

# Introduction

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## Introduction

One way in which the spirit of our age has distanced itself from our centripetal classical heritage is surely through its overriding preoccupation with strangeness. Familiar to us as the Other, the liminal, the aporia (to name but a few of its manifestations in contemporary critical discourse), the strange — in spite of its self-estranging familiarity — continues to function as a powerful incitement to critical thought. This was amply borne out by the massive response to the call for papers by the organizing committee of the SAUTE conference which was held at Basle University on 26 and 27 May 1989. By specifically associating strangeness with the breaking of conventions and the disruption of norms, the organizers provided conference participants with a framework for the presentation of their potentially ubiquitous reflexions, while opening the appropriately Gothic doors of the *Englisches Seminar* in Nadelberg to a variety of disciplines, including that of linguistics (represented by four contributions).

It will come as a surprise to no one that synchronic linguists have a great deal to say about strangeness, given that it is one of the parameters of their art. David Allerton's study of "Linguistically Strange Word Combinations" reminds us, in effect, that the native speaker's experience of certain lexical combinations as strange suggests to the linguist that grammatical and/or locutional conventions are being broken. (The idea that either poetic licence or ignorance must be responsible for this deviance is, incidentally, paralleled by the rhetorician's traditional concepts of metaplasm and barbarism respectively.) On the other hand, the opening paper in this edition of *SPELL*, by guest speaker David Crystal, presents cases of linguistic behaviour susceptible of subverting the traditional role played by the strange in linguistic analysis. Contending that "it is normal linguistic behaviour in most linguistic situations to depart from what is conceived of as a norm for that context," Crystal takes his examples from everyday language, with its "baby talk" and its word games,

and from the specialized languages of advertising and theology. Within the framework of language-philosophy, Andreas Fischer's study of verbal music in the Sirens episode from Joyce's *Ulysses* explores ways in which verbal language – which is traditionally considered to be referential – may escape a number of conventions that govern it (including the arbitrariness of the sign) and tend towards the pure form of musical language; the strangeness of Joyce's onomatopoeia here appears to be a function of the author's tussle with the conditions of verbal communication as defined from Lessing to de Saussure. Finally, whatever standard spoken or written English may be, the material presented by Udo Fries deviates from it. He shows how English death notices from the 18th century to the present day are seen to develop their own text-linguistic conventions (those of the template), which vary from place to place and from time to time, but at all times and in all places constitute a fascinating corpus for the sociolinguist.

For the first time, SPELL may be said to be breaking its own critical conventions by including a work of prose fiction. When Angela Carter was invited to address the participants of a conference on strangeness, the organizers hoped for the kind of multifarious, sensuous, provocative narrative for which she is justly famous. Their hopes were not disappointed. But few can have expected the moving and playful "Introductory Speculation" that preceded her reading of "The Curious Room." And speculative, in the sense of self-reflecting, it is, with its quotations about mannerism as a strategy of quotation and with the author's self-representation in terms of post-modernism and surrealism. No wonder that Carter pronounces her Alice to be not just Tenniel's, or Carroll's, but also Svankmajer's, and that the Prague of Rudolf II and of Arcimboldo is refracted through André Breton and Ludwig Wittgenstein (to whom one might also add Chatwin's *Utz*). Arcimboldo's artifacts, Carmen Miranda's hat, the crystal bubble/ tear/ ball/ looking-glass; all of these are fitting emblems of a colourful, protean work that seduces as it gently incites its academic audience to self mockery. For Carter's masterly tongue-in-cheek handling of such scholarly paraphernalia as the citation and the footnote demands that we review and revise, if not necessarily break, some of the academic conventions embodied in this volume. As such, her concluding footnote, in the form of a conundrum, could function as a cautionary tale for this volume as a whole, which, like "The Curious Room," brings together various (and variegated) objects of curiosity, or curious enquiry.

In spite of their common preoccupation with strangeness, the composition that results from the presentation of these objects of enquiry in a certain sequence must on occasion appear disjunctive, arbitrary, strange. When we opt for a sequence based on alphabetical or chronological order, we accept those disjunctions as an editorial convention. But this convention is easily broken on the present occasion, since the contributions to SPELL 5 afford so many transitions as to make the editor's problem one of discarding some potential patterns in favour of others rather than one of avoiding disjunctions. In touching upon the special status of the language of literature, all of the linguistic papers provide a potential transition with the literary papers proper; of the latter, however, that by Werner Brönnimann, who considers the estrangement of Young's readers in the light of certain linguistic and semiotic features (repetition, allusion and genre-transgression), seems best suited to realize that transition. Following the two studies of Shakespeare's problematical dramatization of the theatrical conventions of tragical endings (Peter Halter on *King Lear*) and of transvestism (Dimiter Daphinoff on *Twelfth Night*), the transition to contemporary writing is given by Neil Forsyth's (re)reading of *Hamlet* through Stoppard's (re)writing, which both familiarizes us with, as it estranges us from, Shakespeare's play. From this exploration of tradition *as* travesty we move to tradition travestied in Tony O'Brien Johnson's presentation of modern Irish poems which appropriate, while they "make strange," indigenous poetic forms (like the *aisling*, the *immram* and the *dinnseanchas*) and the native myths. Pierre Monnin also explores a modern author's attitude to tradition in his study of the various novelistic conventions that combine to inform Fowles's *A Maggot* and to disconcert the reader. The "conventions" that Elizabeth Kaspar Aldrich explores in connexion with Perry Miller's biography of Jonathan Edwards are those of the canon-forming critical establishment. The biographer is shown to develop strategies of estrangement similar to those of his eighteenth-century Puritan subject by contributing to a re-formation of the language of sainthood's representation. After this exploration of the American Puritan's career as reflected in his biography, we are invited by Gregory T. Polletta to pursue the meanderings of John Ashbery's poetic career, which is no less reflective for being a representation of its own aporias. A different approach to the question of self-representation is to be found in Paul Beekman Taylor's cross-cultural study of Rudolfo Anaya's *Heart of Aztlan*; the Chicano's identity is here shown to be a function of his

estrangement from his native land and traditional lore, which reappear transformed and translated in the modern urban setting of this truly heteroglossic novel.

Through their examination of contemporary writing as refraction and reflexion (whether of the precursor, the cultural heritage or the self) and through their foregrounding of the intertextual nature of a given work, virtually all of these contributions have confronted the issue of strangeness in a manner consonant with Carter's elaboration of her *Curious Room*. Some would divide the world into poets, lovers and madmen; others would divide academics from writers, linguists from literary critics, close readers from theoreticians. But were we not all, for the duration of the conference, "expatriate alchemists" united in our search for the philosopher's stone, which might be called the alchemical figuration of estrangement as desire?

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