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**Struggling to resist prior interpellation: the nursery rhyme characters in Lewis  
Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass***

This article examines what is at stake in the utilisation of traditional nursery rhyme characters in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. Relying on an Althusserian and Butlerian framework, the author shows that, although a sense of *déjà-vu* strikes Alice (and the reader) when she meets them, the nursery rhyme characters' attempts to resist their predetermined fate endow them with a new form of authenticity. Indeed, they are interpellated as subjects by a cultural Ideological State Apparatus (the nursery rhymes) and even though they cannot reject this interpellation altogether, they can displace and rework it. The Tweedle brothers, Humpty Dumpty, and the Lion and the Unicorn engage in recurrent metaleptic struggles with Alice, which make it possible for them to counter-interpellate their interpellator.

Cet article étudie les enjeux de la transposition de personnages de comptines traditionnelles dans *De l'autre côté du miroir* de Lewis Carroll. S'appuyant sur un cadre théorique althusserien et butlérien, l'auteur montre que, bien qu'une impression de déjà-vu frappe Alice (et le lecteur) lorsqu'elle les rencontre, les tentatives des personnages de comptine de résister à leur sort prédéterminé leur confèrent une nouvelle authenticité. En effet, ils sont interpellés en tant que sujets par un Appareil Idéologique d'État culturel (les comptines), et même s'ils ne peuvent pas complètement rejeter cette interpellation, ils peuvent la déplacer et la retravailler. Les frères Tweedle, Humpty Dumpty et le Lion et la Licorne se livrent à des luttes métaleptiques récurrentes avec Alice, ce qui leur permet de contre-interpeller leur interpellateur.

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This article proposes to analyse three episodes from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*: when Alice meets the Tweedle brothers in chapter IV, Humpty Dumpty in chapter VI, and the Lion and the Unicorn in chapter VII. A sense of *déjà-vu* cannot but strike Alice when she meets these very well-known nursery rhyme characters, and it does not take long for her to realise who they are and to repeat to herself the traditional nursery rhymes in full. Although none of the nursery rhyme characters acknowledge that they are doomed to the fixed fate related in the traditional rhymes, they seem not to succeed in escaping their destiny. Humpty Dumpty does have a great fall; the Tweedle brothers do fight until the crow flies down; the Lion does beat the Unicorn all round the town. However, they do try to resist the

fixed identity ascribed to them by the nursery rhymes via Alice, namely by engaging in metaleptic struggles with the protagonist. Indeed, they deny being the products of crossovers between narrative levels, which is the definition of “metalepsis” given by Gérard Genette in *Figures III* (243-246). The transposition of these three nursery rhymes into a new context, then, offers both a sense of *déjà-vu* and one of authenticity. The Tweedle brothers, Humpty Dumpty and the Lion and the Unicorn are extremely familiar, since they *are* in a way the traditional nursery rhyme characters incarnate, giving the reader the (justified) impression that they have already heard about them before. At the same time, the reader can experience the uncanny feeling that they are more than predetermined characters, who merely repeat their lines, since they try to resist the fate outlined in the traditional nursery rhymes and attempt to construct an original scenario, distinct from the historical rhymes, which endows them with a new form of authenticity.

On an Althusserian view, the nursery rhyme characters can be said to try to resist their interpellation by cultural Ideological State Apparatuses. In his 1970 “Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État”, Althusser assumes that “in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce” (128). He then argues that two types of State Apparatuses make it possible to reproduce both the productive forces and the relations of production, which constitute the conditions of the production of every social formation: first, the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), which functions massively by repression and violence (at least ultimately), such as the government, the administration, the army, the police, the courts, etc. (142-143); second, the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which functions predominantly by ideology, such as churches, trade unions, families, some schools, most newspapers, etc. (144). The ideology underlying the Ideological State Apparatuses then interpellates individuals as subjects, which means that it turns each individual into a subject through the operation Althusser calls interpellation:

I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or “transforms” the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing. (174)

Althusser stresses the fact that man is attached to his interpellation, because it turns him into a subject, a word which may well mean “a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority” (182), but also “a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives” (182). As Althusser puts it,

the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order [...] that he shall (freely) accept his subjection* (182)

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler analyses Althusser's concept of interpellation in order to show that, although the call "initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject" (121), i.e. although there is no possibility of escaping subjection, the law can be disobeyed. It can be "forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation" (122). This subversive resignification of the law can work even in the extreme case of hate speech, which Butler examines in *Excitable Speech*. As she puts it, "name-calling may be the initiating moment of a counter-mobilization. The name one is called both subordinates and enables, producing a scene of agency from ambivalence, a set of effects that exceed the animating intentions of the call" (1997, 163). According to Butler, the law always means more than what it is supposed to mean, and consequently, there can be several ways of resisting interpellation: "the parodic inhabiting of a conformity, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it" (1993, 122). Therefore, the constitutive failure of the law provides opportunities for disobedience and being subjected does not mean being enslaved. Even though man is undeniably subjected to the power of interpellation, which determines him and is the condition of his identity, he can displace, rework, resignify it; he can also counter-interpellate the interpellator, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle puts it in *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (227).

It is this tension between subjection to interpellation and counter-interpellation that will be under consideration in this paper. I will argue that the nursery rhyme characters try to free themselves from their interpellation through the nursery rhymes, which represent one modality the cultural Ideological State Apparatus can take on, by trying to rework them and by counter-interpellating Alice. These counter-interpellations constitute as many opportunities for the nursery rhyme characters to be granted new life and become subjects in their own rights.

#### 1. INTERPELLATION(S) AND SUBJECTION TO A CULTURAL ISA, THE NURSERY RHYMES

The Tweedle brothers, Humpty Dumpty, and the Lion and the Unicorn exist as nursery rhyme creatures for the reader even before Alice meets them in the Looking-Glass world. They were constituted as nursery rhyme characters by way of their original interpellation in the original nursery rhymes. Yet, this does not mean that their interpellation and subsequent

subjection to a cultural Ideological State Apparatus is unique. As Butler explains, though there may well be an inaugural interpellation, interpellation and subsequent subjection can succeed only because language is intrinsically iterative, that is to say only because a speech act echoes previous speech acts (1997, 51). That is why in *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, Lecerle logically concludes that an interpellative speech act will also necessarily comprise future speech acts: “*Assujettissement* is a continuous and uninterrupted process” (166).

The nursery rhyme characters in *Through the Looking-Glass* experience this repeated interpellation and subsequent subjection. When Alice meets them, she both relies on and reenacts their initial interpellations. When she comes across the Tweedle brothers, the narrator describes her reaction as follows: “feeling sure that they must be Tweedledum and Tweedledee” (188-189). The modal adjective “sure” indicates that there is no room for doubt in her mind: the identification of the men before her goes without saying, even though at no point did they introduce themselves. The epistemic modal auxiliary “must”, which could, at first glance, seem redundant, nevertheless indicates that, for Alice, there is a very high degree of certainty that these men are the Tweedle brothers. In other words, while with “sure” Alice relies on the initial interpellation to identify the men before her, with “must” she ascribes the names of Tweedledum and Tweedledee to “the two fat little men” (188).

The reenactments of the initial hailing scenes would not, however, be complete without the repetitions of the original nursery rhymes. Thanks to these recitations, not only are the names the creatures were assigned confirmed, but their belonging to nursery rhymes is also established. Indeed, when Alice sees the nursery rhyme characters, she cannot help repeating the words of “the old song[s]” (189; 237), which are, then, explicitly described as previous speech acts; they also appear to the reader as collages of prior texts, since they are printed in italics. As such, the nursery rhymes build up expectations about how the nursery rhyme characters are supposed to behave. Accordingly, in chapter VI entitled “Humpty Dumpty,” Alice stands “with her hands ready to catch him, for she was every moment expecting him to fall” (218) and, in chapter VII entitled “The Lion and the Unicorn,” she asks the White King to confirm that the Lion and the Unicorn are really “fighting for the crown” (237).

## 2. AN IMPOSSIBLE (AND UNDESIRABLE) RESISTANCE TO INTERPELLATION

Although Alice refers to and assigns the nursery rhyme characters specific identities, they all refuse to be reduced to predetermined patterns. While the second line of the original nursery rhyme “The Lion and the Unicorn” reads: “The Lion beat the Unicorn all round the town” (238), once the Lion and the Unicorn have stopped fighting in the Looking-Glass

world, the Unicorn says: “I had the best of it this time?” (240). This declarative question is extremely conducive, that is to say that it favours one possible answer over the other (Hudson, 13): the Unicorn merely asks its interlocutor to agree with him. This is confirmed by the use of the introductory verb “say” (“he said to the King”, 240), which hints at the fact that, pragmatically if not syntactically, this question should be interpreted as a statement. Clearly, the Unicorn tries to resist the course of events as related in the traditional nursery rhyme.

Similarly, when Alice voices her concern for Humpty Dumpty because he is sitting on a wall, the latter reacts in the following manner:

“Why, if ever I *did* fall off—which there’s no chance of—but *if* I did—” [...] “If I *did* fall, [...] *the King has promised me*—ah, you may turn pale, if you like! You didn’t think I was going to say that, did you? *The King has promised me—with his very own mouth—to—to—*” (220)

As Veronique Hague puts it in her article “Humpty Dumpty: le passage de l’action à l’histoire, de l’événement à l’image” (42), this passage reveals how Humpty Dumpty rejects the idea of reproducing his fate to the letter; instead of saying, “if I fell off, the King would” or “if I fall, the King will”, a wording which would have insisted on the cause-consequence relationship between the two clauses, Humpty Dumpty says: “if I *did* fall off, *the King has promised me* to.” First, as Hague argues, the use of the past subjunctive “did fall” suggests that, for Humpty Dumpty, this action is counterfactual (and he intends it to remain so, which is why he interrupts his sentence to make the following comment: “which there’s no chance of”). Second, the use of the present perfect shows that the promise made by the King is not a direct consequence of the first proposition, but is unrelated (the King can fulfil his promise even if Humpty Dumpty does not fall). Finally, still according to Hague, the repeated use of “to” hints at Humpty Dumpty’s envisioning the possibility of a future for himself<sup>1</sup>.

Likewise, while Alice, as the narrator suggests, seems to think that Tweedledum and Tweedledee are wax figures (“They stood so still that she quite forgot they were alive”, 189), the Tweedle brothers do not want their fate to be set into stone (or into wax, for that matter) and they keep denying everything Alice says, once they’ve understood that she has been repeating to herself the words of the nursery rhyme:

“I know what you’re thinking about,” said Tweedledum; “but it isn’t so, nohow.”  
“Contrariwise,” continued Tweedledee, “if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn’t, it ain’t. That’s logic.” (190)

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<sup>1</sup> Hague refers here to Adamczewski’s analysis of “to” (10-35). The construction <the King / promise (V<sub>1</sub>) to V<sub>2</sub> (send)> conceals the underlying predicative relation <the King / V<sub>2</sub> (send)>, which is constituted as the speaker’s target by “to”.

From this excerpt onwards, Tweedledum keeps saying “nohow” and Tweedledee “contrariwise”, both words reflecting their oppositional attitude.

Yet, the outcomes of chapters IV, VI and VII reveal the way the nursery rhyme characters are, ultimately, both subjected to the law they seem to reject and attached to their interpellation and subjection. Althusser has argued that the individuals interpellated as subjects by the ISA will freely accept their subjection because “*There are no subjects except by and for their subjection*” (182), which explains why “they ‘work all by themselves’” (182), why they make the gestures and actions of their subjections all by themselves. Although Humpty Dumpty manages to delay his fall, he cannot prevent it from happening, as is made clear by the end of chapter VI: “a heavy crash shook the forest from end to end” (231). Chapter VII then begins with the King’s men and the King’s horses running through the wood, in accordance with the King’s promise.

Once Alice has understood that the creatures which the King calls the Lion and the Unicorn are, in effect, the Lion and the Unicorn from the well-known nursery rhyme, she repeats to herself the whole rhyme. A few pages later, she uses the contents of the rhyme to try to foretell the course of events:

“Speak, wo’n’t you!” cried the King. “How are they getting on with the fight?”  
Hatta made a desperate effort, and swallowed a large piece of bread-and-butter.  
“They’re getting on very well,” he said in a choking voice: “each of them has been down about eighty-seven times.”  
“Then I suppose they’ll soon bring the white bread and the brown?” Alice ventured to remark.  
“It’s waiting for ‘em now,” said Hatta; “this is a bit of it as I’m eating.” (239)

If Alice’s sentence ends with a question mark, its word order is that of a declarative clause, which suggests that this is a confirmatory question, and that Alice is only trying to make sure she is right in thinking that events will happen as planned in the nursery rhyme: since the Lion and the Unicorn in the original rhyme are given white bread and brown bread after fighting each other, Alice deduces from the fact that both Looking-Glass creatures have been fighting for some time that refreshments will be served. It is to be noted that she even uses a similar structure to the one used in the nursery rhyme: “they’ll soon bring *the white bread and the brown*” (239, my italics). The modal auxiliary <will> indicates that the predicative relation <they/bring the white bread and the brown> will be actualized at the very moment the temporal adverb “soon” refers to. Hatta confirms that Alice is right and adds that refreshments have already been served. The rest of the chapter confirms that the course of events is the

same in the Looking-Glass world and in the nursery rhyme: in accordance with the nursery rhyme, Alice serves the plum-cake, and the King orders the drums to begin (244).

Although the Tweedle brothers reject the fate they are condemned to in the original rhyme, by the end of chapter IV, they agree to have a battle because Tweedledum says Tweedledee has spoiled his nice new rattle. Or so he says. Indeed, Alice's description of the rattle does not confirm his own: "It's only a rattle [...]. [O]nly an old rattle—quite old and broken" (199). Instead of examining the rattle himself, Tweedledum ignores the first part of Alice's description ("quite old") and deduces from the adjective "broken" that Tweedledee is responsible for breaking the rattle. When Alice tries to calm him down, she uses the term "old" again: "You needn't be so angry about an old rattle." (200). This time, Tweedledum rebuts her use of this adjective: "But it isn't old! [...] It's *new*, I tell you—I bought it yesterday—my nice NEW RATTLE!" (200) Tweedledum then reproduces the exact wording of the traditional nursery rhyme, which Alice reminded the reader of ("For Tweedledum said Tweedledee / Had spoiled his nice new rattle", 189). Therefore, Tweedledum enacts his own subjection, and even when the facts would enable him to change ever so slightly his fate.

### 3. DISPLACING AND REWORKING THE POWER OF INTERPELLATION:

#### COUNTER-INTERPELLATING ALICE

An outright rejection of interpellation and subjection would be undesirable, since interpellation subordinates and enables at the same time, as Butler has emphasised. Rejecting interpellation and its subsequent subjection would mean risking one's status as a subject. Resistance is nonetheless possible, and the power of interpellation can be displaced and reworked. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, the nursery rhyme characters carry out one of the strategies put forward by Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, that is to say "a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it" (122). They engage in repeated metaleptic struggles with Alice, who keeps interpellating them as subjects. They deny belonging to a different narrative level. They deny belonging to the world of the told when Alice would belong to the world of the telling<sup>2</sup>. For Genette, metalepsis blurs and plays on the limit between these two worlds (1972, 245), as is made clear by his reference to Cortázar's short story "The Continuity of Parks", where the reader of a novel is killed by one of the novel's character. The Looking-Glass nursery rhyme characters, then, rearticulate their interpellation as fictional nursery rhyme characters thanks to repeated metaleptic struggles.

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<sup>2</sup> As nursery rhyme characters transposed into a new fictional world, they do not realise that Alice also belongs to the world of the told.

Humpty Dumpty reworks his interpellation as a fictional character belonging to the nursery rhyme Alice refers to. Although he mentions the agreement between the King and himself, which is reminiscent of the original rhyme, he does not repeat its original wording. He is, therefore, all the more irate, since Alice finishes his sentence for him with the nursery rhyme wording, which she alters only slightly:

“To send all his horses and all his men,” Alice interrupted, rather unwisely.  
“Now I declare that’s too bad!” Humpty Dumpty cried, breaking into a sudden passion. “You’ve been listening at doors—and behind trees—and down chimneys—or you couldn’t have known it!” (220)

Humpty Dumpty’s fierce reaction reveals how he denies that his actions are predetermined (even though Alice “guessed” right). For him, Alice can only know what the King has promised if she has been spying on him, and spying for quite a long time, as is underlined by the accumulation of locative adjuncts. When Alice disabuses him, and explains she has found the information “in a book” (220), Humpty Dumpty does not even consider the possibility that the book in question could be a work of fiction: “Ah, well! They may write such things in a *book*. [...] That’s what you call a History of England, that is” (220). Only after constructing himself as a historical character of some importance can he accept and use Alice’s phrase to end his own sentence: “Yes, all his horses and all his men” (220).

The Tweedle brothers play with the border between the world of the told and the world of the telling right after meeting Alice. After they reprimand her for not shaking hands with them, the little girl complies with their wishes, taking hold of both their hands at once, not to hurt one of the brothers’ feelings. At that moment, they all start singing the well-known rhyme “Here we go round the mulberry bush” (191). Yet, it may seem uncanny that nursery rhyme characters should know other nursery rhymes, since, presumably, all nursery rhyme characters should be on a par with one another. This narrative short-circuit makes it then possible for the Tweedle brothers to question Alice’s identity later on in the chapter:

“Well, it’s no use your talking about waking him,” said Tweedledum, “when you’re only one of the things in his dream. You know very well you’re not real.”  
“I *am* real!” said Alice, and began to cry.  
“You wo’n’t make yourself a bit realler by crying,” Tweedledee remarked: “there’s nothing to cry about.”  
“If I wasn’t real,” Alice said—half-laughing through her tears, it all seemed ridiculous—“I shouldn’t be able to cry.”  
“I hope you don’t suppose those are *real* tears?” Tweedledum interrupted. (198)

On Genette’s view, the metaleptic play on the limit between the world of the told and the world of the telling can be extremely troubling as it hints at the “unacceptable and insistent

hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that perhaps the narrator and his narratee—you and I—belong to some narrative” (1980, 236). Hence, Alice’s distress when the Tweedle brothers insist that she is not real.

The Lion and the Unicorn carry out a similar strategy when Alice meets them. Although their fate seems to be predetermined, they do not perceive themselves as nursery rhyme characters, and not even as fictional or “fabulous” creatures. Like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, not only do they refute the fictional status Alice ascribes to them, but they interpellate Alice as a fictional subject. The Unicorn starts by stating his doubts about the possibility of Alice’s existence, then he denies her status as a human being:

[H]is eye happened to fall upon Alice: he turned round instantly, and stood for some time looking at her with an air of the deepest disgust.

“What—is—this?” he said at last.

“This is a child!” Haigha replied eagerly [...]. “We only found it to-day. It’s as large as life, and twice as natural!”

“I always thought they were fabulous monsters!” said the Unicorn. “Is it alive?”

“It can talk,” said Haigha solemnly.

The Unicorn looked dreamily at Alice, and said “Talk, child.”

Alice could not help her lips curling up into a smile as she began: “Do you know, I always thought Unicorns were fabulous monsters, too? I never saw one alive before!”

“Well, now that we have seen each other,” said the Unicorn, “if you’ll believe in me, I’ll believe in you. Is that a bargain?”

“Yes, if you like,” said Alice. (240-41)

After staring at Alice, the Unicorn uses the interrogative proform “What,” which refers to inanimate referents, instead of “Who.” Likewise, Haigha uses the proform “it” several times instead of “she” to refer to the little girl. Finally, Alice is not granted the right to talk until the very end of the scene, when she can only answer the Unicorn’s order “Talk, child,” as if she were a circus freak or a “fabulous monster.” Moreover, she is not individuated by the Unicorn. At no point does he think of asking Alice her name; he only calls her “child.” In addition, looking at one member of the “child” species immediately reminds him of the whole species, as is indicated by the way he goes from the singular form used by Haigha—“We only found *it* today” (my italics)—to the plural form—“I always thought *they* were fabulous monsters” (my italics). The Unicorn only agrees to believe in the possibility of Alice’s existence because she reminds him that many people, including herself, disbelieve the existence of unicorns. However, the agreement between Alice and the Unicorn does not last long, since Alice’s existence is questioned again by the Lion when he turns up:

“What’s this!” he said, blinking lazily at Alice [...].

“Ah, what is it, now?” the Unicorn cried eagerly. “You’ll never guess! I couldn’t.”

The Lion looked at Alice wearily. “Are you animal—or vegetable—or mineral?” he said, yawning at every other word.

“It’s a fabulous monster!” the Unicorn cried out, before Alice could reply.

“Then hand round the plum-cake, Monster,” the Lion said, lying down and putting his chin on his paws. (241-242)

Once again, Alice is denied her status as a human being, as the Lion uses the interrogative proform “What,” like the Unicorn earlier. Furthermore, there is, significantly, no question mark at the end of his question: although the Lion seems to be asking a question, he is not the least interested in an answer. He asks Alice another question only to humour the Unicorn, and this question is a closed one, which gives Alice a very limited number of possible answers—and the Unicorn does not leave her the time to answer the question for herself anyway. Besides, the agreement between the Unicorn and Alice is proven to be frail since he keeps talking without letting her talk, and he uses the proform “it” again, and even the phrase “a fabulous monster,” thereby violating the understanding they had. The Lion then follows the Unicorn’s example and starts calling Alice “Monster,” which she gets used to very fast, as the narrator underlines (“she was getting quite used to being called ‘the Monster’”, 243).

If Humpty Dumpty does not go as far as to interpellate Alice as a fictional subject, he manages, to some extent, to rework Alice’s interpellation, since he tries to construct himself as a historical subject. Yet, as the previous analyses of chapters VI and VII suggest, Tweedledum, Tweedledee, the Lion and the Unicorn go further than that, and manage to displace their interpellation as nursery rhyme characters. Not only do the Tweedle brothers, the Lion and the Unicorn reject the fictional identity Alice tries to ascribe to them, but to boot, they ascribe this fictional identity to Alice. In other words, they reverse the direction of the interpellation: they counter-interpellate Alice. In so doing, they free themselves, to a certain extent, from the weight of tradition and become full-fledged *Looking-Glass* characters. Fighting the fixed identities ascribed to them by the cultural Ideological State Apparatus (the nursery rhymes repeated by Alice) endows them with new life.

This counter-interpellation by the nursery rhyme characters of the authority who recognised their inaugural interpellation and hailed them once again, that is to say Alice, reveals that the *Looking-Glass* nursery rhyme characters manage to negotiate their identity. But it also highlights the idea that there is no return to the notion of a sovereign subject: the nursery rhyme characters do not and cannot reject their interpellation and subsequent

subjection. Yet, in *Excitable Speech*, Butler says that: “these terms we never really choose are the occasion for something we might still call agency, the repetition of an originary subordination for another purpose, one whose future is partially open” (38). To that extent, the nursery rhyme characters can be said to be agents, who resist, but do not ignore, their prior interpellation. Carroll then plays with the reader’s sense of déjà-vu to create authenticity, which does not come from the blunt (and ultimately impossible) rejection of model texts, but from their creative counter-interpellation and resignification.

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