASH!* / Hell that one wasn't! Now let's try another one!" Similarly, the poem "Warning," concerning a little finger-biting snail who resides in our noses, also concludes differently in the recorded version. The print text simply ends with the warning that this snail "may bite the whole darn [finger] off." The recorded ending (which sounds ad-libbed and features Silverstein's characteristic laughter) continues the poem with the rather prosy but hilariously performed, "So . . . that's why . . . always use your handkerchief. That's right. [pause] / You just take your handkerchief, wrap it around your finger / And jam it up in there."

These differences are not unusual. Many of his children's poems and drawings first appeared in *Playboy*, and were then revised for the new context of a children's book. As a songwriter, he sometimes gave (or sold) his songs to others, and these others—Johnny Cash, Marianne Faithfull, Emmylou Harris, the Irish Rovers, Loretta Lynn—modified the lyrics as they saw fit. The version of "Freakin' at the Freakers Ball" recorded by Silverstein differs from the version recorded by Dr. Hook, just as the text published as poetry in *Playboy* differs from Silverstein's sung lyrics. Like his children's poems, these are not finished texts. There's a draftlike quality to all of his work, a quality that makes an undated, acetate demo recently discovered at A&R Recording Studio in New York such an appropriate addition to Silverstein's oeuvre. Known only as "Fuck 'Em," the title of the acetate's first track, this recording is as profane as its name suggests. Yet among its rather irreverent numbers lies one familiar to most of us, a demo version of "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout." Conceptual continuity, even here.

SOMETHING VITAL SWIRLS around in Silverstein's work, something that children often can key into, yet something critics often fail to get. Yes, Richard Flynn may be right in his claim that there's something less than fair in the way Silverstein muscles out his competition in the children's poetry section. Sure, a whole shelf of those instantly recognizable black-and-white spines means less space for other poets. But I see that shelf as a piece of experimental work par excellence. That shelf is a bit of Silverstein's magnum opus, a tangled mess of art that, like Sarah Stout's garbage pile, "reached so high / . . . it touched the sky." By its very nature, this maximal art resists totalizing interpretations, for it is as contradictory and evocative as his public persona. Remember, his first book of poetry opens with an invitation to "liar[s]," to "magic bean buyer[s]." His poems, drawings, songs, plays—they're all magic beans sold by a baldheaded huckster. And maybe they work. Maybe they are magic. Or maybe his readers—those liars—only *say* they work. Regardless, Silverstein challenges us to plant those beans and watch for stalks, to follow where they lead.

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