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THE TRUTH OF THE FAIRY TALE IN SIMONE WEIL

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1. Introduction. The symbolic language of fairy tales

> It is the same with philosophical work as it is with certain pictures: they are only a heap of colors until one looks at them from a certain vantage point where they are all ordered.
>
> (Weil, *Some Reflections around the Concept of Value: On Valéry's Claim that Philosophy is Poetry*)

The relationship between philosophy and literature is as profound as it is inherently multifaceted, with roots tracing back to antiquity. During the nascent phases of human thought, before the clear demarcation of distinct domains of knowledge, myth, folklore, and fairy tales were not perceived simply as popular fantasies. Rather, they functioned as symbolic conduits of truth, articulating a primordial mode of cognition that predated the formal distinctions and structural conventions later assumed by language. It is precisely because they are custodians of profound truths, often concealed beneath their apparent simplicity, that these narrative forms possess a latent evocative power capable of engaging the most essential dimensions of human experience.

Within this framework, this article aims to explore one of the most compelling and underexplored dimensions of Simone Weil's thought:

Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine • https://rivista.thaumazein.it/index.php/thaum • ISBN: 9791222324463 • ISSN (online): 2284-2918 • DOI: 10.7413/2284-2918018

her profound relationship with fairy tales. Weil, indeed, did not regard fairy tales as mere fantastical narratives, but rather as a privileged means of accessing eternal and universal truths – veritable bridges to the transcendent.

However, before analysing in depth Weil's interpretation of fairy tales, it is necessary to offer some general introductory considerations on the symbolic language of folk narratives. These reflections can help us better understand and contextualise her thought.

«Once upon a time...» or «In a kingdom far, far away, there lived...»: fairy tales typically begin with these stereotypical formulas. These narrative conventions do not merely indicate a temporal and spatial distance; more fundamentally, they signal a detachment from the spatio-temporal coordinates that allow an event to be situated within a historical context. They underscore the ahistorical nature of fairy tales. Fairy tales, indeed, do not recount events that have occurred; what they narrate cannot be placed in a precise geographical location or a specific time.

Nevertheless, fairy tales do not merely tell fantastical stories; they do not spin tall tales [Petrosino 2013]. The «essential» word of the fairy tale possesses a truth-content. It speaks to our deepest experience. Although the opening formulas indicate that what is being recounted is a work of fiction, thereby informing us of the type of narrative, one should not infer that fairy tales convey falsehoods. The purpose of these formulas, their task, one might say, is to prepare us to cross the threshold into a symbolic world, where appearance dissolves to reveal meaning, and every word holds a fragment of ancient truth.

Adopting an allusive language using symbolic characters – such as the prince, the witch, the wizard and so on – as well as allegorical situations, such as challenges and trials,[1] fairy tales convey spiritual truths,

[1] In this article, focusing on Simone Weil's interpretation of fairy tales, we can only briefly mention – in this footnote – the rich and complex 20th-century debate on folklore. This debate concerned analytical methodologies, symbolic interpretations, and theories regarding the origins of fairy tales. It involved figures with widely different perspectives and approaches. Among them, to name just a few, were critics from the Russian Formalist school such as V. Propp and structuralist anthropologists like C. Lévi-Strauss, whose analyses converged in what was at times a polemical exchange on narrative structures. They were joined by functionalist

lessons in wisdom, and moral values that we can recognise, interpret, and apply to our lived experience.

In this sense, fairy tales can paradoxically be defined as «true lies». We generally question their truth value because they recount extraordinary adventures, are often populated by fantastic creatures, and invariably conclude with a happy ending. Lovers are reunited, villains are defeated and punished, intrigues are unveiled, goodness prevails everywhere, and what truly has value is recognised and rewarded. As we know with desperate disillusionment, this rarely, if ever, happens in the world most familiar to us, a world governed by the amoral laws of indifference and imperfection; we often forget that fairy tales do not aim to describe the world as it is, but rather to offer a symbolic image of the invisible, spiritual world where authentic and deeper values are rooted.

Read in this light, the folk tale proves inexhaustible. It invites not distraction or entertainment, but knowledge. Through its evocative language, it prepares the soul for the recognition of absolute values, not conditioned by the contingencies of the empirical world, but rather inscribed in the depths of consciousness, as an echo and reflection of the transcendent.

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anthropologists like B. Malinowski, who explored the social function of myths and narratives; psychologists and psychoanalysts such as Carl Gustav Jung and Bruno Bettelheim; folklorists and scholars of religion like Mircea Eliade and James George Frazer; and Italian writers such as Cristina Campo and Italo Calvino…Simone Weil did not actively participate in this debate. Furthermore, her approach to fairy tales differs profoundly from that of sociologists, ethnologists, folklorists, and psychoanalysts, being characterized by her unwavering emphasis on the supernatural and transcendence. This is clearly emphasized by J. P. Little in the opening pages of her article devoted to the analysis of myth and fairy tales in Simone Weil's work, where she writes: «First of all, at least in her more mature thought, she [Weil] never questioned the idea that mythology and folk tales always speak of the supernatural, of humanity's spiritual life», and further also observes: «She [Weil] would never have admitted, for example, Malinowski's proposition, which held that myths were the recording and validation of a society's institutions, nor that they served to reflect and reconcile conflicts and tensions within a society, as Lévi-Strauss believed. She could not stand Durkheim's theories, which saw the notion of God evolving from the tribe. At times, she even seems to push this need for the supernatural too far, if one is to believe a note in her *Notebooks*, where she ridicules Frazer's ideas» [Little 1978, 106-107].

It is within the framework of very similar considerations that Simone Weil recognised in fairy tales a channel for accessing eternal truths, a bridge to the transcendent dimension, identifying a profound mystical resonance in some of them.

In a letter sent to Jean Wahl from New York in November 1942, Weil confided to the philosopher her conviction, already outlined in many of her writings and in the *Notebooks*, that «one identical thought» is «expressed very precisely and with only slight differences of modality in the ancient mythologies, in the philosophies of Pherekydes, Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Plato, and the Greek Stoics; in Greek poetry of the great age; in universal folklore; in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita; in the Chinese Taoist writings, and in certain currents of Buddhism; in what remains of the sacred writings of Egypt; in the dogmas of the Christian faith and in the writings of the greatest Christian mystics, especially St. John of the Cross; and in certain heresies, especially the Cathar and Manichaean tradition» [Weil 1965, 159]. This one identical thought, she specified shortly thereafter in the same letter, is nothing other than truth itself.

For Weil, then, the truth, understood as one and identical, is expressed «with only slight differences of modality» across the most varied forms of knowledge. The fairy tale expresses this through a language distinct from that of philosophy or science – a symbolic language, one of images – which, as stated in the *Notebooks*, requires a «method» for its interpretation.[2]

The truth of a fairy tale, indeed, is not revealed through a superficial reading. It demands a prolonged, passive immersion in the literal text.

[2] In the *Notebooks*, Weil explicitly speaks of a «method for the interpretation of folklore»: «A method is necessary for the understanding of images, symbols, etc. One should not try to interpret them, but contemplate them until their significance flashes upon one. […] They should first of all be taken in a purely literal fashion, and contemplated thus, for a considerable time. Then they should be taken in a less literal fashion and contemplated thus, and so on, by degrees. One should return to the purely literal fashion of contemplating them. Meanwhile, one should drink the light, whatever it may be, springing from all these several forms of contemplation. (The spring gushing out of the rock). The above is a method for the interpretation of folklore» [Weil 2004, 334]. On attention practice and education in Simone Weil, see Caranfa 2010. This article explores the Platonic roots of Weil's thought and connects pure attention with prayer. On this point, see also Adinolfi 2021.

This is followed by extended contemplation, fueled by a pure and disinterested attention, moved by love. The spiritual content of the fairy tale is thus absorbed slowly, gradually. The reader is not meant to actively seek the meaning; rather, the text itself allows it to emerge.

In other words, one must be disposed to listen, and the spiritual meaning gradually reveals itself, penetrating consciousness without a volitional act on the part of the subject.[3] Operating through metaphor, fairy tales do not explain, but reveal; they do not argue, but awaken a form of non-discursive knowledge. The truth they convey thus requires for its reception a disposition of mind characterised by attention and inner silence. This is a «passive activity» that is not inertia, but a condition of profound openness, a receptive posture that generates inner transformation. Listeners recognise themselves in the narrative, discover their reflection in the characters, and find guidance through the trials these characters face. By stimulating self-understanding and a deeper understanding of the world for those who approach them with the right disposition, fairy tales are profoundly transformative experiences.

Weil repeatedly emphasises that folk tales allude to and refer to something else. In the symbolic language of fairy tales, a word is a sign

[3] Regarding this method, Monique Broc-Lapeyre writes that truth manifests itself as if by «mystical osmosis» and should stem not so much from the interpreter, translator, or commentator of a text, but from the text itself. She writes: «The spiritual act of understanding is pure receptivity, consent». In short, this method is an «invitation to contemplate the letter of the text, without complicating and covering it, for a pure understanding». However, Broc Lapeyre also notes that «Simone Weil's near-religious, fascinated reverence for the text's literality is matched by a complete freedom of interpretation». Weil does not merely contemplate the texts; she «solicits them, shakes them, to bring forth their eternally Christian, atemporal truth, already there before its appearance». This «technique, which she will call 'technique transcendante', explains Simone Weil's extraordinary influence». The scholar concludes that Weil does not, strictly speaking, «interpret the text; she re-infuses it. She is possessed by it, she revives and reincarnates it, she lives it» [Broc-Lapeyre 1991, 37-38]. In response to this, Massimiliano Marianelli objects that, «stemming from the Weilian notion of reading, one should speak not only of 'osmosis', but rather of the revelation of a truth that provokes an inspiration in humanity. The world [...] is indeed 'a text with multiple meanings' and therefore cannot, by itself alone, reveal its intimate truth to humanity. For it to manifest, the intervention of a superior being is necessary to provide the key to its interpretation» [Marianelli 2004, 176-177].

that does not merely denote an external object or a concept, as occurs in ordinary language. The latter is descriptive, analytical, and rational, whereas the language of the fairy tale is, by contrast, imaginative, intuitive, and spiritual. While the former explains, clarifies, and distinguishes, the latter evokes, alludes, and unifies. It evokes an «other» world, bringing together heaven and earth, divine and human.

For Simone Weil, the entire world has a symbolic structure, and thus everything can be read as a sign of an «other», higher, divine reality. The renowned Platonic myth of the «round human» is illuminating for understanding the difference between conventional and symbolic language. As we shall see later, Weil herself refers to it in a passage from her *Notebooks*, precisely on the subject of our discussion.

In Plato's *Symposium*, in order to clarify the nature of Eros, it is recounted how Zeus, to punish the ὕβρις of the round humans – originally complete, self-sufficient beings driven by the desire to ascend to Olympus and contend with the gods for their power – wishing to weaken them without destroying them, «divided them in half», cutting them in two. After this division, the philosopher concludes, «Each of us, then, is a token [σύμβολον] of a human» [*Symp*. 191d; Plato 2008, 23], the half incessantly seeking the part from which it was separated, its corresponding symbol. By seeking the part that completes it, the symbol expresses an essential bond with what it signifies, giving rise to and shaping desire. In Weil's exegesis of the myth, however, the symbol does not fulfil the function of re-establishing the connection between the two halves separated by God following the sin of pride. The unity and the integrity to which human beings aspire after the fracture are not located within the realm of immanence, but rather in that of transcendence. Weil explicitly writes: «It is not with a man that a man can be thus indissolubly united. This can only be with God» [Weil 2024, 111]. Similarly, in her *Notebooks*, she states: «The infinite desire in us for the good is the *symbolum* – what is smaller is not the good. Inequality is reversed in *Cinderella*. That too large foot ...» [Weil 1970, 163].

Therefore, for the Platonic Weil, the symbolic language of the fairy tale is a call from transcendent divine truth. It does not state it, but brings it to light, recalling it in a way that is not that of philosophical enunciation. As Weil writes: «Symbol means, moreover, a half serving as a sign» [Weil 2004, 578].

Thus, in fairy tales, the term «forest» does not only mean a physical place – wild, dangerous, characterised by dense and imposing vegetation – but is charged with a powerful symbolic meaning. It evokes the obstacle, the initiatory test that the human spirit is called upon to face and overcome. It is a place where one can easily lose one's way (consider, for instance, the «dark wood» of Dante's *Divine Comedy*), but also where one may find salvation by discovering a way through, a passage out of its darkness (as will be explored further in Weil's interpretation below). As the etymology of the word suggests, the symbol «brings together», establishing a relation to something beyond itself. It calls forth and recalls that which is absent. In Weil's thought, the symbol functions as an intermediary between the sensible and the supersensible, the visible and the invisible. Paradoxically, then, the symbol simultaneously embodies the original unity and the present rupture, while also pointing toward the possible future recomposition of these severed halves.

As J.P. Little summarises, for Weil reality everywhere bears the traces of God's passage; it is, in this sense, intrinsically symbolic. Humanity, in discerning these divine traces within the world, elaborates myths and fairy tales as narrative forms that preserve and mediate a spiritual truth never fully grasped or possessed [Little 1978].

In New York, while awaiting her passage to London, Weil amassed a considerable quantity of notes on myths, legends, and folk tales. In that anonymous and stratified body of work, she sought – as Domenico Canciani observed – the primordial wisdom that had nurtured humanity's great philosophical and religious traditions. Through those narrative threads, invisible to a distracted gaze, which «only love and attention can intercept», she attempted to «ascend to the primary source of the 'great Revelation', a common heritage of all authentic religions and spiritualities» [Canciani 2013, 18].

It is in light of this conviction that, in the letter addressed to Father Marie-Alain Couturier, known as *Letter to a Priest*, Weil wrote: «Greek mythology is full of prophecies; so are the stories drawn from European folklore, which are known as fairy tales» [Weil 1953, 20]. Elsewhere, she specified even more clearly: «Any number of accounts drawn from mythology and folklore could be translated into Christian truths without forcing or deforming anything in them, but rather, on the contrary, thus throwing a vivid light upon them. And these truths, would in their

turn, thereby take on a new clarity» [Weil 1953, 28-29]. In Weil's reading, therefore, fairy tales are far more than mere childish entertainment: treasures of spirituality «of incalculable antiquity» [Weil 1970, 273], they unveil a dimension that leads back to the Good and God.

Simone Pétrement, Weil's friend and biographer, reports that the philosopher had planned to collect the wisdom of various religious and philosophical traditions into a volume, drawing from classical and Eastern texts, folk tales, and mythical materials. Her premature death prevented her from completing this and other important projects. Yet, as we will immediately see by examining her interpretation of the symbols enclosed in fairy tales, the fragments she left us reveal a profound conviction that truth is sometimes hidden in the simplest and most forgotten places, and that even a fairy tale can lead, with light but sure steps, towards the mystery of the transcendent and the supernatural.

The ensuing pages focus on the mystical dimension of fairy tales, as evinced by interpretations of select folk narratives present in Weil's work and, especially, in her *Notebooks*.

2. Exploring the Weilian Reading of Fairy Tales through Concrete Examples

In order to analyse Simone Weil's symbolic interpretation of the fairy tale in more detail – an approach intimately connected to her personal experiences – Max Horkheimer's reflection, found in his notebooks, offers an illuminating starting point: «The child that does not experience the happiness of having its mother's words and gestures impart to it a teaching for which heaven is not merely a space for rockets but a promise of salvation will get to know new friends and substitutes only in atrophied embodiments» [Horkheimer 1978, 197]. In other words, on children's psyches – tender and malleable like wax – the impressions evoked by fairy tales leave a profound mark that shapes their lives as adults. As such, much of their behaviour will depend on the models they encountered and admired in childhood, and on the fairy tale characters with whom they identified, often without their being fully aware of it. This is precisely what happened to Simone Weil.

The young Simone loved fairy tales, especially one by the Brothers Grimm titled *Mary and the Gold and Mary and the Pitch* (origi-

nally *Frau Holle* in German). Her mother first told her this story when Simone was just three years old, confined to bed for a long time after falling ill and undergoing an appendectomy. The fairy tale recounts the story of an orphan sent into the forest by her stepmother. After much protracted and uncertain wandering, she stumbles upon a house. There, she is asked to choose between entering through a golden door or a pitch door. When she humbly opts for the pitch door, a surprising shower of gold descends upon her. Seeing her return home covered in gold, the stepmother then sends her daughter into the forest, but when she arrives at the same house and is asked the same question, the daughter proudly chooses the golden door, and is consequently deluged by a torrent of pitch.

Simone Pétrement writes that this particular fairy tale deeply affected young Simone's sensibilities and influenced her entire life. «A certain heroic bearing developed from there, from that little seed», insists Nadia Fusini [2013, 41]. What is certain is that throughout her life, Weil would always choose to pass through the pitch doors, and it was precisely that choice that conferred upon her existence the legendary character that distinguished it.

It is no surprise, then, that a philosopher whose life reflected a profound affinity with the spirit of fairy tales devoted particular attention to them in her studies. Folk narratives were so important to her that, while she was at Middlesex Hospital in London, between April 15 and August 17, 1943 (she would pass away shortly thereafter, on August 24, 1943, in a sanatorium in Ashford), she noted down in pencil, with an unsteady hand, a series of reflections on the tales collected by Charles Perrault under the title *Mother Goose Tales*.

Fairy tales, she observed, were dear to her because in them Good – with a capital G – always triumphs. Like myths and legends, they invariably contain treasures of wisdom and spirituality, and the explicit or implicit lessons they convey connect us to the ideal world of values. They inspire the courage needed for daring ventures and generous sacrifices, which in fairy tales are always crowned with success: «In the tales, when someone sets off to win a princess or any treasure, though without even knowing where to seek, then, provided he abandons all else for the sake of his quest and has no thought of return, and is untir-

ing, and is dauntless before any danger, we are sure he will succeed» [Weil 1970, 273-274].

One could thus conclude that fairy tales, with their happy endings, deceive or mislead, but Weil believed instead that they reveal the truth about reality more than any disenchanted reading. They unveil their hidden depth to those who wish to see and can see. To those who know how to read the symbols. Indeed, they teach the eye to perceive the invisible, and the ear to listen to silence. They open up, through time, to the anticipation of the eternal, provided one knows how to solve the enigma of this life and escape the insidious traps set by the prince of this world, under the alluring guises of prestige, power, and worldly success. In one word, provided one truly renounces the self for God. An ultimate test, a true ordeal, which only humility in the decisive moment, in the pure act, triumphantly overcomes:

> God has given me my being so that I may give it back to him. It is like one of those tests which resemble traps and are to be found in fairy tales or stories about initiation. If I accept this gift, it has a bad and fatal effect. Its virtue becomes apparent through a refusal. God permits me to exist while being other than He. It is up to me to refuse this permission.
> The story of 'Mary and the gold and Mary and the pitch', and other similar ones. Humility consists in the refusal to exist. It is the queen of virtues [Weil 2004, 484-485].

Moreover, since all things in this world are interwoven, as the parable of the wheat and the tares teaches, the ordeal lies in learning to discern, in mastering the art of distinction. Above all, it involves recognising God, in hearing His voice as it reveals itself and speaks to us. This is because revelation, as Giancarlo Gaeta notes, is for Simone Weil: «an inner experience of the reality of God», one that manifests itself through a multiplicity of languages, all equally inspired [Gaeta 2018, 145]. And it is this great Revelation, through its many tongues, that unveils the true God as one who has renounced His omnipotent dominion over creation, pure Good and pure Love – who, in this world, can appear only in disguise. As she writes in the *Notebooks*:

> Albanian story of the princess married to a snake. Variant of the Psyche story. There are two varieties of stories of this kind. In one, the princess is God and the animal-man is the soul; in the other, it is the reverse. The two varieties are often fused in the same story. This one is of the second variety. The snake is the son of a king of the Underworld. He wants to come upon earth and have the form of a marvellously handsome prince. But he is only allowed to have this form at night. The stepsisters burn his snake's skin and he must vanish. To find him again the princess goes down to the Underworld. She obtains permission to bring him back to earth. But first, she must go to a witch and ask her for water, and whatever loathsome drink the witch gives her she must drink it and say it is delicious. This is the *amor fati*.
>
> She is only able to find her bridegroom again because one scale has remained intact among the ashes of his skin.
>
> This is the σύμβολον of the *Symposium*, the glass slipper of *Cinderella*, the princess's ribbon in the story of the cobbler. When God has come to find us and gone away again, he leaves some token of himself. Without that, we should seek him in vain.
>
> The prince can only have his princely form at night, and for his bride. At other times he is a snake. […] God can appear only in disguise [Weil 1970, 271-272].

The task of man, then, is to reunite with God, to return to Him starting from *something* He intentionally left us when He visited us – the glass slipper, the princess's ring, and so forth – which will enable us to recognise Him when we encounter Him in another guise. For if God appears only in disguise, as in many fairy tales and myths, and even in the Gospel itself, where He takes on «the form of a servant» [Phil. 2:7], only those who recognise Him in the beggar, the stranger, the wretched man dying on the cross like a criminal will be saved.

In *God's Quest for Man*, Weil examines the Scottish tale of the *Duke of Norway*, a story to which she attaches particular importance and one she continuously reflects upon in the pages of her *Notebooks*. In her classification of myths, Little includes this fairy tale among those that metaphorically represent God's search for man [Little 1978]. In the tale, a prince takes on an animal form by day and assumes his human form only at night. A princess marries him, but one night, weary of the situation, she destroys his animal skin. He vanishes, and she must undertake a long and perilous journey in search of her beloved. When she finally finds him, she appears before him, exhausted, in the rags of a

servant girl. But the prince, who is about to marry another, has forgotten her – his soul is as if asleep, and only at the last moment, when he awakens, does he recognise her. For Weil, the mystical resonance of this fairy tale is unmistakable. It represents God's quest for humans and contains, moreover, the two moments of «God's capture of man»:

> The first takes place in the night of the unconscious, while man's consciousness is still entirely instinctive and his humanity is hidden within him; as soon as God would draw him into the light, man flees, disappears far from God, forgets Him, and prepares for an adulterous union with the flesh. God seeks man with pain and fatigue and reaches him as a beggar. God entices the flesh by means of beauty and obtains access to the soul but finds it sleeping. A term of delay in which to awaken is accorded the soul. If only it wakes an instant before the expiration of this delay, recognizes God, and chooses Him, then the soul is saved [Weil 2024, 5].

Similarly, according to Weil's symbolic interpretation, the journey undertaken by the hero in fairy tales is an allegory of a spiritual quest. In an Italian tale, a young man helps an unfortunate old woman, who, in gratitude, blesses him with the words: «May you marry the princess Belle of the World!». Upon returning home, the boy bids farewell to his father and sets off in search of the princess. He says to his father: «I am off to find the princess Belle of the World. She alone shall be my wife, and none other». He inquires of the Great Wind, which responds: «I have never heard tell of her, but I will send my breezes to search». Weil comments that «One is sure that he will find her, and that she will be much more beautiful even than he hoped. This is an image of the Good». [Weil 1970, 245].

3.Conclusion: Fairy Tales and Mystical Wisdom

It would be an error, however, to think that fairy tales reward a strong, titanic will. On the contrary, for Weil, the accomplishment of impossible feats and superhuman trials is precisely meant to break human will. Humility, perseverance, faithfulness, courage, generosity, devotion, and patience are the true virtues of the fairy tale hero and heroine. In the world, evil appears limitless, always victorious, but this

is not so in the realm of the spirit, where patient and silent dedication to a task is inevitably rewarded, as in the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale *The Six Swans*, which was the subject of one of young Simone's earliest literary reflections.

Although the plot of the fairy tale is well known, it may nonetheless be useful to recall it here, as it constitutes the seed around which many of Weil's later insights and reflections crystallised. The tale recounts how a widowed king marries a cruel woman who, through an act of sorcery, transforms his six sons into swans. Their sister, the sole one to evade the spell, is compelled to undertake a task of extreme rigour: to weave six shirts from white anemones in absolute silence, refraining from uttering a single word for six years, in order to restore her brothers' human form.

During this protracted ordeal, the princess is subjected to calumny and injustice, yet she steadfastly endures without defending herself, bound by the ascetic discipline of her vow. It is only at the critical juncture – on the brink of execution – that she completes the final garment. Casting the shirts over her brothers, she effects their metamorphosis back into human form and, now liberated from silence, is finally able to clear herself and disclose the truth.

In Weil's youthful interpretation, *The Six Swans* emerges as a paradigmatic story of sacrifice:[4]

> To make six shirts from anemones and to keep silent: this is our only way of acquiring power. […] Whoever spends six years sewing white anemones cannot be distracted by anything; they are perfectly pure flowers; but above all anemones are almost impossible to sew into shirts, and this difficulty prevents any other action from altering the purity of this six-year silence. The sole strength in the world is purity; all that which is without admixture is a fragment of the truth. Never have iridescent silks been worth as much as a beautiful diamond. The sole strength and sole virtue is to cease from acting [Pétrement 1976, 36].

Simone Pétrement comments: «It seems that for her it was the silence that saved rather than the shirts, the sacrifice more than the result of the sacrifice. […] The sufferings of the innocent redeem by them-

[4] One can read the *topos* written by Weil, *Le conte des six cygnes dans Grimm*, in Weil 1988, 57-59.

selves; a pure being acts through his mere existence; one is saved without apparent action. She will rediscover the same idea in her last writings» [Pétrement 1976, 36].

In the *Notebooks*, where she returns to reflect on this fairy tale, the silence of the sister of the six swans is compared to that of Christ, the suffering servant who, as Isaiah writes, «Mistreated and insulted, he did not open his mouth» [Isa. 53:7-8].

From this perspective, the impossible tasks and superhuman trials faced by fairy tale heroes and heroines become symbolic representations of spiritual and mystical experiences. A striking example is the tale of the cobbler who, to reach his promised princess, must traverse an immense forest. His endeavour succeeds only when he realises that he cannot clear a path by cutting down trees, as they immediately grow back. Instead, he must advance by leaping from treetop to treetop. Weil interprets this passage with the following words: «What does this mode of progression indicate, moving above evil like a man going from one treetop to another? It is not a question of abolishing evil itself, but of reaching its end. Through all sins, think of the good. Do not think of evil to be destroyed, but of the good» [Weil 1970, 246].

In other words, it is not through the muscular effort of human will that sin is eradicated and the Good attained; rather, it is through love and desire for what is good that one comes to the Good – that one is drawn to God. One cannot elevate or regenerate the soul by one's strength, just as a man cannot reach the sky by striving to leap ever higher. This is the insight Weil derives from the Grimm brothers' tale *The Brave Little Tailor*, in which a giant and a tailor compete to prove their strength. The giant hurls a stone so high that it takes a long time to fall back to earth, but the tailor releases a bird that flies ever upward and never returns. In the *Notebooks*, Weil glosses this tale with the words: «The giant's stone and the little tailor's bird. Will and grace» [Weil 1970, 93]. And in her commentary on the *Pater Noster*, she further clarifies that we are not granted even a single step toward heaven: «We do not walk vertically» [Weil 2021, 156]. But she also says: «If, however, we look heavenwards for a long time, God comes and takes us up. He raises us easily» [Weil 2021, 138].

Mysterious point of connection between the world of values and the world of facts, symbolic transposition of spiritual experiences – the

supernatural truth of the fairy tale must be re-cognised anew. It reveals itself only to those who desire to know, just as God speaks in parables only to those who listen, to those who have «ears to hear» [Mark 4, 9 – Luke 14, 35]. Thus, the interpretation of fairy tales demands a refinement of our perceptive faculties, for, as Cristina Campo insightfully observes, «To perceive is to recognize what alone has value, what alone truly exists» [Campo 2024, 31].

Evidently, this is not about refining the bodily senses. Following Plato, Simone Weil believes it is the invisible that gives meaning to the visible, and the ideal that provides sense and value to the real. Far from being mere fantasies, fairy tales reveal to us the depth of the world, its eternal, hidden meaning. As Palle Yourgrau notes, for Simone Weil, just as for the logician Kurt Gödel (who would later become a colleague of her brother, André Weil), fairy tales «represented the world seen aright» [Yourgrau 2011, 25]. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was Gödel's favourite fairy tale. The Austrian logician said: «Only fables present the world as it should be and as if it had meaning» [Yourgrau 2005, 5].

As a true, perfect mystical journey, the fairy tale hero's life unfolds along a path of death and resurrection. A poignant example is the dead child, eaten and resurrected in the Brothers Grimm's fairy tale *The Juniper Tree*, which Simone Weil, alongside *Snow White*, considers one of the many «images of Christ» found in fairy tales and myths. She writes in the *Notebooks*: «To be swallowed in order to be given back to the world, method for stealing light, sun, or fire in a great many stories. Whoever is not born anew, or from on high... » [Weil 1970, 187]. The implicit reference in this passage is clearly to the words Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in John 3:3: «Truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again».

Therefore, according to Weil, the happy ending of fairy tales must be understood correctly by referring it to its proper realm, which is not the realm of reality. It is, indeed, in the spiritual realm that evil produces nothing but evil and good produces nothing but good, as happens in fairy tales. She observes in the *Notebooks:* «In fairy and folk tales we know at once which characters are on the side of good and we are certain they will be completely successful in the end, through every trial. This exactly expresses the truth in the spiritual domain to which

the stories refer. When it is applied to the affairs of this world it is just silly» [Weil 1970, 273].

The marriage that concludes the fairy tale, the reward that the hero or heroine always receives at the end of their trials, must therefore be understood in an exclusively spiritual sense, according to Weil. They represent the mystical union between the soul and God, as spiritual inner goods. Unlike Cristina Campo, who, in her writings on fairy tales, speaks of a «surplus» regarding the gifts that the hero and the heroine receive after their ordeal: «It is the surplus of happiness promised to those who sought the kingdom of heaven first of all» [Campo 2024, 32], Weil – as Wanda Tommasi observes – works through negation alone, destroying anything that could idolatrously replace the true God. Weil is convinced that, as Tommasi further emphasises, the only happy ending found in fairy tales, as in any mystical, symbolic, or sapiential text, is the «reunion of the soul with God» [Tommasi 2023a, 16]. This reunion is the only reward, the only joy, the only recompense.

With Weil, we are – as Campo once wrote – in the hollow form, in the process of emptying and uncreation. Her pedagogy is a great spiritual teaching *via negationis* [Campo 1998]. Virtue, for Alain's Kantian pupil, is its own reward, just as the grant for any effort of attention is «to enter that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides» [Weil 2021, 26], as she understood when she was still a teenager.

But in the spiritual domain, in the realm that is its own, every pure aspiration, every authentic desire, necessarily achieves the results it seeks. For Weil, the roots of the fairy tale lie in our desire for good and truth, in our desire for God: «If there is a real desire, if the thing desired is really light, the desire for light produces it» [Weil 2021, 63], as the Eskimo fairy tale of the crow teaches, which Simone also loved: «In the eternal darkness, the crow, unable to find any food, longed for light, and the earth was illumined» [Weil 2021, 63].

No golden rain ever touched Simone Weil's life. However, after her death, when her writings began circulating – first among the small circle of those who had known her in life, and later, thanks to Albert Camus, who promoted their publication with Gallimard, they became known to an ever-widening audience – the tension towards Good and Truth that animated them deeply came to light and was recognized.

Their true value eventually emerged and asserted itself in the order of greatness that is proper to it. Not, then, in the order of carnal and external things, but in the order of mind and the order of charity. «They are three different orders», as Pascal wrote [Pascal 1995, 86].[5]

Simone Weil stated: «The object of my search is not the supernatural, but this world. The supernatural is the light. We must not presume to make an object of it, or else we degrade it» [Weil 2004, 173]. As images of spiritual truths, the myths and fairy tales embedded in our popular traditions reflect this light. Such a reflection cannot be possessed by objectifying knowledge; it can only be apprehended through attention, contemplated, and interpreted, allowing oneself, as it were, to be illuminated by it.

Nevertheless, if human beings cannot «possess an exhaustive, but always limited, fragmented, and never entirely self-dependent knowledge» of the divine mystery [Marianelli 2004, 47], then approaching and understanding the mystery of God through its reflection in fairy tales demands rigorous interpretative engagement. In Simone Weil's work, as Giancarlo Gaeta observes, this process is always carried out «under the full control of the intelligence» [Gaeta 2018, 140]. It is – we might conclude – the work of the inspired intelligence of a brilliant woman, endowed with a finely tuned ear capable of discerning the same truth expressed in diverse languages and cultural forms, and of finding deep connections even between seemingly disparate elements.

In the *Notebooks*, drawing on Plato's famous myth of the cave, Simone Weil clarifies that the fairy tale is the story of the prisoner who emerged from the cave, saw the sun, and then returned to tell others what they witnessed. Fairy tales speak to us of the «outside world», yet they do so using the language of our «inside world» – the language of the cave, which is the only one we have. They transmit these messages

[5] Cf. Blaise Pascal: «The infinite distance between body and mind points to the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity, for charity is supernatural. All the brilliance of greatness has no attraction for people who are involved in pursuits of the mind. The greatness of intellectual people is invisible to kings, the rich, captains, to all those great in a material sense. The greatness of wisdom, which is nothing if it does not come from God, is invisible to carnal and to intellectual people. They are three different orders» [Pascal 1995, 86].

through an indirect, symbolic language of images. They are not deceptive when, through this indirect language, they convey genuine spiritual experiences and allude to the supernatural. However, they turn dangerous when manipulated and «immanentised» [Tommasi 1993], because these stories and games can also create «collective hallucinations» – that is, shared illusions and false myths that ultimately reinforce our stay within the cave instead of inspiring us to leave. We read in the *Notebooks*:

> Supposing that, basing, themselves on the accounts of those who have come out of the Cave and have gone back there again, those in the Cave have made up stories, fairy tales about the outside world – perhaps quite in accordance with the truth; if one of the games played there consists of closing one's eyes and saying 'I can see the sun', and if this gives rise to collective illusions, in the long run this game will prevail on some to go outside the Cave. But it will keep a good many others inside the Cave – And then what will happen if those who play this game, taking pity on the others, want to make them see the sun? And even want to make some see it who have really gone outside, but express what they have seen in different words from those of the accounts that have served as a basis for this game! [Weil 2004, 357].

Hence, openness to the transcendent – in Weil's thought – is the very key to discerning an idol from a symbol.

By reading fairy tales as «hideaways in which some treasures of mystical wisdom are kept» [Tommasi 2023b, 54], Simone Weil demonstrated the active interplay between philosophy and literature, surmounting their abstract and sterile separation through her interpretation of the symbolic.

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[6] All quotations from Italian or French articles and volumes not published in English are by the author of this article.

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Keywords

truth; symbol; mysticism; God; Good

Abstract

In this article, the dialogue between philosophy and literature unfolds through the prism of Simone Weil's meditation on fairy tales. With their distinctive narrative structures and evocative language, fairy tales transport us into a realm of suspension – one that transcends the coordinates of ordinary space and time, embodying a symbolic and spiritual dimension. Although they recount fantastic events that never happened, fairy tales do not deceive; rather, they convey spiritual truths through symbolic figures and allegorical tableaux. A lover of Grimm's fairy tales, Simone Weil never considered them works of pure fantasy. In her view, fairy tales held a profound mystical resonance. Far from being simple entertainment for children, they unveil an inner dimension capable of opening the soul to the Good and to God.

L'articolo indaga il dialogo tra filosofia e letteratura attraverso la riflessione di Simone Weil sulla fiaba. Con le loro strutture narrative uniche e il loro linguaggio evocativo, le fiabe ci trasportano in una dimensione sospesa, che trascende le ordinarie coordinate di spazio e tempo per incarnare una dimensione simbolica e spirituale. Sebbene narrino eventi fantastici, mai accaduti, le fiabe non ingannano; piuttosto, veicolano verità spirituali attraverso figure simboliche e quadri allegorici. Grande estimatrice delle fiabe dei fratelli Grimm, Simone Weil non le considerò mai semplici opere di fantasia. Ai

suoi occhi, la fiaba custodiva una profonda risonanza mistica. Lungi dall'essere mera letteratura da intrattenimento per l'infanzia, essa dischiude una dimensione interiore capace di aprire l'anima al Bene e a Dio.

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