

## The Phenomenology of Deep Surprise in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*\*

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On the one hand, we can think of surprise as a premonition of significance. I am surprised because some new idea or experience unexpectedly promises to be meaningful. I may not know what that meaning is at present, but my surprise is in itself a phenomenological herald that the ordinary has been eclipsed and discovery is possible.

On the other hand, we can also be surprised by recognitions that are simply unanticipated, something for which there is no apparent cause or precedent, which doesn't 'fit,' and as such, doesn't command more than passing attention. In "Circles," Emerson argues that life is so filled with these quotidian surprises and that we filter most of them out because they disturb our equilibrium, our desire not to be unsettled by too much "newness" (Emerson 319).

There is a difference, then, between surprise that is "fleet [...] unforeseen [...] [and] momentous" (Grahame 41)—such as the experience of Mr. Toad in his first encounter with a motor car—and surprise that quickly passes because we find a way to accommodate its unfamiliarity—as Colin Craven does shortly after Dickon walks into Misselthwaite Manor with his retinue of wild creatures.<sup>1</sup> We can mark this distinction between 'deep surprise' that presages something potentially meaningful and the evanescent nature of the merely unexpected by reference to the force and duration of our engagement. Instead of another item in the "blooming, buzzing" (James 462) pageant of impressions, deep surprise commands our attention, mobilizes our enthusiasm, and refuses to be filed away and forgotten as a small

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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>>.

spike in the standard algorithm.<sup>2</sup> With the only unexpected, I am a spectator; when deeply surprised, I am called upon to act.

Between these 'antipodes' of surprise, there are naturally degrees of intensity. I can glimpse and forget a wrinkle in the otherwise ordinary; I can reflect briefly on the possibilities of mild incongruence; I can be intrigued enough to track the footsteps of surprise around the next corner; or, I can be so fully possessed by the impression of newness that I follow it to the edge and jump in. In the later case, we assume that surprise is prophetic: the startling appearance of what we could never have imagined seems to promise something special to come. And yet, to follow in the wake of deep surprise is also a risk, precisely because we are in pursuit of what we don't understand. Ali Baba is surprised by the chance discovery of a magic mantra; a discovery that could easily prove disastrous; but risk is overwhelmed by the intuition that surprise has signalled more than meets the eye or can be counted. Marley's surprising arrival announces the immanence of doom at the same time it provides Scrooge with a motive for change.

In the canon of children's fiction, deep surprise is only partly a response to something 'outside over there.' Surprise is also an internal event, a signal that the percipient is prepared to accommodate possibilities beyond the horizon of prior expectations. Put another way, surprise doesn't simply announce a change in the world as perceived by the hero, but also a change in the status of the hero's perception. Beauty is surprised by the Beast's civility, and her surprise initiates a reevaluation of prior allegiances that results in the transformation of her own vision as well as the Beast's form. Wilbur the pig is surprised by a friendly voice in the rafters; and, in the course of his friendship with Charlotte, the humble runt comes to see himself as, in fact, "radiant" (White 114).

Nor is the meta-narrative of children's fiction content with modest change; it assumes instead that the outcome of adventure is nothing short of metamorphosis, fundamental and unimagined change in the deep structure of one's nature and expectations. Geppetto is startled

to hear a voice calling him from inside a pine log; and, as things turn out, the log becomes a puppet and the puppet becomes a real boy. Typically, the role of surprise at the outset of children's fiction is to announce the onset of events that ultimately achieve a quantum leap of character. Russell Hoban's "mouse and his child" are surprised to learn that all the windups in the toy shop can communicate with one another, but this first discovery presages a remarkable series of transformations to follow: the windups become self-winding, their enemy becomes an uncle, scattered allies form a strong social community, and an outlandish prophecy is ultimately fulfilled.

*And yet*, in the magnum opus of children's fiction, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the subject of change in the nature of the heroine's character has been either a matter of dispute or the subject of only passing interest.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the capacity of the *Alice* books to excite hermeneutical speculation on so many complex topics has diverted attention from growth and change as 'master tropes' of the text. Perhaps the coda of *Alice's Adventures*, in which Alice's sister substitutes her second-hand nostalgia for Alice's own revelations, signals a reversal of the diverse insights gained en route and a return to the status quo. Or perhaps the conventions of dream allegory render the adventures "an idle song for a summer's day" with no more transformative power than any other daydream.<sup>4</sup> In any case, the nature and extent of Alice's own development has been routinely supplanted in the critical tradition (if not in pedagogical presentation) by considerations external to the heroine's own experience.

In this critical context, Angelika Zirker reminds us that surprise and its opposite have considerable presence in the *Alice* books and merit renewed attention. My own interest is in outbursts of deep surprise at critical moments in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that not only eclipse the ordinary but may also motivate the quantum leap of character that is the cherished outcome of children's fiction. In the analysis that follows, I will concentrate on two pivotal moments: one at the beginning of the text when surprise sets events in motion, the other near the end when transformation is most evident. In the process, I hope to

contribute to the contested question of Alice's growth: does her initial surprise provide sustained incentive for the process of personal change? And, to what extent can we claim substantive change as the outcome of Alice's personal adventure? Of course, the *Alice* books continually raise complexities that confound determinate response and resist undue reaching after closure. Whatever the outcome of these investigations, my own thinking about these questions has been catalyzed by the concept of surprise, and I am grateful for the opportunity to approach this "never-to-be-exhausted" (Zimmer 4) text in what I hope is a new and productive way.<sup>5</sup>

### Surprise as Catalyst

Zirker makes an important point in calling attention to two kinds of surprise in the opening episode of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice initially registers the talking rabbit as a generic convention of children's fiction who is consequently "(un)surprising" (19). This initial response is quickly supplanted by genuine surprise when Alice realizes that the same rabbit is outfitted in a waistcoat with a pocket watch. In brief, Alice is truly surprised only when what she perceives transcends existing assumptions in unprecedented ways. The distinction is more complex than it might appear because Alice's assumptions about the world include fictive conventions inherited from children's stories as well as the experience accumulated through the first-hand encounters of daily life. As a result, a talking rabbit is routine because recognizable, while the novelty of a rabbit with a waistcoat and a watch calls up an entirely different response. The distinction between the unsurprising and unprecedented is of particular interest because it forecasts the intermingling of the real and the imaginative that is characteristic of Lewis Carroll's narrative practice.

That is, we know waistcoats and pocket watches from practical experience, but we don't know them in connection with talking rabbits that, unlike pocket watches, are a purely imaginative construct. So, in

this first example of Wonderland poetics, a talking rabbit that Alice initially accepts as conventional turns out to surprise because he looks and behaves like a middle-class gentleman that Alice Liddell of Christ Church, Oxford might well have known. On the one hand, what is actually familiar (waistcoats and watches) has been “defamiliarized” by its association with a talking rabbit; on the other, the talking rabbit seems somehow familiar because he appears in the attire of Alice’s own world.<sup>6</sup> The general confusion confounding the status of the White Rabbit not only startles Alice into a state of full-blown surprise, it also anticipates the intricacies that will collect around the subject of Alice’s own development.

By way of a prelude to Wonderland’s convoluted thematics, an additional example should suffice. Alice knows that tea parties are a routine afternoon ritual, but she is unfamiliar with tea parties where time has stopped, discourse is disjointed, stories are incomplete, and etiquette is abandoned. How does one behave when custom (which is rule-driven) is observed primarily though contradiction? What does it mean when ritual (the cornerstone of culture) is so thoroughly subverted? Such puzzles are conventional in Wonderland, where what should be familiar—puppies and well-known poems, the placement of doormen and norms of domesticity, croquet and school curricula, riddles and royal protocol—all become indeterminate because they have been relocated and reconceived though, at the same time, they seem to retain some semblance of things we think we recognize.

Given an uncertain admixture of recognizable oddity that is *de rigueur* in the aesthetics of Wonderland, it is incredible that Alice is so seldom astonished by what she encounters in the course of her adventures. For the most part, Alice is demure, inquisitive, and respectful, which seems a considerable accomplishment for a young girl who is constantly confronted with the enigmatic. It is precisely because Alice so often responds with some measure of equanimity to events so fully ambiguous that readers interested in Alice’s character have every reason to pay particular attention to the infrequent moments when the heroine abandons her famous aplomb, rejects her habitual recourse to

polite curiosity, and surrenders instead to a state of deep and unequivocal surprise, as is the case in the first episode.

When we first meet Alice, she is “beginning to get very tired” of sitting with her sister, feeling “very sleepy and stupid” in the heat of the day, and lazy enough to resist the minimal demands of making a daisy chain (7). The “sudden” appearance of the White Rabbit mumbling to himself within earshot of Alice is not “remarkable” enough to offset her present languor. However, as soon as the Rabbit “actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket,” Alice is all energy (7).

Once alert to the oddity of a middle-class rabbit with temporal anxieties, Alice instantly abandons her lassitude, she “start[s] to her feet,” ideas “flashing across her mind,” and “burning with curiosity” she swiftly pursues a character unlike any she knows from fairy tale (7). To repeat the previous point, Alice is intrigued by the curious blend of her own Oxonian world with the imaginative world of children’s stories where animals can talk and wear waistcoats by Savile Row tailors. On the one hand, the real world of Victorian attire has been incorporated into the fictional world of talking animals; on the other, the anxious gentleman in his fashionable outfit appears as a figure out of beast fable.<sup>7</sup> The conflation of these separate but strangely synonymous domains so catalyzes Alice’s curiosity that she jumps up, runs headlong after the rabbit, and throws herself into his hole “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again” (8). Such are the wages of deep surprise, which compel Alice to leap before she looks, regardless of consequences.

The point of entry into the other world is always a critical moment, and the peculiarity of Alice’s descent prompts careful consideration (see Patch). When Alice glances without interest at the nervous but vocal rabbit, she already possesses a narrative framework that accommodates talking animals and the conventions of children’s fiction. But when these conventions are disturbed by a rabbit in gentleman’s attire, the surprise augurs a story with unpredictable dimensions. Still, why jump off the deep end in response? Perhaps the premonition of

significance called up by deep surprise is too profound to resist. But what is it that is so profound?

The map of children's fiction, inherited principally from fairy tale, leads inexorably into the woods; and for all the risk that lurks there, this path is ultimately the only route to individual growth. Because almost all readers and listeners, children and adults are intimately familiar with the landmarks that mark this map, we tend to identify the dimensions of this fictional terrain by reference to coordinates from our own personal narrative. It is hardly a surprise, for example, that Jim Hawkins, John Silver, and Dr. Livesey all view the map of Treasure Island as an image of their private destinies. In the common template of the fairy tale experience, the thread of continuity through the labyrinth is customarily provided by substituting the self for the central figure, which is why the main character of children's stories is so often a cipher whose nature invites identification.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, if we know the plot and have assumed the role of the hero, substantive surprises in recognizable conventions call our own fortunes into question because our representative has departed from the path. Nor is the otherworld journey exclusively a children's story; to paraphrase Dante: at this early point in my journey, I found myself in the *selva oscura*, astray, gone from the path direct (*Inferno* ll. 1-3). *De te fabula*; the story we are about to enter may be imaginary, but the integrity of our personhood is nonetheless at issue. In Alice's case, the deep surprise excited by the anxious rabbit motivates a quick change in attitude from lethargic familiarity to unexpected engagement, then to abandonment. The encounters that result from Alice's impetuosity and that fill out the adventures in Wonderland have become a matter of public mythology. These adventures remain compelling not simply because of the unrivaled curiosity of the events themselves, but because the map of Alice's personal adventure continues to connect itself to our own journey, despite, or perhaps because of, its unpredictability, confusion, and ambiguity.

In the midst of her fall, Alice is both attentive to her surroundings and undismayed by the prolonged descent into the uncommonly deep

hole. She examines the paradoxical familiarity of each passing item and “wonders” repeatedly what might happen next. Carroll’s genius for juxtaposition is at work in the decoration of the tunnel with trappings of Victorian domesticity.<sup>9</sup> Alice responds by misapplying classroom geography and invoking conventions of proper etiquette, all in an attempt to accommodate the inconceivable by reference to her best guess at a comprehensible scenario. Donald Rackin argues that during her fall Alice struggles to assert her existing belief in regular causal relations, an observation that accurately captures Alice’s rational reaction to the irrationality of her circumstances (393). But we should also acknowledge Alice’s emotional response to these events, which, in comparison to her earlier lassitude, is energetic and motivated. Alice is prompted into engagement by surprise, and she is prepared for discovery by her receptivity to the unprecedented.

The attentiveness activated by even the most exhilarating surprise is not, however, easily sustained. Indeed, surprise is by definition fleeting. In the process of her protracted fall, Alice’s engagement with the novelty of the experience soon enough gives way to reverie, as she begins to overlay the incomprehensibility of her descent with reflections that redesign the experience in a context already familiar if not quite accurate. While floating down the mysterious tunnel, Alice’s thoughts turn not only to geography, but to the vaguely analogous experience of “falling down stairs,” to assumptions that she will be praised for her bravery, and eventually to recollections of her cat, Dinah, who reinforces the pull of the real world because Dinah was the name of the actual cat of the Liddell family.<sup>10</sup> This assimilation of the bizarre to the familiar serves to attenuate the impact of Alice’s initial surprise to the point that (in a direct paraphrase of the novel’s first sentence) Alice “began to get rather sleepy” (9). We can read “sleepiness” as the opposite of the attentiveness prompted by her original surprise, and we might assume that the potential significance introduced at the appearance of the first surprise is eluded as an experience easily familiarized, one of Emerson’s evanescent moments whose



newness is promptly absorbed as routine. Or so the case may be outside of Wonderland, or with someone besides Alice.<sup>11</sup>

But in fact, Wonderland has other surprises in store, and we can admire Alice not only for her tenacity throughout, but also for her willingness to avoid the constant temptation to assimilate the inexplicable into the comfortable assumptions of a recognizable narrative. With the help of another jolt of surprise, Alice is able to evade the pull of the past and commit herself again to the phenomenological present. As soon as she thumps down in the "long, low hall," (9) a setting reminiscent of the interiors at Christ Church, Alice is once again energized and alert. She "jumps" up immediately on spotting the White Rabbit and "without a moment to be lost," she is after him "like the wind" (9). And, as her adventures proceed, Alice's engagement with the novelty of her circumstances continues to overcome the gravitational pull of familiarity: "Alice had got so much into the way of expecting nothing but out-of-the-way things to happen, that it seemed quite dull and stupid to go on in the common way" (12). It may be impossible for creatures of reason to sustain the sense of surprise, but Alice nonetheless maintains the intuition that when the familiar is eclipsed, discovery is at hand. What Alice and readers soon learn is that discovery is not necessarily pleasant, or even fulfilling; but for all that, it remains potentially transformative.

In short order, Alice will discover the golden key, uncover the door to the garden, identify the "great puzzle" of personal identity, and—realizing perhaps that this puzzle may resist solutions—she transfers her attention to "the great question(s)" of how best to manage her growth and where in Wonderland she should be heading (33-34). The episodic progress of Alice's adventures takes us beyond the phenomenology of surprise—and the scope of this response—to the dynamics of Alice's growth (cf. Mendelson). In order to realize that deep surprise not only galvanizes attention but also sets in motion the process of transformation we must turn to Alice's second profound surprise.

## Surprise Ending

Of course, prior to the climactic ending, Alice experiences the almost constant surprises that make Wonderland a monument of creative intellectual invention. My argument, however, is that deep surprise stimulates decisive change; and as a prelude to this conclusion, I cite some preliminary evidence. Most notably, after learning to control her early erratic growth with the help of the Caterpillar's mushroom, Alice makes a deliberate effort to adjust her size to the requirements of her ensuing encounters.<sup>12</sup> Rhetoricians refer to the mature capacity to adjust to the demands of the moment as *kairos*, an ability that transcends a facility for finding the right word at the right time (cf. Kinneavy). Alice's growing awareness of the needs of those around her is *kairotic* in contrast to her self-absorption during such early encounters as those with the mouse, the Caterpillar, and the members of the caucus race.

Once inside the garden, Alice routinely displays a knack for appropriate action by apt responses to ever-new variations of social chaos. Alice's ability to adjust to the changing nature of her environment, without undue surprise at Wonderland's ambiguities, is a transformation in its own right. However, her "growing" maturity and self-control are mostly a prelude to the final surprise. In chapter 11, Alice has been sitting with the Gryphon observing the business of the trial with a good deal more accuracy than she displayed in her earlier geographical speculations. "Imagine her surprise," says the narrator, when the Rabbit reads out the name "Alice!" in the last line and as last word of the penultimate chapter (91). Polite accommodation to a new example of nonsense will not suffice in this instance. Alice is now the principal actor in her eponymous adventures, a now-public participant in the legal procedures that epitomize cultural values, even in Wonderland.

If Alice is energized and attentive as the result of her first surprise, this final surprise prompts her to feel indignant and aggressive, feelings she is now prepared to express. Moments before being called as a

witness, Alice feels herself beginning to grow. At first, she thinks she should leave the court; "but on second thoughts she decided to remain where she was as long as there was room for her" (88). The situation is reminiscent of her confinement in the Rabbit's house, where she *outgrows* her ability to move and so must stay and submit to the Rabbit's assaults (29). In the courtroom, however, she realizes that she has *grown into* her own and can act as she thinks best. The scene also oddly foreshadows a similar moment in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), when the respected doctor is sitting on a bench in Regent's Park and, without recourse to his "salts," he devolves into the heinous Mr. Hyde (91). Jekyll's metamorphosis is a nightmare that shrinks his body and corrupts his spirit. Alice's change is progressive, the development of a bolder, more assertive person, someone prepared to respond with resolve when opportunity appears. But, for the first time, her change in size comes without cakes or "drink me." So, natural development as well as recent experience are contributing to something approaching transformation.

Well before this dramatic growth spurt, Alice had already expressed her disgust at the protocols of the royal party: she speaks back to the Queen, dismisses her threats as "nonsense," and saves the gardeners from unjust punishment (64-65). So, when Alice is ultimately called as a witness, it is not out of character for her to respond without either hesitation or reticence. She had reacted with similar dispatch to the White Rabbit's first appearance, but this time her readiness is tempered with reason and sympathy. When she upsets the jurors' box, she is solicitous in returning them to their places, in a manner very different from her indifference to the feelings of her partners in the caucus race or her first encounter with Bill the Lizard.

But the central feature of Alice's behavior after being called to the witness stand is her intrepid defense of reason in the face of the court's blatant injustice. When asked by the King what she knows "about this business," she declares "nothing" (94). When accused of breaking rule number 42 (being a mile high and refusing to leave court), she argues adroitly that if this is the first rule "it ought to be

Number One" (94). She rebuts the claim that the lack of a signature on the verses proves the Knave's guilt, and she is uninhibited in referring to the King's response to the verses as 'meaningless' (cf. 95). Her most demonstrative action, however, is a rejoinder to the most serious breach of jurisprudence. When the Queen makes her famous demand for the "Sentence first—verdict afterwards" (96), Alice (who has continued to grow during the trial) answers "loudly" that the Queen's comment is "stuff and nonsense" (97). And when the Queen responds by demanding that she hold her tongue, Alice exclaims "I won't!" (97). This is not the demure, anemic Alice who routinely deferred to the cruelty of the adults around her. When Alice first meets the royal entourage, she politely introduces herself, though she adds under her breath that "they're only a pack of cards, after all. I needn't be afraid of them!" (63). By the time she is in court, and after she had "grown to her full size," Alice responds directly to the Queen's shouting with an unequivocal *ad hominem*: "Who cares for *you*? [...] You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (97).

The difference in her demeanor is as dramatic. Alice has been surprised into adopting a new, more mature, more aggressive, even more responsible role. The decisive heroine who exits Wonderland in rebellion is a different person than the attenuated young girl given to sulking and self-doubt. I would not want to claim too much for deep surprise as the initiating agency of this change, because Alice herself deserves full credit as the agent of her own transformation. But if the distinguishing feature of deep surprise is its premonition of impending significance, then Alice finds that meaning by coming into her own as an independent agent of common sense and justice. Empson saw Alice as a passive heroine in the mode of the Cheshire Cat who endures the lack of ethics in Wonderland by standing aside. Surprise in itself cannot reverse Alice's earlier compliance because surprise is something that happens *to us*. But deep surprise is a different matter. Alice is ultimately able to negotiate the distortions and chaos of Wonderland and to learn to function with confidence despite being surrounded by indifference, ill will, ambiguity, and disorder. She does so

because surprise prompts her to realize something *in herself*. Her example has inspired generations, and there is every reason that Alice should continue to do so amidst the chaos and surprise of the twenty-first century.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, Ch. 19.

<sup>2</sup>On "deep" surprise, see Jane Hirshfield 41-42.

<sup>3</sup>For a brief review of criticism of the *Alice* books, see Will Booker 77-104. For commentary on Alice's character, see *Alternative Alices*, as well as essays by Kathleen Blake, Michael Mendelson, and in Robert J. Phillips.

<sup>4</sup>William Morris's *Earthly Paradise* begins with a prologue by the "idle singer of a summer's day."

<sup>5</sup>My personal appreciation to Professor Matthias Bauer for suggesting this inquiry.

<sup>6</sup>*Ostranenie*, or "defamiliarization," was coined by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky.

<sup>7</sup>See Tenniel's picture on page 7.

<sup>8</sup>See Thiele 201-74.

<sup>9</sup>Of special interest is the contrast of the tunnel's commonplace accoutrement with the metaphysical "downness" of Alice's *fall*. See Mendelson 41-42.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Gray 9n3.

<sup>11</sup>Compare the different descents of the two siblings in Grimms' "Mother Holle" (no. 12).

<sup>12</sup>Alice ends chapters 5, 6, and 7 (prior to her visits with the Duchess, the Hatter, and the royal party, respectively) by adjusting her size to the proportions of her hosts. Carroll's placement of these deliberate adjustments at the end of successive chapters is clearly designed for thematic emphasis.

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