In the Belly of the Wolf: Magical Realism & the Revitalization of the Fairy Tale

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1: INTRODUCTION 1

2: FAIRY TALES DESCRIBED 9

3: MAGICAL REALISM DESCRIBED 49

4: FAIRY TALES & MAGICAL REALISM COMPARED 69

4: CARTER'S NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS 107

5: POSTSCRIPT 152

NOTES 158

REFERENCES 168
1: INTRODUCTION


The history of the literary fairy tale is also the history of the struggle of the imagination against its increasing suppression by reality. Compared to other poetic forms the possibilities for the elaboration of this problematic are limited for the fairy tale... While other genres could preserve their forms in that they continued to tolerate the idea of the unity of world and soul only negatively within themselves, the fairy tale has this conceivability as its prerequisite no matter how much it is relativized. The cessation of this conceivability means for the fairy tale that it must abandon its role as the representative form of the
marvelous if it does not want to disintegrate into mere entertainment literature through a pretended harmony and detachment from the processes of life.\textsuperscript{1}

Apel’s statement is convoluted and verbose, so I would like to draw out what I consider to be its key facets, then treat them individually. First, there is the idea that the history of the literary fairy tale parallels the struggle of the imagination against its increasing suppression by reality. Second, the notion that because something called “the unity of world and soul” has been lost, the fairy tale must no longer act as the “representative form of the marvelous” if it is to be more than irrelevant, escapist literature, having no bearing on life as it is lived today.

Each of these statements could be treated in more depth, but I wish only to provide some remarks to get us started. We’ll start with the notion that the history of the fairy tale reflects the struggle of the imagination and reality. Apel’s statement that the imagination has been increasingly suppressed by reality is not, perhaps, obvious or acceptable. But at least the poles he is considering, imagination and reality, are relatively familiar, if somewhat vague.

Reality, I would argue, conforms more or less here to the objective universe, governed by rationally intelligible laws, controlled by forces which we can understand. Imagination, on the other hand, is the vehicle for finding an alternative to reality; it is the faculty by which we compensate for the deficiencies of reality. We use it to explore beyond the rationally intelligible and its laws, which often seem incapable of accounting for or explaining all the variety of human experience.
Apel aligns the literary fairy tale with the faculty of imagination, and that is no surprise. Fairy tales are imaginative narratives, and many do not conform at all to the strictures of rational or empirical universal laws. To make this clearer, it will be useful to discuss Tzvetan Todorov’s seminal study *The Fantastic* (1970). In brief, Todorov argues that the genre of the fantastic exists on the boundary between two other genres, the uncanny and the marvelous. The fantastic, he argues, lasts “only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from ‘reality’ as it exists in the common opinion.”

The reader must make a decision: can the laws of reality as they are commonly understood explain the phenomena in a work, or do the laws of reality not suffice, is what is perceived beyond their purview? In making this decision, the reader ends the hesitation that is the fantastic, and so emerges from it.

If he or she decides that the laws of reality permit the phenomena in the text, then that text belongs to the genre of the uncanny. We might think of someone waking from a dream at the end of a bizarre narrative, as in *Alice in Wonderland* — the text then suddenly belongs to the uncanny, because reality, of course, allows strange dreams. If, on the other hand, the reader decides that the laws of reality do not suffice, that other laws must be constructed to permit the phenomena in the text, then that work belongs, instead, to the genre of the marvelous. We might think here of the fairy tale. Talking animals, magical transformations, girls who survive in the bellies of wolves — these things do not happen in real life.
Apel’s notion that history of the literary fairy tale reflects the struggle between the imagination and reality can be more readily understood now. Science, it seems fair to say, is always expanding the list of phenomena which are explicable by rational laws. In this sense, the rational universe is growing. As the list of rationally explicable things grows larger, the number of things which are totally inexplicable shrinks. In this sense, the things which evoke in us the feeling of the marvelous are confined to a narrower and narrower region. As the fairy tale is tied to the marvelous, this is a matter of concern.

Let us now examine Apel’s second notion, that the “unity of world and soul” is no longer conceivable. I read this as the cessation of the closeness that once existed between man and nature, a process that has been going on for quite some time, but one which achieves probably its most obvious expression during and after the Industrial Revolution. Angela Carter, in her introduction to the Virago Book of Fairy Tales, calls man’s divorce from the land “the most fundamental change in human culture since the Iron Age.” In his essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov,” first published in German in 1936, and not in English until 1968, Walter Benjamin quotes Leskov, who is writing to express the notion that “the epoch in which man could believe himself to be in harmony with nature has expired.” Leskov says:

… that old time when the stones in the womb of the earth and the planets at celestial heights were still concerned with the fate of men, and not today when both in the heavens and beneath the earth everything has grown indifferent to the fates of the sons of men and no voice speaks to them from anywhere, let alone does their bidding. None of the undiscovered planets play any part in
horoscopes any more, and there are a lot of new stones, all measured and weighed and examined for their specific weight and their density, but they no longer proclaim anything to us, nor do they bring us any benefit. Their time for speaking with men is past.⁵

I think it is just this idea which Apel means to evoke. The fairy tale posits a nature in touch with man as part of its essence. This period having ended, and with the imagination increasingly suppressed, Apel maintains that the fairy tale is doomed to “disintegrate into mere entertainment literature,” irrelevant, childish, and forgettable. What Apel is really doing is sounding the death-knell of the fairy tale. If the fairy tale had purpose, if it was of any use, it will be no longer: the fairy tale has grown meaningless in our modern age. I am inclined to disagree.

Of course, the vitality of the fairy tale is a difficult thing to measure. If it is determined simply by increased audience, greater exposure and greater appearance in culture, then it is impossible to argue that the fairy tale is not more vital than ever. A recent article in the New York Times, published March 25, 2012, attests to this fact.⁶ Its headline: “The Better to Entertain You With, My Dear: ‘Mirror Mirror’, ‘Grimm’, and Hollywood Love For Fairy Tales.” The article discusses two newly-aired television shows (on NBC and ABC respectively — competing for their share of the fairy-tale-loving audience)⁷ Grimm and Once Upon a Time, and also two separate, big-budget adaptations (if they may be properly called such) of “Snow White,” to be released by major film studios this year. Julia Roberts and Charlize Theron fill the role of respective Evil
Queens. If nothing else, this willingness to spend a good deal of money on a fairy tale motion picture indicates a belief — at least on the part of executives, or whoever crunches the numbers — that the fairy tale remains relevant, that it remains something people want to hear about. We might easily consider the Shrek films here as well, to say nothing of Disney and the plethora of fairy tale books and merchandise that are sold every year. That many modern works making use of the fairy tale are insipid, uninspired, shallow and uncritical does not, at least by this metric, in any way detract from the fairy tale’s vitality.

Still, it is clear enough that the fairy tale, in this regard, has indeed degenerated into what Apel called “entertainment literature.” It has become fluff, and, worse, rather than setting the imagination alight, these forms of the fairy tale deaden it. However, it is my contention that the fairy tale, whatever other forms it may take, has its meaning — its ability to comment critically on society and culture, its capacity to enter in people’s lives and help them to make sense of the world — restored, and emphatically so, through the literary mode of magical realism.

Magical realism rose to prominence, even came to the forefront of world literature, one might say, with Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, published in 1967. Blending, as its name implies, literary realism with the magical and the fantastic, the mode influenced literary output through the 1970s and into the 80s. Interestingly, this period also saw a great increase in fairy tale studies. Indeed, Stephen Benson writes in his introduction to Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale that “it is
no exaggeration to say that the discipline of fairy-tale studies has been to a degree constituted in this period,

 by which he means the period from about 1969 through to the early 80s. I do not propose to explain this fact, merely to point out the coincidence and imply that the connection I intend to draw between the fairy tale and magical realism is not unwarranted.

Furthermore, in her introduction to *A Companion to Magical Realism*, Wen-Chin Ouyang writes that magical realist texts derive much of their magic from “histories derived from ‘local’ or ‘indigenous’ myths,” and “also from the pre-realist ‘Western’ texts.” The fairy tale, we note, fits quite neatly into these categories. It is at once derived from “local” stories and represents a certain sort of pre-realist Western text. It is well known, too, that magical realism is often used in the service of progressive and post-colonial agendas. These circumstances — the curious historical connection between interest in the fairy tale and interest in magical realism, the connection between the fairy tale and the typical textual referents in magical realism, and the propensity of magical realism to serve some societal function — are auspicious for a study of the revitalization of the fairy tale by magical realism.

I propose first to provide some background and definition on both the fairy tale and magical realism, as the terms are used in a variety of ways, in both scholarly contexts and in everyday speech. Thus, the first two sections of my thesis will be addressing: 1) the history and characteristics of the fairy tale, and 2) the history and characteristics of magical realism. Afterwards, in my third section, I will examine the myriad relations
between the two, strengthening, I hope, my case for undertaking this study at all. In this section I will draw from Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), often considered, after Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the seminal example of the magical realist mode. Then, in the fourth section, I will explore how the fairy tale is revitalized in Angela Carter’s magical realist work *Nights at the Circus* (1984). Finally, I will offer a few concluding comments in a postscript.

So, without further delay, let us turn our attention to the fairy tale.
2: FAIRY TALES DESCRIBED

It is important now that we define what we mean when we talk about “the fairy tale” and “magical realism,” as these terms are often employed haphazardly, without any clear conception of their signification. This obscures their actual meaning. However, we should also recognize that even scholarly attempts to provide certain definition for “the fairy tale” or “magical realism” are inevitably met with criticism from some quarter; it is simply not possible to account for all the possible variations and gradations that exist in the world of actual literary (and oral) production. There are always specific works that straddle the boundaries between genres and works that defy easy classification, finding their home, rather, in gray-shaded and poorly defined borderlands. Thus, while we strive for exactitude and clarity in our definitions, we will have to accept that no definition can be all-encompassing and, furthermore, that no strict definition is necessarily possible or even useful.

To that end we will aim to elucidate the key characteristics — stylistic, formal, thematic, functional — of both the fairy tale and of magical realism. This will bring us
some way towards defining these terms, and point the way towards the essential core of each, even if it leaves some questions unanswered. In any case, we will be able to more readily recognize a fairy tale or a work of magical realism when brought face to face with either. And, more importantly for our purposes, this discussion will furnish us with the necessary background to explore the relationship between the fairy tale and magical realism in all its depth.

It seems only appropriate to begin with that immemorial form, the fairy tale. But, to be more precise and truthful, we must begin some time before the “fairy tale” itself. That term originated with Madame d’Aulnoy’s 1697 collection called simply Les Contes de Fées (Fairy Tales), and while this time period is one of great significance for the evolution and dissemination of the literary fairy tale, we must go back further to find the roots of that genre in the tradition of oral storytelling and then in the important works of two Italian authors, Le piacevoli notti of Giovanni Straparola (c. 1480 – c. 1557) and the Pentamerone of Giambattista Basile (c. 1575–1632).

The history of the fairy tale begins, in a certain sense, with the rise of language and, more importantly, oral storytelling. The first tales ever told were not, of course, fairy tales per se — the relatively specific themes, archetypes and mode of storytelling associated with that genre had obviously not been codified when “storytelling” first began. Still, it is well known that the fairy tale evolved from an oral form. What is surprising, however, is the great antiquity of a vast number of fairy tale motifs.
In the Introduction to his study *Fairy Tales in the Ancient World*, Graham Anderson asks “How old, then, are folktales?” And in response: “A convenient answer would be: ‘old enough for us to be seldom confident that we have found the first example of any given tale.’”¹ It is difficult, in effect, to overestimate the age of the folktale. He warns us as well against the too-common misconception that any tale transmitted orally for an extended period of time will inevitably morph and change beyond all recognition, which would imply that tales which were present in medieval (and later) Europe were re-invented, rather than having survived since antiquity. The example he gives to reinforce this warning is quite remarkable. Anderson writes: “A number of variants were recorded in the late 1940s of an Israeli trickster-tale, and these were published. A few years later a text from some two and a half millennia earlier written in Akkadian, the *lingua franca* of the Babylonian empire, was deciphered. The stories were virtually identical, indeed so close that it was possible to decipher obscurities in the Babylonian text from the folktale.”²

And, finally, Anderson admonishes us not to entertain the “wholly misguided prejudice: ‘that’s a myth, not a fairy tale’, etc.”³ It is an easy enough mistake to make — we tend to think of “wondrous” stories from classical antiquity as myths simply by virtue of their being from that period. However, the boundaries between myth, folk- and fairy tale are porous, and it is unhelpful to insist on a particular story’s being a “myth” to such an extent it precludes any possibility of a folk classification.
Again Anderson provides a helpful example. He relates an English folk tale where a witch comes to a village called Simmerdale and goes from door to door begging for food and drink. At each door, she is refused. Finally, however, a Quaker woman takes her in and feeds her, at which point the witch summons up a great flood that sinks all the town, save for the Quaker woman’s house, to the bottom of a lake. It is alleged that the house is still there today.

But we know this tale! It is the story of Baucis and Philemon. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* — the source for many of what we tend to think of as classical myths, though the theme of metamorphosis is perhaps as central to the folk tale as it is to Ovid’s work — this old couple is the only one to feed two beggars, who are really the gods Jupiter and Mercury in disguise. Thus, theirs is the only house to survive the flood summoned to punish the uncharitable villagers. When they die, Baucis and Philemon are turned to trees, their limbs intertwined, and their house goes on to become a temple — still standing, as of Ovid’s time. As Anderson says: “what we really seem to have here are two different cultural settings of an identical tale.”

We will discuss Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* in more detail later, but, in brief, in that work he outlines a number of “functions” that can occur in a given folktale — effectively, discrete actions, such as the movement of the hero to a faraway place, or the appearance of a magical helper. The means by which these actions take place, how the hero moves to a far away land (by horse or by teleportation), or what sort of magical helper appears, do not enter into his discussion. In this sense, we might say
that these two tales are composed of the same functions, the same actions occur with the same significance, but are given a different cultural “dressing,” so to speak.

The objection might well be raised, then, that, at least in this instance, the folktale related is nothing more than a bastardized myth. But Anderson’s point, which I would like to reiterate, is simply that it is unhelpful to mark such a strong and limiting distinction. For our purposes, which are to trace the genesis of the fairy tale, it is more useful to dwell on the tales’ similarities than on their differences.

With all this in hand, let us take up the example of Little Red Riding Hood, and its various antecedents, a tale to which Anderson devotes a good amount of attention.\(^5\) Anderson recounts a tale found in Pausanius. The boxer Euthymus comes to a town where they have a custom of offering, once a year, a virgin bride to the spirit of an old crewman of Odysseus, stoned to death as a rapist. Naturally, Euthymus enters the temple (Anderson points out here that, “in Callimachus the spirit simply calls for a bed”\(^6\)) where the bride has been left. Naturally as well, he defeats the spirit. Of great interest, however, is the fact that Pausanius had apparently seen a picture of this battle, and in it the spirit is called Lykas\(^7\) — “Mr. Wolf” as Anderson would have it — and is shown wearing a wolfskin. It is not Perrault’s version of Little Red Riding Hood, nor is it the Grimms’ Little Red Cap, but it is recognizably a tale playing with a number of the same motifs — the wolf, the enclosure with a bed — and with the same central concern: rape, or sexual violation of some sort. The girl does not wear red and she isn’t literally eaten, though of
course in the modern stories the eating stands in for violation, but the other ingredients are there.

Anderson goes on to trace a number of other tales which deal in similar motifs, and incorporate the color red as well. What emerges from the discussion is this: “the skeleton of a story in which a child, male or female, is threatened, raped or eaten by a figure with wolf or ogre associations, then disgorged or otherwise reconstituted with or without the substitution of a stone, while the wolf-figure is drowned or killed, and a ‘flame-girl’ (in whatever sense) survives the drowning to see new life brought from stones.”

Naturally, the study provides a wealth of other examples — after all, it is a book devoted entirely to the subject — but the discussion of *Little Red Riding Hood* provides perhaps the clearest and most concise illustration of the shifting forms that fairy tales might have taken in antiquity. The stories do not exist in their entirety, but, in examining a large number of tales dealing in the same motifs, occupied by the same central concerns, we are able “to see that most of the features now known in a tale already exist in antiquity in some sort of stable relationship to one another.” And as regards their age even in those times, Anderson has this to say: “The variants encountered in surviving literature are at least as varied and confused as their modern counterparts, suggesting that the tales themselves are already old.” That is, even in antiquity, the stories were possibly quite old.
Still, though the motifs of various fairy tales have been related since antiquity, and perhaps even longer, this does not mean that fairy tales proper, at least as we tend to think of them, have existed since that time. Jack Zipes, for instance, maintains that the fairy tale is a purely literary phenomenon, and what most closely prefigures it is best called the oral wonder tale, or what Max Lüthi sometimes calls, confusingly, the folk fairy tale. I tend to follow Zipes, though where he occasionally calls written wonder tales simply “fairy tales,” I will generally refer to them as “literary fairy tales,” to emphasize the fact that they are just that: literary. This “literary” means more than a mere transcription, as it implies a degree of conscious conception and change to the oral form. Elizabeth Harries, following Maria Tatar, defines a useful “spectrum” of tales, with *Volksmärchen* (oral tales) at one extreme and *Kunstmärchen* (invented or literary tales, like those of Hoffmann) at the other, with *Buchmärchen* (transcribed oral tales) lying in the center. I, following Zipes and Harries, put what is commonly called the “fairy tale” — the stories of Grimm and Perrault being the most popular examples — towards the *Kunstmärchen* end of the spectrum, and thus will refer to these stories as “literary fairy tales.” In this respect we do not have such tales in antiquity. Both the Grimms and Perrault employ, among other things, a particular style that, despite its affected “folksiness,” serves to differentiate their stories from oral tales or transcriptions of them. They also effect various thematic and ideological changes. Zipes maintains that “Just a superficial glance back into history will tell us that fairy tales have been in existence as oral folk tales for thousands of years…” When tied to literary production, however, as
Zipes goes on to do, of course the fairy tale has not been around so very long. We can then say that as a genre, the fairy tale, as I would employ the term, does not exist in antiquity, though even then, and perhaps long before, it has important precursors in oral folklore.

I would like to point out too that if all the evidence we have is written — for how could it not be? we cannot, save perhaps figuratively, hear a story being told in antiquity — there is no reason to doubt that oral storytelling occurred. Anderson is at pains to make this clear, and notes, referring to the telling of wonder tales: “whatever the frowns of the educated, such storytelling is still obviously going on, though at a sub-literary level for the most part.” He goes on to point out that terms like “groan or titthon mythoi, ‘old women’s tales’ or ‘nurses’ tales’” in Greek, or aniles fabulae in Latin, “old women’s tales,” are common, and also notes a number of rote tale openings — not merely for so-called “nurses’ tales” — found in antique sources. The openings range from the very familiar sounding, “bouts pote en [mys kai gale] (‘so there was once a [mouse and a weasel]”) to “Tina ton palaion thelet’ akousai (‘do you want to hear one of the olden tales”) and even “a ‘roll up, roll up’ call, presumably as of an itinerant storyteller.” What is clear — and not very surprising, I think — is that oral storytelling was certainly going on and the early stories using fairy-tale motifs were likely disseminated in this way.

Our history of the fairy tale now leaps into the medieval period. Specifically, we begin in the first half of the eleventh century, with a book in Latin verse called Fecunda ratis (The Richly Laden Ship), composed by Egbert of Liège between 1022 and 1024. It is
discussed in some length in Jan M. Ziolkowski’s book, *Fairy Tales from Before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies*. Ziolkowski notes that Egbert’s book was intended for pedagogical purposes, and that Egbert, in its composition, “relied heavily, by his own admission, on the rich oral traditions that circulated in his region, a border zone between Germanic and Romance language and culture groups. He incorporated into his poem many Latin translations of vernacular proverbs. Because many of the proverbs originated among uneducated countryfolk, Sigebert of Gembloux (ca. 1030 – 1112) referred to the poem as a book ‘in metrical style about the sayings of peasants.’”

In this work, Egbert includes a tale entitled “*De puella a lupellis serrata,*” “About a Girl Saved from Wolf Cubs.” The tale’s first two lines go: “What I have to relate, country folk can tell along with me, and it is not so much marvelous as it is quite true to believe.” Egbert then continues with the tale of a young girl, baptized on the Pentecost and given by her godfather a “tunic woven of red wool.” Wandering in the woods one day, this girl is seized by a wolf and brought to his den as food for his cubs. I say “his” den because the Latin noun *lupus* used by Egbert is masculine — which affords, to some extent, greater credulity to associations with Little Red Riding Hood. However, the wolf cubs cannot harm the girl because of the protection granted by her red baptismal tunic. The tale concludes with the Christian moral that “God, their creator, soothes untame souls.”
Though it has been the subject of some debate, it seems readily apparent that we are dealing with a Christianized version of an oral folk tale, related to the tales that Perrault would draw from when composing Little Red Riding Hood. Ziolkowski argues in favor of this conclusion. We have already seen that Egbert has acknowledged his debt to local folklore for the *Fecunda ratis* as a whole, but clearly here in the first two lines we have a further acknowledgement that this specific tale would have been, at least in outline, recognizable to the peasantry from which Egbert drew inspiration. As Ziolkowski describes the process:

It is imaginable that Egbert the cleric Christianized a nonreligious story of a little girl in a red garment who was rescued miraculously from being devoured by a wolf: aware that the redness of the garment was too familiar an element in his sources to allow for its omission, perhaps he made a virtue of a necessity by coordinating the color with the symbolism of the liturgy.¹⁹

Still, though Egbert makes use of the folklore of the area, he is decidedly not one of the “folk.” The very fact that he is capable of reading and writing assures us of that. He uses folklore to serve a pedagogical purpose, writing in the dedication, “I drew upon this material in the belief that numerous useful things are found in it, and if in some way the clear insights could be retained, they would make neglectful students into attentive listeners.”²⁰ Effectively, he appropriates the oral culture familiar to his pupils — though the language and structure employed is nothing like that of an oral tale — in order to, as Ziolkowski says, “indoctrinate youths.”²¹ He has refashioned a tale which perhaps
served a simple cautionary role, and used it to teach a lesson about the power of Christian belief and morality.

Ziolkowski notes that such refunctioining is quite common in the world of medieval Latin literature. The tale of Unibos (One-Ox), for instance, tells how a humble plowman outsmarts repeatedly the three potentates of his village, eventually causing their deaths and growing rich in the process. One-Ox is a hero of the lower, peasant class. However, the Latin verse poem through which we know this version of the tale would not, of course, have been accessible to that lower class. Clearly it is intended for a literate audience. So why, then, is the hero a humble plowman who overcomes his social betters? Ziolkowski contends that:

… the boorish behavior and beliefs of [One-Ox] and his fellow villagers help to fix the nature of the class to which the Latin-using audience of One-Ox belonged: the urbane and courtly require the counterpoint of the rustic and boorish to define and legitimate themselves. For One-Ox simultaneously to be a hero to one class and the antihero to another may seem paradoxical, but it is common for stories that convey the concerns and aspirations of one group to be taken to serve the less flattering aims of another group.22

It is important to understand as well that poems like those discussed were likely intended to be sung or performed. This allows for a process of give-and-take between oral and literary narrative. Furthermore, as Ziolkowski and Zipes point out, tale-telling was popular in all walks of life, in all social classes, and so it is nearly impossible to locate any point of origin for specific tales. They moved very easily between social classes,
upwards or downwards, and could catch hold or emerge initially in either. When speaking of the folktale, Zipes writes, “the term folk should be considered an inclusive term… Because everyone told tales during the medieval and Renaissance periods, and the tales were the property of everyone and anyone.” The lower classes played an important role in the formation and dissemination of folktales, to be sure, but the idea that folktales are uniquely from the lower classes or the common folk is simply a well-perpetuated myth.\textsuperscript{23}

The most important oral predecessor to the literary fairy tale is what is known as the oral wonder tale (commonly \emph{Zaubermärchen} in German or \emph{conte merveilleux} in French).\textsuperscript{24} These would fall under the \emph{Volksmärchen} heading in Harries’ aforementioned schema. It is not clear exactly when that form of tale-telling evolved or became popular, but Ziolkowski argues that One-Ox can easily be seen as a sort of anti-wonder tale, an educated writer poking fun at the belief in the marvelous prevalent among the lower classes. That certain members of the lower classes also told these sorts of anti-wonder tales — not oblivious to their message — is likely too; as, indeed, is the converse, that members of the upper class told wonder tales. An education certainly did not preclude belief in marvelous goings-on. Irrespective of such considerations, however, the point is that if One-Ox represents an anti-wonder tale, then this certainly suggests that at the time of its composition, the first half of the eleventh century, the oral wonder tale existed and was popular enough for people to understand when it was being lampooned, or its characteristics manipulated.\textsuperscript{25}
So we know that at least by the mid-eleventh century, wonder tales were circulating and being told. But we still do not know what a wonder tale really is. To that end, we will turn first to the structuralist analysis of Vladimir Propp, given in *The Morphology of the Folktale* (which, according to Propp himself, was intended to be called *The Morphology of the Wondertale*, a much more specific enterprise29). First published in Russian in 1928, Propp’s work would not gain much attention until translated into English in 1958. Since then, the book has received a great deal of attention, not all of it favorable. Nevertheless, it provides an illuminating initial look at the form of the oral wonder tale.

As mentioned briefly before, Propp, based on an exhaustive analysis of Russian wonder tales, attempts to explain all tale types in terms of a progression of what he calls “functions” — defined as “the action of the character from the point of view of its significance for the progress of the narrative.”27 The example he provides in *The Morphology of the Folktale* is useful. Consider these pieces of a narrative:

1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
2. An old man gives Súcenko a horse. The horse carries Súcenko away to another kingdom.
3. A sorcerer gives Iván a little boat. The boat takes Iván to another kingdom.
4. A princess gives Iván a ring. Young men appearing from out of the ring carry Iván away into another kingdom, and so forth.28

Rather than concerning himself with the variable *dramatis personae* or their means of transportation, Propp seeks to analyze the wonder tale essentially by paying attention to the verbs in each instance. Thus, these sentences all become examples of the same function: the transportation of the hero to a new place. Propp identifies 31 basic functions that define the action of a tale, each with the possibility of a corresponding inversion of function. All functions need not be present in any given tale, but their order is always consistent.

I will attempt to lay them out, briefly, without any of Propp's expository or qualifying remarks29. Typically, we have a protagonist who is presented with an interdiction of some sort, and then breaks it. Thus, there is a leave-taking or an exile — Propp calls it simply a departure — and on the resulting journey the hero encounters a person or creature or magical being and is somehow tested. Often these encounters occur in threes. If the hero passes the test, he or she procures aid or a magical object of some sort. At some point, then, the hero will encounter the villain of the tale — which might correspond to any number of things, dragon, witch, ogre, stepmother — and, usually with the help of the magical agent, he or she will overcome the villain in a struggle. Often, this is not the end of the tale, as the hero’s fortunes fall again. Possibly the schema will begin again at this point, perhaps even leading into a second tale; or, the hero must
overcome further adversity, in the form of a false hero or a difficult task. With or without magical aid, the hero must overcome this task too, after which he or she will undergo some sort of marvelous transformation — the hero becomes beautiful/handsome, or a prince/princess living in an enormous palace, or rich or wise — the villain may be punished, and the hero will perhaps be married and live happily ever after.

At best, this is only a sketch of the outline of an oral wonder tale; it might take many more forms and incorporate many more functions. And, indeed, Propp admits that there are tales which cannot fit into his schema, though he maintains they are very few and far between. We should note, too, that Propp based his analysis only on Russian wonder tales, so the completeness of his list of functions should be viewed with a critical eye — though also with one aware of the usefulness of Propp’s methodology.

Jack Zipes maintains that, while Propp’s theory fails to take into account many diverse aspects of the wonder tale, including its specific historical setting and some of its possible social functions — though, we should note, the hopeful emphasis on transformation and the overcoming of inimical obstacles is still apparent in Propp’s analysis — the theory remains of use in how it “helps us understand that the structure of oral tales depends heavily on memory, repetition, and resolution.”30 This structure explains, in large part, tales’ ability to survive orally through so many generations. First, it allows for easy recall of events, of characters defined by their social or familial position, and so on. It also allows for a great deal of adaptability, so that tales can be molded to remain interesting and relevant in constantly changing social circumstances.
Having some understanding, then, of the structure of the oral wonder tale, let us turn now to its style, following Max Lüthi’s discussion of it in Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales (1976). A brief note on terminology is necessary here, however, before we can forge onward. Lüthi uses the term “fairy tale” when he writes his description of its style, but it is important to understand also that the majority of his statements apply equally to the wonder tale. Indeed, Lüthi is typically writing about what he terms the “folk fairy tale,” intending to exclude from the discussion more crafted, literary fairy tales, as he feels they depart from the true, oral style of the folk fairy tale—or, what is essentially the same thing, the wonder tale. For instance, Lüthi considers many of the later versions of the Grimms’ tales — for their stories underwent many revisions, and the Grimms added a great number of stylistic and thematic touches — to have departed from the unadorned style of the “fairy tale” as it was transmitted orally, though commonly people who are not fairy tale scholars consider these Grimms’ tales as paradigmatic of fairy tale style.31

As I attempted to indicate at the very outset of this discussion, “fairy tale” is a complicated and polyvalent term. It is used in sometimes conflicting ways, particularly in everyday speech. However, this should not be discouraging. Lüthi, when writing about “fairy tale” style is describing, by and large, the style of the Volksmärchen, oral tales, and Buchmärchen, transcriptions of those oral tales. He effectively excludes from the discussion of “true fairy tale” style any of the tales with literary touches — that is, Kunstmärchen — and so really refers only to oral wonder tale or folk fairy tale style. That
being said, we will no doubt recognize many of the characteristics of the literary fairy tale, at least as it is familiar from Perrault and the Grimms, in Lüthi’s stylistic discussion, since the literary fairy tale, whatever changes it has undergone, nonetheless derives directly from the tales Lüthi discusses. Thus, our discussion of the style of the oral wonder tale/folk fairy tale will serve in part to describe the style of less adorned literary fairy tales as well.

In brief, Lüthi argues that wonder tale style favors “action, clarity, precision, and compactness.” To draw out these characteristic elements, Lüthi examines a Swedish variant of a story of two brothers of miraculous birth, named Silberweiss and Lillwacker, one of whom slays a number of sea monsters which are each coming to eat a princess. He might have, of course, chosen many others. The style is uniform regardless of national origins or content, and it is one with which we are all probably somewhat familiar, if in slightly modified form. He writes: “The first thing which strikes us is that there is nowhere a detailed description. We are given absolutely no idea how the sea monster looks (here called ‘a troll,’ the Scandinavian name).” All this though, of course, the listeners too have no idea what the sea monster looks like — even the characters do not, until it rears its (possibly) ugly head. “The fairy tale indicates the action and does not get lost in the portrayal of scenes and characters,” a notion which points to the relevance of Propp’s theory of functions. There is an “absence of all desire to describe unessential details,” that “gives the European fairy tale its clarity and precision.” Lüthi maintains that even the smallest embellishments, as when “the Grimm brothers tell of us of a witch’s
long crooked nose or her red eyes,” are departures from the true, unadulterated oral style.33

Furthermore, Lüthi argues that the relative isolation of the characters, who typically set out on quests alone and encounter few people — and even when they do, one never feels as though there is a multitude, since there are so few actual “actors” in the tale — only adds to this clarity. The characters are also isolated socially, as they are drawn from the extremes, the “remotest branches,” of society. We see “the prince and the young swine herd, the despised youngest son or the clumsy boy; and the girl who watches the hearth or tends the geese and the princess.” And these are not the only wild contrasts of which the wonder tale is fond. We see as well the dichotomy between punishment and reward, good and evil, ugly and handsome, clever and foolish. Lüthi argues that this drive for clarity and contrast explains, too, the endless appearance of gold and silver, jewels and crystals: they shine and stand out from the multitude, but also they are, as objects, or elements, “solid and clearly formed.”34

This brings us to another of Lüthi’s key points: the wonder tale often uses such clearly defined objects to externalize the relationships between characters. Like the epic, the fairy tale wastes little time with the interior lives of characters; they do not stop to muse, or ponder. Rather, “in the fairy tale, feelings and relationships are externalized, sometimes in a manner which for us is quite peculiar,” through the giving of particular gifts and symbolic objects.35
And as the wonder tale world is rigid and clearly defined, so too is the language in which it is told. Here we come to the aspect of repetition, where episodes are related using virtually the same exact words as previous ones. And indeed, this repetition brings us to two further aspects of style, the first of which is the episodic nature of the tales. That is, the goings-on in wonder and fairy tales are clearly divided into isolated sections, which, while ultimately somehow interrelated — as the section where the hero receives the magic gift influences the later resolution of the conflict of another episode in the tale — are also able to stand on their own, complete within themselves. This is not dissimilar to the physical isolation of the characters of the wonder tale, and both “contributes to the sharply defined structure” of the tale and “intensifies the severity” of the style. The second aspect is the tales’ predilection for what Lüthi calls “stylized intensification.” That is, the familiar notion that “the last adventure is the most dangerous, the youngest princess the most beautiful, the youngest-son is the fairy-tale hero.” The tales’ predilection for certain round numbers (three, seven, twelve, one hundred) is bound up in this desire for precision and sharp delineation as well. We might note here that these stylistic aspects recall Propp’s structuralist analysis, with its emphasis on the clear delineation of episodes as “functions,” and the tendency for functions to often be repeated in groups.

Furthermore, this tendency towards “definiteness, firmness, and clarity” perhaps goes some way towards explaining the tales’ apparent “timelessness.” Though Zipes, among others, has convincingly argued that they are not so, that they are distinctly
bound up in the lives and social situations of specific tale-tellers, their form and style make us think of them as somehow ageless. Zipes’ argument aside, we ought to note, too, the notion that these tales seem somehow ageless because people return to them repeatedly for their inventiveness and imagination, and the feeling that fairy tales, whatever their specific historical nature, have a certain amount of wisdom to offer. Whatever the case may be, we should note that the wonder tale and the fairy tale are themselves distinctly unconcerned with time. Lüthi goes so far as to say that “the fairy tale conquers time by ignoring it.” The form and style of the tales “remove us from the time continuum and make us feel that there is another way of viewing and experiencing life, that behind all birth and death there is another world, resplendent, imperishable, and incorruptible.” Lüthi notes with regards to Sleeping Beauty/Briar Rose, that she falls asleep for one hundred years and wakes up unconcerned with the changes that have been wrought in that world during her long years of slumber — though Charles Perrault does ironically comment on the fact that her dress has gone out of style. One might say that the wonder tale is atemporal. Certainly, it exists in no particular spatial locality. J.R.R Tolkien argued that it takes place in the realm of Faërie; never (or almost never — one cannot be too wary in discussing what defines these tales) are they set in any specific city or town or village.

Given that we are discussing stories that were transmitted orally, most of what has been said about structure and style comes as no surprise. It is much easier to remember and relate an episodic tale, where events are self-contained and need not be
constantly kept in mind and referenced throughout, than to tell an elaborately self-referential and convoluted story (as may be the case in the literary fairy tale). So, too, is it easier to draw on a specific repertoire of numbers, character-types, and so forth, than to create characters with the psychological depth one might expect in a realistic novel, with all the nuance of our reality. This by no means denigrates the wonder tale or the fairy tale — for all the apparent simplicity of their style and their characters, they can serve complex psychological and social functions, and exhibit a remarkable capacity for imagination. It is easy to lose sight of this when discussing, perhaps somewhat drily, wonder tale or fairy tale style, or examining the two historically: they remain fascinating and imaginative narratives that many people return to time and time again, whether in literature or in their lives.

This element of their style should not be overlooked, as, clearly, it is this particular aspect of the wonder tale, its propensity to induce wonder in the reader, that gives this sort of tale its name. Naturally, wonder serves as an integral part of the wonder tale. As Jack Zipes writes:

The characters, settings, and motifs are combined and varied according to specific functions to induce wonder and hope for change in the audience of listeners/readers, who are likely to marvel or admire the magical changes that occur in the course of the events. At the center of attraction is the survival of the protagonist under difficult conditions, and the tales evoke wonder and admiration for oppressed characters, no matter who they may be. It is this earthy and secular sense of wonder and hope that distinguished the wonder tales from other oral tales such as the legend, the fable, the anecdote, and the myth.
Ziolkowski echoes this sentiment, writing that wonder tales contained “prodigies or marvels of the natural world.”\textsuperscript{42} It is not always possibly to determine to what purpose wonder tales sought to evoke these reactions in their audience. Zipes argues in \textit{When Dreams Came True} that “the ideology expressed in wonder tales always stemmed from the position that the narrator assumed with regard to the developments in his or her community, and the narrative plot and changes made in it depend on the sense of wonder or awe that the narrator wanted to evoke.”\textsuperscript{43} In other words, the reason for the wonder — the function of wonder in the wonder tale — changed according to the specific narrators telling the tale, and the message they wished to express, whether emancipatory, revolutionary, or conservative.

Irrespective, however, of the purpose of the wonder and the ideological intention of the specific tale teller, Zipes maintains that “in the oral wonder tale, we are to marvel about the workings of the universe where anything can happen at any time, and these \textit{fortunate} or \textit{unfortunate} events are never really explained. Nor do the characters demand an explanation—they are instinctively opportunistic and hopeful.”\textsuperscript{44} Just as Lüthi notes, “The real fairy-tale hero is not astonished by miracles and magic; he accepts them as if they were a matter of course.” The supernatural world does not make us “shudder in horror or ecstasy,” because it, the miracle, the marvelous, is “the vital substance in the fairy tale; it permeates the entire tale and is no longer told for its own sake.”\textsuperscript{45}
I would like to point out now that, had there been any doubt, it is now apparent that the wonder tale and the fairy tale clearly fall into the realm of Todorov’s marvelous. In the wonder tale we find ourselves in a universe where anything can happen — animals can talk, men and women can be turned into ponds, dwarves can drink entire cellars filled with wine — and certainly they do not partake of “reality.” Todorov even notes himself that we “generally link the genre of the marvelous to that of the fairy tale... the supernatural events in fairy tales provoke no surprise: neither a hundred years’ sleep, nor a talking wolf, nor the magical gifts of the fairies.”

However, the tales are not entirely detached from real life; they are not merely escapist, or wish-fulfillment. They serve a civilizing, socializing function, and Zipes maintains that they “seek to awaken our regard for the miraculous condition of life and to evoke profound feelings of awe and respect for life as a miraculous process, which can be altered and changed to compensate for the lack of power, wealth, and pleasure that most people experience.” Thus, “it is the celebration of miraculous or fabulous transformations in the name of hope that accounts for its major appeal.” Indeed, in the introduction to the Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales, Zipes writes, “If there is one ‘constant’ in the structure and theme of the wonder tale that was passed on to the literary fairy tale, it is transformation—to be sure, miraculous transformation. Everybody and everything can be transformed in a wonder tale. In particular there is generally a change in the social status of the protagonists.” Regardless, then, of the specific intentions or uses of each tale — say, communicating something about rape or violation through Little
Red Riding Hood, or about poverty through Hansel and Gretel, though these are certainly not the only possibilities — wonder tales and fairy tales share this attitude towards the marvelous; it is a cause for hope for change and a cause to find wonder in life.

It is true too that the tales are brutal in their punishments. Zipes believe the interest in class relations and conflict inherent in the stories necessitates, to a certain extent, a “might makes right” moral philosophy. There is no transcendent other world, and “only one side of the characters and living conditions is described. *Everything is confined to a realm without morals*, where class and power determine power relations.” Still, none of this precludes the wonder tale or the fairy tale from performing the functions previously mentioned, of encouraging hope for change and wonder in life.

According to Zipes, the structure and style of the oral wonder tale as we have discussed it “began to take clear recognizable shape in Europe sometime first during the early medieval period because it was at this time that writers were prompted to recognize it as memorable and wrote it down.” As the process continued through the fifteenth century, written wonder tales came to constitute “the genre of the literary fairy tale, and writers began establishing its particular conventions, motifs, topoi, characters, and plots, based to a large extent on those developed in the oral tradition, but altered to address a reading public formed largely by the clergy, aristocracy, and the middle classes.” As the influence of the Church lessened, the “secular” fairy tale, sometimes now written in
vernacular languages, as opposed to clerical Latin — as for instance, One-Ox and Egbert’s *Fecunda ratis* had been — became more acceptable as a literary genre.

The Italian author known as Giovanni Francesco Straparola (c. 1480 – c. 1557) played quite an important role in this process of the creation of the literary fairy tale. Little is known about Straparola personally, and indeed even the name Straparola, meaning “the loquacious one,” may be merely a pseudonym. However, Zipes writes that, at least, “it is clear from his collection of novelle, which he called *favole*, that he was very well educated and that he must have lived in Venice for some time.”\(^{51}\) His work is full of literary allusions, further indicating that he was well-read and educated. Drawing on the frame narratives and some of the wonder tale themes and motifs in, most notably, Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Straparola composed a work called *Le piacevoli notti* (The Pleasant Nights, sometimes The Facetious Nights) between 1550 and 1553. It tells the story of a group of partygoers — “ten gracious ladies, two matronly women, and four educated and distinguished gentlemen”\(^{52}\) — on the island of Murano, just north of Venice, who tell one another stories to amuse themselves during Carnevale.

The stories that are told vary widely, but, as W.G. Waters writes in the foreword to his translation of *Le piacevoli notti*, “one of the chief claims of the ‘Notti’ on the consideration of later times lies in the fact that Straparola was the first writer who gathered together into one collection the stray fairy tales, for the most part brought from the East, which had been made known in the Italian cities — and in Venice more
especially — by the mouth of the itinerant storyteller.”53 Waters’ comment lends some credence to the fact that, though the important One Thousand and One Nights had not yet reached Europe in any complete form, and would not until the eighteenth century, it is possible that travelers stopping in Venice might have brought with them some of these “Oriental” tales, thus influencing the composition of Le piacevoli notti. Zipes also notes the possible influence of Oriental tales on Straparola’s collection.54

In any case, prior to this point in the fifteenth century, the literary fairy tale could not stand on its own as a work, and was found instead “within such manuscripts as the Gesta Romanorum (c. 1300), medieval romances, sermons delivered by priests, and short Latin poems and narratives.” It is not until Straparola’s collection that “a sizable number of fairy tales were first published in the vernacular and for a mixed audience of upper-class men and women.”55 Zipes maintains that it is of particular significance that Straparola’s work was written in the vernacular (at a time when Latin was still the “dominant print language”) and therefore intended to appeal to a growing middle class audience, because it thus served as part of a nascent Italian “civilizing process,” encouraging increased literacy and demonstrating how fairy tales could be shaped to address contemporary social issues.56

All told, of the seventy-four tales related in Le Piacevoli Notti, at least fifteen can be shown to have had a direct influence on later literary fairy tales, including Perrault’s classic “Puss in Boots.” Jack Zipes argues that while it would be greatly overstating the point to say that Straparola triggered the development of the literary fairy tale, certainly
it is apparent that his tales “circulated throughout Europe and had a considerable influence among educated writers,” including Giambattista Basile, another important early writer of fairy tales in Italy, and “Mme d’Aulnoy, Mme de Murat, Charles Perrault, Eustache Le Noble, and Jean de Mailly,” all significant (and largely female) writers of the literary fairy tale in late seventeenth century France. Through them, Straparola’s tales spread to Germany, to later influence the Brothers Grimm.57

However significant Straparola’s contribution to the genre of the literary fairy tale, though, Jack Zipes maintains that “he was a pale light in comparison with the fiery imaginative Basile.” Indeed, Zipes writes that Giambattista Basile (c. 1575–1632), was “the most brilliant and original writer of fairy tales in Europe until the German romantic E.T.A. Hoffmann came on the scene in 1814.” Penned in Neapolitan dialect, his Lo cunto de li cunti (The Tale of Tales), otherwise known as the Pentamerone (The Pentameron), published from 1634–36, after Basile’s death, is the first collection composed solely of fairy tales. Even the frame narrative for the Pentamerone is itself drawn from folktale. Michele Rak, as quoted by Jack Zipes, maintains that Basile’s collection was the most important work for the establishment of the literary fairy tale — more than Le piacevoli notti or any other — as it was composed of a type of fairy tale that:

produced a literary genre, and its stories produced other texts that had a great circulation because the fairy tale used stories that stemmed from the heritage of Mediterranean culture and because a model was prepared through its structure
that proved itself to be stable: it repeated its communications (avviso) to readers in a regular cadence set up also in the secondary stories. With this model it was possible to construct many diverse tales that were adaptable to various circumstances as the numerous variants and versions have proven.\textsuperscript{58}

Rak, for one, sees Basile’s \textit{Pentamerone} as providing the model upon which the genre of the literary fairy tale would be based. Certainly Basile’s work was reprinted several times in the seventeenth century, translated into both Italian and French, and his episodic tales focus on the journey away from home, “into the woods, onto the sea, or to another city,” always incorporating magical elements, class relations, and exploring the role of fortune, usually as represented by a helpful fairy or a vicious ogre.\textsuperscript{59}

We find ourselves now, at long last, on the cusp of the birth of the fairy tale as we are most familiar with it. Indeed, some sixty years after the publication of the \textit{Pentamerone}, Madame Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy would publish, in France in 1697, \textit{Les Contes de Fées (Fairy Tales)}, followed by \textit{Contes Nouveaux ou les Fées à la Mode (New Tales or Fairies in Fashion)} one year later. In fact, however, it is “L’île de la félicité” ("The Island of Happiness"), a story found in her novel \textit{Histoire d’Hypolite, comte de Duglas (The Story of Hyppolyte, Count of Duglas)}, published in 1690, which is considered to be the first French literary fairy tale, inaugurating the mass of publication which would follow.\textsuperscript{60} Drawing from circulating oral folk and wonder tales and other literary fairy tales, these works “created a vogue of writing that was to last approximately a century and brought about the institutionalization of the fairy tale as a literary genre in Europe and North America.”\textsuperscript{61} Charles Perrault is the most famous writer of fairy tales from this
era, though Mme d'Aulnay is decidedly the most prolific. And it should certainly be noted that, despite Perrault’s lasting fame, and the relative obscurity of most of the other early writers of the fairy tale, the majority of them were, just like Mme d’Aulnay, women.

This is due in large part to the fact that the literary fairy tale in France took shape almost exclusively in the literary salons popular at the time, gatherings which were usually hosted by — and frequently attended by — women. Jack Zipes writes that it is in these salons that the genre was “conventionalized and institutionalized” by writers such as “Marie-Jeanne Lhéririer, Catherine Bernard, Charlotte-Rose Caumont de la Force, Henriette Julie de Murat, Jean de Mailly, Eustache le Noble, and Charles Perrault,” most of whom knew one another. In fact, Mlle Lhéririer was Perrault’s niece.

According to Zipes, this group of French authors, like Straparola and Basile before them, “exploited the marvelous in conscious narrative strategies to deal with real social issues of their time,” but, went further in that “they were able to ground and institutionalize [the literary fairy tale] as a genre more effectively than the Italians had done through the salon culture and advances made in literacy and printing.” They created together a genre and a body of work that was able to address pressing social issues of the day, including the dissatisfaction with Louis XIV’s court due to war and famine, the changing roles of women (this was the period of the famous Querelle des anciens et des modernes, and also the latter days of the Querelle des femmes), class relations, and power relations, all through the use of the marvelous, in tales replete with references to “pan-
European and Oriental tradition” — and notably often without any reference to “Greek, Roman, and Christian allegorical systems.” It was a decidedly modernist, progressive, and complex literary movement.

I should also mention that it is at about this time that Europeans were first directly introduced to the One Thousand and One Nights through Antoine Galland’s translations of them into French, the first of which appeared in 1704. They were an immediate success, the arrival of the translation of Oriental tales coinciding propitiously with this French vogue of fairy tale writing inaugurated by Mme d’Aulnoy.

However, despite the very significant contributions of French women to the genre of the literary fairy tale, it is Perrault’s stories that have become canonized and have been passed on to us. D’Aulnoy’s “Finette Cendron,” a version of Cinderella, is likely known to very few people today, while it seems fair to say that Perrault’s “Cendrillon” is among the most well known tales in all the Western world (and not only thanks to Walt Disney). Indeed, none of the tales penned by the early French female writers of fairy tales — called conteuses — have made it into the fairy tale canon, though they were reprinted all throughout the eighteenth century.

Elizabeth Harries argues that this is due in part to the fact that tales of the conteuses are often elaborate and self-referential, “invented as a complex and ironic comment on the historical moment in which they were produced,” rather than existing in the “timeless space of folk culture.” Thus, they do not conform as well to the simplistic style of the wonder tale; their “style, length, and timeliness do not fit the
ideology of the fairy tale as it has been constructed.65 Thus, towards the beginning of
the nineteenth century, when, with the rise of what Harries calls “romantic nationalism,”
it became important to construct national identity from the lore (and wisdom) of the
“folk,” the tales of the conteuses did not fit the mold. Furthermore, those same tales
tended to be more critical of present social patterns, we might simply say patriarchal
patterns, than those of Perrault, and thus “as fairy tales gradually became guarantors of
good behavior, bourgeois family stability, and submissive female purity” the tales of the
conteuses became less and less acceptable.66

This brings us to an important point with regards to Perrault’s collection of
stories, Histoires ou contes du temps passé (Stories or tales from times past, 1697), and to
make it we will return to the familiar example of Little Red Riding Hood. In Why Fairy
Tales Stick, Jack Zipes relates “The Story of the Grandmother,” an oral version of the
Little Red Riding Hood tale, reconstructed by folklorist Paul Delarue, which was
circulating in France at the end of the seventeenth century. The outline of the plot is
familiar: a girl sets out into the woods to visit her grandmother, she meets there a wolf-
figure with whom she converses, the wolf heads to her grandmother’s house, kills the
grandmother, and the girl arrives shortly thereafter.

The devil, however, is in the details. And in this tale the details differ from those
with which we are generally familiar. Most significantly, in this oral rendition: there is no
red tunic or hood; upon arriving at the cottage, the heroine eats, unknowingly, a bit of
the grandmother’s flesh and drinks a bit of her blood, prompting a small cat to say “A
slut is she who eats the flesh and drinks the blood of her granny;” and, notably, after burning all her clothing and getting into bed with the werewolf, the heroine realizes her mistake and is able to trick her would-be devourer and escape, unaided save by her own wit and cleverness.

These differences between the oral tales and Perrault’s literary tale which sprang from them are, in a certain sense, relatively minor. Seen from afar, the tale looks very much the same. But the stylistic changes, and, much more importantly, the ideological and psychological transformation effected by Perrault in his literary version are anything but minor. Zipes enumerates Perrault’s changes:

First, she is donned with a red hat, a chaperon, making her into a type of bourgeois girl tainted with sin since red, like the scarlet letter A, recalls the devil and heresy. Second, she is spoiled, negligent, and naive. Third, she speaks to a wolf in the woods—rather dumb on her part—and makes a type of contract with him: she accepts a wager, which, it is implied, she wants to lose. Fourth, she plays right into the wolf’s hands and is too stupid to trick him. Fifth, she is swallowed or raped like her grandmother. Sixth, there is no salvation, simply an ironic moral in verse that warns little girls to beware of strangers, otherwise they will deservedly suffer the consequences.67

Obviously, in contrast to the contes, he wrote in a simple, unadorned style intended to be reminiscent of the “ignorant” folk narrators of the oral versions of the tales from which Perrault drew (some of) his inspiration. Though he does get rid of the cannibalism and the racy language, what Zipes’ analysis makes clear is that Perrault’s tales, or at least this one, though I think it is a wider trend, contrast with those of the
contesues in much more than mere style. The ideological change that Perrault effects in his version of Little Red Riding Hood is quite shocking. Perrault makes the girl a symbol of Christian sin, and, moreover, he makes her a stupid, wanton little thing, who, ultimately, is responsible for her own violation, and too foolish to escape it.

Zipes argues that this is, if not the reason, then a very large part of the reason that Perrault’s version of Little Red Riding Hood — and indeed his other tales — caught on, while the tales of the contesues were forgotten. “Given the cultural control that males have exercised in society at large and in the cultural domain,” he writes, “it is not by chance that the meme of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ has taken hold and spread.” Leaving aside Zipes’ use of the much contested theory of memetics, this is a sentiment echoed by Harries in explaining the same phenomenon, the neglect of tales written by contesues and the almost unthinkable success of those by Perrault. Harries writes, “Bernard’s [a conteuse] pessimism and her critique of contemporary patriarchal marriage patterns would certainly not have endeared [her tale] to the Grimms or their successors.” The tales selected for replication and repetition, the tales told and retold so that they become canonical, are those which tend to support the ideology of the people who were selecting, replicating, and telling those tales. In a decidedly patriarchal society then, Perrault’s patriarchal tales, quite aside from any question of style, were much more attractive than those of the contesues.

And Perrault’s version is, by and large, the version of the fairy tale that persists to this day. The Grimms do little to change it, save to add the fortunate appearance of the
woodsman who is able to rescue both grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood from the belly of the wolf. In Zipes’ words, “Only a strong male figure can rescue a girl from herself and her lustful desires.” Elsewhere he writes: “Put crudely, one could say that the literary appropriation of the oral wonder tales served the hegemonic interests of males within the upper classes of particular communities and societies, and to a great extent this is true. However, such a crude statement must be qualified, for the writing down of the tales also preserved a great deal of the value system of those deprived of power.”

Certainly service of the “hegemonic interests of males” seems to be upheld in the fairy tales of Perrault, and, later, the Brothers Grimm. Their tales have acted in part to conserve and to stabilize the dominant ideology. That they preserved some of the value system of the lower classes is apparent as well; we see some of this even in the very early tale of One-Ox.

However, the tales served other purposes as well. They are not still so widely read and loved solely because they portray active princes and passive princesses. As I have attempted to note throughout, while there is a great deal of focus, especially from Zipes, on the sexist aspects of these tales, they remain a means for understanding the world, sources of hope for transformation, of ourselves and of our lives. Sleeping Beauty, for instance, need not only be a symbol of a passive princess in need of rescue; as Lüthi notes, we might find instead the notion that:

Every important turning point in development, every transition from one stage of life to another, is felt as a threat. At this age it is natural for the young man to
be self-conscious and the young woman retiring, for both sexes to become for a period either shy and withdrawn or caustic, defiant, and unfriendly. A hedge of thorns seems to grow around young people and to shield them from the world. But in the protection such seclusion affords, the youth matures and will awaken to a new, larger, and brighter life.\textsuperscript{72}

One hundred years of slumber, rather than a sign of passivity, might symbolize instead a reflective turn inwards, or the necessity of figurative death and resurrection, or a the maturation of the soul.

We should note, too, that tales of the \textit{conteuses} did not serve to further the interests of upper class males. Their interests were precisely the opposite, and so they filled their tales with all-powerful, intelligent, artistic, women, and used them to question a woman’s role in society. Still, these tales of the \textit{conteuses} have not, as we noted above, become part of our fairy tale canon, like Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Cinderella, and so on. In part, this is due to the influence in the twentieth century of Walt Disney; the majority of people are vastly more familiar with the tales that have become Disney movies than with any others. But it also reflects Harries’ point, cited above, that the tales’ complex style prevented their appropriation as folk artifacts for the construction of national identity, and that their failure to promote “good behavior” and “submissive female purity” rendered them problematic for a patriarchal society encouraging those values. Thus, with important qualifications, I would still accept Zipes’ point that many early literary fairy tales served a stabilizing, perpetuating function with regards to
dominant values — largely patriarchal — at the time of writing, and that this played a large role in their canonization.

As for the issue of Perrault’s tales being written only for children, Zipes maintains that for Perrault this is decidedly not the case, as “there was no children’s literature per se at that time” and “most writers of fairy tales were composing and reciting their tales for their peers in the literary salons.”\(^2\)\(^3\) However, by the mid-eighteenth century, with the notable publications of Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess or, Little Female Academy* in 1749 and *Le Magasin des enfants* by Mme. Leprince de Beaumont in 1757, fairy tales were being used to educate children, and, more specifically to educate young girls in how “proper moral and ethical behavior” — consisting, by and large, of domestication, industriousness, and support of men — “can bring about happiness for young ladies.”\(^4\)\(^7\)\(^4\) In fact, *Le magasin des enfants* contained Jeanne-Marie le Prince de Beaumont’s *La Belle et la Bête*, itself a significant reworking of Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve’s earlier version.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the forty-volume *Le Cabinet des fées* (1785–89), a collection of the most important fairy tales, put together by one Charles-Joseph Mayer, was published. And, of course, In 1812 and 1815, the first two volumes of the Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children’s and Household Tales)*, were published, containing “156 tales and copious notes in the appendixes and were not at all intended for children.”\(^5\)\(^7\)\(^5\) The second volume, however, and all successive volumes up to the fifth and final, published in 1857, were “consciously designed to address two audiences at the
same time, and [the Grimms] carefully cultivated the form of their tales so that they could be easily grasped by children and adults.76

It should be apparent, then, and indeed it is more and more a piece of common knowledge, that the Grimms did not publish their tales unadulterated: they added Christian sentiments, removed “erotic, cruel, or bawdy passages,” and aimed, in general, for what they considered a simple, “folk” style.77 The style of the tales is, according to Harries, one of “constructed simplicity” that serves to legitimate them as “traditional and authentic” stories.78 We might note too that the Brothers Grimm are cited as the authors of a book of fairy tales, and not simply the editors of one. Consider certain modifications to the tale of “Rapunzel” effected between the publication of the first edition in 1812 of the Grimms’ Kinder- und Hausmärchen and the publication of the seventh and final edition in 1857:

“Rapunzel” — 1812 Edition
At first Rapunzel was afraid, but soon she took such a liking to the young king that she made an agreement with him: he was to come every day and be pulled up. Thus they lived merrily and joyfully for a certain time, and the fairy did not discover anything until one day when Rapunzel began talking to her and said, “Tell me, Mother Gothel, why do you think my clothes have become too tight for me and no longer fit?”

“Rapunzel” — 1857 Edition
When he entered the tower, Rapunzel was at first terribly afraid, for she had never laid eyes on a man before. However, the prince began to talk to her in a friendly way and told her that her song had touched his heart so deeply that he had not been able to rest until he had seen her. Rapunzel then lost her fear, and
when he asked her whether she would have him for her husband, and she saw
that he was young and handsome, she thought, He'll certainly love me better
than old Mother Gothel. So she said yes and placed her hand in his.

“I want to go with you very much,” she said, “but I don’t know how I can
get down. Every time you come, you must bring a skein of silk with you, and I’ll
weave it into a ladder. When it’s finished, then I’ll climb down, and you can take
me away on your horse.”

They agreed that until then he would come to her every evening, for the old
woman came during the day. Meanwhile, the sorceress did not notice anything,
until one day Rapunzel blurted out, ‘Mother Gothel, how is it that you’re much
heavier than the prince? When I pull him up, he’s here in a second.”

The changes made are various, and reflect a number of different tendencies in the
Grimm brothers’ work, from their effort to appeal to a middle-class audience by excising
possibly offensive erotic elements (like the overt reference to Rapunzel’s pregnancy), to
their growing recognition that children would be hearing these tales (the first editions
included scholarly annotations, that later were published separately) and ought to be able
to take some clear, possibly Christian value away from the tales. In the Introduction to
his translation of the Grimms’ tales, Zipes writes that the Grimms achievement was “to
create an ideal type for the literary fairy tale, one that sought to be as close to the oral
tradition as possible, while incorporating stylistic, formal, and substantial thematic
changes to appeal to a growing middle-class audience.” There is a great deal here to
discuss, but I would like to highlight the fact that, stylistically, the Grimms “endowed
many of the tales with a ‘homey’ or Biedermeier flavor by the use of diminutives, quaint
expressions, and cute descriptions.” As mentioned above, in an odd way, the literariness
of the tales of the Brothers Grimm is an attempt to make the tales sound more oral and folksy than a simple transcription of a spoken tale.

We should note too that the relationship of the oral to the literary in the case of the fairy tale is further complicated by the fact that tellers of oral versions of tales could easily have read or heard literary versions of the tales they were telling, perhaps influencing renditions of the “original” oral tale. In the case of the Grimms’ informants Zipes writes: “most... were familiar with both oral tradition and literary tradition and would combine motifs from both sources.” Moreover, many of them were French Huguenots, familiar with the tales of Charles Perrault.

The history of the Grimms’ version of “Rapunzel,” discussed by Harries, provides a neat illustration of these confused relations. “Rapunzel,” Harries tells us, “comes from an eighteenth-century German version of the tale, published by Friedrich Schulz in his Kleine Romane in 1790; which was an adaptation of Charlotte Caumont de la Force’s story ‘Persinette,’ first printed in 1697; which probably was taken from Giambattista Basile’s collection of fairy tales, Lo cunto de li cunti or Pentamerone (published after his death in 1634–1636).” The Grimms, however, were apparently unaware of this rather lengthy history, and believed their tale to be oral in origin. Whether their informant believed the same thing is not clear, but it is certainly possible.

Whatever the Grimms’ sources, from about 1830 onward, after the Grimms began revising their tales with a mind for “two audiences,” the fairy tale was conceived of as more and more suitable for children. In 1835, Hans Christian Andersen published his
first tales, many based on folk tales, and many of which — most obviously “The Princess on the Pea” and “the Little Mermaid” — would become part of the classic fairy tale canon. Zipes maintains that, at the time Andersen was writing, “the sociocultural setting had become more propitious to receive the fairy tale, and Andersen opened it up for the proper grooming of Good Christian children.”

From here, the fairy tale proliferates, mostly, through 1850, in a variety of didactic forms intended for children “in keeping with the principles of the Protestant ethic... and male supremacy. The fairy tale was intended to play a major role in the socialization process.” But, as the genre of the literary fairy tale became more and more recognized a tendency to parody it and to experiment with it arose. Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, Oscar Wilde’s The Happy Prince and Other Tales, L. Frank Baum’s Wizard of Oz, considered by Zipes to be the great American fairy tale, and J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan are all a part of this movement. And indeed, they set the stage for even later fantastic literature, written by such authors as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.

In a certain sense, then, the magical realist authors of the end of the twentieth century are only the latest in a long line of inheritors and modifiers of the fairy tale. However, the magical realist project — if such a thing can be said to exist — and the particular stylistic and thematic aspects of works in the genre put it in a very unique relation to the fairy tale. In the interest of later exploring this relation, we will next explore the defining characteristics of magical realism.
3: MAGICAL REALISM DESCRIBED

The term “magic realism” (Magischer Realismus) was first used by German art

critic Franz Roh in 1925 to give a name to a new development in the world of painting.\(^1\)

In contrast to the relative abstraction and subjectivity of the Expressionist movement —
a style that showed “an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote

objects”\(^2\) — which preceded it, Roh maintained that this new style of painting marked a

return to the sobriety and restraint of Realism, but with an important development. In

this new style of painting, Roh argued, the “fantastic dreamscape” of Expressionism is
gone, and the “real world re-emerges before our eyes, bathed in the clarity of a new day.

We recognize this world, although now — not only because we have emerged from a
dream — we look on it with new eyes.”\(^3\) This new style represents objects realistically,

but combines them in strange ways which make them seem fresh and new, evincing a

“calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their

own faces.”\(^4\) Hence, Magic Realism. In Roh’s own words, “with the word ‘magic,’ as
opposed to ‘mystic,’ I wish to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it.”

His work was translated into Spanish the next year, and though in the world of painting Roh’s *Magischer Realismus* would largely be eclipsed by the term *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity, in Latin America the term was seized on by literary critics, and it is in this realm of literary-criticism that it has become most important. Precisely how applicable Roh’s descriptions of the characteristics of Magic Realism, which refer to pictorial arts, are to the literary world is, as Irene Guenther has demonstrated, a matter of some debate. Ultimately, however, it is perhaps of little importance, with the appropriation of Roh’s pictorial term by literary critics “facilitated by the pliant meanings of both ‘magic’ and ‘realism’ and the ambivalence with which Roh first presented Magic Realism.”

Given these already confused beginnings and the “pliant meanings” of the words “magic” and “realism,” it is no wonder that the issue of defining what exactly magical realism refers to is such a complicated one. Other early essays on the subject only tangle things further. In an expanded version of the preface to his novel *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*, 1949) published in 1967, the Swiss-born, Cuban-raised, Alejo Carpentier coined the term *lo real maravilloso americano*, the marvellous American real, to denote a uniquely American — specifically, Latin American — aesthetic, natural and historical experience. In contrast to stale, constructed, cerebral European Surrealism, that “literary ruse” of the marvelous “manufactured by tricks of prestidigitation, by
juxtaposing objects unlikely ever to be found together,”⁹ Carpentier found in Latin America a realm where “the marvelous real that I defend and that is our own marvelous real is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent, in all that is Latin American. Here the strange is commonplace, and always was commonplace.”¹⁰

Carpentier locates the marvelous in reality, in history and even in nature, but insists that this is a uniquely Latin American phenomenon. Hence, lo real maravilloso americano and hence the evolution of a certain literary style harnessing this in Latin America. Amaryll Chanady takes issue, however, with this “virulent territorialization of the imaginary,” taking pains to point out the complex interrelation of the magical realist mode in post-colonial Latin America with its metropolitan colonizers.¹¹ She writes that the development of the literary modes associated with magical realism “cannot be attributed by a naive essentialist argument to the supposed marvelous reality of the continent or ascribed to the unidirectional flow of metropolitan influence.” Rather, she maintains, the development of these modes is:

… conditioned by various factors, such as a critical stance with respect to canonical rational and especially positivistic paradigms in the context of neocolonial resistance, the tradition of the artist’s vindication of the imagination and subversion of hegemonic models, the French Surrealists’ indictment of restrictive empirical knowledge and valorization of non-European mentalities, the appropriation of the indigenous Other as a marker of difference, and the general delegitimation of values and conceptual frameworks of the past few decades.¹²
Chanady brings out here a number of related tendencies within magical realist texts. By and large, we see a valorization of non-Western systems of thought and belief — perhaps those of the “indigenous” — carrying with it an inherent critique of the claims to universality made by Western empiricism, rationality and positivism. Magical realism, it seems, is written by the colonized — or, perhaps more accurately, by the marginalized — against the dominant Western ideology and typically Western modes of thought.

Jorge Luis Borges presents a particularly interesting case with regards to the development of magical realism and the question of whether or not it ought to be tied specifically to Latin America. Borges, for his part, while he lived and wrote for much of his life in Argentina, was educated in Geneva, where he arrived in 1914 at the age of 15, just before the beginning of the First World War. He did not return to Argentina until 1921, and in an interview conducted in 1986 said, “In a certain manner, I am Swiss.” Thus, he is uniquely positioned to, at once, understand the so-called “marvelous reality” and to feel the influence of the European metropole on literature.

Angel Flores, in an essay written in 1954, argued for Borges as “pathfinder and moving spirit” for the group of stylists whose literature marked the beginnings of magical realism. He also noted what he saw as the profound influence of Kafka on Borges’ writing, again speaking to Borges’ liminal position as European and Latin American. Indeed, Flores argued for the widespread influence of Europeans on what he considered
the earliest magical realists, who flowered between 1940 and 1950, citing the influence not only of Kafka but of Camus on their work.

However, Luis Leal, writing in 1967, took great issue with what he saw as Flores’ inaccurate characterization of magical realism and portrayal of its beginnings. Leal argued that magical realism did not derive from Kafka, and, furthermore, that Borges was not a magical realist at all, because in his work “the principal trait is the creation of infinite hierarchies,” whereas the principal thing in magical realism “is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances.”\(^{14}\) Twenty years later, however, in 1988, after the mode was well established, Scott Simpkins would use many of Borges’ as examples of magical realism in order to effect a critique of the mode.\(^{15}\)

Whether or not Borges was a magical realist, and, indeed, whether or not he falls on the side of the “metropolitan colonizers,” is unclear — though certainly no one outright denounces Borges as a “colonizer,” even when claiming he is not a magical realist. What does become clear through all this contradictory debate, however, is precisely the aptness of Chanady’s observation that neither the influence of Surrealism and the literature of Europe, nor the unique concerns of Latin American writers can wholly account for the appearance of magical realism in Latin America. That being said, it \textit{does} appear in Latin America and it does seem to manifest a particular interest in writing against typically Western empirical modes of thought.
Theo D’Haen argues for the vitality of this attitude to magical realism, writing, “It is precisely the notion of the ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place ‘other’ than ‘the’ or ‘a’ center, that seems to me an essential feature of that strain of postmodernism we call magic realism.” His conception is more general than Chanady’s, however, because he is not dealing specifically with Latin American magical realism, having rejected Carpentier’s (among others) “territorialization of the imaginary,” as elucidated by Chanady. This is an important point. D’Haen’s idea of ex-centricity, of writing from “the margin” against “a center,” allows for the possibility that the magical realist mode could be employed in a variety of ways, not merely for postcolonial discourse against Western colonizers and their imposed modes of thought and systems of belief. As D’Haen explains the possibilities:

It is a way of access to the main body of ‘Western’ literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of views of the hegemonic forces together with their discourse. Alternatively, it is a means for writers coming from the privileged centers of literature to dissociate themselves from their own discourses of power, and to speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged (with the risk of being judged ‘patronizing’ by those on whose behalf such writers seek to speak).17

Thus, magic realism is a mode or a form that lends itself to the writing of the marginalized and the underprivileged of any sort, allowing them to resist the powerful, repressive forces that keep them at the margins. Simultaneously, it might provide a
means for writers at the “center” to undermine and subvert the systems that keep others excluded. Of course, as D’Haen notes, this latter is a much riskier proposition: championing the rights of the underprivileged is all well and good, but it certainly invites cries of hypocrisy and patronization.

In an introductory essay to the Companion to Magical Realism, Wen-Chin Ouyang argues for a similar expansiveness of application. She maintains that, indeed, “Resistance to, subversion and reconfiguration of what may be termed ‘modern Western epistemology’, whether in the form of empiricism or empire, are uncovered, discussed and packaged as magical realism.” However, “these broad theoretical principles, under close scrutiny, are at risk of becoming a straitjacket, especially for non-Spanish American texts, essentially obscuring other equally important theoretical principles.”18 We should be wary, then, of excluding other texts by focusing too closely on the relations of magical realism solely to postcolonial literature.

This leaves us with the question then, of what other theoretical principles we ought to consider when discussing magical realism. We still have not uncovered what characteristics define magical realism as a literary mode. It makes itself useful to the marginalized, but certainly not any text written, as one might say, “against the center,” is necessarily magical realist. This may be a central strand as identified by numerous critics — Chanady, D’Haen, and Ouyang among them — but, the question remains: stylistically, thematically, structurally, what defines magical realism?
It is not such a simple question to answer. Wendy B. Faris, in the introduction to her critical work *Ordinary Enchantments*, gives us the following:

Very briefly defined, magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them. Furthermore, that combination of realistic and fantastical narrative, together with the inclusion of different cultural traditions, means that magical realism reflects, in both its narrative mode and its cultural environment, the hybrid nature of much postcolonial society.¹⁹

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* has this to say:

A kind of modern fiction in which fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains the ‘reliable’ tone of objective realistic report… The term has also been extended to works from very different cultures, designating a tendency of the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folktale and myth while retaining a strong contemporary social relevance.²⁰

And Angela Carter, who discussed the mode in the third act of her novel *Nights at the Circus* (1982), writes:

… it dissolved the slender margin the Shaman apprehended between real and unreal, although the Shaman himself would not have put it that way since he noticed only the margin, shallow as a step, between one level of reality and another. He made no categorical distinction between seeing and believing. It could be said that, for all the peoples of this region, there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magic realism.²¹
Many more definitions might be proffered, but the general idea, perhaps the most basic characteristic of the mode, is apparent in these three. Luis Leal called magical realism “an attitude toward reality,” and while this is not precisely the attitude that he went on to define, nevertheless, I think his choice of words is apt. It is an attitude toward reality. Namely, the attitude that wondrous, fabulous, magical events — miracles — are part and parcel of everyday, realistic life. The fantastical and the realistic do not exist on separate ontological levels, or in different realms; they coexist, and they are treated in that manner by the narrators of magical realist works, and typically by the characters themselves (one of whom might of course, be, and indeed often is, the narrator). In magical realist texts, “the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence — admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism. Magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing.”

In contrast to the realist text, the magical realist text “rejects a rational explanation of events as the product of the protagonist’s imagination in what would then be a patently oneric or hallucinatory account.” It rejects too “the treatment of the supernatural in the canonical fantastic, in which the apparently inexplicable events produce disbelief and fear in the observer/narrator.” Hence, of course, magical realism. It is the magical treated realistically, the fantastic and the rational standing side by side,
not in an antinomian (to use a term popular in magical realist criticism) relationship, but in a resolved one.

Consider the quotation from Angela Carter concerning the shaman. No background is really needed to understand it, at least not insofar as it helps us to understand magical realism. For this Shaman, there is “no difference between fact and fiction,” because, for him, fiction is fact. Seeing is believing, quite literally, even though what the Shaman sees more often than not are dreamlike visions brought on by, believe it or not, hallucinogenic drugs and fermented urine. His fantastic hallucinations are every bit as real to him as the taiga that is his habitat, as his hut, and his bear familiar that he will later sacrifice, and his own hands and feet. They are not supernatural, they are perfectly natural — this is the perspective of magical realism. The marvelous exists on the same ontological level as the real.

This should, I think, go some way towards explaining precisely how magical realism is able to undermine or work against Western empiricism and rationalism. Realism, in its claim to represent an objective reality necessarily makes further claims to universality of representation, just as empiricism and rationalism do. However, inherent in the magical realist text is the idea that realism and its associated epistemology are not capable of representing the world as it is. Gabriel Gárcia Márquez said in an interview that realism is “a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality.” And he goes on, “disproportion is part of our reality too. Our reality is itself out of all proportion,” a fact with which realism as a literary mode is not equipped
to cope.\textsuperscript{24} Realism, Marquez implies, cannot encompass the phantasmagorical, disproportionate political and cultural displacements and events of the postmodern world. Thus, as Scott Simpkins points out, the magical realist text, which can handle these realities through the marvelous, paradoxically seems to become more realistic than the realistic text.\textsuperscript{25}

To clarify this effect of undermining Western rationalism, we might make recourse once again to Todorov’s conception of the Fantastic. Recall that the Fantastic, as Todorov defines it, lies only in the hesitation of a reader who is forced to decide whether the rational laws of our universe as they are commonly conceived of can explain the phenomena in the text. If rational laws can explain the happenings in the text, we are in the uncanny; if they cannot, then we are in the genre of the marvelous. At least from the perspective of Western rationalist and empirical laws, magical realism is clearly of the marvelous. Magical realist texts naturally are just that, magical, or marvelous. The hard-and-fast laws of the world do not permit all the phenomena in magical realist texts.

To an extent, however, magical realism also breaks free from Todorov’s system, in that the magical realist text is grounded in an objectively realistic, almost always historically situated, world. As Ouyang puts it, the differences between “the fantastic” (used here in the sense of fantasy literature, à la Tolkien, which would fall into Todorov’s category of the marvelous) and magic realism are in some regards quite minor, and no clear line need necessarily exist between them. However, she maintains that they certainly differ in the “location of the fantastic,” as “in magical realism it is grafted on reality and
in fantasy on a never-land.”26 This is not an undreamed-of complication for Todorov, certainly, but more than any other texts he considers, magical realism fails to privilege either realism or the supernatural. (This largely explains certain critics’ use of the term magic realism as opposed to magical realism — the use of two nouns implies that neither is subordinated, and neither is privileged). The typical magical realist text’s pronounced attachment to a recognizable historical and cultural reality strongly resists the epistemological basis that allows Todorov to construct his categories of the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvelous. Thus, the texts seem to break and escape from Todorov’s system.

Theo D’Haen writes that magical realism works by:

appropriating the techniques of the ‘centr’-al line and then using these, not as in the case of these central movements, ‘realistically,’ that is, to duplicate existing reality as perceived by the theoretical or philosophical tenets underlying said movements, but rather to create an alternative world correcting so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this ‘reality’ depends upon.27

The point is that magical realism is corrective, it exists to fix the erroneous “theoretical or philosophical” views of the West. D’Haen does not posit the mode as merely literary, but encourages us to see it as wanting to effect change in actual, epistemological considerations. Precisely how effective magical realism is in this regard, to what extent it serves to break Todorov’s categories, is a matter of some debate — but nonetheless, D’Haen maintains, this is certainly its goal.
Let us return now to the pursuit of the defining characteristics of magical realism. Wendy Faris’ definition, that “magical realism combines the real and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between the two,” nicely recalls Franz Roh’s formulation that “the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it.” The mystery is behind the represented world, not above it, on some separate plane — and magical realism draws it out, or allows it to grow organically within the represented world. We might do well to strike from our minds Roh’s term “hides,” however, since, more often than not, the marvelous goings on in magical realist texts are anything but hidden. Wendy Faris even goes so far as to write that, because the magical elements of the text surprise readers, they “say, in almost existential fashion, ‘I EKsist,’ ‘I stick out’.”

In the introduction to her book-length critical work on magical realism, Ordinary Enchantments, Wendy Faris also enumerates five key characteristics of the mode:

First, the text contains an ‘irreducible element’ of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity.

The first element is the most familiar, and perhaps the most defining. It is the element discussed above. As Faris remarks, the so-called irreducible element of magic is “something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been
formulated in Western empirically based discourse, that is, according to ‘logic, familiar knowledge, or received belief,’ as David Young and Keith Hollaman describe it.\textsuperscript{30} We need not dwell on the significance and effect of this aspect of magical realism, since we have already dealt with it in some depth. We should note, however, two further effects that Faris describes as deriving from this “irreducible element.” First, a disruption of the logic of cause and effect is common, as the magical is not beholden to these laws. Faris provides an example from D.M. Thomas’ \textit{The White Hotel}, wherein a woman Lisa begins experiencing the pains from an event before the event has actually transpired. Second, as a result of these prior effects, “the real as we know it may seem amazing or ridiculous.”\textsuperscript{31} And as the supernatural seems normal, the natural and historical can come to seem quite bizarre and ridiculous. Faris cites Gogol’s “The Nose,” where the bureaucratic red tape that he goes through to report the loss of his nose comes to seem even more absurd than the loss of the nose itself.\textsuperscript{32}

Let us move on now to Faris’ second aspect of magical realism, the strong presence of the phenomenal world. This is what she calls “the realism in magical realism.”\textsuperscript{33} As noted above, great attention is paid not merely to the magical events, but also to realistic events and detailed description. This second aspect also encompasses magical realism’s penchant for historical or geographical determinacy. Angela Carter’s \textit{Nights at the Circus}, for instance, is set quite emphatically at the “smoldering butt end” of the nineteenth century, on the cusp of “the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground.” By situating the novel historically, remarking upon that historical
situation, and recalling the (ongoing) historical struggle of feminism, the very real nature of the narrative, regardless of its magic, is emphasized. The intense import (and this may be an understatement) of the postcolonial struggle of India in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is another example of this phenomenon. Faris puts it quite well: “history is the weight that tethers the balloon of magic” in magical realism.\textsuperscript{34}

Now we turn to the characteristic of “unsettling doubts” experienced by readers in attempting to understand two conflicting versions of events. This is one of the more complicated aspects of Faris’ list, because, as she readily admits, magical realism permits a great deal of variation in this regard. Effectively, we are talking about Todorov’s fantastic: the inability of the reader to decide whether there is a rational explanation for events, or whether we must make recourse to the marvelous. Typically, “the contemporary Western reader’s primary doubt is most often between understanding an event as a character’s dream or hallucination, and, alternatively, understanding it as a miracle.”\textsuperscript{35} Faris maintains that readers in some cultures, however, will hesitate less than others, as “belief systems” and “narrative traditions” differ amongst cultures. What causes hesitation according to one system of beliefs engenders none according to another. I have argued above that magical realism is distinctly a part of the marvelous, until it breaks free from Todorov’s categories in its bursting of the Western laws of reality and rationality upon which those categories are based, and Faris’ remark about different belief systems lends credence to that view. The Western reader is forced to adopt the epistemological
viewpoint of another culture — or, if that view does not correspond to any one culture, it is still not that of “the West.”

To return, however, to this notion of unsettling doubts and Todorov’s fantastic in magical realism, Faris ultimately comes down on the side of the marvelous. The reader may experience doubts, and the author may even quite deliberately invite these doubts, but ultimately the marvelous wins out. Consider, for example, the structure of Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*. The reporter Walser, a man with eyes “the cool grey of skepticism,”36 is writing a column on “The Great Humbugs of the World,” and is, for this particular issue, attempting to discover whether the famous *aerialiste* Fevvers does, in fact, have wings. Naturally, the Western reader identifies with Walser’s skepticism: women do not, by and large, have wings. Carter encourages this skepticism by giving us access only to Walser’s thoughts, and not those of the women to whom he is speaking. It is not until the end of the novel that we are forced to conclude that not only are Fevvers’ wings real, but a number of her other outrageous stories — such as being hatched from an egg, like Helen of Troy — are also true. And, indeed, a number of other fantastic events have verifiably occurred. Thus, as this example demonstrates, while hesitation may be invited and even encouraged, magical realist texts do come down on the side of the marvelous.

We should point out, too, that hesitation is not *always* invited, nor even necessary. Faris writes: “in many instances, however, the magic in magical realism is clear and we barely hesitate, the narrator’s acceptance of the magic modeling our own.” There
remains one final complication in this question of readerly doubt, and that is what Faris calls the temptation to view the magical element as mere allegory. She cites the example of the levitation of people in “a charmed circle of ideological bliss” in Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, where this levitation reflects the “unbearable lightness” that totalitarian ideologies will tend to engender.” She warns, however, against such an interpretation, arguing that “the weight of the nonallegorical thrust of realistic narrative” discourages us from a reduction to mere allegory — the literal and the allegorical perspective must, at least, be adopted side by side.37

Next up: the “merging of realms.” Some of this should be apparent already. We have seen a merging of historical realms, as *Nights at the Circus* is set on what is repeatedly called the “cusp” or “hinge” of the new (twentieth) century. The titular children of *Midnight’s Children* are born on the eve of India’s independence. This also encourages a confrontation between “ancient or traditional—sometimes indigenous—and modern worlds.” For instance, in both Carter’s *Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffmann* and *Nights at the Circus* — as we saw with the Shaman — there is a section where the protagonist finds himself living among an indigenous group, and dealing with the complications of the confrontation between this indigenous world and the modern. Furthermore, as Faris points out, there is an ontological merging of the “magical and the material,” and a generic merging of “realism and the fantastic.” This recalls D’Haen’s notion of magical realism as ex-centric writing: in order to influence the discourse of the
center, magical realism must exist on the boundary between that center and the “outside,” the “ex-center.” This is what is often called magical realism’s liminal nature.

We come now to Faris’ fifth and final characteristic of magical realism: disturbing “received ideas about time, space and identity.” Faris cites the years-long rain in García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude and the plague of insomnia it causes. Consider also that Big Ben — not just any old clock — strikes midnight three times in one evening in the opening section of Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus, causing our skeptical Walser to be, for the first time, “seriously discomposed.” For the entirety of the novel, too, the question inscribed on her advertisements hangs over Fevvers herself: “Is she fact or is she fiction?” Her identity is unclear to us — is she a humbug, as Walser is out to prove, or is she really a marvel? To what extent, too, we are forced to ask, can we trust her autobiographical narrative related in the first section that establishes for the reader who she is and where she comes from? Can we trust the facts as she relates them — and, what’s more, can we trust the performative way in which she relates them? There are a number of other events that might be cited as well, but this will do for now.

We have before us now an idea of what characteristics might serve to define a magical realist text. Historical grounding, and a presence of the “real” world, the unique relation of the mundane and the marvelous, the realistic and the magical, the liminality of the magical realist text, its existence on boundaries and borderlands, its tendency to merge worlds, and engender unsettling doubts. We are also aware of its tendency to question Western modes of thought, to adapt itself for the use of writing concerned with
the plight of the marginalized and underprivileged, in whatever sense those terms might be taken. Initially understood as a uniquely Latin American term, the label has spread since then — Faris posits India with Salman Rushdie, Germany with Günter Grass (for her, a forerunner), and South America, specifically Colombia, with García Márquez as the three (initial) points of the magical realist triangle — and now is often applied willy-nilly to all sorts of literature. The Harry Potter books, for instance, have been called magical realist.40

I make these comments by way of warning. The mode of “magical realism” is fraught with variations and gradations, and it has been ill-used. Furthermore, in treating the term generally, as I have done, there is the risk, as Wendy Faris acknowledges, of losing sight of its particularities. By and large magical realism may be said to work in a certain way, to lend itself to certain agendas, and so forth, but of course there are nuances, particularly when discussing texts present “in societies at all stages of development—in both ‘First’ and ‘Third’ Worlds.” I do not know that there is anything to be done about this. The particular risk for “magical realism” is that, as a mode (often) utilized in favor of the “marginalized” or “ex-centric,” a mode (frequently) of exploring difference and opposing more-or-less monolithic Western notions, sweeping it into one vast category is almost a colonial, oppressive tactic all its own.41 I suppose I follow Faris in her remark that the best solution to this problem is merely “to keep it constantly in mind.”42 So, we should endeavor to do so, while recognizing that valid critical comments can still be made about general trends.
At this point, some of the relations between magical realism and the fairy tale as I have described them should be, I think, apparent. In the next section we will make these relations explicit, in an attempt to demonstrate just how closely tied together these two modes can be, and, indeed, the significant ways in which they differ. All this should go some way towards elucidating the possibilities magical realism has for returning to the fairy tale some of its relevance and significance.
4: FAIRY TALES & MAGICAL REALISM COMPARED

Magical realism draws on “elements of ‘local’ myths and religions,” on indigenous cultures and beliefs, to aid in its search for magic and wonder. Each of these might present an interesting subject for analysis. However, the fairy tale is our concern, and I think it a particularly interesting case for a number of reasons. First, the fairy tale and the magical realist text bear great similarities in the relations of the mundane to the fantastic, or marvelous. Furthermore, our canonical fairy tales as conservative narratives, despite caveats about their former emancipatory function and the wisdom they contain, are a particularly interesting choice of intertextual referent for works in a genre that is so very far from conservative in its usual narrative and ideological goals. Bound up in this is the notion of the fairy tale as a more-or-less “epic” form, and ways in which this might restrict the fairy tale’s ability to serve a non-conservative, even revolutionary goal. And, finally, there is the intriguing relation and treatment of orality in both the canonical fairy tale and in the writings of many magical realists, which ties in to many of the themes
above. We will treat our topics in approximately this order, though the points of contact between them are many and various.

Let us begin with what I called a moment ago, the relation of the “mundane to the fantastic.” We have mentioned that the genuine fairy tale is, in Todorov’s classification, wholly marvelous. Zipes tells us that in the fairy tale “we are to marvel about the workings of the universe where anything can happen at any time,” and Lüthi writes that in the fairy tale the miracle is “a matter of course… The wild beast in the forest may frighten the fairy-tale hero, but as soon as it begins to speak, the anxiety vanishes. And even though in a few such cases the fairy-tale hero says, ‘What? You can speak?’, this is no longer genuine fairy tale style.” If we recall then, our previous discussion of the classification of magical realist texts by Todorov’s categories, the contacts between this aspect of the fairy tale and magical realism should be apparent. Magical realism is, as best it can be classified by Todorov, marvelous.

In both the fairy tale and in magical realism, the magic is ordinary, it is part and parcel of everyday life. It is true that in magical realism, we as readers, and the characters themselves — as in Walser’s case, interviewing the winged Fevvers — sometimes experience “unsettling doubts,” as described by Faris, with regards to the nature of the miraculous events. Ultimately, however, those events always defy rational explanation, and so become marvelous. Our doubts do ensure that magical realism cannot be called an example of the pure marvelous, like the fairy tale, but this is a relatively minor difference. The fairy tale in less strictly regarded terms permits similar doubts about the
marvelous. Not, perhaps, in the case of Lüthi’s folk fairy tale, nor the tales of the Grimms and Perrault which are relatively close to it, but certainly, for instance, in the literary fairy tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann.

A much more significant difference between the forms is that remarked upon by Ouyang, mentioned in the previous section. Specifically, that in the fairy tale, fantastic events are “grafted onto a never-land,” while in magical realism they are grafted onto a realistic, grounded world. The fairy tale’s atemporality, and what might be called its denial of locality stand in marked opposition to the specific historical, political, and cultural involvement of the magical realist text. We are inclined to view the fairy tale as timeless, while magical realist texts are anything but timeless (at least in this sense), foregrounding as they do contemporaneous political and cultural conflicts. This is related as well to Faris’ description of the strong presence of the phenomenal world in magical realism. By contrast, the phenomenal world is generally present in the fairy tale only as it is necessary, and when it is presented it exists only as a sketch (if not less than that). As Lüthi remarks, “there is nowhere a detailed description.” The monsters and characters are not described, neither the environments. Everything loses its “distinctive character… and stands before us in abstract stylization, so to speak.”

Chanady sums it up thus: “Magical realism does not occupy a distinct area of literary production separate from that of mimetic writing, as does the marvelous domain of fairy tales, where the laws of logic and verisimilitude are constantly infringed without affecting our ‘normal’ perception of reality, in a temporary suspension of disbelief.” The
fairy tale has no pretensions of mimetic, realistic representation, and so the reader simply
takes the marvelous as it comes, suspending disbelief. Magical realism, on the other
hand, does not permit such a suspension, because of the realistic elements in the text. As
Angel Flores writes: “The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent
‘literature’ from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in
fairy tales, to supernatural realms.” Although Flores makes some questionable stylistic
arguments, this point, that magical realist writers “cling to reality” to prevent their works
from “flying off” as fairy tales do “to supernatural realms,” is well taken.6

The literary fairy tales of Hoffmann again provide an interesting wrinkle, however. For instance, his story “The Golden Pot” is set in Dresden, apparently in the
era in which Hoffmann composed it, the early-to-mid nineteenth century. Its full title is
“The Golden Pot: A Modern Fairy Tale,” yet it is neither atemporal nor does it lack a
definite locality. Though the specific location of Dresden affects the tale little, if at all, it
is nevertheless consciously set in that city. The realistic and the marvelous coexist, and
the marvelous is even accepted with little remark by certain of the more romantic
characters. However, it fails to make the same ontological claims that magical realism
does, as the marvelous derives from a distinctly separate realm from that of reality,
namely the Kingdom of Atlantis. The two frequently overlap, as the goings on in Atlantis
have long since spilled over into the real world locale of Dresden, but nevertheless, the
marvelous has, we might say, a “home” — and it is not the real world. We might note as
well that the realistic ultimately comes to play second-fiddle to a panoply of magical
events. However, Hoffmann was writing before realism as a literary movement — realism of the sort which would be “supplemented” or co-opted by magical realism — had really come into being, complicating any judgement about the weight of “realism” versus “magic” in Hoffmann’s tales.

And, indeed, I do not think we should be too rigid in our judgment. Zamora and Faris point out that critical studies of the history of magical realism “may suggest that magical realism is less a trend than a tradition, an evolving mode or genre that has had its waxings and wanings over the centuries and is now experiencing one more period of ascendancy.” Perhaps Hoffmann’s stories, then, mark a period of magical realism’s waxing. In this light, Chanady’s criticisms that ”Fairy tales cannot be considered magical realist because they adhere to relatively uniform plot structures, as Vladimir Propp demonstrated in 1928, an inevitable moral resolution of the Manichean conflict of the characters, and a classifiable number of motifs that have been cataloged by folklorists since the beginning of the century,” and that “The rigid fairy-tale form effectively restricts the imaginary to well-defined models, even more than the strictures of realism” seem like too simplistic a view. She mentions Coleridge’s distinction between fancy and imagination, where fancy is simply the manipulation of fixed, definite things and imagination is a more creative faculty, to explain the difference between the fairy tale and magical realism. The fairy tale is aligned with fancy, while magical realism is aligned with the imaginary. 9 Taking into consideration Zipes’ previously mentioned critique of the fullness of Propp’s methodology, and the numerous forms which things that might
rightly be called fairy tales might take — not only Hoffmann’s stories, but also the complex, self-referential tales of the *conteuses* as discussed by Harries, modern re-imaginings and re-tellings of tales, as in, to name only one well-known source, Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, and so on — it is perhaps too reductive to say that the “rigid fairy-tale form” permits no inventiveness and restricts the imaginary to “well-defined models.”

If we wished to be quite bold, we might even extend the definition of fairy tale so far as virtually to encompass magical realism, making that mode simply the latest trend in the evolution of the fairy tale. Harries’ interest in rehabilitating and revitalizing the tales of the *conteuses*, for instance, necessitates an argument in *Twice Upon a Time* for a broadening of the definition of fairy tale, making it more encompassing. She remarks that were the term “postmodern” not tied specifically to (more or less) the last thirty to forty years, the tales of the *conteuses* might rightly be called “postmodern.” Barring the actual appellation “postmodern,” she claims those tales might at least serve as anticipations of “postmodern” writing. Either way, this admission encourages a broadening of the definition of fairy tale that would allow it to come into greater contact with magical realism.¹⁰ Still, Harries’ argument, while convincing in its case for certain fairy tales anticipating postmodern concerns, does not go so far as to oblige us to posit magical realism as a modern evolution of the fairy tale. Such a broadening of the definition, would, I think, be too bold. But there is at least an argument to be made,
implying that magical realism and the fairy tale, if we are to allow some flexibility in their conception, are in fact quite closely related.

However, if we restrict ourselves to considering only the canonical fairy tales of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, Andersen, etc., the tales that, for better or worse, we tend to think of when the topic of “fairy tale” is broached, we can engage in a more specific and useful analysis of the relations of magical realism to the fairy tale. I think the place of these canonical tales as “common currency” lends some justification to this restriction: the canonical tales are more likely to serve as intertextual references in writing, magical realist or otherwise, because they are the tales that come to the minds of virtually all Westerners (and likely non-Westerners as well), writers included. These tales are virtually united in their relative simplicity of style, lack of intertextual referentiality (with the notable exception of the oral or literary antecedents of that tale), atemporality, denial of locality, and their adherence to most of what Chanady cites above as the reasons for differentiating fairy tales from magical realism.

Lüthi maintains that the atemporality and the denial of locality found in the fairy tale are a large part of its unique identity, serving to differentiate it from the local legend and the saint’s legend. The latter is too often temporally linked, as for instance, when seven saintly brothers sleep for 372 years — a distinctly un-fairy tale like number — and, during their slumber, the external world advances and changes greatly. Compare this to Sleeping Beauty/Briar Rose’s peaceful 100 year slumber, from which she awakens as though nothing at all has changed — and indeed, nothing really has, save perhaps
symbolically in her — and the difference is obvious. For its part, the former, the local legend, is obviously too distinctly geographical, too tied to specific, local landmarks and places to assume a fairy tale-like atmosphere.¹¹

Quite aside from its “location” (or denial of location), we should also consider the particular role or function of the marvelous in both the fairy tale and magical realism. In general, as mentioned in our discussion of the fairy tale, Zipes maintains — and Lüthi’s symbolic analysis of the fairy tales bears this contention out — that the audience of an oral tale was intended to feel wonder, hope for change, and admiration for the characters’ ability to adapt and survive in difficult and varied circumstances. These aspects are to an extent timeless, and persist independent of the specific social circumstances in which the tale was told. However, Zipes argues too that wonder in the wonder tale also served as a means to comment upon developments in a community or culture. But, since we cannot determine the exact relationship of any given tale-teller to these developments, the ideological and social function of a particular rendition of an oral tale cannot be determined, nor can the specific, historically localized reasons for the use of wonder in the tale. Tales might have been conservative, revolutionary, emancipatory, they might have endorsed or rejected cultural or societal changes — we simply cannot know, in all too many instances. Therefore, in general, if we accept Zipes’ argument about the importance of specific historical analysis for understanding a tale, we can say only what we did earlier: fairy tales induce wonder and admiration and hope for
change, serving as a means to comment on communal and societal developments. These
general functions, I would note, are not at all insignificant.

The case for the literary fairy tale is rather different. Written by a single author in
an identifiable time period, the literary fairy tale is as much a candidate for analysis as
any other literary text. It is true that the vital relation of a literary fairy tale to the oral
variants of tales from which it draws must be taken into consideration when conducting
any analysis, but the possible vagaries of this task still do not in any way disqualify the
analysis. Thus, in the case of the literary fairy tale, we can examine the specific
ideological intention of an author, or the function of the marvelous or wonder within the
stories. And, as was mentioned earlier with regards to Charles Perrault’s and the Grimm
Brothers’ versions of Little Red Riding Hood, the tales, almost to the very last, reinforce
a dominant, patriarchal ideology. In the case of Little Red Riding Hood, Zipes argues
that the message that Perrault has encoded in his tale is that women are responsible for
their own rape. Whether consciously done or otherwise (though I do not think we
should underestimate Perrault’s understanding of his own writing) this message was so
well received, spoke so well to those who controlled literary production and
dissemination at the time of the tale’s writing in the late seventeenth century — in part
because of the message itself, in part because of Perrault’s considerable abilities as a
storyteller — that the tale became part of our received fairy tale canon. With the addition
of, among other things, the huntsman who happens along and conveniently saves
helpless Red Riding Hood and her grandmother, the Grimms, in their version of Red Riding Hood, only added to this androcentric, patriarchal undertone.

Whatever the sociocultural relevance and effect of specific oral tales might have been, then, it is clear that a great many canonical literary fairy tales have served a socially conservative purpose. They have bolstered a dominant patriarchal ideology and have continued to disseminate that ideology to this day. The effect is (one would hope) somewhat less dramatic now, since the problematic aspects of many fairy tales — such as, for instance, the passive, domestic female characters and the ever active, dynamic male heroes — have received more attention, but it is still present. Alternatives exist now in the form of collections of tales featuring clever, active heroines; re-imagined fairy tales often featuring the same sorts of heroines; subversive fairy tales; re-told fairy tales, and so on. Historically, however, the conservative, usually patriarchal leanings of the canonical literary fairy tales, comprised mostly of stories by Perrault and the Grimms, remain apparent.

By contrast, I have pointed out that magical realist texts are anything but conservative. They revolt against dominant Western ideology and epistemology by their very nature, and they are written against the “center,” from the margins of society. If the canonical literary fairy tales serve to uphold the social and cultural order, magical realist texts are devoted, if not to overthrowing it, at least to forcing a reexamination of it.

In this regard, then, it is interesting that magical realist texts should draw on the fairy tale at all: for a long period of time the fairy tale has served a function precisely the
opposite of the ostensible function of those texts. Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, for instance, endured considerable criticism from feminists because, whatever her purposes — for what it’s worth, they have been described as “post-feminist” — in using fairy tales as the basis for her new tales (or re-inventions of old ones), she remains, in the words of Patricia Duncker, “within the strait-jacket of their original structures.” Thus, Carter only “explains, amplifies and re-produces rather than alters the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic.”12 Whether or not we agree with Duncker’s statement about Carter’s stories, it is clear that fairy tales do carry with them a strong patriarchal history and message, and therefore it may not be an easy thing to subvert the tales for other purposes — as magical realism seeks to do.

In examining this interplay between subversion and conservativism, we might consider Amaryll Chanady’s remark about M.M. Bakhtin, who notably formulated the idea of the carnivalesque in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Chanady writes:

Bakhtin establishes a filiation between the modern novel and the Menippean tradition of satirizing dominant figures and systems, in which the narrative is transformed into a polyphonous integration of subversive discourses, as opposed to the epic, which functions as a foundational narrative affirming official values and versions of history.13

In light of what we have said before, it is not too difficult, I think, to draw out a parallel which aligns magical realism with Bakhtin’s subversive, modern novelistic
tradition, and the fairy tale with the epic tradition. Indeed, Lüthi refers to the fairy tale as a “short epic form,” and his comments about its style tending towards action, the externalization of relationships in objects or signs, the lack of interior life of the characters, and so forth, lend credence to this view. If we view the fairy tale in this way and in light of Bakhtin’s formulation, it is perhaps unsurprising that as a written form the fairy tale came to reinforce “official” patriarchal values. It might explain, too, the style of the early fairy tales of the *conteuses*. Written in more florid, expansive prose than the tales of Perrault or, later, the Brothers Grimm, they were intended to achieve more “postmodern” effects and aims than those short-form epic, canonized tales. Thus they may be more readily aligned with Bakhtin’s subversive modern novelistic tradition than with the foundational epic. Perhaps, the epic style cannot achieve such relatively complex narrative goals.

I think, though, that it does seem more than a bit foolhardy to underestimate the resources of the epic style. And furthermore, as Chanady notes, this distinction between the subversive modern novel and the conservative epic does not hold up so well in more recent times. She writes: “Narratives that emphasize cultural specificity and difference, identity construction and self-affirmation in the context of neocolonialism frequently exhibit a foundational function analogous to that of the epic, and may *also* be highly critical of dominant paradigms.” Magical realism, particularly Latin American magical realism, serves as a rather good example of this fact. As we have noted time and again, magical realist texts tend to be critical of dominant Western paradigms, or simply of
“dominant paradigms” in general. Simultaneously, however, many intend to found or inaugurate a new sense, at least in Latin American magical realism — and Chanady specifically refers to Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* — of cultural identity and autonomy.\(^{15}\)

Salman Rushdie does not do precisely this in *Midnight’s Children*, but the narrator Saleem is described as “handcuffed to history,” to the very literal extent that because of the divisions in Indian society, his own body is actually cracked and split into pieces. As this is a work of magical realism, the relation is not simply symbolic — Saleem is quite literally and physically broken apart. The reader is encouraged, in this and in other ways, to see Saleem’s story, which is the same thing as the novel *Midnight’s Children*, as literally relating a history of modern India — a story of its birth and its growing pains. At the same time, it is not so much a history as it is a vivid portrait. Taking these two efforts together, it seems that the novel comes to *define*, in some way, India. Thus, Rushdie’s novelistic endeavor is at once epic in its foundational possibilities, while remaining indubitably tied, through the mode of magical realism, to a questioning and a subversion of dominant values.

To return, however, to the issue of the appropriation of the sometimes-epic form of the fairy tale by magical realism, it is helpful to make reference to a term recalled by David Gross in his work *The Past In Ruins*. Used by Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Bloch “and other Marxist intellectuals in the Germany of the 1920s,” the term is, in German, *Umfunktionierung*.\(^{16}\) Gross translates it into English as “refunctioning,” and defines it as
“extracting and rearranging elements from within the capitalist system in order to set them against capitalism itself.” He goes on to say: “As it turned out, however, the real masters of the art of refunctioning were not Weimar’s left-wing intellectuals but the modern state and the modern economy. And the greatest successes of refunctioning have not been those that subverted bourgeois values, but those that transformed many of the old traditions, forcing them to serve ends for which they were not initially intended.”

Gross writes about the sinister aspect of this refunctioning — specifically, the commodification of the fairy tale, by Disney and others. Indeed, the term “refunctioning” for Gross implies a process by which a tradition is not only altered “to fit new circumstances, but is deliberately altered to extract from it some political or economic benefit” at times even “moving a tradition well beyond, and often against, the ends it had previously served.” This idea is of particular interest in the case of the fairy tale and magical realism. First of all, it is obvious that the fairy tale has undergone such “refunctioning” repeatedly in its history. First, in the literary appropriation of an oral form that often privileged members of the lower classes to serve the “hegemonic interests of males within the upper classes of particular communities and societies,” and certainly again by Disney and great many other companies looking simply for opportunities to cash in on children’s (and adults’) fascination with the fairy tale, regardless of its former import as a means of communication. It seems to me that now the fairy tale may be undergoing (or has undergone) a third refunctioning in its appropriation by magical realist texts. They make use of the fairy tale’s touchstone forms, structures and motifs to
subvert them, thus turning the conservative fairy tales of Grimm and Perrault against themselves and the ideologies they support in a process of reffunctioning that in fact goes some way towards undoing the abuses of the first reffunctioning process, wherein the fairy tale became a socially conservative, ideologically stabilizing form. We will return to this idea later.

Another interesting linkage between the fairy tale and magical realism lies in the role of orality in both forms. Fairy tales draw from oral folklore, to greater or lesser extents; the canonical literary fairy tale marks the literary appropriation of an oral form. Furthermore, many of these tales — like those of Perrault, or the Brothers Grimm — show a conscious literary effort to seem oral and “folksy.” We should recall, too, how this already intriguing relationship between the literary and the oral in fairy tales is tangled further when oral tellers begin to draw on literary tales for their renditions, and literary writers begin to draw on these new oral renditions when writing their own stories.

We have in the history of the fairy tale, then, a movement from oral to literary (perhaps closer to something like, “literarily oral”), though it is a transition complicated by the tangled relations of oral and literary renditions of tales. Still, the importance of oral storytelling to the fairy tale, and the fairy tale’s tendency towards stylistic literary representation of oral storytelling are, I think, apparent.

I would be remiss in not mentioning the One Thousand and One Nights in this context. Scheherazade is perhaps the most famous storyteller in all of literature, and the complex frame narrative of the One Thousand and One Nights is equally well known. An
unknown narrator relates to us the the story of Scheherazade, who, in order to put off the day of her execution, tells her husband, the king Shahryar, part of a story each night. The stakes, of course, could hardly be higher: the power of Scheherazade’s narrative, her ability to weave a tale, are all that stand between her and death. As we know, the king is so eager to hear the end of Scheherazade’s tales that he stays her execution. She repeats the same trick the next night, and so on for one thousand and one nights, until Shahryar decides, finally, that perhaps he’d better not threaten to execute his beloved (and faithful) Scheherazade after all.

It is Scheherazade’s stories, her oral narrative, that comprise the vast majority of the One Thousand and One Nights. Many of her stories are folkloric, even fairy tale like. And the complex orality of the collection is frequently deepened when Scheherazade relates a tale in which some character tells yet another story. Like a series of nested dolls, this process has the potential to multiply ad infinitum. The tales of Sinbad the Sailor, in which Scheherazade tells how Sinbad the Sailor relates his seven voyages to Sinbad the Porter, are perhaps the best known example of this phenomenon. To a great extent, the One Thousand and One Nights is a folkloric text that is as much about the act of storytelling as it is about anything else.

This brief discussion of the One Thousand and One Nights provides a convenient path into a discussion of the orality of magical realism. Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, which has become something of a seminal example of the magical realist mode, consciously recalls the Arabian Nights in its title — and in the fact that there are one
thousand one children born at the stroke of midnight on the eve of India’s independence. Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* clearly recalls it as well. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, both novels evince a deep concern with the power of oral narrative. Unlike our canonical fairy tales, magical realist texts are not, obviously, modified, literary transcriptions of an oral form, but they are, nevertheless, self-consciously concerned with the power of storytelling, particularly oral storytelling.

The framing conceit of *Midnight’s Children* is that we are apparently hearing the thoughts of the narrator Saleem as he relates his autobiography — which he is writing down as he speaks it aloud — to another character, Padma. Padma often interjects when Saleem becomes carried away, or threatens to lose the thread of his narrative, and her comments are apparently included as a part of his autobiography. And when she departs for a time, Saleem remarks that “A balance has been upset; I feel cracks widening down the length of my body; because suddenly I am alone, without my necessary ear, and it isn’t enough.”

It is, I think, a complex frame, and deserves a deeper analysis, but if nothing else we can see already the importance of oral narrative, and its strange relations to literature, in Rushdie’s writing.

Not all magical realist texts are necessarily so concerned — though to a certain extent the incorporation of local tradition and mythology lends itself to oral language — but it is worth pointing out too that the first act of Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* effectively places us in the head of the skeptical journalist Walser as he listens to an outlandish tall-tale (which we nevertheless come some way towards believing) about the
upbringing and life of the famous winged aerialiste Fevvers. Carter’s novel The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman is also written in the first person, as the narrator Desiderio puts down on paper the story of his experiences in “the Great War” (not our Great War). And, indeed, the title alone of Rushdie’s novel Haroun and the Sea of Stories points to this overriding interest.

In his essay “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin laments the downfall of traditional storytelling. He writes: “Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant.”21 Why should this be the case? Benjamin goes on to answer this question, but we should note, first of all, that perhaps the disappearance of the storyteller is not so much the case as we are inclined to believe. I hope to demonstrate this to an extent in magical realist texts, but I would like to point out too that it need not have been the case even in 1936, when Benjamin was writing. Ivan Kreilkamp, for one, argues in his study Voice and the Victorian Storyteller (2005) that the Victorian novel represents a “fabricated struggle between multiple and complex forms of speech and writing,” and while writing may have been privileged, the importance of orality still “required fiction to turn on itself and invest extraordinary value in an idealized version of the speech community it had relegated to the past.”22 Thus even in an era that saw the rise of the modern novel, a time when it seemed that the written voice and creative power of the artist was paramount, actual, oral speech still had to be given its due.
Still, these few caveats aside, it certainly seems fair to say that Benjamin’s general contention — that the importance of oral tale telling has declined in modern times — is a valid one. Benjamin proposes a number of reasons, but he begins with the contention that in the modern era we have lost the ability to communicate our experiences to one another. “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war,” he asks, “that men returned from the battlefield grown silent — not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth.” And he writes, movingly, I think, about the profound sense of incommunicability, of solitude, these men must have felt. “A generation,” he says, “that had gone to school on a horse drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.”23 It is as though in a world so utterly and fearfully changed — economically, technologically, morally — that ability which has been with man from time immemorial, the ability to communicate orally, which is to communicate communally if only on some small scale, was taken from him.24 And it is only through oral communication, through the sharing of lived experiences, that the storyteller is able to thrive.

By contrast, Benjamin tells us, the “novelist has isolated himself.” Where the storyteller and his stories can thrive only in community, through the sharing of lived experience, the “birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to
express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns... To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life.” And the novel cannot exist without the book — that is, for Benjamin, what distinguishes it most succinctly from the story. A story can exist in the memory or on the tongue or in the community; the novel exists only with the book. Still, the novel is not the cause of the decline of storytelling, it is only a symptom — and not even a totally modern one, as Benjamin sees the beginnings of the novel as “going back to antiquity.” It is a symptom “of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling;” the novel is a symptom of that decline brought about by the “secular productive forces of history,” which brought about in their turn the printing press and the middle class. Still, this does not make the novel any less antithetical to the oral tale. It need not be entirely so — Benjamin’s essay is, after all, in part an effort to trace the outlines of the figure of the storyteller in Nikolai Leskov, who, while he wrote many things besides, did pen some novels — yet the fact remains that the novelistic storytellers are scarce, even to the extent that such a thing is probably not fully possible at all. Indeed, Benjamin writes: “What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature — the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella — is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it.” 25

The novel is utterly cut off from oral tradition; it is utterly individual, both in its conception and its consumption.26 (“The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader.”)27 The question we have to ask is obvious, I think, at this point: what are we to do with magical realist novels, that, as I hope I have adequately
demonstrated, are so deeply concerned with oral tradition, that they even attempt, in many instances, to create in the reader a sense of community? Before answering, however, I would like to make note of a few more salient points from Benjamin’s essay, which I think will make even more apparent the particularly important relation of magical realism as a literary mode to Benjamin’s idea of the concurrent death of storytelling and rise of the modern novel.

And as we are discussing a death, it seems only appropriate that we should begin with Benjamin’s own thoughts on the topic, and its ties to the novel. He tells us that “not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life — and this is the stuff that stories are made of — first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.” On his deathbed, his life passing before his eyes, suddenly in the dying man’s “expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses the the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.” Yet because death is no longer a palpable presence in our lives — how many houses now contain a room in which someone has died? Benjamin asks — we cannot experience this authority, we cannot experience death, and so we search for it in the novel. The character in the novel has “the ‘meaning’ of his life… revealed only in his death.” And so, in order to come closer to the meaning of life, we read about death. “The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else’s fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger’s fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields to us the warmth which we
never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.”

It need not be the literal death of a character; we might as easily read to his or her “figurative death — the end of the novel.” But, in contrast to this figurative death at the end of the novel, for Benjamin — and now we are nearing the point — “there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate.” One story ties into another, like the tales of Scheherazade in the Arabian nights. Benjamin writes that the Muse-derived element (so-called because it comes from the epic muse Mnemonys, meaning Memory) of the story is that of reminiscence; discursive, wandering and diffuse. The novelist, on the other hand, deals in the Muse-derived element of remembrance; the subject is “one hero, one odyssey, one battle,” and so the novelist “cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing ‘Finis.’” The novel guarantees us death, and so the meaning of life. It grants us the means to warm our shivering lives over the fire of another’s ultimate fate, as we never can over our own — it comes to an end. The story, on the other hand, makes no such guarantee; it continues on, as reminiscences will, one story, one memory, somehow trailing foggily into another. The fairy tale’s “happily ever after,” we should note, implies just this ongoing, indeterminate, future beyond story’s end.

I have mentioned before Gabriel García Márquez’s remark that “realism is a kind of premeditated literature that offers too static and exclusive a vision of reality.” He goes
on to say, though: “However good or bad they may be, they are books which finish on the last page.”32 They reach a figurative death, that is to say. Many magical realist novels, on the other hand, are self-consciously conceived so as not to end on that last page.
Holly Martin writes about García Márquez’s method for achieving this in *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

The story itself is supposedly, within the context of the novel, written by a ghost named Melquíades who returns to Macondo after dying of a fever. At the end of the novel, another character… Aureliano, deciphers the text… and realizes that the text contains the history of his family — written one hundred years ahead of time. As Aureliano reads about the history of his family, eventually reaching the account of his present life, a strong whirlwind begins blowing outside the house…33

The house, the entire village, the book *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* is wiped from existence in the text before Aureliano can finish deciphering it. In a way, the reader can never reach the end of García Márquez’s novel. Scott Simpkins discusses similar effects in a number of Borges’ stories, most notably “The Garden of Forking Paths,” wherein “Borges constructs a multi-perspective text which appears to cover all fictional possibilities,” thus escaping from the traditional boundaries of narrative.34 As I have mentioned, there is some debate about Borges’ position with regards to the mode of magical realism — Angel Flores considers him to have inaugurated the mode, while many others see him rather as an important precusor to magical realism proper — but,
nevertheless, his stories dearly employ similar narrative strategies to those of the magical realists.

Of course, not all magical realist texts employ such deliberate methods for escaping the inevitable death of the novel as that found in One Hundred Years of Solitude. In Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus, for instance, at the novel’s close — just after we have (perhaps!) discovered that Fevvers was, in fact, hatched from an egg, and does, in fact, have real wings — Fevvers’ now-husband Walser, their marriage consummated, asks her: “Fevvers, only the one question... why did you go to such lengths, once upon a time, to convince me you were the ‘only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world’?” She bursts out laughing, replying, “I fooled you, then! Gawd, I fooled you!” and then, “To think I really fooled you! It just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence.” It is a decidedly ambiguous statement — just how exactly has Walser been fooled? Does Fevvers refer to her being inacta — that is, “untouched,” a virgin — or to her wings, or to something else entirely? Sarah Sceats provides an intriguing alternative: “It probably even refers to the confidence trick pulled off by Carter in getting us to believe in her at all.” This metafictive maneuver of Carter’s — and it is not the only one — causes in the reader, if it is recognized, a reevaluation of one’s relation to the text, of the function of narrative and its creative power, and indeed of the role of the reader in helping to constitute the meaning of the text. Thus, at the novel’s last gasp, and indeed throughout, the boundary between fictional narrative and reality is broken down, so that the novel fails to “end on the last page,” and instead intrudes upon a readerly reality.
In this way, we might recognize the tendency of magical realists to force readers to reexamine received conceptions about rationality, or Western empiricism, and so on, as a means of escaping inevitable novelistic death — of breaking out of their last page, into the world of the reader. Of course, this is a broadly “postmodern” concern, and is not merely restricted to magical realism. Thomas Bernhard’s *Korrektur* (*Correction*, 1975), for instance, employs a remarkably complex narrative strategy, whereby it becomes gradually clear that we are reading the successive corrections of a text by (we suspect) a friend of the author of the original text, one Roithamer. Eventually the friend (though perhaps mad, sycophantic devotee would be more accurate) seems somehow to be absorbed into the text itself, his identity lost as he writes more and more frequently in direct, and unattributed, quotes from his friend Roithamer. The effect is incredibly disorienting, and attempting to reconstruct what is going on “behind the text” so to speak, forces the reader to take a role in the constitution of the text.

W.B. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), achieves a similar effect, as it weaves a realistic fictional narrative, yet is spotted throughout with black and white photographs, some of which are real photographs and, furthermore, are actually the photographs that they are described to be in the text, and some of which are manufactured photographs that the text claims are real. This bizarre interplay of the real world and the fictional world serves to dissolve the boundary between the two, forcing the book off the page, so to speak, even as the real world seems to be drawn into it.
One could make the case as well that this is simply a “novelistic” interest — every novel is about something, and certainly the best ones aren’t merely put down and forgotten about. They linger and they remain in mind, affecting one’s perceptions, even one’s actions. They are a specter that hangs over our shoulder, or in the corner of our eye, that we cannot shake off — it is for this reason novels are called haunting. In that sense, any good novel fails to end on the last page. But many magical realist texts, at least as I have argued, show a particular concern for this effect, and a particular interest in oral storytelling that make this escape from the last page particularly relevant. To return to Benjamin’s notion of the “figurative death” of characters at the end of the novel, we can say that magical realist texts, in often escaping from this novelistic tendency to end on the last page, actually recapture aspects of the storytelling tradition, the death-knell of which Walter Benjamin was ringing some seventy-five years ago.

And they do so in other ways as well. I have already argued for the intense interest of Rushdie and Carter in oral tradition, obvious in the titles of both Nights at the Circus and Midnight’s Children. Perhaps they will not enter the oral tradition in that they will probably never be memorized and recited, and so shared communally in that sense — that much may be true. But it is true also, for instance, of Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children that while the novel is told from the point of view of one person, and it is, in a certain sense, only Saleem’s chronicle, it owes much more to Benjamin’s Muse-derived element of story, reminiscence, than the Muse-derived element of the novel, remembrance. The entire novel is, in fact, one long reminiscence, beginning even before the narrator
was born. Though, of course, the novel has a certain thrust — namely, towards Saleem’s death — the path it travels is errant and winding, and even at the novel’s beginning our (sometime) interlocutor Padma is forced to interrupt: “At this rate... you’ll be two hundred years old before you manage to tell about your birth... You better get a move on or you’ll die before you get yourself born.” And Saleem responds, tellingly: “Fighting down the proper pride of the successful storyteller” — for he believes his “story has her by the throat” — “I attempt to educate her. ‘Things—even people—have a way of leaking into each other... the past has dripped into me... so we can’t ignore it.” The past has “dripped” into him, he has been many people, and they have become a part of him, his story has been spun into theirs and theirs into this. Saleem’s reminiscences, we see, carry his tale — which is Rushdie’s tale, too — far into the past and, as will become clearer in a moment, into the future as well.

The end of Rushdie’s novel picks up on this thread, and, furthermore, recalls Benjamin’s closing comments in “The Storyteller:"

His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller, in Leskov as in Hauff, in Poe as in Stevenson. The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.

In contrast to the reader of the novel, who warms his “shivering life” over the deaths of characters, consuming the novel as the wick of their lives, and in contrast to the
novelist, who can only tell part of his life, the storyteller can tell his whole life, and in
telling it, warm himself over his own flame. As his story draws to a close, Saleem, the
narrator of Midnight’s Children, asks himself: “One empty jar… how to end?” He refers
to the pickling jars that he has been filling up, one for each chapter of the novel. As a
result of Saleem’s strange powers, the ingredients of each, a chutney, a pickled mixture of
vegetables, fruits, spices, can conjure for whoever tastes them all the feelings and the
happenings of that chapter of Saleem’s story — that chapter of Midnight’s Children.

So he asks himself, should he end “with questions,” or with “dreams” — but no,
he decides, he shall end with neither. Rather, Saleem says: “I shall have to write the
future as I have written the past, to set it down with the absolute certainty of a prophet.
But the future cannot be preserved in a jar; one jar must remain empty…” What future?
Why, his own, of course. Saleem tells us of his own inevitable death, for it is the great
distinction of the storyteller to be able to tell his entire life. So:

… I have been so-many too-many persons, life unlike syntax allows one more
than three, and at last somewhere the striking of a clock, twelve chimes, release.
Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three,
four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust,
just as, in all good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son
who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first
generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts
and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the
curse of midnight’s children to be both masters and victims of their times, to
forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes,
and to be unable to live or die in peace.11
Saleem tells us of his death, how he is trampled under foot by the multitudes, as the divisions in India — the country to which he is literally, inextricably bound — fissure his own body at the stroke of midnight. Like Cinderella at the ball, at midnight he is released from his spell — but he, only in death. Saleem relates his death, yes, as only the true storyteller can, his story consuming the wick of his own life. And yet, his story spirals still further, away into the future, into other stories of his son and his grandson and his grandson’s son, a thousand and one generations, a thousand and one gifts of midnight. Like the storyteller — that communal, oral tale-teller who, on arriving in town one night, does not seek shelter but instead calls out for others to join him: “Roll up! Roll up!” — like him, Saleem and the other children of midnight forsake privacy, and join the “multitudes,” entering into community, relinquishing the individual privacy which is that of the novel. That community they enter is an “annihilating whirlpool,” perhaps, but that is the fate of the storyteller, for his story to consume the wick of his life; he does not have the luxury of warming himself with the flames of other’s lives. And even in death he cannot, just as Saleem cannot, find peace — in life he has been “so-many too-many persons,” and in death too his story will find its way into others, and in its way never end.

Rushdie’s — Saleem’s — comment that “life, unlike syntax, allows for more than three persons,” that is, allows for one to be more than three persons, is amusing in light of the fact that Saleem, and Rushdie, have conjured so very many persons through that
limited syntax. It is yet another way in which Rushdie’s novel reclaims the reminiscent function of storytelling.

And finally, the last, the thirty-first, jar — “thirty jars with chapter-headings for names” plus one — in Rushdie’s story remains open, refusing closure just as Saleem does. It is the final flourish with which Rushdie’s novel too seems to break free from the page. And it is perhaps fitting, then, that the title of that final chapter — the chapter that would, if it could, contain the chutnification, the pickling of the future itself — should be “Abracadabra.”

Very well. I have shown, I hope, how in a variety of magical realist texts, aspects of the storytelling tradition are reclaimed. Let us recall Benjamin’s contention that the novel “neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it.” I think this is, at best, a questionable claim, in light of what’s been written above. We have encountered Benjamin’s figure of the storyteller in Midnight’s Children, we have seen novels which struggle to overcome their “figurative death” on the last page, in whatever way they might be able to do so, breaking free from the page into real life, their story leading into others; we have observed the so-called Muse-derived element of the story on the pages of novels.

However, there is still more to do: we must not forget about the fairy tale. I have spent some time drawing out the points of contact between the fairy tale and magical realism, but I have said little about the importance of these relations, though it is perhaps
apparent to some extent on its own. I would like to turn now to precisely why the relationship of magical realism to the fairy tale is of some concern. Benjamin tells us:

‘And they lived happily ever after,’ says the fairy tale. The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest.\textsuperscript{42}

Whether or not we accept Benjamin’s categorical “the first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales,” it is clear, at least, that the fairy tale had its beginnings in oral tale telling, to the extent that the most successful adaptations to this day of that oral mode, the tales of Perrault and the Grimms, remain those which, through literary artifice, approximate a “folksy” style. And indeed, whether or not we believe that “the fairy tale… was once the first tutor of mankind,” it is clear that the fairy tale, or at least oral folklore which employed fairy tale-like motifs, is quite ancient indeed. We might recall here Graham Anderson’s comment that folktales are ”old enough for us to be seldom confident that we have found the first example of any given tale.”\textsuperscript{43}

For Benjamin, then, the truest storyteller, the one closest to the old heart of human affairs, is the teller of fairy tales. We, at least, can say: the teller of fairy tales and folktales is a very old sort of tale teller indeed, perhaps even older than the teller of myths.\textsuperscript{44} And, furthermore, I think we can say that, by and large, when we think of
“stories,” our minds often jump directly to fairy tales, through the stories of Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Rumpelstiltskin, Snow White, and so on. While we haven’t necessarily committed ourselves to Benjamin’s epic-sounding discourse, we are aware of the importance of fairy tales in our culture. We are aware too of their antiquity and their central place in the canon of “story.”

But what, we must ask, has become of them? I wrote about this earlier, but I would like to reiterate it here. Fairy tales in their oral form — what I have called the wonder tale — had a mythic quality to them. In the introduction to *Fairy Tale As Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994) Jack Zipes writes (perhaps not surprisingly to those who have read the title of his book): “The fairy tale is myth. That is, the classical fairy tale has undergone a process of mythicization. Any fairy tale in our society, if it seeks to become natural and eternal, must become myth.” He defines mythicization as a process of becoming “dehistoricized, depoliticized to represent and maintain the hegemonic interests of the bourgeoisie.” Fairy tales have become myths in our society in the sense that they have become inviolable — we think of them as timeless because of their atemporality and their denial of space; their rigid, crystalline structure, written of by Lüthi, seems to be the only appropriate structure, and we will permit little deviation. Furthermore, they are largely relegated to the realm of childhood, and we will scarcely permit any deviation at all in the things that we hold in fond memories from that time.

Zipes’ idea of mythicization is precisely the opposite of what I meant when I wrote that oral wonder tales had a mythic quality to them. Zipes is concerned with the
formation of modern myths, of how the fairy tale has become static. When I write of a mythic quality in wonder tales, I mean to highlight specifically their dynamism. In this sense, a culture develops myths as a means for making sense of the world. It is true that they are lent a certain imperishable quality by the fact that they are passed from generation to generation; this process gives them a feeling of timelessness. (Lest we think, however, that any tale passed from mouth to mouth for generations must change significantly, even beyond recognition, we need only think again of Graham Anderson’s example of the Israeli oral tale first recorded in the 1940s that was used to decipher an ancient Babylonian text from fully two millennia prior.) But, even as myths are timeless, each generation is able to put them to use to understand its present situation, to make sense of its own world, and the changes occurring in it.

The oral wonder tale had this mythic quality. I have commented on it before. Zipes (among others) writes that we need to examine each oral telling in its historical specificity to understand what function it was intended to serve — emancipatory, revolutionary, conservative, and so forth. Zipes writes about the incredible adaptability of fairy tales in Why Fairy Tales Stick. The oral wonder tale, the fairy tale, are able to address themselves to various circumstances, they are tales that were passed on from generation to generation, and allowed each in their own way to comment on the circumstances of their lives. In this way, they were like myths. They were of course different in many other ways, but we might recall again Graham Anderson’s comment that it may not be helpful to draw any sharp distinction between folk tale and myth. As in the case of Baucis and
Philemon and the English folk tale of the begging witch, perhaps what we have are different cultural settings of the same tale. Without entering into the nitty-gritty of Anderson’s suggestion, we can at least say that in the myth and the oral fairy tale, the wonder tale, we have tales that adapted themselves to serve the uses of a culture that needed to make sense of the world.

My conception of the mythic tale as one that served the needs of a culture seeking to make sense of the world, that gained a certain imperishable quality as it was passed from generation to generation, but remained flexible enough that it could serve the changing needs of those successive generations, touches that of Zipes at precisely one point: the point where the oral wonder tale was codified as the literary fairy tale. This is, of course, not a single historical moment, but is, rather, an ongoing process. Still, it is just at the moment when the oral wonder tale is written down, when it becomes literary and is introduced into a tradition or a realm of authorial and cultural artifice that it loses its mythic quality — its dynamism, its ability to speak to changing circumstances — as I see it, and undergoes a process of mythicization as Zipes sees it, whereby it becomes “dehistoricized, depoliticized to represent and maintain the hegemonic interests of the bourgeoisie.” Again, this is an ongoing movement, of course, but it reaches a peak first with the tales of Perrault — think again of the changes he wrought in Little Red Riding Hood, rendering her as a sinful ninny, probably responsible for her own violation — and then again in the tales of the Brothers Grimm.
I followed David Gross in his use of the term reffunctioning to describe this process. That is, the process “that transformed many of the old traditions, forcing them to serve ends for which they were not initially intended.” We might go further in the case of fairy tales, where the reffunctioning process did not merely cause them to serve ends for which they were not originally intended, rather it forced them to work directly against their initial purpose. Where once the fairy tale had been intended to serve as a means for understanding and reflecting on the world, engaging dynamically and communally with developments in a culture or a society, it became instead, through its appropriation as a literary form, a means for reinforcing the dominant order, that is, for keeping things static. Whatever else we might say, given the very important role that wondrous transformation plays in wonder tales and fairy tales, this reffunctioned intention to “keep things as they are” seems particularly sad.

I have pointed out Perrault and the Brothers Grimm as the greatest culprits here because their tales express a number of questionable patriarchal and repressive messages, and their tales are also far and away the most popular. By contrast, I noted that the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann certainly used the fairy tale form to comment critically on society, not merely to maintain prevalent values. I think this is true — but Hoffmann’s tales are not the cultural touchstones that Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty are. The literary rendering of the oral wonder tale need not have been the agent of this (rather sinister) process of reffunctioning, but it was — and whatever the messages of the literary fairy tales of Hoffmann and Goethe and many others, the tales of Grimm and Perrault, which
represent best the results of this process, have remained steadfastly the most popular and influential. This, we should acknowledge, is in part due to the influence of Walt Disney, but not entirely.

If I seem to say these tales are all bad, I do not mean to. They have, I think, a great deal to offer: we return to them time and again because they feel somehow wise, even if we cannot put our fingers on why; as Benjamin put it, they offer “counsel.” I do not want to lose sight of this, because it is easy to comment over and over again on the negative aspects of these tales. But they remain fascinating, wondrous and imaginative. Still, the important negative aspects of these stories should not be overlooked, nor should their regrettable change in societal function.

It is at this point that magical realism again enters the picture. It reclaims the storytelling tradition, at least as expounded by Benjamin; and in many texts, and notably the texts we are concerned with here, it draws on the the fairy tale — “the first tutor of mankind,” the sort of story told by “the first true storyteller.” Magical realism, as I have pointed out, is a mode that is interested in liminal spaces, the boundaries and borders between cultures, societies, sexes, countries, people. Magical realism explores and probes those boundaries, and often seeks to break them down, almost always in the interest of some marginalized group, for the purpose of commenting critically and meaningfully on societal ills. It incorporates the fairy tale into this mission — because the fairy tale is uniquely positioned to help. As I have taken pains to point out in this past section, the relationship between the fairy tale and magical realism is a complex one, but one thing
we can say is: in appropriating the fairy tale, magical realism returns to it its ability to talk meaningfully about society.

Earlier, I called this a refuctioning, and I think that it genuinely is. As Gross notes, “refunctioned traditions can easily be passed on as authentic” so that, in time, “their fabricated nature would not be noticed.” This is what has happened in the case of the canonical fairy tale. Many people are unaware of its earlier emancipatory, revolutionary, critical potential, to the extent that they do not think of fairy tales as relevant to anything at all, beyond being the delightful stories of their youth. Thus, the refunctioned fairy tales, our canonical fairy tales, have become the genuine article, so far as most people are concerned. In this way, magical realism grasps hold of a very real tradition — that of the canonical, static fairy tale — and refunctions it, turning it back to its old purposes, returning to it the possibility to speak meaningfully and critically about society, to serve emancipatory, revolutionary, dynamic goals.

Thus it is that magical realism fairy tales can become once again a means by which we may make sense of our culture — even the old fairy tales that we are now forced to reexamine. Angela Carter uses fairy tales to examine questions of sexuality and domination, of performativity and feminism. Rushdie uses them to examine the complex nature of our postcolonial societies, what it means to be an immigrant, to exist, as it were, in the liminal space between two worlds. And, as magical realism renders fairy tales once more mythic vehicles for understanding the world, for understanding and commenting upon a culture, so too does it de mythicize them, as Zipes defined it. Fairy
lose their inviolability, and will permit again new variations, new forms. Magical realism’s appropriation of the fairy tale is only one such variation that has become permissible in the absence of this inviolability.

Moreover, in its recapturing — perhaps we might say its resuscitation — of the form and the feel of the oral storyteller, magical realism revitalizes the fairy tale yet further, recalling its earliest mythic beginnings. Especially in the works of Carter and Rushdie, this is an important movement. Both authors seem to respect the power of oral storytelling, and, though they achieve complex effects with their narratives, there is as well a certain joy inherent simply in the act of a lively and well-performed narration. Benjamin writes that we encounter the storyteller “in Leskov as in Hauff, in Poe as in Stevenson” — and I would not long hesitate to append, in Carter as in Rushdie.

I would like to now examine Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus to draw out in a specific context the interrelations of magical realism and the fairy tale, and the ways in which the two forms can interact to achieve some of the effects — especially the revitalization of the fairy tale as a means for commenting on culture — mentioned above.
4: CARTER’S NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS

Angela Carter’s Nights at the Circus opens with a fairy tale. Not, perhaps, in a strict sense, not as described by the characteristics discussed earlier, but certainly in the familiar, colloquial way in which we use the term every day. That is to say, more or less, a sugary-sweet lie. We use the term “fairy tale” to refer to something totally implausible, as in, for instance, “Oh, marriages never last — that’s just a fairy tale!” The German term for fairy tale is märchen, a diminutive of the word mär, which just means “news” or “tale” — and so a märchen is a little bit of news, a small tale, take it or leave it, believe it or not.1 And while the narrative that comprises the first act of Carter’s novel is not so small — on the contrary, it is very much larger than life — we are often forced to wonder just how much of it we should believe.

I have mentioned the scenario a few times at this point, but allow me to repeat myself. The first of three parts of Carter’s novel takes place in a London dressing room, cramped and messy, heteroclite heaps of discarded clothing, admirers’ gifts and champagne bottles covering the floor. There, the young American reporter Jack Walser
— a man with “eyes the cool grey of skepticism” whose extreme “habit of suspending belief extended even unto his own being” and who “like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver,” does not know “how to be afraid” — is interviewing the winged performer Fevvers, billed as “the Cockney Venus.”² Fevvers’ voice is the first thing we hear in the novel:

‘Lor’ love you, sir!’ Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. ‘As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old London, didn’t I! Not billed the “Cockney Venus”, for nothing, sir, though they could just as well ’ave called me “Helen of the High Wire”, due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore — for I never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh dear me, no; but just like Helen of Troy, was hatched.

‘Hatched out of a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!’³⁵

Walser is interviewing Fevvers for his column on the “Great Humbugs of the World,” and so he has come, pen and pad in hand “at the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history” to hear her tell her own story, and to see if he can determine the answer to the slogan inscribed in foot-high letters on the poster on her dressing-room wall: “Is she fact or is she fiction?”⁴ Positioned immediately between centuries and between conflicting views of Fevvers, we see already the concern for the liminal that I have mentioned as characterizing many magical realist texts. For his part Walser, skeptic that he is, is not really prepared to believe a word of her testimony, and Carter ensures that the reader
remain quite as skeptical as he, narrating from a limited third-person, and so giving access only to Walser’s disbelieving, rationalizing thoughts.

We are encouraged to be doubtful in others ways as well: it is made eminently clear that Fevvers is a consummate performer, both on and off the stage. Like any hyperfamous celebrity — and that she certainly is — Fevvers, as she presents herself, is not so much a person as she is a persona, and she revels in the fact. Indeed, she is in the act of removing her makeup, taking off her face, as it were, when we first encounter her. Grinning mischievously into the mirror, she rips “six inches of false lash from her left eyelid.” And she has not yet even begun her story. The novel begins with the incredulous lines above, and as she prepares, after a minor interruption, to launch into her story proper as the first chapter concludes, she repeats the most farfetched detail of all once more for our benefit: “‘Hatched,’” she said!” Thus, the first chapter is framed by Fevvers’ incredible nature, hatched like Helen from an egg. And as Linden Peach points out, this incredible nature places Fevvers outside of traditional history and “outside of the normal pattern of origins,” allowing her to serve as a comment on those traditional patterns in a way that someone embedded in them perhaps could not. Fevvers herself says that, on the day of her first flight, she “feared a wound not of the body but the soul, sir, an irreconcilable division between [herself] and the rest of humankind.” And of course, we should note Carter raises feminist concerns immediately, though not explicitly. It is no accident that Helen’s mother, Leda, was raped by Zeus in the guise of
a swan — Yeats’ “brute blood of the air” — and the story of Leda and the Swan is an oft-mentioned intertext.

But let us return to Fevvers’ oral narrative, the story of her life as she performs it for Walser and for the reader in a London dressing room at the turn of the twentieth century. With her foster-mother Lizzie at her shoulder, Fevvers relates to Walser the incredible story of her “coming up” and her beginnings as an aerialiste, recounting for him her upbringing in a brothel that seems, in many ways, ahead of its time; her time spent in a grim, darkly famous freak-show; and her near-sacrifice by an aging necromancer, also a member of Parliament, before she at last launched her career as a performer. Even in outline the story seems patently ridiculous — and as our contact with the story is mediated through the incredulous medium of Walser, we are encouraged to feel this way even more so. It is a tall tale, or a fairy tale — it must be!

Yet, if the novel were solely a succession of unbelievable, fantastic events, we would not find ourselves, as we do, in the realm of magical realism. As has been mentioned, in magical realist texts there must be a “strong presence of the phenomenal world;” put, I think, more helpfully, this is in part the idea that “history is the weight that tethers the balloon of magic” in magical realism. And certainly there is a weight of history in Nights at the Circus. As Carter herself points out: “That novel is set at exactly the moment in European history when things began to change. It’s set at that time quite deliberately, and she [Fevvers] is the new woman.” Thus, the novel consciously recalls the women’s movement that began gaining momentum at (and even before) the turn of
the century. Aidan Day catalogues a number of other ways in which the novel is historically grounded. First, there are numerous allusions to actual historical personages, including “the late Victorian music hall comedian Dan Leno,” Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, dramatist Alfred Jarry, novelist Colette, an indirect reference, by way of the term psychoanalysis, to Freud, and the “infamously lecherous” Prince of Wales. Second, there are various political currents which are touched upon, and which will come up shortly, including the feminism of the women in the brothel, the Parliamentary and anti-women’s suffrage position of our aging necromancer, and, indeed, the character of Lizzie, Fevvers’ foster-mother, who is a radical socialist and feminist, and even helps to incite the Russian Revolution of 1917. As Day puts it, *Nights at the Circus*:

… for all its flamboyant craziness … makes sense specifically in relation to the historical context that is sketched in by Carter. It is not gratuitous or surrealist fantasy, but fantasy whose symbolic meaning can be recovered in rational historical terms.

Still, while all this historical grounding is undeniably present, we, like Walser, cannot help but be mesmerized by Fevvers’ and Carter’s narrative. The power that Fevvers’ oral narrative exerts over Walser, and perhaps even over the world of the novel, is made explicit in a number of ways. First, and perhaps most apparent, is that Big Ben — the timepiece not only for London, but, because of the great power of the British Empire at the time, also, in a certain sense, timepiece for much of the world — strikes
midnight three times. While the details of Fevvers’ tall tale or fairy tale oral narrative are implausible, they are not really, by themselves patently impossible, as this seems to be. Walser, for one, is dumbstruck — the hand of his watch has stopped, too, just at midnight, and the only clock in Fevvers’ apartment, inherited from her brothel madame, one Admiral Nelson (who dressed always in the apparel fitting her assumed rank), always reads that time. In Fevvers’ dressing room, we see, it is always the witching hour, the hour of the fairy tale.

Moreover, Carter remarks that as the women tell Walser their combined story, “he continued to take notes in a mechanical fashion,” but is unable to apply his usual perceptive powers of disbelief, and feels as “a sultan faced with not one but two Scheherazades, both intent on impacting a thousand stories into the single night.”¹⁴ Thus is the intertextual reference in the title — the Arabian Nights, mentioned previously as the quintessential example of literary oral narrative — made almost entirely explicit. Walser is taken captive by Fevvers’ story and, indeed, her voice. Carter writes: “It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife.”¹⁵ As Fevvers’ narrative continues, Walser’s hand falls slack, unable to take notes, and he is confronted with “the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the aerialiste were a pair of sets of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds, and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt himself trembling as if he, too, stood on an unknown threshold.”¹⁶ But this vertiginous
feeling of trembling on the edge of a world opening into a world opening into a world, is implicit in the act of storytelling, as we remarked upon with reference to “The Storyteller” and to Midnight’s Children. One story leads inevitably into another, and nowhere do they end, just as in the tales of Scheherazade.

So we have, implicitly and explicitly, a reference to fairy tales. Implicit, in the sense that Benjamin recalled the teller of the fairy tale as the first and the truest teller of stories. Fevvers’ role as storyteller, and the peculiar power of her narrative, cannot help but recall to us the power of the oral tale, of which the fairy tale serves as the most obvious and probably most significant example (certainly it is the most significant for our purposes, but it seems probable to me that most people, when they think of oral stories, think of fairy tales). We are reminded of this fact when, at the end of Fevvers’ narrative, Big Ben chimes six (after having struck midnight thrice and naught else for the whole story), and time suddenly lurches back into itself. As though Fevvers had transported us to an atemporal never-never land — the world of the fairy tale — with her story, when the clock finally does strike six it feels as though “Walser and his companions and the very dressing-room itself were all at once precipitated down a vast chute. It took his breath away. As if the room that had, in some way, without his knowledge, been plucked out of its everyday, temporal continuum, had been held for a while above the spinning world and was now — dropped back into place.”

And, of course, we have the explicit reference to Scheherazade and the Arabian Nights, a famous collection of, among other things, fairy tales. If these overarching
references to the fairy tale seem to be obvious only because we are looking for them, I would point out too the time of midnight and the plurality of very conscious, explicit fairy tale references that Carter makes throughout her narrative — we saw one in the description of Walser as being like the boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver — ensure that fairy tales are always on our mind. I have not pointed out any others of these references yet, but I will shortly discuss a number of them.

Before that, however, I would like to discuss the effect of this overarching oral, fairy tale-type narrative. Peach, among other critics, points out that “autobiography is one of the strategies by which women can take responsibility for their own sense of self in a restricted and restrictive environment or milieu, challenging the traditional appropriation of women’s lives and histories by men. Self-making is an essential element in women’s autobiography and the notion of the self as a ‘subject in process’” is important to Nights at the Circus.18 Thus Fevvers’ far-fetched, fairy or tall tale narrative of her life becomes a means by which she can create her own self — and we should recall here the profuse makeup she wears, her delight in the performative aspects of her tale, her life on stage, and the creation of her persona — refusing to allow it to be defined by the views and the gaze of (usually male) others, particularly Walser. In this light, it is significant too that Fevvers gives Walser only the most meagre possibility of checking the facts of her account. At one point, he laments “the dilemma of the first checkable fact they’d offered him and the impossibility of checking it. Cable Mrs — III and ask her if she’d ever worked in a brothel run by a one-eyed whore named Nelson? Contracts had
been taken out for less.” And indeed, not only does Fevvers prevent Walser from checking the facts, but, we should recall, she even stuns him, by the end of her story, into not taking any notes at all. Thus, Fevvers’ oral narrative recalls the fairy tale and uses it — ironically, given what we have noted as the patriarchal codes inscribed in many fairy tales — as a means of female self-definition, of telling “herstory” (to use a term that Carter thought particularly laughable) as opposed to a masculine appropriation of it. It is worth noting, too, that Walser’s inability to fix Fevvers’ identity extends to the reader as well, as we too are unable to determine what is true and what is false, what is performance and what, if anything, is genuine.

Now we should discuss some of the explicit fairy-tale references in Fevvers’ story and Carter’s prose that serve to keep the fairy tale in mind throughout the first section of *Nights at the Circus*. Fairy tale figures, for one thing, are among Carter’s fondest referents for metaphors, comparisons, and minor allusions. Again, the comparison of Walser to the protagonist of the Grimms’ “A Tale About the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was” is exemplary. Or, we might consider the following description of Fevvers, landing triumphantly after her act, bombarded by bouquets and well-wishes: “Her face, thickly coated with rouge and powder so that you can see how beautiful she is from the back row of the gallery, is wreathed in triumphant smiles; her white teeth are big and carnivorous as those of Red Riding Hood’s grandmother.” This inversion and subversion of fairy tale roles is, as we might expect, typical of Carter. If at first it seems that Fevvers is, as a woman, pandering to the gaze of her viewers, if at first it seems that
she is foolishly vain, covered in rouge and powder, seeking only admiration, the fairy tale reference sets us right in a hurry. She is a wolf in grandmother’s clothing. If we think her innocent, we are making a grave mistake, for she is a predator, no timid granny or delectable Red Riding Hood. She lets herself be perceived as her audience wishes, but it is only deception for her own interests; as Carter writes: “You’d never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers.”22 As Carter has said in an interview, Fevvers isn’t out to create her own myth — “Fevvers is out to earn a living,” whatever that takes.23

This comparison to the wolf of Little Red Riding Hood is an incredibly apt metaphor. From a purely fictional standpoint, it is at once amusing, telling and accessible to anyone who has ever heard the tale of Little Red Riding Hood — and indeed, who has not? At once we see Carter’s use of fairy tale motifs in the service of a feminist agenda; by placing Fevvers in the role of wolf, we are made perfectly aware that not only is she nobody’s meat, she is, in fact, the predator. A woman need not be passive, and indeed she need not be sweet: she may be, perfectly justifiably, out to “get hers,” so to speak. As I wrote above, Carter inverts and subverts the expected fairy tale roles here as a means of making a feminist critique, in much the same way as Fevvers’ over-arching oral narrative allows Carter to make a related statement. And, of course, as noted before, this reference to the fairy tale reinforces the similarity of Fevvers’ larger narrative to an oral tale of wonder.
Other examples as well serve to reinforce the narrative’s relations to the fairy tale, and many, if not all, seem to serve as some sort of commentary or critique on gender and the place of women in society. Let us begin with the brothel where Fevvers is brought up, a place where the clock — the same one in Fevvers’ dressing room — “stood always at either midnight or noon, the minute hand and the hour hand folded perpetually together as if in prayer, for Ma Nelson said the clock in her reception room must show the dead centre of the day or night, the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm of time.”\(^{24}\) It has the fairy tale feel of a world apart — a timeless world, stuck always, again, at the witching hour, the hour of the fairy tale. And it is remarkable for other reasons besides. As Fevvers explains it, the women within “were all suffragists in that house; oh, Nelson was a one for ‘Votes for Women’, I can tell you!” And Lizzie promptly inquires, “with an edge of steel in her voice”: “Does that seem strange to you? That the caged bird should want to see the end of cages, sir?”\(^ {25}\)

Furthermore, as Fevvers stresses, “it was a wholly female world within Ma Nelson’s door.” The dog at the door is a bitch, and all the cats within are female. “Life within those walls was governed by a sweet and loving reason. I never saw a single blow exchanged between any of the sisterhood who reared me, nor heard a cross word or voice raised in anger… the benign silence might be interrupted only by the staccato rattle of the typewriter as Grace practised her stenography or the lyric ripple of the flute upon which Esmeralda was proving to be something of a virtuoso.”\(^ {26}\) The almost fairy-tale world of the brothel — it is called, we should note, “The Academy,” not what one might
expect from such a place — is a feminist haven, and a bastion of forward-thinking women. And it is very apparent that they are women; we cannot think of them as simply “prostitutes,” defining them by their occupation, for they are much more than that. One is a virtuoso flute player, one a stenographer, and all are engaged women, concerned with the politics of their time, their rights, and their futures.

Over all this, 14-year-old Feppers presided as the Winged Victory, encased in plaster each evening, sword in hand. She says: “Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I waited, I waited… although I could not have told you for what it was I waited. Except, I assure you, I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my appearance for ever!”[27] Again recourse is made to the fairy tale, and again it is to subvert its conventions, commenting critically on the notion that the kiss of a prince could be salvation. On the contrary, rather than the wondrous transformation we associate with fairy tales, the kiss of the prince strikes one into stillness, sealing one up in one’s appearance of motionless, passive, fairy tale princess once and for all (a far cry from “happily ever after”). For Carter and for Feppers, it seems that rather than awakening Sleeping Beauty, the kiss instead shunts her into slumbering stasis.

But all good things must come to an end — at the stroke of midnight, all Cinderella’s lovely things vanish like so much smoke, and she must leave the ball. In the case of our feminist brothel, its proprietor Ma Nelson slips and is trampled by a passing carriage, and so her property is inherited by her brother, a Bible-thumping cleric, who
promptly evicts the women. We find another conscious recollection of the fairy tale, as the curtains of the brothel are opened for the first time:

It was the cold light of early dawn and how sadly, how soberly it lit that room which deceitful candles made so gorgeous! We saw, now, what we had never seen before; how the moth had nibbled the upholstery, the mice had gnawed away the Persian carpets and dust caked all the cornices. The luxury of that place had been nothing but illusion, created by the candles of midnight, and, in the dawn, all was sere, worn-out decay…

… Then we understood the house had served its turn for us, for the parlour itself began to waver and dissolve before our very eyes. Even the solidity of the sofas seemed called into question for they and the heavy leather armchairs now had the dubious air of furniture carved out of smoke.  

When the curtains are thrown open, the illusion of midnight is past — and, of course, the enchantment of the brothel vanishes. Not only is all “sere, worn-out decay,” it even becomes insubstantial, threatening to vanish before their eyes. The episode is, of course, reminiscent of Cinderella, but it recalls to a certain extent the tale of Cupid and Psyche as well, often referred to as the first ever literary fairy tale. Casting light on the mystery of the brothel, as Psyche did on Cupid, all the mystery and beauty fades before their eyes — as Cupid banishes Psyche from his palace, his invisible servants serving her no longer, and she no longer lying with him at night. It is perhaps, significant, then, that before she posed as the Winged Victory on the brothel mantelpiece, Fevvers posed as Cupid, bow and arrow in hand. And indeed, Fevvers remarks that, on the day she first flew — Lizzie, to force the issue, shoved her from the roof — it was as though her foster-
mother had “arranged [her] marriage to the wind itself.” “Yes!” Fevvers exclaims “I must be the bride of that wild, sightless, fleshless rover, or else could not exist, sir.”30 In the tale of Cupid and Psyche it is the west wind Zephyrus that carries Psyche to Cupid’s palace, and though there is certainly no direct correspondence between elements in *Nights at the Circus* and those in the tale of Cupid and Psyche — for again there is an inversion, where Fevvers plays the winged Cupid — the motifs of invisibility, the wind, and the disenchantment that can come with forbidden perception, all call that earliest of literary fairy tales to mind.31

It would seem, perhaps, that the fairy tale world of Ma Nelson’s brothel was just that: a fairy tale world, a never-never place, unlikely and unbelievable, progressive, and feminist, guided by the light of reason, doubling at nighttime as a house where “some dirty bugger poked away” at intelligent, talented women with “his incompetent instrument.” But, of course, Carter’s humanization of these women is not a fairy tale, and indeed the “fairy tale” nature of the brothel — the idea that such a thing is inherently unbelievable, like a wood populated with talking animals — serves to highlight the nature of common perceptions of prostitutes and perhaps women at large at the turn of the century; perceptions which, to an extent, persist today.

Peach does note that, “*Nights at the Circus* also reflects the way in which the prostitute during the Victorian period was beginning to be seen in more humane ways,” and that may be true, but I think that the more negative view has not disappeared so very much. For instance, in a New York Times article about brothel tourism in Spain and the
plight of women involved in the industry published on April 7, 2012, a young man who had visited a brothel, when asked whether or not the women were being forced to have sex, responded: “Maybe. But I think they are having a good time.” It seems to me that, while Carter may be recalling changing attitudes towards prostitutes at the turn of the century, the fairy tale nevertheless serves again here as a means to effect a societal and social critique. Peach acknowledges that there is an element of this as well.

This humanization of the prostitutes working in Ma Nelson’s brothel is mirrored by the humanization of the denizens of Fevvers’ next stop: the freak show and brothel of one Madame Schreck. A disturbed and twisted mirror of Ma Nelson, Schreck caters not to those who were “perturbed in their bodies” but rather “to those were troubled in their... souls.” In her subterranean dungeon we find “prodigies of nature” such as “Fanny Four-Eyes,” who has eyes where her nipples should be; “the Sleeping Beauty,” who, like her namesake, sleeps a great deal, though the Sleeping Beauty of Madame Schreck’s peep-show does not sleep for one hundred years, but rather sleeps a bit more every day; “the Wiltshire Wonder,” a woman no more than three feet tall; “Albert/Albertina,” a transvestite; and “Cobwebs,” whose face is, shockingly, covered with cobwebs. As Fevvers says, “These were the girls behind the curtains, sir, the denizens of ‘Down Below,’ all with hearts that beat, like yours, and souls that suffer, sir.”

The Wonder and Fanny Four-Eyes each present interesting cases of abuse and objectification by men. In the Wonder’s case, having taken up with a band of dwarves
she saw in a production of *Snow White*, she remarks that the dwarves “were brothers and believed in share and share alike. I fear they did not treat me kindly, for although they were little, they were men.” As for Fanny, Fevvers remarks:

I asked her once, what did she see with those mamillary eyes, and she says: “Why, same as with the top ones but lower down.” Yet I do think, for all her free, open disposition, she saw too much of the world altogether and that is why she’d come to rest with all us other dispossessed creatures, for whom there was no earthly use, in this lumber room of femininity, this rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

The remark “same as with the top ones but lower down,” demands to be interpreted in an ironic light. The implication, it seems, is that yes, Fanny sees the same things with both pairs of eyes, but one pair of eyes is more than enough for a woman to have seen too much of the world. That she has two pairs, and so must see her own degradation and oppression twice over, merely ensured that she could not bear it, and so she retreated to rest with all the other “dispossessed creatures,” who, at least, could understand her.

Fevvers calls Madame Schreck’s freakshow the “lumber room of femininity,” and indeed it seems that the women therein do correspond to certain typical views of women. Fanny’s perception of the world is through her role as a mother, her nipples having become eyes — although, ironically, and terribly, she cannot have a child of her own, for as she asks, “How can you nourish a babby on salt tears?” Sleeping Beauty is the very image of the passive woman, slipping into longer and longer periods of sleep — that is,
perfect passivity — beginning the day of her first menses. The Wiltshire Wonder is diminutive and easily cowed, so convinced of her own worthlessness that she wonders if she does not deserve the punishment of display in Madame Schreck’s so-called museum.

With no purpose left to serve, deemed monsters in the sense of Latin *monstrum* — that is, prodigies, beings from out of the ordinary — all these various representations of femininity are relegated to the freak-show to be made into objects for the sadistic gaze and lecherous attentions of those men with darkened souls, who frequent Madame Schreck’s brothel. These are all women “with souls that suffer,” but are seen nevertheless as of a piece with Yeats’ “mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street, / Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can, / Old iron, old bones, old rags…” Yet we should note too that Fevvers tells us their stories, and so humanizes them, these fantastic women, prodigies that yet represent, in some sense, the views and modes of womanhood prescribed by patriarchal society.

The effects of this movement are complicated. By making these stereotyped women literal creations, as a magical realist mode permits her to, Carter draws attention to the fact that this is what happens to women by and large in patriarchal culture — they are forced to conform to certain stereotypes. That these “denizens of the ‘Down Below’” echo fairy tale types is no accident either, as the fairy tale can often serve as a grand repository for stereotypical, archetypal roles for women. Simultaneously, however, Carter draws attention to the individuality of each of these characters, freeing them from the mold of their archetypal femininity. As in the case of the prostitutes in Ma Nelson’s
brothel, we are encouraged to see past their role as objects in a patriarchal society to their reality as active subjects.

Fevvers provides, I think, a particularly interesting case. She served the role of “Death the Protectress,” standing a silent vigil over the still, naked form of Sleeping Beauty as men came to gaze on her — a particularly vile sort of rape, since she can neither shield herself from their gaze, nor return it, nor is she even aware of it. Fevvers in this role is — as best she can be — a guardian angel of sorts, recalling her symbolic role in the novel as the New Woman, “the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground.”  

Her role is not so dissimilar from that as played in the brothel of Madame Schreck, where she represented the Winged Victory. As Aidan Day notes, however, “the problem with patriarchy’s use of woman as the Winged Victory, or, indeed, its symbolic use of any woman, is that in such use the female has no unique personality, no individuality.”

He goes on to quote, however, Lorna Sage’s study _Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form_ (1985), wherein she says: “What Carter does is give Fevvers the mobility, particularity, weight and humour of a character, and so give her back her gender. Fevvers uses signs as well as being one. Yeats in the Leda Poem [‘Leda and the Swan’] produces a grand rhetorical question: ‘Did she put on his knowledge with his power …?’ Well, annoyingly enough, yes, in this version. Fevvers’ other name, we recall, is Sophia, which means wisdom.” Thus, in the same way that Carter has given back to the other representations of womanhood their individuality, she gives it to Fevvers as well.
— and indeed, it is only in her appropriation of this womanhood, that Fevvers can become more than the simple patriarchal symbol of the Winged Victory, and become instead a symbol of the New Woman for the New Century waiting, as it were, in the wings.

We have said a good bit, at this point, about some of the ways in which Carter uses fairy tales, especially in the first third of *Nights at the Circus*. Using them strategically as intertextual references, she is able to at once recall the patriarchal biases of the tales and simultaneously invert and subvert them, so as to effect not only a critique of the fairy tale form itself, but, more significantly, of the ways in which those same biases were present in our society at the turn of the twentieth century, and remain with us today. To an extent, this is only possible within the magical realist mode, as it allows Carter to literally represent outlandish possibilities — as in the dark, fantastic forms of Madam Schreck’s brothel, but also as in the otherworldly fairy tale unreality of Madame Nelson’s — that otherwise could only be symbolic, or fantastic in a way that allows them to be easily dismissed.

Also, and I think this is important to note, Carter uses the fairy tale — and oral narrative and the trope of the storyteller in general — to emphasize the role that women can play in their own narration and creation of self. Carter writes that Fevvers “lassoed [Walser] with her narrative and dragged him along with her.”[2] Fevvers as Scheherazade — that is a large part of the significance of the *Nights* in *Nights at the Circus*. I would venture too, as I did at the end of the previous section, that in addition to these
ideological goals, Carter simply had a respect for the power of a good narrative. It seems she was aware of and respected the potential a story has to warp the perception of time and to transport one to another place, and that in the first third of *Nights at the Circus* she pays homage to that power. It is the magical realist trick of the clock striking midnight three times allows her to make this power a literal reality.

Yet this is all in the first section of the novel, set in London. The second section takes us to St. Petersburg, Walser having joined the circus to follow Fevvers and, as he says, “have my sense of wonder polished up,” and the third brings us by train and by foot through the vast taiga of Siberia. As the location grows more distant and exotic, the novel grows correspondingly more fantastic. Following this movement will afford us the opportunity to examine another aspect of the novel inscribed in its title — in, of course, the word *Circus*. Tied to M.M. Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, it will be worthwhile to examine Carter’s interest in the circus, the ways in which the interests of the magical realist mode are reflected by Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, and the ways in which the fairy tale inserts itself into this milieu.

Writing in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), Bakhtin describes the nature of carnival:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is non-carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people
(including age). All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people.\textsuperscript{43}

In its essence, carnival dissolves established social boundaries and hierarchies and overturns the social order, a movement embodied in the ritual crowning of the carnival king (and, of course, the associated “decrowning” of traditional authorities). As Bakhtin writes, carnival proclaims “the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position.”\textsuperscript{44} Its relation to magical realism is immediately apparent: both share an interest in the overturning of established hierarchies, and exploring the permeability of established boundaries; in fact, those particular aspects are not merely present in, but are strongly characteristic of both modes. And indeed, as Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque it is not at all restricted to a certain genre of literature, but rather, through the (more or less) representative form of the menippea, the carnivalesque has “manifested an extraordinary ‘protean’ capacity for changing its external form (while preserving its inner generic essence), a capacity to grow into whole novels, to combine with kindred genres, to infiltrate other large genres (for example, the Greek and ancient Christian novel).”\textsuperscript{45} I make note of this here because of the very close similarities it bears to Zipes’ argument about the adaptability and survivability of the fairy tale. It is interesting that these two very malleable genres — the carnivalesque and the fairy tale — should both be so closely tied to the literary mode of magical realism. Bakhtin locates the carnivalesque in Dostoevsky as well, but it should come as no surprise at all to find it in magical realism, particularly given that Bakhtin points to Don Quixote — sometimes
discussed as an early anticipation of much of magical realism — as “one of the greatest and at the same time most carnivalistic novels of world literature.” Dostoevsky’s fascination with the novel is well known, too, perhaps betraying the presence of the carnivalesque in his own work. Bakhtin quotes him:

“There is nothing in the world more profound and powerful than this work. It is the ultimate and greatest word yet uttered by human thought, it is the most bitter irony that a man could express, and if the world should end and people were asked there, somewhere, ‘Well, did you understand your life on earth and what conclusions have you drawn from it?’ a person could silently point to Don Quixote. ‘Here is my conclusion about life, can you judge me for it?’”

Dostoevsky and Don Quixote aside, however, the relations of the carnivalesque to the circus itself — specifically Carter’s circus, where Walser finds himself disguised as a clown in order to follow Fevvers, incognito — deserve to be discussed. By and large, I think the relations are rather apparent. The close association of the words carnival and circus in English points to the interrelation of the two as literary concepts. The circus is a place where the abnormal is the norm, where freaks and strongmen and the bizarre are the commonplace, and so the norms of the outside world are inverted at all times. As Bakhtin remarks of the carnival, the circus is “to some extent ‘life turned inside out,’ ‘the reverse side of the world’ (‘monde à l’envers’).” As the narrator of another of Carter’s novels, The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffmann, remarks, the circus folk he knew “were not in the least aware how extraordinary they were because they made their living out of the grotesque. Their bread was deformity. Their biographies, however tragic
or bizarre, were all alike in singularity...” The circus is a natural setting for a fantastic narrative or a magical realist one as, in some small sense, it is magical realism come to life — the abnormal or marvelous become normal and the normal become abnormal.

Carter herself describes it in related, though certainly not identical, terms, writing of “The Circus itself, constructed to house permanent displays of the triumphs of man’s will over gravity and over rationality...” The triumph of man’s will, of his desire, over not only the forces of nature but also the repressive rationality of his own mind; man triumphs over nature and over part of himself in the circus, inverting rationality and received notions in a world made topsy-turvy. Carter associates entering the circus, too, with certain sorts of fairy tales, writing of the paying customers that left “furs in a cloakroom that, during performance, became a treasury of skins of sable, fox and precious little rats, as though there one left behind the skin of one’s own beastliness so as not to embarrass the beasts with it.” Like the tales where a man transforms into a beast — the werewolf of Little Red Riding Hood is perhaps the most obvious example — Carter highlights the beastliness of man and woman (I presume that Russian men wore furs as well as women, in that cold), their shedding of their beast skins upon entrance into the carnival world of the circus ironically calling attention to the sad inversion that culture in many ways renders us even more beastly than animals themselves.

A similar inversion is borne out within the circus proper. Walser is studying “Lamarck’s Educated Apes,” who are known to put on a convincing portrayal of a schoolroom, one chimp serving as the Professor while the others act as students, the
whole thing eventually devolving, as schoolrooms often do, into raucous chaos. But Walser stumbles upon something rather different, as the apes rehearse a genuine lesson, complete with genuine writing on the chalkboard from the ape-Professor and genuine questions from the ape-students. When they realize that Walser is watching, of course, they revert to their usual chaotic number — but ultimately, silent complicity established by an intense exchange of glances, through which man and (sentient) ape acknowledge “their meeting across the gulf of strangeness,” the Professor has Walser join in as the object of their lesson, a dunce cap planted firmly on his head. Stripping naked save for the cap, Walser ponders: were they perhaps “grappling with Darwin’s theory — from the other end?”

The whole lesson produces in him, as one might imagine, a “dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not.” We should note, too, that all the while the Strong Man is noisily having sex with the “Ape-Man’s woman” (tellingly, she is given no other moniker than this, for the time being), who, like someone resigned to her fate, is fain to put away her emery board upon his arrival. Thus is the inverted relation between man and beast revealed, made comic, yes, but also disconcertingly real through the magical realist trick of apes’ intelligence. The apes are the educated and the cultured, studying Walser as an object, his dunce cap revealing man’s reductive stupidity in not perceiving the intelligence of the apes — and suggesting, too, perhaps, that culture does no more for the apes than it does for us, since though they have acknowledged Walser’s sentience, they appear to consider him no more worthy of respect than we do them. And,
of course, all the while, the grunts and the rhythmic rise and fall of the “twin moons of
the bum of the Strong Man” provide a constant reminder of man’s carnal, beastly nature,
not so much through the act of sex, but through the woman’s resigned detachment to
that act as the Strong Man plows away, unconcerned.⁵³

Yet another inversion follows hot on its heels, though this one is more closely
tied to the fairy tale. An escaped tiger bursts into the ring! — sending the apes and the
Strong Man, who abandons the woman without a second thought, scurrying for cover,
leaving only Walser and the woman, whose name we later learn is Mignon, a self-
conscious parallel to Goethe’s Mignon in Wilhem Meister’s Apprenticeship (1795-1796)⁵⁴,
in the ring with a ravenous tiger. Walser’s first instinct is, we might say, a noble one, the
act of a fairy tale prince. He rushes to save Mignon. But it is, Carter would have us
know, rather stupid too. She writes with wry amusement: “Walser let rip a tremendous,
wordless war-cry: here comes the Clown to kill the Tiger! Kill it, how? Strangle it with
his bare hands, perhaps?”⁵⁵ And in the end, Walser wakes up, gored for his trouble, not
by a tiger but by a tigress — “Female of the species. Deadlier than the male and all that,”
Fevvers remarks⁵⁶ — and having been rescued by the keeper of those animals, a woman
who, tellingly, goes by the name of “the Princess.” The inversion of fairy tale positions is
obvious: the role of fairy tale prince is equated with the role of Clown, and the outcome
is just as disastrous for the prince as that equation implies — he is laid low by a female
monster, and rescued by the Princess. Walser awakens in Fevvers and Lizzie’s room,
keenly aware of how his attempts at heroics rendered him instead a fool, feeling “much diminished” in the eyes of the two powerful women.

All this reveals, certainly, the carnivalesque inherent in the circus, its ability to turn the world upside down, to invert all the traditional, hierarchical structures — man and beast, cultured and uncultured, hero and heroine, active and passive — to which we are accustomed. The inversion, of course, extends even to the established paradigms of the fairy tale (though we have seen such inversions before).

To that end, the circus and the carnivalesque are in line with Fevvers’ and Carter’s feminist, ex-centric leanings in the novel. Yet it becomes clear that the circus still remains a deeply ambivalent symbol. Indeed, the chapter in which Walser wakes up in Fevvers’ room and becomes aware of the fact that “by the very ‘heroicness’ of his extravagant gesture, he had ‘made a fool of himself,’” is scarcely two pages long, and ends, importantly, with the line: “From the monkey house, echoing on the night air, came a rhythmic thud as the Ape-Man beat his woman as though she were a carpet.”57 As the chapter closes, the Ape-Man’s woman is again defined only by reference to him, and is beaten not as a person but as an object. Thus, we see that the circus, reflection of the joyful relativity of the carnivalesque, much as it may upset traditional patriarchal structures, is not free from them and is, in fact, still rife with beastliness, violence, and oppression.
Carter, in fact, hints at this dual nature of the circus and the carnivalesque before any of these significant events transpire. At the close of the very first chapter of the second section of *Nights at the Circus*, she writes:

Walser, as it turns out, has, in reality, only seen the beastly backside [of Petersburg] — a yellow light in a chemist’s window; two noseless women under a streetlamp; a drunk rolled under a doorway in a pool of vomit.. In a scummed canal, ice in the pelt of the dead dog floating there. Mist, and winter coming.

Fevvers, nestling under a Venetian chandelier in the Hotel de l’Europe, has seen nothing of the city in which Walser lodges. She has seen swans of ice with a thick encrustation of caviare between the wings; she has seen cut-glass and diamonds; she has seen all the luxurious, bright, transparent things, that make her blue eyes cross with greed.

Their paths converge only upon the brick barracks of the Imperial Circus.⁵⁸

We see that the high and the low meet only upon the brick barracks of the Imperial Circus; only in this place of curious inversions, grand spectacle and despicable violence does the wondrous, sparkling beauty of Petersburg meet its sickly underbelly of death, drunkenness and decay. Peach calls the circus as symbol “ambivalent,” and it is the right word, for the meaning of the circus moves back and forth between two opposing, contradictory valences. The circus represents a place where traditional, patriarchal notions and structures can be overturned in the joyous decrowning of the carnivalesque; yet it serves also, through its “hierarchy of male performers, pursuit of profit and oppression of subordinates,” as a potent symbol of “patriarchal capitalist society.”⁵⁹
The clowns, among whose number Walser is unfortunately forced to count
himself, serve as a particularly interesting example of Carter’s reservations about the
possibilities of the carnivalesque. Their leader is one Buffo the Great, called the Clown of
Clowns, the Master Clown, and, significantly, the Lord of Misrule, when he presides
over the “Feast of Fools, the Clowns’ Christmas Dinner.” Carter makes him out to be
the very embodiment of the carnivalesque, he who is crowned king of carnival, Lord of
Misrule, when the time comes. She writes: “Things fall apart at the very shiver of his
tread. He is himself the centre that does not hold.” He is equated with Christ as he
presides over the Clowns’ Christmas Dinner, delivering a liturgy to his twelve clown
compatriots, invoking not order or salvation but utter chaos, in a bizarre mockery of the
Last Supper. As Buffo himself explains it, filling and refilling his glass of vodka:

The mirth the clown creates grows in proportion to the humiliation he is forced
to endure… And yet, too, you might say, might you not, that the clown is the
very image of Christ… The despised and rejected, the scapegoat upon whose
stooped shoulders is heaped the fury of the mob, the object and yet — yet! also
he is the subject of laughter. For what we are, we have chosen to be.

So too are they whores; Buffo says:

… the whores of mirth, for, like a whore, we know what we are; we know we are
mere hirelings hard at work and yet those who hire us see us as beings perpetually
at play. Our work is their pleasure and so they think our work must be our
pleasure, too, so there is always an abyss between their notion of our work as
play, and ours, of their leisure as our labor.
Bakhtin writes that “Carnival brings together, unifies, wed, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.” The clowns do indeed embody this view of the world: they are Christ and the whore, subject and object, they are depressed bearers of mirth, and the more deadly serious they become, the more hilarious their act grows. The laughter of the crowd at the clowns expresses the deep ambivalence of carnival laughter, directed “toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders,” and containing at once “death and rebirth, negation (a smirk) and affirmation (rejoicing laughter).” Their act embodies the extreme inversion of the hierarchies of real life in the carnival, as the serious becomes comic, the morose, hysterical, and the object of ridiculing laughter the subject too of affirming laughter. As Day points out, the height of Buffo’s act “enacts the subversion of order and form, including his own,” as.

At the climax of his turn, everything have collapsed about him as if a grenade exploded it, he starts to deconstruct himself. His face becomes contorted by the most hideous grimaces as if he were trying to shake off the very wet white with which it is coated: shake! shake! shake out his teeth, shake off his nose, shake away his eyeballs, let all go flying off in a convulsive self-dismemberment.

He begins to spin round and round where he stands.

Then, when you think, this time, Buffo the Great must whirl apart into his constituents, as if he had turned into his own centrifuge, the terrific drum roll which accompanies this extraordinary display concludes and Buffo leaps, shaking, into the air, to fall flat on his back.

Silence.
The clowns, as Carter writes them, have an existential freedom in their role as
carnivalesque players, it is true — they are able to choose their own faces, which is
synonymous with choosing their own identity. There is a very great freedom in that. But
we see an implicit critique as well of the clowns’ unrepentant invocation of chaos. Their
act, as is their welcome to Walser in their cabin, is a “[d]ance of disintegration; and of
regression; celebration of the primal slime.” But what comes of it? In Buffo’s case, he
does not deconstruct himself, but rather comes to the very point of deconstructing
himself before he leaps into the air and we find — nothing at all has changed. He lies in
silence.

Day, in his critique of the clowns’ nihilism and their ultimate irrelevance, notes
the ironic similarity of King Lear’s intonation that “Nothing will come of nothing” to
Buffo’s emphatic utterance, “Nothing will come of nothing.” The difference, of course, is
that “King Lear questions the value of nothingness while Buffo nihilistically delights in
it.” Carter, as quoted by Peach, enunciates a similar critique, saying “The carnival has
to stop. The whole point of the feast of fools is that things went on as they did before,
after it stopped.” And indeed we see this utter pointlessness mirrored once more in the
novel:

Little Ivan’s relations with the clowns went thus: first, he was afraid of them;
then, he was entranced by them; at last he wished to become as they, so that he,
too, could terrify, enchant, vandalise, ravage, yet always stay on the safe side of
being, licensed to commit licence and yet forbidden to act, so that the baboushka
back at home could go on reddening and blackening the charcoal even if the
clowns denoted the entire city around her and nothing would really change. Nothing. The exploded buildings would float up into the air insubstantial as bubbles, and gently waft to earth again on exactly the same places where they had stood before. The corpses would writhe, spring apart at the joints, dismember — then pick up their own dismembered limbs to juggle with them before slotting them back in their good old sockets, all present and correct, sir.

So then you’d know, you’d seen the proof, that things would always be as they had always been; that nothing came of catastrophe; that chaos invoked stasis.

It was as though a fairy godmother had given each clown an ambivalent blessing when he was born: you can do anything you like as long as nobody takes you seriously.70

Bakhtin, would, I think, call this a misrepresentation of the carnivalesque, or at least an inaccurate portrayal of its possibilities, for he writes that the carnival “is not naked, absolute negation and destruction (absolute negation, like absolute affirmation, is unknown to carnival).”71 Yet Carter clearly feels that the subversive potential of the carnivalesque is ultimately no more than a nihilistic sideshow, a dethroning of established hierarchies for its own sake, unable to effect any real and lasting change, resulting only — as happens after the last performance in Petersburg to Buffo, the Clown of Clowns, the Lord of Misure — in madness and irrelevance. This mocking dismissal of the nihilism of the carnivalesque serves to reinforce the actual, historical and political interests that subsume the novel. This effect is only heightened by the presence of the stooped babushka, toiling away at home while all the great chaos of the carnivalesque causes nothing at all to change around her — her dismal circumstances remain the same, even after the very city has been detonated by carnival.
The section in Petersburg concludes with Fevvers’ catastrophic visit to the house of a man we know only as the Grand Duke. His house is described in terms that recall Lüthi’s notion of the fairy tale fascination with “gold and silver, and iron and crystal” as reflecting its stylistic drive for a world “solid and clearly formed”.

His house was the realm of minerals, of metals of vitrification — of gold, marble and crystal; pale halls and endless mirrors and glittering chandeliers that clanged like wind-bells in the draught from the front door... and a sense of frigidity, of sterility, almost palpable, almost tangible in the hard, chill surfaces and empty spaces.

The Grand Duke himself recalls the central character of one of the best known and most widely adapted fairy tales, Bluebeard. Indeed, before we are given any description of the Grand Duke’s appearance, we are made aware of the fact he pressed a “bearded mouth” to Fevvers’ palm in greeting, “giving her a sensation of hot, wet, turbulent, unpleasant hairiness.” His beard, while not blue, is the first thing we learn about him aside from his incredible wealth — wealth, which, we should note, is also a defining feature of Bluebeard in the story. Indeed, it is the aristocratic Bluebeard’s great wealth that draws his wives to him, just as it is the Grand Duke’s wealth that attracts Fevvers, whose “pupils narrowed down to the shape of £ signs” upon receiving his diamond-encrusted invitation. Like Bluebeard, too, this aristocrat is a collector of sorts — Fevvers notes that his interest in her is only as “rara avis,” and though we are not yet aware of it when Fevvers first enters his home, he intends to shrink her (through some
unexplained, magical realist narrative means) and keep her, miniaturized, locked in a Fabergé egg opened by a tiny key, like a bird in a gilded cage (to use the words of Fevers’ favorite song). The connection to fairy tales is reinforced, too, when the Grand Duke writes out Fevers’ actual name, Sophia, in vodka glasses, and Fevers shivers, feeling the “familiar, goose-walking-over-a-grave feeling that Tom-Tit-Tot suffers in the old story” — Tom-Tit-Tot being an English version of the tale of Rumpelstiltskin, where the imp’s name holds all the power. 77

And indeed, the particular threat of miniaturization recalls E.T.A Hoffmann’s German Romantic fairy tale, often regarded as his masterpiece, “The Golden Pot.” At one point, the protagonist of that tale, one Herr Anselmus, finds himself miniaturized, trapped on a magician’s mantelpiece in a glass bottle, one of a number of such unfortunate souls. The Grand Duke has his own assortment on his mantelpiece, not of people, yet, but of exquisite, nested miniatures, set in his Fabergé eggs. Fevers is to be the jewel of his collection. This connection to the tales of Hoffmann is borne out further by the Grand Duke’s trio of automata musicians, his “clockwork orchestra.”78 Such automata frequently appear in Hoffmann’s tales, from the aptly titled “Automata” to “The Sandman” — famously examined by Freud in his essay on the Uncanny — wherein a woman automaton even plays the piano.

It is fitting that this welter of fairy tale references and intertexts, recalling in so many ways the marvelous and simultaneously sinister aspect of fairy tales, accompanies what is perhaps the boldest magical realist twist in the text. Fevers feels herself, indeed,
her very sense of self, wavering under the Duke’s powerful will to objectify her, to render her a caged object for his gaze, his consumption, and his pleasure. He has snapped her sword in two, the sword she has carried since her time as the Winged Victory in Ma Nelson’s brothel, symbolizing, as Sarah Sceats points out, “the loss of Fevvers’ phallic power,” with which she was able to overcome the first Bluebeard-like character in the narrative, the occultist Parliament member.79 She is, she admits, “out of [her] depth,” feeling as Walser did when Big Ben struck midnight for a third time. She is not without her feminine wiles, however, and using, in some sense, her sexuality as a weapon — or at least using her would-be captor’s fetishistic desires against him — Fevvers undoes the Grand Duke’s breeches and begins to “manipulate him… as if her life depended on it.”80 In the blissful moment of his ejaculation the Duke is distracted, and Fevvers, seizing a miniature model of the Trans-Siberian Express, the train the circus will be taking through the Siberian wastes, tosses it onto a miniaturized train track and, in a vertigo-inducing moment, simply runs “helter-skelter down the platform” and throws herself through the train door into Lizzie’s arms, dress “ripped and clotted with semen.”81

In this episode, the fairy tale serves a twofold purpose. First, it highlights, through Carter’s evocation of the Bluebeard tale, the dangers of being caught within what we might call a masculine architecture of self — defining oneself or allowing oneself to be defined through the male gaze, through male appropriations of femininity, and the objectification of women. This is the sinister aspect of the fairy tale, and we should follow Carter in her admonition that “if many stories end with a wedding, don’t
forget how many of them start with a death — of a father, or a mother, or both; events that plunge the survivors directly into catastrophe." We should not forget the preponderance of stepmothers and stepsisters, nor that Hansel and Gretel burn the witch in her own oven, nor that Bluebeard has been married many times, and nary a wife is anywhere to be found, before he gets his comeuppance. Neither, it seems, can women — even "New Women," women with wings — lose sight, in their overconfidence, of the stricures of patriarchal society.

Second, however, the fairy tale in this instance also legitimates Fevvers’ purely marvelous escape from the hands of the Grand Duke. We are within a work of magical realism, that much is true, but the strong evocation of the fairy tale throughout Fevvers’ encounter with the Grand Duke, beginning with her walk up to his jewel-encrusted house, and continuing through the eerie fairy tales of Hoffmann, aligns the marvelous in equal measure with the fairy tale as with magical realism. In fact, the episode serves to highlight, I would suggest, the very close liaisons between magical realism and the fairy tale, showing how one form can, effortlessly, draw so close to the other.

In the final act, “Siberia,” of Nights at the Circus, the train carrying the circus across the frozen wastes, in an ironic reflection of the carnivalesque and the circuses’ inability to detonate anything in reality, explodes. Fevvers, one wing broken in the accident, and the other members of the troupe are kidnapped by a group of Russian convicts (they attacked a few government officials, landlords, etc. who violated the peasants’ sisters, wives, daughters and sweethearts) hoping that Fevvers — who is
rumored to have something going on back in England with a member of the royal family — can put in a good word with Queen Victoria, who in turn can speak to the Tsar of Russia, the Queen’s granddaughter’s husband, and have him pardon them, these convicts living in the wastes of Siberia.

Walser, however, is not among the kidnapped. Rather, he is knocked unconscious and buried under the snow and wreckage. Fevvers — and it is now acknowledged that she loves Walser and Walser loves her, though Walser is not, as yet, fit to be partnered to the New Woman, and nothing has yet come of their love — despite her searching, cannot find him before she is dragged away at gunpoint. Walser is rescued instead by a band of good-hearted lesbian murderesses — Carter remarks: “There are many reasons, most of them good ones, why a woman should want to murder her husband”83 — who, having escaped, along with their guards (“wardresses,” for they are all female) from a panoptic prison à la Bentham and Foucault erected in the wilderness, stumble upon the train in search of provisions. Hearing Walser’s muffled moans, one woman asks another: “How shall we wake him?” To which her lover replies, with some irony, “The old tales diagnose a kiss as the cure for sleeping beauties.”84

But upon receiving his kiss and awakening, it is clear that something is very wrong with Walser — he has had his memory knocked clean out of his head during the train accident. “Like the landscape, he was a perfect blank.”85 The only small piece of his identity he is able to reclaim is the humanoid chicken he played to Buffo’s demented, homicidal meat-carver in what would turn out to be the Imperial Circus’ final
performance. So it is that when the murderesses leave him behind, Walser runs off into the wilderness believing himself a chicken, arms flapping like a great — and we should note, flightless, to Fevvers’ flighted — bird, crying out “Cock-a-doodle-doo! Cock-a-doodle-dooski!” at the top of his lungs.

Lorna Sage, in her essay “Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale,” quotes Italo Calvino, who recalls Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*. Specifically, the function of “transference of the hero,” which is defined as follows: “Usually the object sought is in ‘another’ or ‘different’ realm that may be situated far away horizontally or else at a great vertical depth or height.” This function of Propp’s calls to mind Joseph Campbell’s idea, first expressed in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), that the hero must make a journey out in the wilderness, where, whatever else transpires, he will be changed, or transformed. And this transformation is again one of Propp’s functions, as it is one of the defining features of the wonder tale and the fairy tale. It is not surprising that these forms should overlap, the wonder and fairy tale and Campbell’s monomyth, for both exemplify, to some extent, a universal human drive towards storytelling.

Regardless, what we have in this third section of *Nights at the Circus* is this very transformative journey into the wilderness, the transference into a realm where the marvelous holds sway, like the primeval forest of the fairy tale. Lorna Sage identifies Walser as the hero of transference, and it is no coincidence that Walser, in this vast wilderness, with its broad expanses of snow recalling the blank page of Walser’s mind, upon which anything might well be inscribed, is apprenticed to a native shaman. This
shaman’s system of belief is utterly ludicrous — we might say marvelous — and totally
detached from the truth of reality, but it is also one in which he believes utterly:

This world, dream, dreamed idea or settled conviction extended upwards, to the
heavens, and downwards, into the bowels of the earth and the depths of the lakes
and rivers, with all whose tenants they lived on intimate terms. But it did not
extend laterally. It did not, could not, take into account any other interpretation
of the world, or dream, which was not their own one. Their dream was foolproof.
An engine-turned fabrication. A closed system. Foolproof because it was a closed
system. The Shaman’s cosmogony, for all its complexity of forms, impulses and
states of being perpetually in flux, was finite just because it was a human
invention and possessed none of the implausibility of authentic history. And
‘history’ was a concept with which they were perfectly unfamiliar, as, indeed,
they were with any kind of geography except the mystically four-dimensional one
they invented for themselves.

They knew the space they knew. They believed in a space they apprehended.
Between knowledge and belief there was no room for surmise or doubt. They
were, at the same time, pragmatic as all hell, and, intellectually speaking,
permanently three sheets in the wind.87

This shaman’s belief system was mentioned previously as one which
approximated, to an extent, the outlook of magical realism. This remains an apt
comparison. The shaman’s world, his real world, the rational, empirical world, as he
knows it — though, of course, his is neither rational or empirical, because rationality and
empiricism are largely alien concepts to him — includes all his hallucinatory fantasies; all
the marvelous events that occur merely in his mind are to him as concrete and solid as
the porridge he eats, or the bear-cub familiar that he is raising as a sacrifice.
Day makes the point that the ahistoricism and solipsism of this native cosmogony renders the tribesfolk not unlike the nihilistic clowns. Unable to extend their world “laterally,” their worldview too complexly-simple and finite to account for the vagaries and unlikelihoods of actual “history,” they can enter into history in no way; as Carter writes, their “entire sense of lived reality… impinged on real reality only inadvertently.”

Day’s point is a valid one, I think; Carter even writes at a certain point that “You could not even say” of the natives that “they were exiles from history; rather, they inhabited a temporal dimension which did not take history into account. They were a-historic. Time meant nothing to them.” Still, I would like to leave Day’s point aside and focus instead on the fact that it is nevertheless this onereic belief system which holds sway in the vast taiga, particularly for Walser. The hero of transference has indeed lost himself in the wilderness of the marvelous, in the fairy tale forest.

Furthermore, even outside of the minds of these primitive folk, the wilderness does not obey the rules of the rational, empirical world as we have know it. In the train wreck, Fevers’ clock, Ma Nelson’s clock, was lost; so too was Lizzie’s handbag, responsible, it is implied, for the trick with Big Ben, oh-so-long-ago in London. As Lizzie says:

Prepare yourself for the worst, gel; we’ve lost the bloody clock, haven’t we. Burnt to a crisp in the wreck, most likely. First your sword, now my clock. We’ll soon lose track of all time, and then what will become of us. Nekon’s clock. Gone. And that’s not all. My handbag. That’s gone too.
It is strange that the loss of a clock that never tells the proper time should cause one to lose track of time, but this is precisely what happens. Fevvers and Walser, now separated, appear to drift on entirely different currents of time. Chapters alternate between telling the story of Walser and that of Fevvers. From Fevvers' point of view no more than a week, certainly, has passed, since her separation from Walser; yet, when she does see him, he has already grown a beard thick enough that he is all but unrecognizable. Fevvers exclaims: “What a sea-change! Or, rather, forest-change, for we were as far from the sea as you can get on this planet Earth. I thought he was become a wild, wild woman, and then I saw his jaws glint, as if silver plated, but all it was, was — a beard. He has been gone from me long enough to grow a beard! Oh, my heart.” As Lizzie remarks “Something’s going on. Something we wot not of, my dear. Remember we have lost our clock; remember Father Time has many children and I think it was his bastard offspring inherited this region.”

What, though, in this marvelous wilderness, should the hero of transference find himself transformed into — and how? The answer to the second question is what one might imagine: through an encounter with Fevvers. They are reunited when Fevvers and Lizzie stumble upon the village god-hut as Walser and the Shaman prepare a sacrifice. Rather than a joyful reunion, however, Fevvers finds, to her horror, that Walser’s eyes “the cool grey of skepticism” are now, “of a glossy brilliance,” and hold in them “a vatic glare and no trace of scepticism at all. Furthermore, they seemed to have lost their power to reflect.” Having lived as a Shaman, Fevvers is no longer a marvel for him — she is
simply another element of dull reality; not marvelous at all, as Walser exists in a world of magical realism. She is simply and completely mundane. Carter writes:

Fevvers felt that shivering sensation which always visited her when mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself. She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea… In Walser’s eyes she saw herself, at last, swimming into definition, like the image on photographic paper; but, instead of Fevvers, she saw two perfect miniatures of a dream.

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser’s eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: ‘Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?’

At this moment of crisis, Walser’s gaze becomes analogous, through the word “miniatures,” to the gaze of the Grand Duke, who also sought to freeze Fevvers into a toy and an object, something without individuality. The climax of the third section of Nights at the Circus mirrors that of the first two: Fevvers confronted with a man who seeks to make her an object. Walser threatens to strip from Fevvers all her individuality, rendering her, as remarked on earlier in this section with regards to the Winged Victory, merely an idea, an idea to be appropriated and manipulated and used. Like the Winged Victory or the Angel of Death, without her individuality Fevvers is simply another patriarchal representation of femininity. As Walser himself mused earlier in the novel, Fevvers “owes it to herself to remain a woman… It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has a meaning, as an anomaly, none. As an anomaly, she would become
again, as she once had been, an exhibit in a museum of curiosities. Walser’s gaze, pulling from Fevvers her singularity as though he himself were responsible for it, stripping from her her womanhood, threatens to make her, yet again, a curiosity and an object to be gazed upon. Fevvers wonders, giddily: “Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?” Will she define herself, or will he define her?

In the end, the natives — not so accustomed to illusion as Walser and the Shaman — burst into the god-hut just as Fevvers throws her one good wing wide. Her plumage ripples “in the wind of wonder, their expelled breaths,” restoring Fevvers’ belief in herself, her belief in her own reality, her unique womanhood, and her majesty. And as she finds herself restored, Walser scrambles to his feet and Fevvers sees a haze clear from his eyes and perceives that “he was not that man he had been or would ever be again; some other hen had hatched him out.”

The hero of transference has been transformed, he has hatched — and it is Fevvers who has hatched him. On their trudge through the tundra, Lizzie and Fevvers discussed the unpleasant, de-individualizing prospect of marriage:

“The prince who rescues the Princess from the dragon’s lair is always forced to marry her, whether they’ve taken a liking to one another or not. That’s the custom. And I don’t doubt that custom will apply to the trapeze artiste who rescues the clown. The name of this custom is ‘happy ending.’”

“Marriage,” repeated Fevvers, in a murmur of awed distaste. But, after a moment, she perked up.

“Oh, but Liz — think of his malleable look. As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he’ll have the decency to give himself to me, when we
meet again, not expect the vice versa! Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well — I’ll sit on him, I’ll hatch him out, I’ll make a new man of him. I’ll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we’ll march hand in hand into the New Century —”

It is only after he has been hatched — and it is important (and amusing) that when Fevvers was looking into Walser’s vatic eyes, she was sitting atop of him — by Fevvers, by that he becomes a fit mate for the New Woman. The hero of transference has been transformed in the wilderness. Yet, there is a wild inversion of fairy tale forms. Fevvers is the Prince who saves Walser the Princess from the dragon’s lair, but Walser remains in traditional male role of the hero of transference, the one who ventures into the wilderness to be transmuted, to become fully himself.

Thus the end of the novel, or what is nearly its end, corresponds to the triumphant, marvelous transformation at fairy tale’s end, whereby our hero becomes rich or wise or marries and lives happily after. But, we should note, this story, though it draws heavily on the fairy tale, remains not precisely a fairy tale: Carter, whatever else she is, is not one to commit fully to a flight of fancy, to an unabashedly, unashamedly, uncritically happy ending. Walser is the New Man, yes, a fit mate for the New Woman, but, as Lizzie remarks when Fevvers begins to wax poetic about the glorious transformation that is the New Century — “It’s going to be more complicated than that… This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future, I see through a glass, darkly.” Carter’s novel is boisterous, joyous, even marvelous, true — but it is tempered
throughout with realism. As it must be: history, again, is the weight that tethers the balloon of magic in magical realism.

How, then, are we to read the laughter that ends the novel? Fevvers, sitting astride Walser, laughs delightedly, and her laughter begins “to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if in a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing.” And she cries: “To think I really fooled you! It just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence.” I have pointed out previously how Fevvers’ confidence trick is, at least in part, Carter’s confidence trick in getting us to believe in her narrative at all — thus allowing her novel to escape its death on the last page. But what of the laughter?

It is, at least, a personal laughter — Fevvers and Walser are in love, and, as far as it goes, the custom of happy ending is working out just fine. Yet, it is only working out just fine because it is a custom transformed. As Walser is transmuted at the end of the Carter’s narrative, the novel *Nights at the Circus* becomes a project by which the very custom of “happy ending” is itself transformed. I would argue that the laughter grows to touch the whole world just because of this very fact — because this happy ending is a custom transformed. It is not the fairy tale happy ending of bygone days, the happy ending of the rescue of the Prince by the Princess, the Marriage and the Happily Ever After. It is a happy ending marvelously canged, as is characteristic of the fairy tale, into something greater. Happy ending need not exist any longer in some never-never land, and it need not leave behind legacies of Sleeping Beauties and Red Riding Hoods
devoured by wolves. Fevvers’ laughter is the all-encompassing laughter of a happy ending more fully itself, because, as we see, through the mode of magical realism, this fairy tale ending once more touches the world.
5: POSTSCRIPT

I would like to offer now a few, brief, concluding comments, in the interest of summing up what has come before, providing a few notes on what more might have been done, and explaining, in candid terms, why I chose to address this question of the continued vitality of the fairy tale at all, and why it might be of interest to people at large.

My goal has been, by and large, to refute Friedmar Apel’s statement, written in 1978 and cited in the Introduction to this thesis, that the fairy tale “must abandon its role as the representative form of the marvelous if it does not want to disintegrate into mere entertainment literature through a pretended harmony and detachment from the processes of life.” This seems to me entirely too rash.

I might have chosen other ways, I think, to refute this hypothesis — certainly there are direct adaptations and re-imaginings of fairy tales that I might have made recourse to — but I settled on the mode of magical realism. This was, in part, because of its relatively important, or at least prominent, place in recent literary history, which lent
it, I felt, a certain gravity. It was in part, too, because magical realism seems, as I hope I have demonstrated, to address Apel’s critique of the fairy tale head on: if the fairy tale is divorced from the proceedings of life, well, magical realism is a mode that is consciously used to change and address those proceedings. And, finally, it was a mode that I knew relatively little about, and wished to understand in greater depth.

I have traced the history and outlined the characteristics of both magical realism and the fairy tale, in an effort to make them more understandable, and, at once, to demonstrate the vagaries inherent in a rigid definition of either. I hope it does not seem as though I have shirked my work in this regard. As Sartre demands for moral decisions, and as Zipes asks for with regards to understanding the specific function of a wonder tale, I would maintain that we ought examine each work in its individuality before we can judge to what genre or literary mode it belongs. I wanted, too, to illuminate the great many points of contact between the fairy tale and magical realism. As I hope I have shown, the two have much in common — even, as I mentioned in passing, to the point that one could argue for magical realism as simply one of the most current evolutions of the fairy tale. Specifically, however, I wished to illustrate magical realism’s engagement with the world, to demonstrate that, through magical realist appropriation of the fairy tale, the fairy tale might once more be brought into meaningful contact with a world that Apel claimed had no more use for it.

To that end, Angela Carter’s works served as a particularly relevant examples. I have attempted to demonstrate how she employs fairy tales in a magical realist text,
*Nights at the Circus*, to make real and relevant comments about contemporary society, thereby returning to them the key function that Apel maintains they have lost. It seems perhaps unfair to have settled on Carter — her frequent engagement with the fairy tale is well known. I would maintain, however, that Rushdie evinces a similar interest. Furthermore, recourse to fairy tales may be less common in the Latin American magical realists — I am certainly not widely enough read to comment on it — but their interest in local or indigenous lore, religion, etc. is, one might argue, not so very different from Rushdie’s or Carter’s engagement with the fairy tale. Such an expansion of the works read would be a logical enough direction to take this thesis. Regardless, it remains the case that Rushdie and Carter do engage with the fairy and folk tale, and, as I hope I have demonstrated, do return to it some of its vitality.

The observation that the growth of the mode of magical realism and the boom of fairy tale scholarship so neatly coincided — both occurred from the late 60s through to the early 80s — perhaps lends some plausibility to this connection between fairy tale and magical realism. I am no great hand at American history, but as I understand it, it is at about this time, an era of great discontent with, for instance, the rationalizations of “the man,” the Vietnam war, and the military-industrial complex, that slogans like “Power to the imagination!” and “Be realistic, demand the impossible!” were circulating — or being spray-painted on various surfaces.

If reason and the imagination have long been debated poles throughout human history, this observation suggests that American culture, at least, and perhaps Western
culture at large, swung in this period once more towards privileging the imagination. This cannot, of course, explain all of the growth of magical realism in Latin America, as that is certainly a phenomenon whose roots go much deeper than the era of the Vietnam War. In Latin American fiction, there seems to be an abiding concern with the wars of liberation of the various Latin American republics, which were generally quite violent. Nevertheless, I think there may be something to the notion of an increased recourse to the imagination as reaction against the perceived faults of rationalism, and the concurrent growth of fairy tale studies and of imaginative literary forms like magical realism (and, indeed, the fantasy of authors like Tolkien).

At a certain point, rationality seems incapable of accounting for everything that goes on in our lives. It may even seem the culprit for the terrible things that go on, as we invent, to take a well-worn example, ever more creative and effective ways of murdering one another. At any rate, all too often, it seems that people find there is no reasonable order at all in life. In cases like these, we need imagination, to account for these deficiencies of reason and rationality. It is here that the fairy tale and magical realism, as forms that tap into the imaginative in order to reflect on reality, become noteworthy, and, I would say, praiseworthy.

Children, we know, are drawn to fairy tales. I was no different. I may be different, however, in that I remain intrigued by fairy tales, and not simply for their long histories, or for their place as historical artifacts or vehicles of the socialization process.
All these are perfectly interesting in their own right, but at the heart of my fascination with the fairy tale is that even after the myriad studies written about them — from formalist, psychoanalytic, feminist, historical, postmodern, who knows how many other perspectives — they remain mysterious. There still remains something untouched, it seems, some stone unturned, even in these tersest and superficially simplest of narratives.

Fairy tales are often talked about in connection with myth, and though I know it has been the fashion to critique mythologies and to demythologize — “mythology as pathology” comes to mind as an invented, but appropriate sort of phrase — I still feel that these forms of story have not lost their purpose. It may be an illusion, and perhaps I am being romantic or naïve and will think back on this in twenty years and say that I was very young, but I cannot help but feel when reading these stories that there is some wisdom in them. It is constantly receding, always evading one’s grasp and always just out of reach, but perhaps this is what keeps me — and others, for I do not think I am alone in this — returning to them. This elusive meaning, I think, is the sort of thing that Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment*, or even Max Lüthi in many of the chapters of *Once Upon a Time*, attempt to understand and explain. Whatever the case, this hint of some deeper wisdom, of something palpitating behind the surface like the magic of Roh’s magical realism, serves to fire the imagination. And it speaks, too, to the unconscious and inexpressible power of stories, and of literature.

I think that for this reason, too, we should not lose hold of the fairy tale, or relegate it to the dustbin of history. I think for this reason that it is important that
magical realism, or certain magical realists, grasp the fairy tale and reinvigorate it. It also
why I would contend that the close relations of magical realism as a mode to the fairy
tale are important, regardless of whether or not a specific magical realist text makes use of
fairy tales intertextually. Because of these close relations, magical realist texts recall the
fairy tale to us, recall the marvelous to us, and though it may serve some political or
social effect, it also serves thereby to render the world more marvelous. Again, perhaps I
am being naïve, but this seems to me to be an important thing.

These considerations are my defense of the fairy tale against the charges that it
has nothing left to offer us, that is it bankrupt, spent, exhausted. If my arguments are
convincing, they owe much of their force to the brilliance and originality of the magical
realist narratives that I have analyzed in their development.
NOTES

NOTES ON THE INTRODUCTION

3 This representation is slightly simplistic, but it suffices. For a fuller explanation, see Ibid., 41-57.
4 Angela Carter, ed. The Virago Book of Fairy Tales (London: Virago Press, 1990), xxii.
7 You can almost see the executive who came second to the idea pounding his fist on the table and demanding that somebody given him a goddamn fairy tale show, now! (Although I envision the language rather more like that of Sidney Lumet’s Network, when William Holden’s character, Max Schumacher, gets fired. But this is neither here nor there.)

NOTES ON SECTION 2: FAIRY TALES

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 18.
4 Ibid., 17.
5 I should note that Jack Zipes in Why Fairy Tales Stick makes use of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood to illustrate the evolution of the fairy tale. He has also written a book entirely devoted to the tale, The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood. I am deeply indebted to him throughout my discussion of the history of the fairy tale. The notes likely give some indication of this, but even where it is not apparent, I’m sure some of his thought is there.
6 Ibid., 94.
7 The root in, for instance, lycanthropy — a mixing of man and wolf.
8 Ibid., 96.
9 Ibid., 102.
10 Ibid.
11 For the claim that the fairy tale is a purely literary phenomenon, see Jack Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 23.
13 Jack Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell, 2.
15 Ibid., 4.
16 We might even think of the events of Plato’s Symposium here, as an obvious example of antique storytelling.


18 Ibid., 103.

19 Ibid., 116. The liturgy referred to is that of Pentecost, the symbolic color of which is red.

20 Ibid., 101.

21 Ibid., 104.

22 Ibid., 143.


24 Jack Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick, 45.

25 For more, see Jan M. Ziolkowski, Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales, 144-49.

26 Vladimir Propp, Theory and History of Folklore (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1984), 70.

27 Ibid., 74.


29 For Propp’s full discussion of the thirty-one functions of the Russian wonder tale, see the third chapter of The Morphology of the Folktale. It is worth noting, too, the similarity of this analysis to Joseph Campbell’s analysis of the Hero’s Journey or the monomyth in The Hero With A Thousand Faces.

30 Jack Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick, 50.

31 See, for instance, Max Lüthi, Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 27-28. Discussing stylistic changes made to the Sleeping Beauty/Brier Rose story, Lüthi writes: “In the final sentence the Grimm brothers return to actual fairy-tale style, which, in a few well chosen words, merely suggests the sequence of events, and which has a preference for action rather than lengthy description.” (emphasis mine). Clearly the Grimms have not been employing “actual fairy-tale” style all along.

32 Ibid., 72.

33 Ibid., 49-50.

34 Ibid., 50-51.

35 Ibid., 51.

36 Ibid., 54.

37 Ibid., 51-52.


39 Ibid., 44-45.

40 This in his famous essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” which can be viewed in its entirety online at http://bjorn.kiev.ua/librae/Tolkien/Tolkien_On_Fairy_Stories.htm.

41 Jack Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick, 50. Italics his.

42 Jan M. Ziolkowski, Fairy Tales From Before Fairy Tales, 148.

43 Jack Zipes, When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition, 2 ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 6. This same section is reprinted in When Fairy Tales Stick.

44 Jack Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick, 51.

45 Max Lüthi, Once Upon a Time, 46.

NOTES ON SECTION 3: MAGICAL REALISM

2 Ibid., 16.
3 Ibid., 17.
4 Ibid., 20.
5 Ibid., 16.
7 Ibid., 57.
9 Ibid., 85.
12 Ibid., 141.
17 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Wen-chin Ouyang, “Magical Realism and Beyond: Ideology of Fantasy,” 19.
29 Ibid., 7.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 11.
32 Ibid., 12.
33 Ibid., 14.
34 Ibid., 16.
35 Ibid., 17.
36 Angela Carter, Nights At the Circus, 10.
38 This notion of the importance of the borderline or “ex-centric” may be extended to postmodernism at large, as is done by Linda Hutcheon in her Poetics of Postmodernism (1988). A number of other aspects of magical realism might be said to be more broadly “postmodern” as well. Theo D’Haen’s essay Magical Realism and Postmodernism does just this, even going so far as to posit magical realism as the “cutting edge of postmodernism.”
39 Angela Carter, Nights At the Circus, 42.
40 Perhaps this seems reasonable — after all, Harry lives in a (relatively) realistic world that is inundated with magic. However, the magic does not well up from the ordinary, and, more and more as the series goes on, we find we are not really living in our world, but in another, fantastic realm. Harry Potter lacks historical grounding, and the unremarkable representation of magic far surpasses that of the “phenomenal world.” Furthermore, the magic is institutionalized in a way that it never is in magical realism, and (perhaps as a result) does not engender the same epistemological doubts that it does in the mode with which we are concerned. None of this, of course, is meant to disparage: I quite like the Harry Potter books. And indeed, Gene Wolfe, a brilliant author of fantasy, has called magical realism simply “Fantasy written in Spanish.” Wen-chin Ouyang, who co-edited the Companion to Magical Realism, has also admitted that the divide between fantasy and magical realism is a difficult one to maintain, and quite often is as simple as the split between ‘popular fiction’ and ‘literature.’ So we must take our divides with a grain of salt.
41 This idea was expressed by Stephen Slemen, as quoted in Faris’ Ordinary Enchantments, p. 41.
42 Wendy B. Faris, Ordinary Enchantments, 40.
3 Ibid., 49-50.
6 Chanady takes issue with Flores’ statement about magical realists not wanting “‘literature’ to get in their way” in her essay on the Territorialization of the Imaginary, cited just above.
9 I don’t know if Coleridge would necessarily have approved of this move, either. He appears to have regarded the fairy tale as quite important for his formation, and not at all as a formulaic, relatively unimaginative form, writing to Thomas Poole in October of 1797 (as quoted in John Spencer’s Imagination in Coleridge, London: MacMillan, 1978): “For from my early reading of Fairy Tales, & Genii &c &c — my mind had been habituated to the Vast — & I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions not by my sight — even at that age. Should children be permitted to read Romances, & Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii? — I know
all that has been said against it; but I have formed my faith in the affirmative. I know no other way of giving the mind a love of 'the Great,' & 'the Whole.' — Those who have been led to the same truths step by step thro’ the constant testimony of their senses, seem to me to want a sense which I possess — They contemplate nothing but parts — and all parts are necessarily little — and the Universe to them is but a mass of little things.”

10 See the introduction to Harries’ Twice Upon a Time for an overview of what she considers the “postmodern” aspects of the tales of the contesseus, specifically pp. 13-17.

11 See the second chapter of Lüthi’s Once Upon a Time for more on this, pp. 35-46.

12 Patricia Duncker, “Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter’s Bloody Chambers,” Literature and History 10:1 (1984), 6. In his Introduction to Angela Carter (part of the Macmillan Modern Novelists Series) Linden Peach provides a long list of folks who have similar issues with Carter’s perceived “failed feminism.”


14 Ibid., 137.

15 Ibid., 137-39.

16 Jack Zipes, in the final chapter of Why Fairy Tales Stick, also makes recourse to David Gross’ discussion of “refunctioning.” It is there that I first encountered the term.


18 Ibid., 110.


24 Even today we might note, in our rapidly changing world, the capacity technology has to unite us, and, simultaneously, to make us feel ever more isolated and alone, any meaningful contact with people ironically inhibited by our constant contact with them.

25 Ibid., 364-65.

26 This is not a terribly surprising notion to come from the period in which Benjamin was writing. In particular, Benjamin’s concern with intense isolation and interiority, the incommunicability of experience, &c. recall, among other works, Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (1927), Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu (1913-1927), particularly the first volume, Du côté de Chez Swann — both seminal modernist works — and even Rilke’s Duino Elegies (1912-1922). We might also make note here of the newfound popularity of book groups. They at once refute Benjamin’s statement about the isolation of novelistic consumption, and speak to the truth of it — for book groups are a means to address that inherent isolation.

27 Ibid., 372.

28 Ibid., 368-69.

29 Ibid., 372. Emphasis mine.

30 Ibid., 371.

31 Ibid., 372.


34 Scott Simpkins, “Sources of Magic Realism,” 151.
NOTES ON SECTION 5: ANGELA CARTER

1 As explained to me by Professor Vera Grant, whose German is — so far as I can tell, not speaking any myself — quite entirely up to snuff. It is, after all, her native tongue.


3 Ibid., 7.

4 Ibid., 11.

5 Ibid., 7.

6 Of course, the comparison to Helen naturally makes us think of a rather large egg, like that of a swan or an ostrich, but, in keeping with the doublet nature of Fever’s narrative, we might just as well interpret this as her having hatched — as we all do — from the egg of a real, flesh and blood woman. Professor Needle pointed this rather interesting detail out to me.


8 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 34.

9 I would like to point out that Angela Carter herself had no particular love for this term’s being applied to her own work. In an interview conducted on BBC Radio 3, she said “It’s got really no meaning at all in relation to Europe, it’s got no meaning at all in relation to Britain.” Still, plenty of critics disagree with her about the strict Latin American application of the term, and I suppose I follow them in this regard. My apologies to Angela Carter. (The interview can be accessed online at the BBC website, at the following URL: http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12245.shtml)

13 Ibid., 175.
14 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 40.
15 Ibid., 43.
16 Ibid., 34.
17 Ibid., 86-87.
18 Linden Peach, *Angela Carter*, 133.
19 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 47.
21 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 18.
22 Ibid., 12.
23 Angela Carter, and Anna Katsavos, “A Conversation With Angela Carter.”
24 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 29.
25 Ibid., 38.
26 Ibid., 38-39.
27 Ibid., 39.
28 Ibid., 49.
29 We might note here that these women recall the title of the work of Rushdie’s published three years prior to this — *Midnight’s Children*. Fewers certainly does, as she is raised in this house of midnight from the time she’s a child. However, the rest of the women do too: it is in the brothel, “The Academy” where the clock always reads midnight, that they grow into themselves as women, and it is only as a result of their time there that they are able to go on to lead successful lives (and lead them they all do, as stenographers, businesswomen, performers, etc.). It is not, perhaps, terribly significant, but it is interesting to note the many ways in which these novels echo one another. I should note that Professor Needler pointed this particular tidbit out to me.
30 Ibid., 33.
31 Indeed, Fewers’ vying with the wind — and the potential that she might, in fact, simply fall to her death, realism having prevailed over the marvelous — recalls the fate of Psyche’s two wicked sisters. They go up to a mountaintop and jump off, but the wind does not catch them. In their case, we might say that gruesome realism triumphs, as they plummet to their deaths. The wicked sisters always seem to get their comeuppance in the traditional tales.
33 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 57.
34 Ibid., 69.
35 Ibid., 68.
36 Ibid., 69.
37 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 25.
41 Quoted in Ibid.
42 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 60.
44 Ibid., 124.
Quoted in Ibid., 128.
47 Ibid., 122.
49 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 105.
50 Ibid., 108.
51 Ibid., 110.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 This observation is from a source that, to my regret, I failed to note and so, can no longer identify.
55 Ibid., 112.
56 Ibid., 113.
57 Ibid., 114-15.
58 Ibid., 104.
59 Linden Peach, *Angela Carter*, 141.
60 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 175.
61 Ibid., 117.
62 Ibid., 119.
63 Ibid.
64 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 127.
66 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 117.
67 Ibid., 125.
69 Quoted in Linden Peach, *Angela Carter*, 143.
70 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 151-52.
73 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 184.
74 Ibid., 186.
75 Ibid., 172.
76 Ibid., 185.
77 Ibid., 187.
78 Ibid., 188.
80 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 190-91.
81 Ibid., 192-93.
84 Ibid., 222.
85 Ibid.
87 Angela Carter, *Nights At the Circus*, 253.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., 265.
90 Ibid., 226.
91 Ibid., 250.
92 Ibid., 272.
93 Ibid., 289.
94 Ibid., 289-90.
95 Ibid., 161.
96 Ibid., 291.
97 Ibid., 281.
98 Ibid., 286.

1 I might very well say this anyway, though, I suppose, for different reasons.
REFERENCES


