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Alternative Realities in Enlightenment Fairy Tales
Wieland's and Naubert's Literary Experiments

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Abstract

This article explores how late 18th-century German fairy tales negotiate the boundaries between imagination and social reality. Through close readings of selected narratives, it traces how the construction of "alternative realities" enables critical approaches that reflect the tensions of the Enlightenment period. Focusing on the works of Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) and Christiane Benedikte Naubert (1752-1819), the analysis demonstrates that marvelous elements in these tales serve as vehicles for philosophical and social reflection. By creating fictional alternatives, these Enlightenment narratives invite readers to critically engage with contemporary discourses and reimagine existing social arrangements. The article thus shows how the genre participates in a productive dialectic between reason and imagination, offering "experimental" – in the sense of tentative or exploratory – models for social critique and transformation. Employing close reading methodology, this analysis identifies three distinct modes of what can be termed "social imagining": reformist approaches that seek to improve existing structures, transformative visions that envision radical alternatives, and diagnostic perspectives that reveal fundamental incompatibilities between different orders of knowledge.

Keywords: German fairy tales, Enlightenment literature, Christoph Martin Wieland, Christiane Benedikte Naubert, imagination and reason

1. The Dialectic of Enlightenment Fairy Tales[2]

The creation of "alternative realities" – understood here not simply as speculative or fantastical worlds but as parallel, mutable constructs that coexist and interact with the observable world – is, by no means, a modern invention. Literary history offers numerous examples of the fabrication of possible worlds that enter into productive tension with empirical reality. Fiction, as a central expression of human imagination, has always enabled the exploration of social alternatives and the testing of the boundaries of possibility. In this respect, the fairy tales of the German Enlightenment prove particularly revealing texts,

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[2] This article develops themes initially examined in my Master's Thesis "Wahrheiten, die sich nicht gerne ohne Schleier zeigen – Integration von Wunderbarem und Wirklichkeit in deutschsprachigen Märchensammlungen des 18. Jahrhunderts" submitted to Friedrich Schiller University Jena in April 2024, and extends into my current doctoral research on fairy tale imagination processes in 19th-century European publications. The work has benefitted from discussions within the Excellence Cluster "Imaginamics" at the same institution.

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precisely because they emerge in an era fundamentally skeptical towards the marvelous and irrational.

The fairy tales of Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) and Christiane Benedikte Naubert (1752-1819) exemplarily demonstrate how, towards the end of the 18th century, a German-language type of fairy tale emerges only to place the marvelous and reality in a productive relationship with one another. The narrative spaces in Wieland's "Dschinnistan"[3] (1786-1789) and Naubert's "New Folk Tales of the Germans" ["Neue Volksmärchen der Deutschen"] (1789-1793) do not function as escape routes from social realities, but rather as spaces of reflection for contemporary conditions.

Wieland's poetological reflection in the preface to his collection reveals a decidedly Enlightenment-oriented approach that conceives the fairy tale's supposed detachment from reality[4] as an opportunity to practice social criticism:

> It was found that wit and humor, even philosophy and indeed philosophy of the esoteric kind, are very compatible with this popular form of poetry [the fairy tale], which is so far removed from all pretension; and that it is a very good way to introduce certain truths, which do not like to show themselves without a veil, into society: or to make those agreeable and popular which have something deterrent in serious garb (Wieland, 2007, 7-8).[5]

The present investigation shows how the fairy tales of Wieland and Naubert open up "experimental" [6] spaces through the construction of alternative realities, in which contemporary discourses are reflected upon and critically illuminated. The marvelous does not serve as world-flight but becomes a vehicle for philosophical and social reflection. Through these narratives, the Enlightenment authors engage in what can be termed as "social imagining"[7] – the literary construction and testing of possible social arrangements that invite readers to reimagine existing conditions. This process operates on multiple levels: authors imagine alternatives, characters experience them, and readers are prompted to evaluate both their own world and the fictional possibilities presented to them.

2. From Court to Cottage: Christoph Martin Wieland's Alternative Realities

As early as 1764, Christoph Martin Wieland established an early milestone for the literary significance of the fairy tale by integrating the tale of Prince Biribinker into his novel "The Adventures of Don Sylvio De Rosalva" ["Der Sieg der Natur über die Schwärmerei"]. The

[3] In this neologism Wieland combines "djinn" (genie) with the Persian suffix "-stan" (land), thus meaning "Land of the Genies".

[4] A notion, which was decisively shaped and popularized by the Brothers Grimm, who write in their preface to the second edition of the "Children's and Household Tales" ["Kinder- und Hausmärchen"] from 1819: "but the fairy tale stands apart from the world in an enclosed, undisturbed place, from which it does not look out into that world any further" (Grimm, 1952, 120), though recent decades of research have reflected more critically on this paradigm and engage with it in significantly more differentiated ways (see Hühn & Matuschek, 2014; Röhrich, 2001)

[5] Except for Wieland's "The Philosophers' Stone" in which case I am gratefully using an English translation by Jack Zipes, all translations of the original German text have been done by myself.

[6] The term "experimental" draws on the concept of literature as thought experiment, as theorized by scholars like Davenport (1983) and more recently explored by Bornmüller et al. (2019), wherein fictional narratives function as systematic explorations of hypothetical scenarios – a tradition traceable to Enlightenment concepts of "hypothetical possibilities" (Musäus, 1926, 3).

[7] The concept builds on Castoriadis' "The imaginary institution of society" (1987; original French publication from 1975) – the idea that societies create themselves through acts of imagination – applied here to analyze how fairy tales participate in this process of social self-creation.

Biribinker tale, which explicitly refers to the French tradition of the "Contes des Fées," is considered the first German-language fairy tale composition.

In the context of his work as editor of the cultural magazine "The German Mercury" ["Der Teutsche Merkur"] (1773-1789), Wieland repeatedly investigated the relationship between reason and imagination. In his essay "On the Human Inclination to Believe in Magic and Supernatural Phenomena" ["Über den Hang der Menschen an Magie und Geistererscheinungen zu glauben"] (1781), he articulated a position that was quite exceptional within the context of the Enlightenment: instead of denying or suppressing the "inclination toward the marvelous" (Wieland, 1796, 68), he recognized it as an anthropological constant and emphasized the necessity of its productive use for the Enlightenment project.

Crucially, Wieland theorizes how literature can harness this inclination productively through what he terms "Einbildungskraft" (Wieland, 1796, 68) – the imaginative faculty. He argues that in the medium of art, a tacit agreement emerges whereby authors deploy marvelous narrative elements to which readers willingly consent in order to participate in aesthetic experience, as Wieland explains: "poets, from whom the richest source of invention and interest would be taken away with the marvelous, nourish this inclination in such a seductive way that, even though we have enough understanding to see that they are deceiving us, we still willingly agree to be so pleasantly deceived" (Wieland, 1796, 69).

Against this background the "Dschinnistan" collection appears as a literary implementation of Wieland's theoretical reflections on the marvelous. In the preface to the collection, he reflects on the seemingly contradictory human inclinations: "it seems strange that two such contradictory inclinations, as the tendency towards the marvelous and the love of truth, should be equally natural, equally essential to man; and yet it is so" (Wieland, 2007, 6).

This realization leads him to the conception of the fairy tale as the literary form which can accommodate both human inclinations through the strategic deployment of the "Einbildungskraft," allowing reason and wonder to coexist as "a deceptive whole for the imagination" (Wieland, 2007, 6). Based on this theoretical framework, the "Dschinnistan" narratives function as sophisticated analytical instruments that use the marvelous strategically to examine contemporary social conditions.

2.1 Childish Dreams and Conservative Endings: "Timander and Melissa"

Wieland's "Timander and Melissa" ["Timander und Melissa"] establishes an opposition between competing modes of understanding already in the exposition. Thessaly, a country modeled after the historical Greek mainland, where "fairy magic and sorcery had been at home since ancient times," is contrasted with a hypothetical world that "from the very beginning would have devoted itself to the natural sciences" (Wieland, 2007, 196). The fairy tale framing stands in striking contrast to the initially realistic conception of the human characters. The plot of "Timander and Melissa" begins at a royal court, which is depicted as a space of political intrigue. King Siopas is characterized as a "good kind of king" through his "negative virtues," yet his rule is marked by passivity – he does nothing that "would have caused a stir in the world" (Wieland, 2007, 195). This demonstrative

inactivity of the king ultimately provokes a conspiracy among his subjects, who are displeased with his style of governance.

The first fairy tale-like element in a classical sense – a magical ring that allows King Siopas to "read the hearts of men" (Wieland, 2007, 196) – fulfills an enlightening function. Through the ring, he becomes aware of the corruption of his royal court for the first time: "either the ring was lying, or his entire court retinue was a pack of false, scheming, ungrateful, fawning, rapacious flatterers and traitors, whose sole purpose was to outwit one another, to deceive and to exploit him" (Wieland, 2007, 196-197).

The initial juxtaposition of fairy tale framing and political reality is paradigmatic of Wieland's literary procedure in his "Dschinnistan" tales. What manifests itself here at the beginning is a narrative strategy that employs the fairy tale as an instrument of critical distancing. The magical ring functions as a medium of knowledge – not by revealing marvelous secrets, but by exposing the prosaic truths of courtly power dynamics and human corruption.

King Siopas subsequently finds a successor to the throne so that he himself can turn his back on the depraved court. He flees to a rural landscape, which, at least in appearance, is inhabited by people of "innocent character." However, he only settles there after casting away the magic ring with a spell, for he does not wish "to see whether appearances would be deceiving here as well" (Wieland, 2007, 198). If the ring is a medium of knowledge, Siopas here consciously rejects it by adopting a resigned attitude: instead of striving for a true utopia, he retreats into a pseudo-idyll.

The newly appointed King Euthyfron meanwhile attempts to educate his subjects to become better people through simple virtues. However, the main narrative only unfolds with the introduction of his son, Timander. The young prince is driven by an inner "restlessness" that leads him out of his kingdom one day and into an "unpaved mountain range" (Wieland, 2007, 200). Here the youth, filled with yearning, hopes: "to find an object that would fill his entire imagination and grant him all the raptures he had anticipated, without having seen the person who might bestow them upon him" (Wieland, 2007, 200).

Timander's enthusiastic disposition prepares him for the marvelous encounter that now follows. He comes upon a "strange apparition," which he initially "was inclined to take for a product of his imagination." A flock of white doves, bearing a "marvelous giant throne," alights before the youth and presents him with the invitation to embark on an "adventure" and to take a seat upon it (Wieland, 2007, 200).

The narrator's choice of words repeatedly indicates that Timander doubts the credibility of the wondrous events, questioning whether they might be illusory. This creates a remarkable tension, since Thessaly is introduced as a place where "fairy magic and sorcery had been at home since ancient times." Rather than depicting a unified magical realm, Wieland's narrative constructs a divided fairy tale world: a rational human sphere represented by the royal household, and a marvelous fairy sphere that exists apart from ordinary reality. Timander's first impression upon his arrival in the fairy realm reveals a world of absolute harmony:

> This place awakened all the loveliest dreams of his childhood and youth at once within him. [...] An eternal summer shared dominion over these enchanted fields with zephyrs and floras; the trees never lost their foliage, nor the meadows their flowers [...]. Storms, rain, and tempests were forever banished from this happy island [...]. Everything breathed harmony and love in this earthly Elysium. There was no plant that discolored the flowers around it with its poison-

> breathing shade, no bird of prey [...], no predatory beasts, no snakes, no troublesome insects desecrated this abode of joy and voluptuous repose (Wieland, 2007, 201-202).

This fairy realm brimming with harmony is conceived not merely as a contrasting setting to the intrigue-ridden royal court, but as a far more radical narrative construction that quickly unmasks itself. This world with no seasons, changes in weather, insects or dangerous animals springs from a childlike notion of happiness that seeks to free itself from anything perceived as uncomfortable or restrictive. The idyll follows a purely self-referential logic – aimed solely at personal well-being, without regard for natural cycles and dependencies.

On his further journey through the fairy realm, Timander meets the fairy princess Pasithea. At first, he feels a passionate desire for her. However, after the two spend a night together and Timander, in the morning light, secretly removes the veil from the sleeping princess's face – which until then had concealed her features – he is astonished by her "little monkey face" (Wieland, 2007, 210) and launches into a torrent of insults. Deeply offended, Pasithea transforms him into a butterfly, though he retains the "consciousness of his former being and status" (Wieland, 2007, 212).

In his butterfly form, Timander later encounters the young girl Melissa, who once grew up as the princess daughter of former King Siopas at the court of Thessaly, but was then abducted by a good fairy, as the latter had prophesied that the child would be "poorly raised" in the human world (Wieland, 2007, 220). However, the fairy did not bring Melissa to the realm of fairies, but to a simple peasant woman. Under her care, Melissa grew up over the past years to become a "good, sensitive, and innocent girl, modest, gentle, compassionate, charitable, capable of every noble sentiment, and open to every human joy" (Wieland, 2007, 220). While the courtly world is inevitably corrupting, the combination of fairy tale intervention and rural simplicity enables the formation of an unspoiled character.

Timander, too, is ultimately made a better person through his adventure. Up to this point, he appears as a headstrong and superficial hero who, in his search for paradisiacal places and erotic fulfillment, shows little interest in the reality outside himself. Other people interest him only insofar as they relate to his own needs. As a butterfly, however, his perception fundamentally changes. When he finds Melissa sleeping and half-naked in a meadow, he feels: "instead of cursing his butterfly form, an indescribable pleasure at the thought of loving the lovely beauty purely for her own sake, without any selfish desires, and of delighting in the pure contemplation of her perfections, without, like a common lover, destroying them through his own selfish love" (Wieland, 2007, 213-214).

Finally, Timander is restored to his human form by means of a magical vial. He and Melissa return to Thessaly, where their wedding promises happiness and prosperity to the kingdom. King Siopas also reappears to discover that his daughter Melissa is still alive. He acknowledges the value of her upbringing away from the royal house: "she certainly would not have turned out that way at court" (Wieland, 2007, 220).

A truly progressive message – such as an opening up of rigid marriage principles – cannot be expected from "Timander and Melissa." Thus, Timander's father initially rejects his wish to marry Melissa on the grounds that she is merely a "country girl" (Wieland, 2007, 221). Only after it is revealed that she is, in fact, the long-lost daughter of former King Siopas, social equality is established and the marriage can be consummated. This turn of events exposes the fairy tale resolution as a conventional affirmation of aristocratic order,

leaving unresolved the question of whether the courtly corruption depicted earlier can truly be overcome through the mere education of the enlightened rulers.

This underlying conservative attitude becomes even more apparent in the grotesque resolution of the Pasithea conflict: a husband is found for the offended fairy princess who, having been raised "among such ugly monkeys" since childhood, is attracted to her "monkey face" (Wieland, 2007, 222). While this solution does indicate a certain skepticism towards superficial ideals of beauty, it remains in its exaggeration merely a comedic punchline without transformative power.

Although a socio-critical dimension unfolds in "Timander and Melissa" through the juxtaposition of realistic court and magical intervention, the tale ultimately remains tied to conventional structures. Timander's transformation into a butterfly does function as a process of moral correction, freeing him from his egotistical dreams and enabling genuine empathy. However, this individual purification ultimately results in a return to the existing order. The fairy tale-elements serve less to fundamentally question social hierarchies than to admonish their moral renewal. In the end, the social order – described as deficient in the beginning of the tale – is not overcome but merely reaffirmed, as Melissa is rehabilitated as an equal princess. The fairy tale thus corresponds to an Enlightenment reform project that imagines alternatives of education in order to improve existing structures, but not to transform them in a revolutionary manner.

2.2 Social Transformation and the Critique of Materialism: "The Philosophers' Stone"

While "Timander and Melissa" deploys the marvelous encounter as a pedagogical corrective, "The Philosophers' Stone" ["Der Stein der Weisen"] intensifies this dimension of social critique through a materialist analysis of aristocratic power structures. From the outset, King Mark is presented as the embodiment of monarchical decadence: „he was arrogant without ambition, sensuous without taste, and greedy without knowing how to be economical. [...] When his income was no longer sufficient for his expenses, he burdened his subjects with new taxes. And when they no longer had anything to give, he made money off them by selling them to his neighbors" (Wieland, 1993, 529).

This depiction reveals more than just individual failure: the progression from taxation to human trafficking illustrates how aristocratic excess inevitably degrades subjects to merchandise. The royal court thus becomes a parasitic institution that consumes its own foundations.

This structural dysfunction reproduces itself in the quality of Mark's advisors. Through miserable court management, he squanders his fortune and now seeks remedy among wandering "treasure seekers, necromancers, alchemists, and swindlers who called themselves disciples of the great Hermes" (Wieland, 1993, 530). The court mutates into a magnet for charlatans; Mark's credulity – he is described as "most gullible man in the world" (Wieland, 1993, 530) – prevents reasonable counsel from breaking this vicious cycle.

Mark's personal relationships reveal the same fundamental flaw as his economic policies: treating all resources as inexhaustibly available rather than requiring active cultivation. This aristocratic entitlement creates a systematic blindness to the labor required to maintain both financial stability and intimate bonds, evident in his indifference toward Queen

Mabillje and his nonchalance regarding her romantic entanglements with some young knights.

Into this sphere of systematic failure steps Misfragmutosiris, whose enigmatic name already signals his otherness. Mark falls under his spell because he "had a great deal of gold and a bunch of rare items with him, and he talked about huge sums of money as if they were trifles" (Wieland, 1993, 533). Misfragmutosiris claims to be over a thousand years old and to possess mysterious powers, under which "everything is possible" (Wieland, 1993, 542).

After this mysterious figure has strung King Mark along for a while and demanded an enormous quantity of precious stones from him – allegedly in order to produce the coveted philosophers' stone that would transmute base metals into gold and solve all his financial woes – Misfragmutosiris disappears without a trace. Mark is magically transformed into a donkey, flees the castle and wanders the wilderness, shying away from people who might exploit him as a beast of burden. Now he has lost not only his kingdom but also his human existence, and yet "he still yearned to possess the stone of wise, even though he was a donkey" (Wieland, 1993, 561). To rid him of this obsessive desire, a "beneficent spirit" (Wieland, 1993, 561) now appears in the fairy tale, attempting to influence him through a dream.

The most innovative literary device in Wieland's "Philosophers' Stone" lies in this central dream sequence. Mark – once again a human and still king within the dream – receives from the spirit a magical lily that enables him to transform any object into gold. Yet instead of bringing him happiness, a cascade of economic catastrophes unfolds:

> Still, the enormous amount of gold that King Mark poured into the world brought considerable inconveniences with it. The first was that the foreigners who had flocked to his court from all parts of the world to offer him their wares [...] raised their prices as soon as they were informed about his inexhaustible supply of gold. [...] The products of the craftsmen became so expensive that gold, of which there was a surplus, became cheap, and eventually it could no longer be used as a symbol of the value of things in trade (Wieland, 1993, 563-564).

The tale here demonstrates a remarkable understanding of monetary theory. The social collapse that follows this economic destabilization is developed just as systematically. The native population falls into poverty as production comes to a standstill:

> While his court life was conducted in a bountiful, sumptuous, and wasteful way, which flooded half the world with gold, most of his own subjects were starving because they were denied all opportunities to earn something. They stopped all farming and business, for who wanted to do anything when one could have all life's necessities and luxuries in all the harbors of the kingdom at all times, and in much greater quantity and quality? [...] Everyone just wanted to have a good time, and soon all their riches, which had cost them so little, were consumed in riotous living and debauchery (Wieland, 1993, 564-565).

The dream sequence becomes a precise allegory for the dangers of a purely consumption-oriented model of society and thus serves as a critique of 18th-century economic assumptions that equated national wealth with the accumulation of precious metals.[8] By playing out the logical consequences of this idea to its destructive end, the text exposes the illusion that material accumulation is sufficient to solve social problems. The fairy tale invites readers to use the experiences of an alternative literary reality to reflect on the aporias of contemporary economic theories and to reconsider forms of social organization.

The healing process in Wieland's tale, while initiated by magical intervention, unfolds primarily through a radical change of spatial and social sphere. Mark's transformation into

[8] For the centrality of bullionism in early modern economic thought, see Heckscher (1955).

a donkey and the ensuing dream indicate the beginning of a therapeutic process that frees him from the corrupted environment of the court and brings him into contact with the possibility of an alternative form of life. As a donkey, Mark roams through a natural landscape that resembles the "romantic appearance of [...] wilderness" (Wieland, 1993, 566). Here he encounters a young peasant woman whose appearance presents a striking contrast to the courtly world. The narrative stages this encounter as an erotic awakening, even though it is based on entirely different foundations than the superficial pleasures of the court – the maid embodies a "daughter of guileless nature" (Wieland, 1993, 567) and thus represents the tale's vision of uncorrupted human nature.

By eating a lily – the same flower with which he was able to turn everything to gold in his dream – Mark regains his human form, but not as King Mark; instead, he becomes a "husky peasant about thirty years of age, full of health and strength" (Wieland, 1993, 568). This transformation is accompanied by a profound psychological change: "the strangest thing about it was that he had totally believed himself to be Mark, King of Cornwall, just a few days before and had a clear memory of all the foolish things he had done during that period of his life, and yet he was thinking quite differently, felt his heart beating in an entirely different way" (Wieland, 1993, 568).

Mark, who from now on calls himself Sylvester, does not experience this change as a loss, but as an immense gain. His new identity enables him to attain a form of happiness that was impossible within the courtly sphere. The therapeutic transformation culminates in Sylvester's complete reversal of values: "he thought with horror about what his fate might have been if he had become King Mark once again. [...] if he had to choose, he would prefer to become a donkey again rather than be King Mark of Cornwall" (Wieland 1993, 568).

These reflections clarify that the alternative reality of the rural sphere functions not merely as a place of temporary respite, but as a lasting cure for the pathologies of power. The transformation into the peasant Sylvester represents his rebirth as a happier and more complete person. In this way, Wieland's fairy tale thus demonstrates that true transformation is not achieved through external privileges or material wealth, but through a fundamental change in one's living conditions and social relationships.

The healing power of the alternative reality is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the restoration of the relationship between the formerly estranged spouses. For what does Sylvester discover in conversation with the country girl he has fallen in love with? She is none other than his wife, Queen Mabillje, who had first been transformed into a goat by one of her seducers, before she, too, was changed into a young maid through the consumption of a flower and took the name Rosine.

Transformed into Sylvester and Rosine, Mark and Mabillje now encounter each other not only as new versions of themselves, but as individuals who have undergone the same process of transformation. This parallel experience of alienation from the courtly sphere creates a new foundation for a connection unmarked by courtly presence between the couple – one that was impossible in their original existence. The recognition of their shared past does not lead to nostalgic longing for their lost status, but rather to an affirmation of their new identities. Both confess their renewed love to one another: "'I'm the happiest creature in the world just as long as you remain Sylvester–' 'And I'm the happiest of men just as long as you never stop being Rosine'" (Wieland, 1993, 577).

The alternative reality of the rural sphere thus functions as an enabling space for what the tale presents as authentic relationships. Whereas King Mark and Queen Mabillje were

separated by indifference and emotional coldness, Sylvester and Rosine discover a love based on mutual respect and genuine affection. It was not the individuals themselves who were bad – after all, Sylvester and Rosine are essentially still the same people – but rather the courtly sphere that brought out the worst in them.

Wieland's "Philosophers' Stone" operates according to what might be called – in modern terms – a "poetics of possible worlds," where magical elements serve primarily as poetic vehicles to access realistic social alternatives within the Enlightenment framework of probability.[9] The rural alternative to courtly decadence presents itself not as a supernatural utopia, but as a realistic life option, characterized by simplicity, physical activity, and authentic interpersonal relationships. The marvelous thus serves as a poetic vehicle, enabling the transition between social spheres without undermining the plausibility of the depicted alternative.

The functioning of the alternative reality here differs fundamentally from that in "Timander and Melissa." Whereas the fairy realm in "Timander and Melissa" is conceived primarily as a temporary space of education from which the protagonists return to their original world, "The Philosophers' Stone" establishes the rural sphere as a permanent alternative. Mark and Mabillje remain as Sylvester and Rosine in their new existence.

Through the permanence of the alternative, the nature of social reflection is decisively altered. "Timander and Melissa" invites readers to consider improvements to existing structures, whereas "The Philosophers' Stone" raises the more radical question of whether alternative ways of life might be desirable on a lasting basis. The focus shifts from optimizing what already exists to seriously contemplating entirely different social arrangements. This marks a crucial distinction in how Enlightenment authors employ social imagining: while "Timander and Melissa" uses it reformistically to improve existing structures, "The Philosophers' Stone" mobilizes it transformatively to envision radical alternatives.

3. The Costs of Transcendence: Benedikte Naubert's "Ottilie"

With Christiane Benedikte Naubert's "New Folk Tales of the Germans," the construction of alternative realities in German-language fairy tales undergoes a decisive shift. While Wieland's "Dschinnistan" is committed to the principle of a harmonious reconciliation of reason and sentiment, Naubert's tales develop a markedly more pessimistic understanding of the marvelous. Her texts are less concerned with integrating supernatural experiences into rational concepts of life than with exploring the destructive consequences that can arise when incompatible systems of reality collide.

Naubert's "New Folk Tales," which could only be attributed to its anonymous author in 1817, do not function as utopian models of society, but rather as narrative experiments that explore the limits of social integration. The alternative realities become, in a sense, experimental setups in which tensions between individual aspirations and societal demands are not resolved but are instead fully displayed in all their complexity.

[9] While the term "possible worlds" is modern, the concept aligns with Enlightenment poetics as developed by Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, who sought to legitimate the marvelous within verisimilar frameworks (cf. Nobis, 1976, 38 & 261; Schelle, 1981, 121).

The fairy tale "Ottilie"[10] exemplifies this approach by posing a radically new question: what happens when the experience of a marvelous parallel world does not enable an individual

to improve existing conditions, but instead renders them permanently unfit for life? Here Naubert employs a different form of social imagining than Wieland – a form that does not explore the possibility of social transformation but rather diagnoses a profound incompatibility between individual and social reality.

From the very beginning, the narrative establishes two essentially incompatible worlds. The dying Princess Ottilie, cast out by her husband Rörich[11], entrusts her newborn child to the Virgin Mary. The Mother of God baptizes the child with the names Marie and Ottilie "in memory of her unfortunate mother" (Naubert, 2001, I 171) and, after the mother's death, leads the girl into the kingdom of heaven. However, Virgin Mary decides not to raise the child "for the life of the blessed" (Naubert, 2001, I 172) in the celestial sphere, but rather to prepare her for earthly existence. To this end, she gives the heavenly beings an appearance deceptive to the child's eyes, adapting them to human customs: "angels and the blessed appeared to the little earth-dweller as beautiful golden-haired youths and maidens, the festivities of heaven bore much resemblance to those on earth [...] and even the small tasks [...] were the same as those that might await her in her future earthly life" (Naubert, 2001, I 172).

In the fairy tale, the heavenly realm is thus conceived as a paradoxical pedagogical construct: an alternative reality that must deny its own alterity in order to fulfill its educational mission. This translation of the transcendent into familiar categories reveals a fundamental contradiction: the attempt to build a bridge between incompatible spheres through mimetic adaptation produces neither what might constitute an experience of heaven nor genuine preparation for the human world. Instead, a hybrid "neither-nor space" emerges – neither fully celestial nor truly earthly – and leaves little Marie inadequately prepared for both forms of existence.

The narrative voice criticizes this pedagogical project with remarkable sharpness. The direct characterization as a "half-completed education" that can "never be of great benefit" (Naubert, 2001, I 172) exposes the aporia of the heavenly educational program. The central problem does not lie in deficient execution, but in the conceptual impossibility of the undertaking itself: the intended preparation for earthly existence fails precisely because of the otherworldly environment. Marie's taste is so "infinitely refined" by the "heavenly company" (Naubert, 2001, I 172) – a refinement that implies both aesthetic sensitization and moral elevation – that this sublime state does not produce transferable education but rather leads to existential alienation.

What appears on the level of the plot as a failed pedagogical experiment functions on the level of reception as a sophisticated narrative technique. Particularly revealing in this context is the topographical concretization of the transcendent sphere: the kingdom of heaven is not located in a beyond universe that is closed off from the realm of experience, but on the moon, an empirically tangible celestial body. For the Enlightenment-era fairy tale, the moon serves as a liminal space par excellence – visible yet unreachable,

[10] Deriving from the historical Saint Odilia of Alsace (c. 660-720), whose life spawned countless legends and folk tales across German-speaking lands. These stories typically involve themes of miraculous transformation and divine favor.

[11] Rörich's cruelty exemplifies the type of corrupt ruler also embodied by King Mark in the beginning of Wieland's "Philosophers' Stone," representing the Enlightenment critique of monarchical incompetence and moral failure.

scientifically explored yet mythologically charged, part of the empirical cosmos and at the same time a projection surface for fantasies. This localization enables the text to productively exploit the tension between rational worldview and imaginative world-making.

The realization that she is on Earth's satellite is imparted to little Marie by the words of a dubious spirit who, through his tale, sows in the child a longing for her lost homeland: "do you really believe you are in heaven? – Poor deceived one, you are living on a small planet, called the moon by the inhabitants of the earth, whose main purpose is to shine upon their nights. – Can you imagine that the servant of the earth could be more beautiful than the earth itself?" (Naubert, 2001, I 176).

In this interpretative ambivalence, the epistemological crisis of the Enlightenment crystallizes; the fairy tale stages the collision of incommensurable worldviews: the moon becomes a contested terrain of competing systems of imagination – the sacred topography of divine perfection collides with the mechanistic cosmology of the Enlightenment science. This tension culminates in Marie's transgression, as she defies the prohibition of her heavenly patroness and leaves the far side of the moon. What follows is one of the most striking passages of the fairy tale:

> [...] a lake, which the eye could not take in at glance, appeared before her, and above it there was no other covering than the dusky evening sky, on whose horizon the deceived one's [Marie] dearest luminary[12] rose beautifully and terribly. Fate had willed that she had chosen precisely the hour for her daring deed in which the moon's inhabitants were anticipating an eclipse of the earth. The sun stood behind the dark planet, which cast a dreadful shadow on the luminary that the foster daughter of the saint had never before seen as anything but silver-bright and pure. The part of the earth which was not in the shadow was red as blood, and the edge of the smooth lake seemed to swim in fire from its reflection (Naubert, 2001, I 178-179).

The eclipse of the earth becomes a cosmic threshold scene in which multiple layers of meaning overlap: the blood-red earth functions as a polyvalent sign – it simultaneously evokes violence and vitality, sacrifice and regeneration, the Passion of Christ and the Fall of Man. The fiery lake that lies between Marie and earth in turn activates an intertextual web of biblical apocalyptic imagery ("lake of fire" in the Book of Revelation[13]) and ancient conceptions of liminal waters (Styx, Lethe).

The threshold scene marks the turning point of the narrative. Marie's transgression brings about the unyielding lawfulness of heaven suddenly revealing the contradictions inherent in the entire educational project. Virgin Mary finds herself in the position of having to enforce a judgment that leaves no room for mercy: "the sentence of expulsion from these dwellings of peace is irrevocable" (Naubert, 2001, I 180). It is precisely these "dwellings of peace" that prove to be a place of merciless regularity. When Saint Mary promises "not to completely abandon" (Naubert, 2001, I 181) the child on earth, the continuation of the precarious liminal existence that has defined Marie's life is already foreshadowed.

The return to earth – designated as "land of tears" (Naubert, 2001, I 181) – is accompanied by the command that Marie must now assume her earthly name, Ottilie. Upon arriving in

[12] "Luminary" translates "Gestirn," which in 18th-century usage had a broader meaning than the modern "star." According to Adelung, "Gestirn" could refer both to individual stars and, as a collective term, to "all stars, or stars in general" (Adelung, 1793-1801, II 638). The term encompassed any celestial body, as Adelung's definition of "star" includes "all luminous celestial bodies, except the sun and moon" (Adelung, 1793-1801, IV 356).

[13] The "lake of fire" appears multiple times in Revelation as the final destination of the damned (Rev., 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8).

her birthland, she is discovered by her father Rörich, who immediately recognizes and accepts her as his own long-lost daughter. However, the initial reintegration quickly proves to be illusory. The sensitivity Ottilie cultivated in heaven manifests itself as an ensemble of "talents of the sort that could only be considered supernatural" – abilities that inevitably mark the child as a stranger, one from whom "everyone recoiled" (Naubert, 2001, I 186-188). This supernatural refinement functions not as a gift, but as a stigma that stands in the way of any genuine participation in the human community. The resulting longing for the "place from which she came" (Naubert, 2001, I 186) completes a tragic symmetry of homelessness. Just as Marie's longing for earth was awakened on the moon, so now does earthly reality in Ottilie give rise to a yearning for the lost heavenly sphere.

The father's prompt insistence on arranging a marriage for Ottilie, shortly after her arrival, exposes the unbridgeable gulf between heavenly formation and earthly social order in all its brutality. Ottilie's desperate search among her earthly suitors for a "heavenly smiling John" or "golden-haired Gabriel" (Naubert, 2001, I 189) reveals more than mere romantic infatuation – it documents the impossibility of reconciling her internalized ideals with the prosaic reality of courtly marriage politics.[14] The devastating assessment – "as for perfection of soul, things looked even more concerning" (Naubert, 2001, I 189) – marks not only the moral deficiencies of the suitors, but the fundamental incommensurability of two value systems. When "the thought of a union with an earthly youth" (Naubert, 2001, I 188) fills Ottilie with revulsion, it manifests a radical self-alienation: she is unable to imagine herself as part of the human species. The pragmatic advice of the governess, that princesses "must never follow their hearts, but only consider reasons of state," clashes directly with Ottilie's internalized conception of love as an "eternal union" (Naubert, 2001, I 189).

The return of the dubious spirit marks the final escalation of Ottilie's existential crisis. This figure, who had already orchestrated Marie's heavenly disillusionment, now appears as a dark doppelganger of her own homelessness. His self-identification as an "outcast" (Naubert, 2001, I 196), born from the Old Testament's sinful union of angels and humans, mirrors Ottilie's own hybrid existence. The spirit offers Ottilie a way out, if she commits to him: "immortality! [...] The entire cosmos, all of eternity is ours, and we grant it to whomever we wish. Oh mortal girl, to fly for aeons from planet to planet in the arms of an instructing angel, to gaze upon all the wonders of creation and their most secret primal forces, in my arms, Ottilie" (Naubert, 2001, I 198).

Ottilie's desperate attempts at categorization – "are you human, an angel of light, or a spirit of the night [...]?" (Naubert, 2001, I 198-199) – reveal her complete epistemological disorientation. Fleeing from her father and a bridegroom chosen for her, she is on the verge of surrendering herself to the "tempter" (Naubert, 2001, I 207), when suddenly the Virgin Mary hears the cries for help from her former foster child and performs a miracle: "the mountain opened up, took [Ottilie] into its bosom, and closed thunderously behind her" (Naubert, 2001, I 207). At first, this may suggest a final redemption, but the last sentences of the fairy tale deconstruct this hope. It is told that the mountain into which Ottilie disappeared was now named after her, since it "was sometimes visited by the silent shade of the blessed one, who, even in the heavenly realms, still clung longingly to her

[14] Naubert's fairy tales are particularly compelling in their exploration of female perspectives and the challenges women face within patriarchal social structures. Her collection repeatedly foregrounds women's experiences of constraint and agency, as exemplified in tales like "The Short Cloak" ["Der kurze Mantel"] which has been the subject of feminist literary analysis (cf. Diamond, 1999; Martin, 2006, 98-99; Thiel, 2001).

homeland, and on moonlit nights would gladly float down to its peaceful regions" (Naubert, 2001, I 209).

The resolution of the narrative – Marie/Ottilie as an eternal wanderer between heaven and earth – crystallizes the fairy tale's radical critique of the Enlightenment fantasies of mediation. While Wieland's characters either pass through their alternative experiences temporarily (as in "Timander and Melissa") or settle permanently in alternative realities (as in "The Philosophers' Stone"), Naubert condemns her protagonist to a state of existential liminal homelessness. Whereas Wieland still explores reformist or transformative possibilities, Naubert diagnoses the fundamental incommensurability between different orders of knowledge.

"Ottilie" thus dismantles the pedagogical optimism project of the Enlightenment. The heavenly education, conceived as a bridge between transcendence and immanence, instead produces a subject fit for neither world. This tragic paradox distinguishes Naubert's vision from Wieland's tales: while the fairy in "Timander and Melissa" successfully intervenes educationally, and the benevolent spirit in "The Philosophers' Stone" enables a salutary transformation, Virgin Mary's educational experiment fails due to the impossibility of synthesizing the irreconcilable. Naubert's fairy tale thus demonstrates a third mode of social imagining – neither reformist like Wieland's "Timander and Melissa", nor transformative like his "Philosophers' Stone," but diagnostic: it reveals how exposure to transcendent alternatives can render individuals incapable of social participation.

What emerges from Naubert's portrayal is a sharp critique of idealistic pedagogy. Exposure to idealized alternatives – be they heavenly spheres or utopian models of society – is here revealed not as liberating, but as potentially destructive. In this way, Naubert formulates a fundamental critique of the Enlightenment ideal of education itself: cultivation and sensitization that are detached from the world can lead to social incapacity.

4. The Instrumentalization of the Marvelous

The fairy tales examined here illustrate how the Enlightenment narratives deploy the marvelous – precisely that element which would seem to contradict their rationalist worldview – as an instrument of critical social analysis. Through their strategic use of alternative realities, these texts develop a sophisticated typology of social imagining: Wieland's reformist mode in "Timander and Melissa" seeks to improve existing structures through temporary education; his transformative mode in "The Philosophers' Stone" permanently reimagines social arrangements; while Naubert's diagnostic mode in "Ottilie" reveals the tragic impossibility of reconciling incompatible worlds.

These different narrative strategies reveal the philosophical sophistication of the Enlightenment fairy tale. The texts operate not escapistically, but analytically – they use the marvelous to conduct thought experiments that would be impossible within realistic forms of representation. Alternative realities function as contrasting backdrops that make the deficits of existing orders visible: the corruption of the nobility in "Timander and Melissa," the materialistic delusion in "The Philosophers' Stone," and the failure of Enlightenment attempts at synthesis in "Ottilie."

The alternative worlds are not autonomous poetic spaces but carefully constructed instruments of social imagining through which the tensions between ideal and reality, between the marvelous and the rational, can be productively negotiated. By identifying these three modes of social imagining – reformist, transformative, and diagnostic –, this

analysis reveals how the Enlightenment fairy tales developed a sophisticated repertoire of critical strategies that anticipate later debates about literature's capacity to envision social change.

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