

Alice Fell Down a Hole

An architectural model for Jacques Derrida

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Alice fell down a hole. But in a later adventure, she met Humpty Dumpty, and had a meaningful conversation:

“When I make a word do a lot of work like that,” said Humpty Dumpty, “I always pay it extra.”

“Oh!” said Alice. She was too much puzzled to make any other remark.¹

Afterwards, Humpty fell off his wall. The task faced by the king’s horses and king’s men must have been rather substantial, for while the nursery rhyme only mentions the seemingly clean if unsalvageable shattering of his shell (as if his perverse polysemy were being made material), the oozing mess that was once his body must have seeped into the ground, egg white and yellow. Were it not for the fact that foundations are already a highly suspect form of support, as forty years of deconstruction have taught us, we might assume that this would have made the ground muddy and sticky – runny – thereby further undermining any sense of a secure ground on which to base my argument.

This was the ground on which I based an architectural project, a project to which I gave the wilful title *A tetradomational gazebo-croton, an unfinished construction for hysteric stones and petrified droppings*. But in the beginning – and beginnings and endings were also nodes in my thinking as I created this work, and now that I think of it, Humpty Dumpty, a shattered egg, would seem to embody both an archaeology and a teleology – in the beginning, in the genesis of the project, there was no Alice, there was no Humpty, there was no knowledge of deconstruction. There was only architecture to deal with. There was only my formless sense of architecture’s incredibly infuriating readiness to pin things down (“That’s all very nice, but is it architecture?”), of architecture’s apparent obsession with its own boundaries, a discipline that seemed to me to be both threatened and mesmerized by what lay ‘outside’ it, as if those boundaries were so plain to see. A hermetic world, self-enclosed, insistent about insides and outsides, scrambling to appropriate crutches from philosophy, literature, film, yet always fearful of

contamination (“That’s all very nice, but what does this have to do with architecture?”). Architecture, “containing and ordering, and representing through firmness, commodity, and beauty: consisting of orders, entablature, and architrave; base, shaft, and capital; nave, choir, and apse; father, son, and spirit, world without end, amen.”² A discipline that, to me, in my undergrad angst, seemed puffed-up and proper, self-important, as secure in itself (yet as easily offended) as an egg in a cravat.

“What a beautiful belt you’ve got on!” Alice suddenly remarked. ... “At least,” she corrected herself on second thoughts, “a beautiful cravat, I should have said – no, a belt, I mean – oh, I *beg* your pardon!” she added in dismay, for Humpty Dumpty looked thoroughly offended, and she began to wish she hadn’t chosen that subject. “If only I knew,” she thought to herself, “which was neck and which was waist!”³

The following short essay (and the architectural project which it supplements – see attached pages) takes the form of an oblique story about my ‘seduction’ into deconstruction not so many years ago, a tale about how deconstruction taught me to stop worrying and love architecture (or at least to develop something like a passion for it, a passion being something that, as Jennifer Bloomer notes in her own oblique story about her relationship to architecture, involves both love and hate – and many things in between).⁴ Now, in the year after Derrida’s death, it must also be a tribute to him. For if commentators have been heralding the death of deconstruction for at least the last fifteen years, and if the heyday of deconstructive thinking in architectural philosophy seems like a relic from the heady days of the late nineteen-eighties, then I want my project and this essay to serve partly as a kind of reminder of how invigorating it can be for a student of architecture to read (and misread), for the first time, the texts of Derrida and those of his intellectual progeny. Deconstructive reading is now routine, hardly subversive. One might claim that it is already a passing fad, an intellectual fashion that has had its time. In that case, let this be a kind of nostalgic revival, let this be a last gasp rehearsal, for me as well as for you, of steps well-trodden – remembering however that deconstruction, being a strategy of wilful difference, always seems most dormant when it is most awake.

Let us begin this rehearsal then. For there are many stories to be read and misread in this short piece. There are those difficult texts of Derrida’s to read, there is the text of architecture to look at, and also, there is Alice. Alice, who, as she so often is during her adventures, is turned inside out. The cause of her confusion is

one of Derrida's famous undecidables – a *pharmakon*, a thing that first inverts and then undermines ontological certainty. To begin, we have to go back a bit, before Humpty, back to the Mad Tea Party. The Dormouse is telling a story:

“Once upon a time, there were three little sisters,” the Dormouse began in a great hurry; “and their names were Elsie, Lacie and Tillie; and they lived at the bottom of a well –”

“What did they live on?” said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking.

“They lived on treacle,” said the Dormouse after thinking a minute or two.

“They couldn't have done that you know,” Alice gently remarked; “they'd have been ill.”

“So they were,” said the Dormouse; “very ill.”⁵

The remainder of this essay will not be a deconstructive reading of an episode from *Alice in Wonderland*, but rather, a ground-breaking, or more accurately, muddying, wager that the treacle in the Dormouse's story is indeed a *pharmakon* (this word, which in the Greek means both poison and cure, is, we will recall, Derrida's shorthand for the infectious undecidability of writing). This is an attempt to work out if the story within a story of three girls living in a treacle well is a moment in *Alice* when the undecidability of an irrational-seeming text does indeed coalesce into something like a sticky graspable substance. In other words, let's calcify treacle, freeze it so that we can affix it with the essence of a non-essence (or inversely, affix a non-essence, which is to give it essence, distil it, catch in treacle like an errant fly).

But according to Derrida, a *pharmakon* that is calcified, an undecidable that is pinned down, would seem to preclude the analogy. If treacle can be pinned down to be a *pharmakon*, then we might be on the wrong track, for the *pharmakon* is defined as that which is un-pin-down-able, undefinable.

The *pharmakon* would be a substance – with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy – if we didn't have eventually to come to recognize it as antistubstance itself : that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity [literally, “othersidedness”] of what constitutes it and the infinite absence of what dissolves it.⁶

Philosophy, in this early text of Derrida's, disowns undecidability, and hence becomes philosophy, constituting itself out of difference from that which it disclaims. But in the tortuous, revelatory logic of the supplement, the *pharmakon*,

being that which makes philosophy possible, is also that which constitutes it, gnaws it away from the inside. The *pharmakon* is thus both what opposes philosophy as well as the grounds on which philosophy is established, the ground on which it is constructed – its substrate. So the boundaries of the *pharmakon* are not clean-cut but contagious.

What will cure this contagion? The thing that made them ill in the first place – treacle, or if you will, the *pharmakon*. But not only is treacle the poison as well as the antidote, it is also the substrate of subsistence itself, the subsistence of Elsie, Lacie and Tillie. “What did they live on?” said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking. “They lived on treacle,” said the Dormouse after thinking a minute or two.”⁷

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But at this very moment, architecture (or something like it) is activated. Architecture (or something like it) is implicated in the pun on “lived on” as meaning “to subsist on, to eat and drink,” as well as literally meaning “lived on,” or “lived in,” or “lived at” – the space of inhabitation, a container for living in, the domain of those meddling architects. Elsie, Lacie and Tillie literally live *on* treacle (or perhaps they swam *in* it, or waded *through* it). After all, you can’t help living *on* treacle if you live in a treacle well.

“Why did they live at the bottom of a well?”

The Dormouse again took a minute or two to think about it, and then said, “It was a treacle well.”

“There’s no such thing!” Alice was beginning very angrily, but the Hatter and the March Hare went Sh! Sh!...⁸

The *pharmakon*, or treacle, is thus, in this case, at its most literal sense, the grounds for inhabitation (*on*-habitation?). The *pharmakon* is both the contents of the pharmacy, as well as the pharmacy itself. It is both the treacle *and* the treacle well, its container – both philosophy as well as the grounds for philosophy, both the construction of philosophy as well as the foundations that allow this construction.⁹

Elsie, Lacie and Tillie are now beginning to look less like three innocent little girls and more like the crafty priestesses of the pharmacy. For they are also learning to draw.

“What did they draw?” said Alice, quite forgetting her promise.

“Treacle”, said the Dormouse, without considering at all this time.¹⁰

After this point, the giddy spiraling into the abyss, the plummet into the treacle well, is inexorable:

Alice did not wish to offend the Dormouse again, so she began very cautiously: “But I don’t understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?”

“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.

“Of course they were,” said the Dormouse; “–well in”.

This answer so confused Alice, that she let the Dormouse go on for some time without interrupting it.¹¹

This confusion, this absolute bewilderment, is in fact the sign that by now Alice is *herself* in the treacle well, well in, covered in treacle, melting, gooey. To begin with, what confuses Alice is the *nature* of the education of Elsie, Lacie and Tillie, her inability to understand it. Within the pun, the craft that they are learning seems to be contradictory and multiple, whereas in fact, *they are learning to write*. Which is also learning to draw, which is also learning to inscribe, to encrypt, to seduce, to lead astray, to draw treacle, and to *draw* treacle, which is all the same thing – Elsie, Lacie and Tillie are imbibing the pharmaceutical craft. Alice’s confusion is at confusion itself. She loses the plot, loses the way, because of the very errantry of writing, its essence as non-essence. Perhaps Elsie, Lacie and Tillie are even receiving an architectural education, for Jennifer Bloomer tells us of “writing’s desire to draw, in the sense of leading or pulling someone somewhere, but also in the sense of the other possibility of the word that has to do with black marks made by architects on paper.”¹² (This may be wishful thinking given that, in my experience, most practicing architects are terrible at writing. But inversely, perhaps this means that it is *only* architects who really understand the meaning of writing since all drawings are merely encryptions in excess, hieroglyphs to the nth degree, writing at its most swollen, the well spilling over. By the way, I’m terrible at drawing – unless you mean drawing in the sense of a digression, drawing away).

This seduction into writing is complete when we learn what it is they draw – “everything beginning with an M –”

“Why with an M?” said Alice.

“Why not?” said the March Hare.

Alice was silent.¹³

That is they choose what they draw according to the laws, not of the signified, but of the arbitrary signifier – the law of writing itself, which is no law at all. To draw is to produce signifiers. To draw all things beginning with M is to produce signifiers of signifiers – drawings from words – and thus to set in motion an endless train of signification. In drawing what is written (all things beginning with an M), Elsie, Lacie and Tillie write themselves into drawing, draw themselves into writing. They draw themselves into the treacle well despite already being in it, *a feat impossible unless they simultaneously inhabit the inside and the outside of the well*. This is the crux of Alice’s bewilderment, the treacle in which she is finally submerged.

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 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 –
““Then you shouldn’t talk,” said the Hatter.¹⁴

But there is nothing left to say. Alice is speechless. Well in. The Hatter’s rudeness goes unanswered.

* * *

All this reminds me of a childhood riddle.

Q: What begins with T, ends with T, and is filled with T?

A: A teapot.

For not only is this riddle very much like the drawing of everything beginning with an M in its inextricable muddling of referent, signifier and signified, but it also reminds us that there is, finally, another sticky golden substance at work in this text. At this conclusion of the Mad Tea Party, Alice walks off in a huff, “though she looked back once or twice, half hoping that they would call after her: the last time she saw them, they were trying to put the Dormouse in the teapot.”¹⁵ Knowing, as all good architects should, that teapots are not made for habitation, we might expect the vessel to at once crack under the pressure of fulfilling such an improper function, thus spilling its contents all over the ground. Were it not for the fact that foundations are already a highly suspect form of support, as Derrida has told us and others after him will tell us, we might assume that this would make the ground muddy and sticky – treacly – thereby further undermining (but perhaps also fortifying) any sense of a secure ground on which to base my argument.

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- 1 Lewis Carroll, "Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There," in *Alice in Wonderland* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993), 159.
 - 2 Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 166.
 - 3 Carroll, "Through the Looking Glass," 157.
 - 4 Bloomer, 3.
 - 5 Lewis Carroll, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," in *Alice in Wonderland* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993), 61-62.
 - 6 Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," trans. Barbara Johnson, *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds. (Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 429.
 - 7 Carroll, "Alice's Adventures," 61.
 - 8 Carroll, "Alice's Adventures," 62.
 - 9 "We will watch it [the pharmakon] infinitely promise itself and endlessly vanish through concealed doorways that shine like mirrors and open onto a labyrinth. It is also this background reserve that we are calling the pharmacy." Derrida, 444.
 - 10 Carroll, "Alice's Adventures," 62.
 - 11 Carroll, "Alice's Adventures," 63.
 - 12 Bloomer, 177.
 - 13 Carroll, "Alice's Adventures," 63.
 - 14 Carroll, "Alice's Adventures," 63. In America, of course, treacle begins with an M – molasses.
 - 15 Carroll, "Alice's Adventures," 63.