

Things Beginning with the Letter “M”

Frank Stevenson
Department of English
Chinese Culture University, Taiwan

In the “Mad Tea Party” chapter of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, we get a conversation between Alice, the Mad Hatter, the March Hare and the Dormouse. At one point the Dormouse tells the story of “three little sisters” who “lived at the bottom of a treacle well” and “were learning to draw treacle”¹:

“Where did they draw the treacle from?” asked Alice.

“You can draw water out of a water-well,” said the Hatter; “so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well—eh, stupid?”

“But they were IN the well,” Alice said to the Dormouse, not choosing to notice this last remark.²

“Of course they were,” said the Dormouse; “—well in. . . . They were learning to draw,” the Dormouse went on, yawning and rubbing its eyes, for it was getting very sleepy; “and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M—” . . .

“Why with an M?” said Alice.

“Why not?” said the March Hare.

. . . The Dormouse had closed its eyes by this time, and was going off into a doze; but, on being pinched by the Hatter, it woke up again with a little shriek, and went on: “—that begins with an M, such as mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness—you know you say things are ‘much of a muchness’—did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness?”

“Really, now you ask me,” said Alice, very much confused, “I don’t think—” (Carroll 74-75)

¹ “Treacle” means “antidote to a poison” and comes from the Greek *theriake* (“antidote”), which is from the feminine of *theriakos*, “of a wild animal”—a curious point which might have implications for Derrida’s Platonic *pharmakon* (meaning both “poison” and “antidote”), “dialectics,” psychoanalysis and gender studies, among other things.

² A dormouse is in form between a mouse and a squirrel, and the *dor* may come from Middle French *dormir* (to sleep)—thus Carroll makes him a very sleepy (or perhaps drugged) mouse.

4 *Concentric* 36.2 (Sept. 2010): 3-16

Putting aside the play—though we sense it might be crucial to the deeper meaning here—on “draw” as “pull” (as in “draw water, or treacle, from a well”) and “draw” as in “draw a picture,” which we assume is the term’s main meaning when we come to “drawing things that begin with an M,” the four M-terms mentioned are quite interesting. While “mouse-trap” must have for the dormouse the greatest existential or ontological gravitas, signifying as it does the very means of his annihilation (in more than an Hegelian sense of “negation”), I will mainly focus here on “muchness,” “memory” and “moon.” *Muchness*, implying as it does great size or excessiveness, could suggest an economy of some sort, whether open or closed: when the theme of “words beginning with M” was first chosen for this issue of *Concentric*, apparently “Marx” and “money” were high on the list of terms or concepts being contemplated, along with “modernity.” Though I am not sure what it means to “say things are ‘much of a muchness,’” the mathematician-logician Carroll (Charles Dodgson) arguably supports a radically “economic” interpretation of the above passage—in the sense of poverty and survival, of trying to draw sustenance from an empty or almost-empty well—with his logico-mathematical, linguistic-paradoxical games:

“Take some more tea,” the March Hare said to Alice.

“I’ve had nothing yet,” Alice replied in an offended tone, so I can’t take more.”

“You mean you can’t take LESS,” said the Hatter: it’s very easy to take More than nothing.” (Carroll 73)

Of course, a well is both closed and open. Closed economies (*oikos nomos* means “house management”) suggest the self-contained dynamism of an operational system, dialectical or otherwise, though Hegel’s dialectic arguably opens out as we reach higher levels. Derrida and generally poststructuralism speak of (different kinds of) “differences” which are thought to be more “open” than Hegelian dialectical negation, and Deleuze’s radical “openness” (in the sense too of excessiveness or “muchness,” like that of Nietzsche and Bataille) extends to his discussion of “nonsense” in *The Logic of Sense*, which is on level, and explicitly in the Preface (“From Lewis Carroll to the Stoics”), a reading of *Alice in Wonderland*. With poststructuralism generally, as well as Freud, Marx and Hegel, it may be safest to speak of “open and closed economies.”

Only one of the essays in this “M”-*Concentric* has “Economy” in its title: Elyssa Cheng’s “Moral Economy and the Politics of Food Riots in *Coriolanus*” looks at the bread-and-butter issues of poverty and survival in the context of a political and moral economy. There is a clear conflict: the poor people (in

Shakespeare's London and now transposed to ancient Rome) are threatened with a scarcity of food and thus with starvation. The food riots "were ritualistic acts" meant to "compel the authorities to respect the plebeians' legitimate right to eat." That is, the rioters "do not rise up to subvert the established social order [. . . but] to alert the authorities that their grievances must be heard and respected." The authorities (who know the upper classes are hoarding grain) try to say that they are genuinely concerned with the poor people's plight, but the people know this is not really true—hence we have a kind of dialectical interplay within a closed system.³

In the play Menenius speaks to the crowd, saying the famine was caused, not by upper-class food hoarding but by the weather, that is, by the gods (an "external" force); he also compares the state to the belly of the "body politic" and the "food rioters to the mutinous, disconnected body parts": the "limbs' rebellion against the belly is absurd because the belly altruistically digests food, and sends out nourishment to the limbs" (paraphrasing *Coriolanus* 1.1 85-144). However, "upon hearing Menenius' grotesquely constructed carnal economy, the First Citizen offers his own politico-corporeal metaphors: ' . . . the arm our soldier, / Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter, / With other muniments and petty helps / In this our fabric'" (1.1 105-8). This *other* interpretation of the body "stresses function rather than subservience, action rather than dependence" (Jagendorf 460). "By deconstructing Menenius' horizontal topography of storehouses, rivers and offices centered upon the belly, the rebel reconstructs [a] vertical model in which the body parts cooperate in the service of a common enterprise and are merely restrained by the guts at the bottom—"Who is the sink o'th'body'" (*Coriolanus* 1.1.111).

The notion of a "moral economy" also fits two of the other eight "M"-essays. In Hsin-yun Ou's "Mark Twain's Racial Concepts in Relation to the Chinese" we have the late-19th-century American author's support of the Chinese immigrants (or Chinese Americans), who were treated by the whites as second-class citizens—if not, like those forced to build the western section of the transcontinental railroad, as virtual slaves. "Twain's anti-racism fueled his powerful anti-imperial writings later in his life," writings which expressed "his sympathy for the oppressed Chinese and an insistence on racial tolerance." The sense of what might be called a closed-and-open moral economy is implied by the antagonism between opposite forces, racism and anti-racism, combined with the complicating factor that "when Twain observed the Chinese, he was in fact examining the American character in comparison with

³ Perhaps the First Citizen's vertical model of the body politic (see below) suggests a more open system than that implied by Menenius' horizontal model with the government as the "belly."

his ideal vision of the U.S. as a nation that represented the forces of social justice and liberalism.”

Pi-Jung Chang’s “Ethics of Reading and Writing: Self, Truth and Responsibility in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*” brings explicitly into play another of the Dormouse’s M-words, *memory* (as well as a literary *modernism* which, while not mentioned by the Dormouse, is arguably also represented by the 1865 *Alice in Wonderland*), and in fact Proust, whose mother was Jewish, starting writing the first part of his opus, *Swann’s Way*, just ten years after Twain expressed his sense of “fair play” in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* No. 592 in 1899, in an essay entitled “Concerning the Jews”: “I am quite sure that I have no race prejudices, and I think I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices. . . . All that I care to know is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me; he can’t be any worse.”⁴ Chang claims that while Proust’s work has “often been accused of being implicated in or leading to subjectivism, relativism or even nihilism, this essay argues that the ethical value of Proust’s text does not derive so much from particular moral messages it articulates as from the narrative and stylistic techniques it employs, and from its concern with reading and writing as being ethically relevant.” With its “excess of signification” and “anxiety in representation, Proust’s work promotes a sense of responsibility in readers and writers by inviting an attentiveness to [interpersonal] otherness.”⁵

We get an explicitly Hegelian-dialectical, open-and-closed economy, one that is biological but also ethical-political, in Catherine Malabou’s 2004 book *Que faire de notre cerveau?* (*What Should We Do With Our Brain?* 2009), discussed by Hugh Silverman in his essay “Malabou, Plasticity, and the Sculpturing of the Self.”⁶ Malabou begins from the traditional (e.g. Cartesian) mind-body problem in philosophy—“If our mind is nothing but a bio-physio-chemical brain, then why do we not *experience* it this way?”—and from the Hegelian move from consciousness-of-object back to self-consciousness (where the self becomes the object of its own

⁴ One is almost tempted to compare the “moral economy” of “you can’t be less than a human being” with the Hatter’s remark to Alice that you “can’t have less than *no* tea,” except that it is also not clear that one can be more than a human being.

⁵ Among the philosophical and critical works discussed by the author are Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. The stress on “reading” and “writing” (the Mock Turtle’s “Reeling” and “Writhing”) in both this and the *Correction* essay (see below) may invite one to ponder the Mad Hatter’s insoluble riddle: “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” We assume the answer is not Poe but might be the open-ended linguistic-phonetic play of (post)modern poetics?

⁶ As Silverman points out, the French title might better be translated in a more open-ended way as “What to Do with the Brain?”, which strangely enough seems to fit *Alice* (with its many images of disembodied heads and also hats), and in particular the confusions of the Mad Hatter.

consciousness). But Malabou takes the more radical step of reflecting on the brain itself, which now appears—in a Hegelian-dialectical move—as a non-identity rather than as that central organ of the body, that powerful “sovereign” in absolute control of the rest of the body which the brain has traditionally been seen as, at least in the West.⁷ Silverman discusses Malabou’s notion of the brain’s “plasticity”—neither supple nor rigid but *between* these two states (dialectics again), her “de-centering” and in some respects Deleuzian “transdifferentiation” of the brain, her making it part of an interconnected body-system in which all elements cooperate equally, as in a harmonious, democratic and just society with no philosopher-kings on top.

But the brain also “sculpts” and “re-fashions” itself, in close connection with the rest of the body, so that in Malabou’s radicalized-Hegelian view we are always resculpting ourselves in a diachronic sense as well, moving or opening into a new future at every moment, our own cells and synapses exploding into new forms, new possibilities. Thus her body-brain model does not only suggest a more open, democratic and harmonious society by way of analogy: we ourselves are becoming such a society, and here the essentializing concept of the “I” (or “we”) is being called into question, as generally in poststructuralist discourses, in a radically empirical manner. If “You are your synapses” as Malabou says (perhaps parodying Lacan and Žižek, “You are your symptoms”), that is, if “you” are also all your most minute individual body-particles (Deleuzian multiplicity again), then “we” (as its tiny parts) are equally the body-politic that we are becoming.

In Jeffrey W. Salyer’s “Mastery and Mock Dialectic in Thomas Bernhard’s *Correction*” we get Hegel’s master-slave dialectic again and the poststructuralist (e.g. Derrida, Deleuze) attack on Hegel’s conception of negation; the latter seems to assume a self-identity that gets negated, not to mention a final, all-encompassing unity, as opposed to Adorno’s “unswerving negation” (and Adorno may have influenced the Austrian Bernhard) and the poststructuralist “difference.” The highly complex novel *Correction* (1975) “concerns the relation between the narrator and his deceased friend, Roithamer, for whom the narrator serves as literary executor.” Roithamer, a “gifted geneticist and professor at Cambridge,”⁸ had demanded of the narrator that he “correct” his somewhat chaotic manuscript so as to make a clearer order out of it, and then committed suicide—thereby “correcting himself out of existence.” Thus the novel is totally based on the narrator’s thoughts and memories

⁷ Thus Menenius’ giving of priority, of centrality and sovereignty to the “belly” is interesting.

⁸ It is a strange contingency—one Carroll, who taught mathematics at Oxford, might enjoy—that “genetics” should appear here inasmuch as Bogue’s and Malabou’s essays are both concerned with this subject, Bogue’s more explicitly.

regarding this dead writer who had wanted to maintain an “absolute mastery” over him, even after the “self-negation” Roithamer had already planned for himself. In a climactic scene the narrator, constantly oppressed by the sense that he has been forced into a slave-like role, gives up “trying to make order” and “hopelessly confuses Roithamer’s legacy, written out on thousands of slips of paper, by tipping over the knapsack containing the slips and stuffing them willy-nilly into a drawer of a bureau” (paraphrasing Bernhard 120-21).⁹

Allowing that multiple readings of the novel are possible, the author suggests two interpretive approaches, both explicitly “Hegelian” yet also darkly ironic, arguably even comic—and the term “mock dialectic” suggests after all that the whole weighty edifice of the Hegelian dialectic is here being mocked, and/or is itself already and inevitably somehow fake, a “mock-up.”¹⁰ The first approach assumes that “the narrator’s actions underline the precariousness of all notions of order, and, with malevolent humor, emphasize the potential tyranny of editorial order. Intention and the contrived stasis of totalization are mocked by raising questions as to whether there was any order to start with or as to how an editorial ‘re-construction’ imposes structure that was never there.” The second approach “posits that the [narrator’s] disarrangement of the legacy is a defense against the posthumous psychological abuse suffered by the narrator [and] the culmination of a contest” in which the dead author is striving to posthumously dominate his editor. Thus we may see the narrator’s “self-consciousness” as threatening “either to neutralize (mock dialectic) or to liquidate (abstract negation) the dialectical process, both [being operations that are] destabilizing to what Derrida terms a restricted

⁹ This scene, more a textual *disordering* than textual disruption, may remind us of the important scene coming just before Alice wakes up from her (also-textual, as Freud was aware) dream at the end of *Alice in Wonderland*. “‘No, no!’ said the Queen. ‘Sentence first—verdict afterward.’ ‘Stuff and nonsense!’ said Alice loudly. ‘The idea of having the sentence first!’ ‘Hold your tongue!’ said the Queen, turning purple. ‘I won’t!’ said Alice. ‘Off with her head!’ the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved. ‘Who cares for you?’ said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). ‘*You’re nothing but a pack of cards!*’ At this the whole pack rose up in the air, and came flying down upon her; she gave a little scream, half of fright and half of anger, and tried to beat them off, and found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister. . . . ‘Wake up, Alice dear!’” (115-116, emphasis added). The scene of all the cards flying like leaves above Alice’s head, captured very well in the original illustration of John Tenniel, might suggest the now de-condensed fragments (dream-thoughts) of a dream disrupted.

And Proust’s *Swann’s Way* begins with the narrator’s long, ambiguous waking-up process.

¹⁰ In Chapter 9 of *Alice*, “The Mock Turtle’s Story,” the Mock Turtle says that he was once a “real turtle” but then “we went to school in the sea” where his “master was an old turtle—we used to call him Tortoise . . . because he taught us . . .” (91). The queen says a Mock Turtle is “the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from” (89); mock turtle soup is actually made from meat, wine and spices in imitation of (actual) green turtle soup.

Hegelian economy.” In any event Bernhard “problematizes this sense of identity, which Deleuze [and Derrida] philosophically calls into question, and in so doing ‘challenges the notion that the aim of thought is to re-present, to make explicit or conceptualize what already exists in a non-conceptual form’” (McMahon 45).

Now I would like to bring into play that third “M”-word mentioned by the Dormouse: the *moon*. While the “real” moon could connote space travel and science fiction, Lady Moon may conveniently suggest, *via* metaphorical and also metonymic extension—given her cyclic phases or transformations as well as her mythological gender in many (but not all) mythopoetic traditions—two other “M” words that I was eager to appropriate in any case: “mother” and “metamorphosis.” “Mother” can be easily tied to “muchness” (even “much of a muchness”) insofar as the mother, on a mythopoetic and also French feminist model, is the all-encompassing, all-engendering womb, Irigary’s “volume without contours” and “sex which is not one,” Kristeva’s “semiotic *khora* (womb) of language”—a place where Carroll seems very much at home.

Metamorphosis or transformation as a *special kind* of linear-temporal process suggests the breaking out of any sort of economy, even a very “open” one though this might depend on how open is our definition of “openness.” Malabou’s free and open-ended, future-oriented, bio-political praxis of self-sculpting or self-fashioning may be a form of metamorphosis, as may be the “explosion” of genesis or giving-birth, of mothering. Yet here we would still need to distinguish the event of a mother’s one-celled egg becoming fertilized and commencing to subdivide into many cells (genesis) from the metamorphosis (in the *sens propre*) of a caterpillar—the wise, hookah-smoking one in *Alice* for instance—into a butterfly, or (in fantasy) of a “real” turtle into a human “mock turtle.” The question then remains as to whether we see Malabou’s “re-forming” (through a sort of self-negation) of cells as “metamorphosis” or “genesis” or both.

Ronald Bogue’s “Metamorphosis and the Genesis of *Xenos*: Becoming-Other and Sexual Politics in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis Trilogy*” takes us back to the body and also back to the future. Bogue claims that Deleuze and Guattari’s words from *A Thousand Plateaus* (1982) seem to anticipate Butler’s trilogy, the first of whose novels would appear seven years later: “Science fiction has gone through a whole evolution taking it from animal, vegetable and mineral becomings to becomings of bacteria, viruses, molecules, and things imperceptible” (248). In *ATP 10* we have the key notion of *becoming-other*, whose type is becoming-woman: “Rather, becoming-woman is something that passes between the categories of man and woman, establishing a ‘zone of proximity . . . an objective zone of

indetermination or uncertainty' (*ATP* 273), a 'proximity, an *indiscernibility*' (*ATP* 279), within which a mutative undoing of the categories of male and female may issue forth in a creative 'line of flight' toward some hitherto unmapped gendering of the human. . . ." Moreover: "Becomings always move away from dominant categories because such categories exist primarily to resist metamorphosis—to fix, control, code, regulate and structure," and "since the orthodox category of 'woman' is structured by its controlling opposite . . . only an active 'othering' of the category 'woman' will initiate a genuine becoming-woman. . . . All becomings 'begin and end with a becoming-woman' (*ATP* 277), but [they] also tend toward 'becoming-elementary, -cellular, -molecular, and even . . . imperceptible'" (*ATP* 248).

This sort of perspective, which may remind us of Malabou's body-brain differentiated unity whose tiniest parts "self-sculpt" and "re-form" themselves, is then used by Bogue to elucidate Butler's sci-fi trilogy. In the opening novel, *Dawn*, we learn that "Lilith and her fellow human survivors of a nuclear holocaust have been preserved in pod-like wombs for over two centuries while the Oankali restore earth's ecosystems and prepare to interbreed with the humans. The Oankali are genetic 'traders' whose goal is the creation of hybrid 'constructs,' both human- and Oankali-born. This envisioned procreative process is a general 'becoming-animal,' a becoming-Oankali of the humans and a becoming-human of the Oankali, one whose product will be something between the two species. But the Oankali are already decidedly 'other' within themselves, since they are 'like mature asexual animals' that 'divide into three' (*Dawn* 35): Dinso, who stay on earth and breed with humans; Toaht, who take human partners but leave in the spaceship that carried the Oankali to earth; and Akjai, . . . who depart in a new space ship created after reaching earth. Above all, the Oankali are fascinated by difference—unlike humans, who fear it—and constitutively devoted to metamorphically becoming-other. . . . 'We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. We carry the drive to do this in a miniscule cell within a cell—a tiny organelle within every cell of our bodies'" (*Dawn* 41).

Bogue discusses this in the light of the Deleuze-Guattarian becoming-other when it cuts across human-nonhuman boundaries, generating *thirds* but also passing beyond the bounds, not only of any sort of closed or open dialectical system or economy but of "logical order" itself. "The orchid and the wasp are engaged in a process of becoming-other, the orchid becoming-wasp in its resemblance to the sexual organs of a wasp, the wasp becoming-orchid in its pollination of other orchids, this symbiotic relation developing not through mimicry but through an aparallel evolution. . . . The wasp-orchid relation . . . conjoins heterogeneous

elements in a mutual undoing and reconfiguration. . . . Deleuze and Guattari oppose the process of reproduction via becoming-other (orchid-wasp) to the process of ordinary reproduction as we would oppose epidemic to filiation, or contagion to propagation. If evolution involves any true becoming, they say, ‘it is the domain of symbioses that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation’” (*ATP* 238). How then might one compare such a radically contingent and “open” view of human evolution with the sort of human future, generated through the self-sculpting and the free metamorphosing of individual human synapses and cells (“organelles”), by extension of human bodies-and-brains and by further extension of human society, that Malabou may be thinking of? More generally, can this model of “epidemic and contagion” even any longer be compared at all with (“post”- ?) poststructuralist economies of “difference”?

Though Butler’s possible future world need not necessarily be characterized as one filled with “monstrous” creatures, we do often get the latter in movies such as those in the *Alien* series, where Captain Ripley (a woman) becomes a human-alien hybrid. Of course, “grotesque” human-animal hybrids are common in Greek and other mythologies and in fantastic “children’s” books like *Alice in Wonderland*. The perversely (unconscious, Freudian) sexual implications of the creatures in many fairy tales, folk tales and children’s tales—Snow White living with seven male dwarfs? A tiny human Alice conversing with a huge, pipe-smoking, monstrous, grotesquely phallic caterpillar?—help to make these figures shocking and horrifying, horrible. And if a dwarf or a pipe could also be taken, via Freud, as a “fetish,” so could Kristeva’s “abjection”—which has to do with the “open dialectic” of mother and baby—be taken as the shocking otherness of a metamorphosis. The last two Messays, both interpretations of films (*movies*), are concerned in various ways with muchness, memory (both historical and traumatic) and the moon of motherhood and metamorphosis¹¹—in the context of psychoanalysis and gender theory as well as politics and history.

In “Resisting the Lure of the Fetish: Between Abjection and Fetishism in Kai Wai Wong’s *In the Mood for Love* (2000),” Yuh-yi Tan claims that “though abjection has been an unexplored aspect of fetishistic theories, its association with excluded otherness, the logic of disavowal, and the horror of castration not only is basic to fetishism, but also offers an approach to mobilize and reify categories of sexuality and gender.” In his 1927 article “Fetishism” Freud says that the young boy (for Melanie Klein also the young girl) is shocked to see that his mother has no

¹¹ The “moon” also suggests a woman’s monthly “period”; “menstruation” comes from the word “*menses*” or “month” which comes from “moon.”

penis, as her “castration” seems to imply his own, and so he gives her a substitute penis (his “fetish”) to which he now becomes very attached: “Something else has taken its place . . . and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute. Furthermore, an aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals remains an indelible stigma of the repression that has taken place [and] a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it” (*Standard Edition* 21: 154). Kristeva’s concept of “abjection” (in *The Powers of Horror*) refers to the process by which a baby emerges from its mother at birth (with all of the chaotic and horrifying blood and gore) as well as the early or pre-Oedipal stage of the infant’s relation to the mother, seen by Kristeva as an alternation between total dependence on and hatred of (desire to be free from) the horrible object—hence “excluded otherness” and “the logic of disavowal.”

Therefore both fetishism and abjection (in their “original” senses) may seem to imply some sort of dialectic, to be open-and-closed economies of some kind, and “Resisting the Lure” looks at the larger interplay between them in its reading of the “mood for love” in the Hong Kong film with its 1960s setting: “Articulating the relation between abjection and fetishism, [the film] facilitates reflection on a true object cathexis that recalls a lost maternal memory, a reflective mirror that leads us to the primal trauma and [to healing].”

An abrupt opposition, if not also a dialectical interplay or even an intermittent series (X then Y then X . . .), may be implied by the title of Ang Lee’s 2007 film, *Lust, Caution*, and the title of Hsien-hao Liao’s “Becoming Modernized or Simply ‘Modern’?: Sex, Chineseness, Diasporic Consciousness in *Lust, Caution*” gives us the process of becoming, of a development if not also a becoming-other. The author tells us that the “extended, seemingly self-indulgent sex scenes in [the film] have generated rather unfavorable responses from both Chinese and Western critics. But this paper argues that these sex scenes are central to Ang Lee’s project of interrogating Chineseness from a Taiwanese/diasporic Chinese position. Sex here is just a metaphor for a people-state relationship which often approximates lust.” What all Chinese people then need, the author claims, is to “become modern” through a process something like the one which Wang Jiazhi in the film has undergone: “a Lacanian (and Freudian) *Versagung*, or redoubled renunciation, during which what Lacan calls ‘subjective destitution’ is experienced. The caution against lust is therefore a call from the diaspora to renegotiate Chineseness by becoming post-Chinese/post-Taiwanese.”

The various forms of negations and (redoubled) renunciations, as well as their syntheses and overcomings, at work in these two interpretations of Chinese films—films made by directors not from China “itself” or the Chinese “mainland” (the “trunk” or “head” or “belly”?) but from its “limbs,” Hong Kong and Taiwan—suggest once again the broad usefulness of “economic” models of interpretation which might be “dialectical” in some sense of the term. Yet if Hegel’s physical world (or “reality”) is already rational and self-conscious, a *Geist* (Spirit) that is becoming conscious of itself through history, Malabou breaks down the body/mind (that is, body/brain) duality in a more radically empirical way, and in doing so deconstructs the traditional (at least in the West) body-brain opposition, where body had been always the slave and brain (not belly) the master. Perhaps then the scenes in *Alice in Wonderland* with “disembodied” heads—mainly that of the Cheshire Cat—as well as hats that are not accompanied by heads (though they are properly the metonymic extensions of heads)—mainly the hats made and sometimes worn by the Mad Hatter—are also intended by Carroll as a mockery, subversion, deconstruction of the scenes that feature absolute-power-driven beheadings . . . beheadings of the sort not at all uncommon in the England of Shakespeare’s day.

In the original illustration by John Tenniel that accompanies the following scene from *Alice*, a gigantic cat’s head appears up in the air above the much smaller king, queen and others on the queen’s croquet-ground, which is why at first only Alice sees it and speaks to it:

“How do you like the Queen?” said the cat in a low voice.

“Not at all,” said Alice. She’s so extremely . . . likely to win, that it’s hardly worth while finishing the game.” . . .

“Who *are* you talking to?” said the King . . .

“It’s a friend of mine—a Cheshire-Cat,” said Alice . . .

“I don’t like the look of it at all,” said the King: however, it may kiss my hand, if it likes.”

“I’d rather not,” said the Cat.

“Don’t be impertinent! . . . Well, it must be removed” . . .

The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. “Off with his head!” she said without even looking around.

“I’ll fetch the executioner myself,” said the king eagerly, and hurried off. . . .

When [Alice] got back to the Cheshire-cat, she was surprised to find quite a large crowd collected around it: there was a dispute going

on between the executioner, the King, and the Queen, who were all talking at once. . . .

The executioner's argument was that you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn't going to begin at HIS time of life.

The King's argument was, that anything that had a head could be beheaded, and that you weren't to talk nonsense.

The Queen's argument was, that if something wasn't done about it in less than no time she'd have everybody executed, all round. (It was this last remark that had made the whole party look so grave and anxious.)

Alice could think of nothing else to say but "It belongs to the Duchess: you'd better ask her about it."

"She's in prison," the Queen said to the executioner: "fetch her here." And the executioner went off like an arrow.

The Cat's head began fading away the moment he was gone, and, by the time he had come back with the Duchess, it had entirely disappeared; so the King and the executioner ran wildly up and down looking for it, while the rest of the party went back to the game. (Carroll 83-85)¹²

Of course, while beheadings are real (or at least were in England a few centuries ago, and probably still are somewhere in the world today), the Cheshire Cat, even when it "rematerializes" as a whole body-and-head, is just a fantasy, as is the Mad Hatter himself and his missing (thus doubly non-existent) hat. And yet are not things like the Freudian and Lacanian phallus (which both the father and mother may have and not have in various senses)—and if not the phallus then at least the "fetish" as imaginary substitute for the lost or lacking or non-existent phallus—in fact also "fantasies" in some sense?¹³ But even if so, we obviously take them to be

¹² The "fading away" of the cat's head—and the fact that the King and executioner are upset since they wanted the head to be cut off and not to just naturally disappear—is perhaps interesting in the context of Silverman's "Malabou" and Cheng's "Coriolanus" essay.

¹³ Obviously such a statement must immediately be qualified, for how can "serious" philosophical or theoretical concepts—the various poststructuralist "differences," Foucault's "discourse," Lacan's "real" (which in some sense already announces itself, like abjection and the fetish, as a kind of "absence"), Deleuze's "plane of immanence"—be mere "fantasies"? (And if we say these are "metaphysical" concepts it would not be a bad thing, since the law of gravity or

more “real” or at least more “useful” fantasies than that of the Cheshire cat—even the whole cat when it is fully materialized.

Still, this “much of a muchness” drawn out of a magician’s hat as if from a deep well, this smile of a vanished cat that itself disappears will keep returning, perhaps not so much as “the repressed” or even a ghostly *revenant* as the continual need for things that make us laugh—and that remind us that even the “real” world, the actual, physical, material King and Queen themselves (or anyway their counterparts in the year 2010), could ultimately themselves be “nothing but a pack of cards.”

“You’ll see me there,” said the Cat, and vanished. . . .

While [Alice] was still looking at the place where it had been, it suddenly appeared again [and later] vanished again. . . .

“All right,” said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which had remained some time after the rest of it had gone. (Carroll 66)

law of supply and demand are also metaphysical concepts inasmuch as we do not perceive these laws themselves with our five senses—yet no one would say these are not very “serious” laws.)

But ironically, while Deleuze makes a point of distinguishing philosophical concepts in the *sens propre* from the concepts, metaphors, figures or images of science as well as those of art and poetry (in e.g. *What is Philosophy?*), he also breaks down Plato’s distinction between “absolute ideas” (which possess the highest level of reality) and simulacra or “false images,” those which do not even correspond to any physical objects. (In a way he is “cutting off the head” here, as Nietzsche does with his denial, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, of any hierarchy whose “higher” term has an “independent origin” (God, Being, etc.) and thus more truth or reality than the lower term.) That is, for Deleuze there would in some sense be “only simulacra” on the rhizomic surface of the plane of immanence (without “height” or “depth”). But he also takes this figure (or concept) seriously, just as he takes very seriously (in *The Logic of Sense*) the logical and sometimes “nonsensical” play of *Alice in Wonderland*, where this has perhaps become projected onto a flat surface with its various figures or diagrams.

In fact, in *The Logic of Sense* the “First Series of Paradoxes of Pure Becoming” includes “Alice’s adventures or ‘events,’” the “Second Series of Paradoxes of Surface Effects” includes “Discovery of the surface in the work of Lewis Carroll,” and the “Thirteenth Series of the Schizophrenic and the Little Girl” talks about “Antonin Artaud and Lewis Carroll” and the “Distinction between the nonsense of depth and the nonsense of surface.” Part of Series 13 is based on Deleuze’s August-September 1968 article “*Le Schizophrène et le mot*” (“The Schizophrenic and Language”), on Carroll and Artaud, in *Critique* 255-56.

And yet in a more “innocent” way it seems clear that the height and depth—whether fantastic, unconscious or “real”—of Alice’s journey down the rabbit hole to another world and back again (simply waking from a dream with her head in her sister’s lap) gives us the plot and substance of this delightful novel. Lacking this, it would be as if *Alice* had had its (or her) head cut off.

Works Cited

- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*. Intro. Martin Garner. Illustrated. John Tenniel. New York: Signet, 2000.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *The Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale. Ed. Constantin Boundas. New York: Columbia UP, 1990.

About the Author

Frank Stevenson has a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston College; he has taught western literature and literary theory at NTNU and now teaches at Chinese Culture University. He has published essays and reviews on Chinese-Western comparative philosophy in *Philosophy East and West*, the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, *Soziale Systeme*, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* and *Tamkang Review*; on Virginia Woolf in *Journal of the Short Story in English*; and on Nietzsche, Deleuze, Serres, Kafka and Poe in *Concentric*. He has also published two books, *Poe's Aulos: Voice, Echo and the Logic of Noise* and *Chaos and Cosmos in Morrison's Sentence of the Gods*, and essays in two books, *Buddhisms and Deconstructions* and *East/West Interculture*.
Email: stardog6666@yahoo.com

[Received 14 Aug. 2010; revised 27 Aug. 2010]