

## Response to “Alice was not surprised”\*

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I entirely agree with the opening and closing remarks of Angelika Zirker’s article: “Alice often is not surprised although things happen that might be regarded as ‘unexpected’” (19) and “[i]n *Alice*, Carroll shows that being surprised and not being surprised are not mutually exclusive states but easily go together” (31). It seems to me that the dialectics of surprise and unsurprise provide an excellent point of entry into the world of the two *Alices*. It is indeed surprising that Alice is so often not surprised or that when she is surprised, she is not *that* surprised. Often, we have the impression that, imitating Queen Victoria, she would like to say: “We are not surprised.” But I am not so sure that this mixture of surprise and unsurprise, this possibility of a mild form of schizophrenia, is to be ascribed solely to the psychology, or to the social position, of the child: my contention is that such mild schizophrenia is not confined to the character, but has something to do with the genre of the text, with its relation to language and even with the processes of subjectivation which concern every human subject, and not only the child or infant.

Let us start by moving from ‘surprised’ to ‘curious.’ The word, in the lexicon and in Carroll’s text, is ambiguous between a subjective and an objective meaning. Hence the celebrated pun at the end of the first chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, when the narrator makes one of his few comments on the character of Alice: “and once she remembered trying to box her ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself, for this curious child

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\*Reference: Angelika Zirker, “‘Alice was not surprised’: (Un)Surprises in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice-Books*,” *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 19-37.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debzirker01413.htm>>.

was very fond of pretending to be two people" (15). And we duly note that the pun occurs in a context where the mild schizophrenia I have diagnosed is hinted at. Indeed, the world of Wonderland is an objectively curious world ("What a curious feeling!" said Alice; 'I must be shutting up like a telescope'" [14]), and Alice herself, who is both surprised and unsurprised, is a subjectively curious child: curiosity may have killed the cat, but it is what propels Alice into her adventures. You have to be a curious child (in the objective sense) to see a white rabbit taking a watch out of its waistcoat pocket and muttering to himself; and you have to be a curious child (in the subjective sense) to follow it down the rabbit hole. The first, objective, meaning of the adjective is faintly disapproving. Alice is morally constrained by her position as a little girl and by her education, she has interiorised the maxims inculcated by her governess concerning decent language and decent behaviour, so finding herself in the middle of a fairy tale is an odd and slightly unbecoming experience for a well-bred young lady. But she obviously welcomes, nay actively seeks out, the experience, as the second, subjective sense of the adjective is positive and liberating. By following the Rabbit down the rabbit-hole, Alice frees herself from social and family constraints and leads her own life, a (temporary) life of adventures: she becomes, in a mild and fairly respectable way, a young adventuress. In her first, morally and socially constrained, persona, she is surprised (at the characters' unusual and untoward behaviour) and unsurprised (because she knows what's right and normal: her governess has told her where the antipodes, or is it the antipathies, lie). In her second, liberated, persona, she is unsurprised (she is prepared to accept anything out of the ordinary as 'natural,' as Zirker points out) and surprised (she experiences the delight of the new, the pleasure of the encounter with the unexpected, whether man, beast or event).

The question, therefore, is the following: is the dialectics of surprise and unsurprise a psychological one, to be ascribed to the mind of a child still under the sway of the pleasure principle and whose mental world contains as an integral part the world of fairy tales? I would like

to suggest that if such psychological dialectics is apparent on the surface of the text, it has a deeper source and deeper significance. And the first answer to my question will note that the dialectics is also a generic one: it rules the text as well as the mind of the child protagonist. In its generic form, this dialectics is the dialectics of the teleology of the text, where there is no surprise, as the end of the text is programmed from the very beginning, and of the liberation of the text in the form of unpredictable happenings, which delay the inevitable end and blur its necessity. In *AAW*, the teleology is inscribed in the framing of the tale by the dream, which means that every incident tends towards the inevitable moment when Alice will wake up, so that the text has the structure of a complete story as defined in Aristotle's *Poetics*, that is a story that has a beginning, a middle and an end, in that order. This definition, an apparent tautology, but one that has considerable narratological significance, is famously parodied in the King of Hearts's advice to the White Rabbit in chapter twelve of *AAW*: "'Begin at the beginning,' the King said gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end; then stop'" (106).

But within that framework, the narrative drifts from scene to scene, in a form of *fuite en avant*, the emblem of which is Alice tumbling down the rabbit-hole, following the White Rabbit without further thought, forgetting the rules of decorum and the constraints of right behaviour ("A good little girl never follows a stranger down a dark passage" is as good an injunction as "a good little girl never drinks out of a bottle marked 'Poison'"). So, when she does exclaim "Curiouser and curiouser!" (16), forgetting the rules of grammatical decorum, we understand the illicit comparatives as markers of the *fuite en avant* of adventurousness. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, the dialectics is even more explicit as the roadmap precedes the text, in the shape of the chessboard and the game of chess that maximally constrain Alice's progress, in so far as her aim is to go to queen, while the characters are even madder than in the first tale and their assaults on Alice's well-behaved certainties even more violent (witness her agonistic bouts

with the talking flowers, which Zirker mentions, or her verbal intercourse with Humpty-Dumpty).

Zirker situates the dialectics of surprise and unsurprise in the “codes of interaction” (26; 28) and in the “playful treatment of language” (23). I could not agree more. And this enables me to attempt to go a little further than the psychological or narratological accounts of the dialectics. For surprise and unsurprise and all things nice are what little girls are made of, and surprise and unsurprise are what good tales are made of, because they are what all human subjects, in so far as they are speaking subjects, are made of. In other words, I would like to argue that the context of the “Curiouser and curiouser!” incident, when the narrator notes that “She was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English” (16) is relevant, as it expresses the dialectics of subjectivation through language. This dialectics tells us how the young speaker enters the maximally constrained system of language (which means both the grammatical system of Saussurean *langue* and the pragmatic conventions of linguistic behaviour or decorum), where surprise there is none, and how she learns to appropriate it and find her own voice by being surprised at what she can utter beyond and against the rules of language, whereby she not only acquires a voice, but establishes her personality and becomes a subject. But in order to explain this, I need a theoretical language and a philosophical detour.

It is often objected to structuralist philosophies that they ignore history and change by concentrating on the synchronic system and that they downplay the role of human freedom, subjectivity and agency by concentrating on the determinations of the structure. Thus, Althusser’s ‘structural’ version of Marxism makes it difficult, it would seem, to understand the contingency of the revolutionary moment, when the structure is temporarily dislocated in order to make way for social and political change, as it makes it difficult to understand the agency and freedom of the subject, her capacity to revolt, interpellated as she is at her place in the social structure by the dominant ideology. This is, of course, a superficial reading of Althusser’s texts, of their co-

herence and of their evolution. There is a sense in which his contribution to the Marxist tradition precisely consists in an attempt to think the moment of revolutionary change beyond the determinism and teleology of classical Marxism: the concept of overdetermination in *Pour Marx*, which he borrowed from Freud, does precisely this. And if the individual is interpellated into a subject by ideology, a process that concerns all individuals and never fails, it leaves open a space for counter-interpellation (of the dominant ideology by the interpellated subject), a process described by Judith Butler in *The Psychic life of Power and Excitable Speech*. This double dialectics of determination by the structure and resistance in the shape of the revolutionary conjuncture (an overdetermined conjunction of elements of the structure, contingently joined at a particular historical moment), and of interpellation by ideology, the workings of which are as eternal as the Freudian unconscious, and counter-interpellation by a speaking subject that has appropriated the language that constrains and places her, is the source and rationale for the literary dialectics of surprise and unsurprise, in both its generic and psychological forms. Indeed, in Althusser, especially in his late texts (e.g. *Sur la philosophie*), where he develops what he calls an aleatory materialism, based on Lucretius's concept of *clinamen* or deviation, we find the concepts we need to account for our dialectics: deviation, contingency, conjuncture, counter-interpellation, all concepts that seek to express the moment of the encounter with the radically new, the encounter with the event, be it the event of revolution or the event of seeing a white rabbit take a watch out of its waistcoat pocket.

The dialectics of surprise and unsurprise expresses the fact that, in the course of her adventures, Alice becomes a subject. She is, of course, already a subject as she tumbles down the rabbit-hole: the individual is always-already interpellated by the dominant ideology. So our Alice is unsurprised, in the slightly disapproving sense of the term: she knows what's what, and when rules are being broken—"You should learn not to make personal remarks," she tells the Hatter in chapter seven of *AAW* (60): she knows her place in the Ideological

State Apparatus of the family, she knows its rituals and she is surprised when its practices are not conformed to. So she is surprised at the characters' strange behaviour, and at the strange behaviour of the world she finds herself in: "The most curious part of the thing was, that the trees and the other things round them never changed their places at all: however fast they went, they never seemed to pass anything" (145): In chapter two of *TLG*, Alice learns that in the looking-glass world, you must run very very fast in order to stay in the same place. But she is also surprised at her own reaction, as she soon learns how to hold her own in an indifferent or even hostile world: "'How should I know?' said Alice, surprised at her own courage; 'it's no business of mine.' The Queen turned crimson with fury" (72). In other words, she is learning the art of counter-interpellation: she makes use of the language that interpellates her into a subjected subject in order to counter-interpellate the authority (of the dominant ideology) and become a subject in the full sense of the term, endowed with freedom and agency. After which, of course, she is no longer surprised at the strangeness of the world of Wonderland, which she has integrated as she has appropriated the language that structures it. As a token of appreciation of Angelika Zirker's excellent article, I would like to end by reformulating her last sentence: Alice's linguistic adventures in Wonderland enable the child, that emblem of all human subjects, to react with both surprise and unsurprise at the most fantastic things and occurrences.

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