Truth is trope, a trope generates a norm or value, this value (or ideology) is no longer true. It is true that tropes are the producers of ideologies that are no longer true.”

Paul de Man

“A close examination of Donald Barthelme’s Snow White,” writes Judith Halden in a recent essay, “reveals that, in one sense, his retelling of the traditional fairy tale is nothing new. For centuries storytellers have retold tales in their own ways, embellishing the storyline with details peculiarly representative of both the individual teller and his time.” Consequently, Halden proceeds to argue, this novel, “contrary to several current analyses, is indeed a fairy tale.” Taking Max Luthi’s stylistic approach to the genre, she recognizes some “key fairy tale characteristics” in the modern Snow White (e.g., flat characterization, supernatural setting, isolation of characters in a world marked by extremes and sharply defined objects, etc.) and shows how Barthelme manipulates others (e.g., heroic action and psychological maturation) in order to “communicate his modern sensibility” and reinvigorate “the tale for his audience, making it somewhat ‘real’ for them.” The identification of those specific fairy tale elements Barthelme incorporates
or transforms in his narrative certainly adds to our understanding of his project and, of course, "in one sense" Halden's sensitive analysis of Snow White is accurate. Repetition and variation seem to be the stuff that narrative, be it folk or literary, is made on.

But if Barthelme's is yet another "retelling of the traditional fairy tale," it is also a reading of it which, like Angela Carter's "The Snow Child" and Robert Coover's "The Dead Queen," is grounded in a "new" understanding of metaphor and ideology in that traditional tale. Carter's, Coover's, and Barthelme's fictions break away from the straightforward pattern of repetition and variation which Halden believes is at work in all storytelling, to enact a more self-conscious and critical pattern of repetition and variation which names and questions the tacit premises on which the Märchen and, more in the particular, "Snow White" are built. These three powerful retellings of "Snow White" do not approach the Märchen's narrative conventions, i.e., those "key fairy tale characteristics," from a strictly stylistic perspective, but rather call our attention to, and distance themselves from, a complicitous relationship of narrative and cultural norms at work in the familiar tale. In the first part of my essay, I will propose a critical reading of the traditional tale which makes explicit the ideological nature and power of the metaphor of Snow White, in both its cultural and its narrative ramifications. In the second part of this essay, I will show how a similar reading of the tale is implicit in Barthelme's, Carter's and Coover's contemporary retellings of "Snow White." These fictions, I will argue, are radical re-visions of the Märchen because they are engaged in uncovering and questioning the intertwined rules of sexual reproduction and narrative production which silently authorize the tale of Snow White.

What has made the character and story of Snow White resonate so deeply in the imaginations of Western tellers and listeners alike? In the first chapter of The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer a solid feminist interpretation of the Grimm tale of "Little Snow White," which can be helpful in answering at least part of this question. Having observed that "myths and fairy tales often state and enforce culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated texts," Gilbert and Gubar choose to analyze "Little Snow White" as their primary example of a story which "dramatizes the essential but equivocal relationship between the angel-woman and the monster-woman" (MA, p 36), those two extreme mythic masks which women (writers and readers) see when glancing into "the mirror of the male-inscribed text" (MA, p 15). Why does the mirror generate "those eternal lineaments'? Gilbert and Gubar argue, on the basis of Edward Said's pointed analysis of authority and its etymological ties with the concept of author ("Auctoritas is production, invention, cause, in addition to meaning a right of possession"), that the metaphor of literary paternity is built into the very word "author." In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the author's text is a father, a progenitor, a procreator.
an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (MA, p 6) Since the author/father is also the owner of the text, he is “of course, owner/possessor of the subjects of his text, that is to say of those figures, scenes, and events—those brain children—he has both incarnated in black and white and ‘bound’ in cloth or leather” (MA, p 7)

The “angel-woman” and the “monster-woman” then are ideas about women, which have been author(iz)ed by a male voice in the case of “Little Snow White” that voice is the mirror, the looking glass which defines the very identity of Snow White (“the fairest of all”) and her stepmother (the ex-“fairest of all”) and the nature of their relationship (rivalry) On the surface of this glass the only possible female images seem to be Snow White, whose beautiful and inspiring selflessness is a translation of her death as an objet d’art in the glass coffin, and the evil Queen, whose threatening and “unnatural” craftiness must be punished with death because it is an expression of her physicality and her assertive creative energy To make things worse, the angel-woman (Snow White and the “good” Queen who gives birth to her only to die) and the monster-woman (the stepmother, the plotting Queen) share a common and seemingly inexorable fate The “new” Queen is framed in a magic looking glass just as “her predecessor—that is, her earlier self—had been framed in a window” (MA, p 37) and Snow White will be too, for “the Queen and Snow White are in some sense one while the Queen struggles to free herself from the passive Snow White in herself, Snow White must struggle to repress the assertive Queen in herself. That both women eat from the same deadly apple in the third temptation episode merely clarifies and dramatizes this point” (MA, p 41)

Gilbert’s and Gubar’s reading of “Little Snow White” confirms more traditional and influential interpretations indeed Snow White’s story symbolizes the process of sexual, psychological, and social development in women—that is, female initiation 5 But, having named the authority of the mirror, their analysis suggests that Snow White haunts our imagination also because her story silently points to the conditions of women’s socialization, to the cultural context which frames that very process of development, defining and legitimizing it, while simultaneously setting stifling boundaries for it I want to argue that the authority of the mirror does more than name Snow White’s fate in a male-inscribed text it legitimizes sexual reproduction and, at the same time, ratifies narrative production in that same text To do so, I will focus my analysis on the Grimm version not only because it is the best known, but also because it is grounded in the nineteenth-century European dominant discourse about women and the bourgeois cult of domesticity, the ideological effects of which are still with us, as the Disney version of “Snow White” and its popularity only confirm 6 A close reading of the circumstances of Snow White’s wondrous birth will help to show how the process of mirroring—as mimesis—overtly functions to ensure the truthfulness of the tale, but covertly establishes what that truth is by reflecting it.
By presiding over the protagonist's birth, the authority of the mirror operates as *movens* (to use Luthi's term) in the narrative, as it sets the entire plot in motion. Let us reread the tale's opening in the Grimm version.

Once upon a time in the middle of winter, when the flakes of snow were falling like feathers from the sky, a Queen sat at a window sewing, and the frame of the window was made of black ebony. And whilst she was sewing and looking out of the window at the snow, she pricked her finger with the needle and three drops of blood fell upon the snow. And the red looked pretty upon the white snow, and she thought to herself "Would that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window-frame".

Soon after that she had a little daughter, who was as white as snow, and as red as blood, and her hair was as black as ebony, and she was therefore called Little Snow White. And when the child was born, the Queen died.

Snow White appears to be born out of her mother's wish, without any intervention on the King's part, but actually her very birth as a character is an instance of mirroring the image of woman that her mother has internalized. Histories of religion and anthropologists tell us that white, red, and black are the colors which accompany initiation, the process of becoming a whole human being, and the child is given the parts of white, red, and black to mark her potential. Since her socialization occurs through her relationship with men (the huntsmen, the dwarves as miniature men, the Prince) and her sexuality is seen in terms of its reproductive function, she will become "whole" only when the white (semen) and the red (of menstrual blood), i.e., male and female opposites, are united "through the agency of the black (the ritual "death" involved in the initiation and marriage union)." Before that, as her name indicates, white, the color of purity and innocence, is dominant in Snow White's nature; she is a "blank page" upon which her author can write. Having recognized in the outside world what makes a woman acceptable and worthy (beauty—"the red looked pretty on the white snow"—purity, fertility, ritual death in a sexual union), the "good" mother gives birth to the absent King's wish, mimetically reproducing one of his ideas of what woman "is." A more explicit version of the tale shows the displacement for what it is.

A count and a countess drove by three mounds of white snow which made the count say, "I wish I had a girl as white as this snow." A short while later they came to three holes full of red blood, at which he said, "I wish I had a girl with cheeks as red as this blood." Finally, three black ravens flew by, at which moment
he desired a girl “with hair as black as these ravens.”

As they drove on, they encountered a girl as white as snow, as red as blood, and with hair as black as the raven, and she was Snow White. The count immediately made her sit in the coach and loved her, but the countess did not like it and thought only about how she could get rid of her.

Snow White’s birth as a character then is legitimate because of her mimetic relationship to the cultural world which produces her. It is also, when we think of it in terms of discourse rather than plot, the telling of an act of creation based on mimesis and, as such, it points to the ideological nature of the imagination which has generated it—that is, it points to the authority of the mirror as movens of more than just plot. Snow White is acceptable as a character and “Little Snow White” is acceptable as a narrative because the authority of the mirror legitimizes both. Drawing on Silvana Turzio’s and Marie-Hélène Huet’s essays may serve as an illuminating contrast since they discuss early eighteenth-century explanations of the connection between fertility of the imagination in a very different tale of magic, the French conte de fées, and monstrous births. These contes de fées, which were extremely popular among women writers and readers during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, were also discredited as implausible divertissements with no educational function and, unlike the tales Perrault collected in the same period, pretty soon fell into oblivion. The dominant scientific and intellectual trends of the time, of which Malebranche’s essay De la Recherche de la Verité is representative, denounced this kind of writing as monstrous since it was generated by an “excessive” imagination. On the basis of an argument which parallels the contemporary critique of “monstrous” literary production, Malebranche interpreted monstrous births as a sign of “aberrant desire” and “illegitimate fantasy.” According to this theory, a monstrous child was “the very image of his mother’s desire” and reproduced “the appearance of an imaginary progenitor at the legitimate father’s expense.”

Not surprisingly, since the object of his discourse is truth, Malebranche brings “real life” examples to support his thesis.

Il n'y a pas un an qu'une femme ayant considéré avec trop d'application le tableau de Saint Pie, dont on
célebrait la fête de la Canonisation, accoucha d'un enfant qui ressemblait parfaitement à la représentation de ce Saint. Il avait le visage d'un vieillard, autant qu'en est capable un enfant qui n'a point de barbe. Ses bras étaient croisés sur sa poitrine, ses yeux tournés vers le Ciel, et il avait très peu de front, parce que l'image de ce Saint étant élevée vers la voute de l'église en regardant le Ciel, n'en avait aussi presque point de front. Enfin cet enfant ressemblait fort au tableau, sur lequel sa mère l'avait formé par la force de son imagination. C'est une chose que tout Paris a pu voir aussi bien que moi, parce qu'on l'a conservé assez longtemps dans de l'esprit-de-vin.

In an instance of mimesis, which closely resembles the way in which the "good" Queen's wish reflects authoritative cultural norms, the excessively pious woman gives birth to the reproduction of a portrait. The striking similarity between the circumstances of this birth and Snow White's birth can further our understanding of the ideological premises of the narratives which frame them. A birth which threatens the father's authority is seen as "monstrous," but Snow White, whose birth implicitly strengthens the father's wish (camouflaged as the mother's), is an "angel." In a similar way, the conte de fées is monstrous because it is born out of a certain dérèglement of the imagination, while "Little Snow White," which belongs to a genre that artfully naturalizes the conventions and norms it is generated by, is not only acceptable but serves (and structuralist analyses of folktales pointed this out in the sixties) as an authoritative primary model for Western writers of fiction.

Paradoxical as it may seem for a "taie of magic," then, the story of Snow White fits Gérard Genette's definition of vraisemblable on a cultural and narrative level. "Le récit vraisemblable est donc un récit dont les actions répondent à un corps de maximes reçues comme vraies par le public auquel il s'adresse, mais ces maximes, du fait même qu'elles sont admises, restent le plus souvent implicites." The principle of respect for the norm is social as well as literary. Vraisemblance is tied to bienséance and, as Nancy K. Miller remarks in her exposition of Genette's essay "Vraisemblance et motivation," a well-made fiction does "reinscribe received ideas about the representation of life in art." Furthermore, Genette continues, "Le rapport entre le récit vraisemblable et le système de vraisemblance auquel il s'astreint est donc essentiellement muet:" norms of behavior are carried out and never explained since "elles vont absolument de soi dans le contract tacite entre l'œuvre et son public" (F II, pp. 76-77) As we read or listen to "Little Snow White" the narrative claims to tell us the truth about our world and about the nature of our fictions; at the same time, it prescriptively defines what this truth is by framing and reflecting it in ways that seem to be natural, but are culturally and narratively conventional. On the basis of this reading which makes the tale's cultural and narrative premises explicit, I would conclude that the character and story of Snow White resonate
so deeply in our Western imaginations because they constitute a crystal clear metaphor of both sexual reproduction and narrative production as authorized by a traditional ideology of representation

Barthelme's *Snow White*, Carter's "The Snow Child," and Coover's "The Dead Queen" acknowledge the power that such a metaphor has had in shaping our imaginations, but, unlike modernized retellings of "Snow White" which want to simply renew that power, they name and question its ideological and repressive nature and call for change, for a narrative whose power will rest on a different relationship with the reader and the "real" world. As James Rother points out in his discussion of Barthelme's texts, which he labels "parafictions" "Because fictions lie, parafictions, themselves uncommitted to anything as portentous as truth, can tell us how they lie, how they take us in." Each of these contemporary re-visions of "Snow White" brings to the surface the link between sexual reproduction and narrative production implicit in the tale and questions the claim to truth which "Snow White" makes on a psycho-social and narrative level. Each of the three fictions explores different narrative possibilities in this re-vision and in the process distances itself from the authority of the mirror. Having already discussed the importance of the two-fold role of the mirror, in what follows I will take each text's relationship to the authority of the mirror as the organizing principle of my readings. Coover is first because his short story focuses relentlessly on making us aware of the mirror and its framing power. Barthelme's "novel" follows since it attempts to escape that same authority by allowing Snow White to be one of the narrators, last comes Carter's miniature tale, which defies "received ideas about the representation of life in art" as it does away with the mirror in the tale altogether and yet re-presents it power in a chilling and unsettling *mise en abîme*.

In "The Dead Queen," the tale of "Little Snow White" is retold in flashbacks by the prince who has just married her the day before and is now gazing speculatively at her dead stepmother in the glass coffin which once contained his wife. The story then begins where many fairy tales end—after the wedding—and, quite unusually, at a funeral, in the past tense and in a quasi-existentialist and reflective mode, which lends itself to comic effects and parody, the prince supplements the tale as we know it with unexpected details from his magic wedding night and with a new episode at the grave site, of which he is protagonist and narrator. Puzzled first by Snow White's passionate and anything but innocent lovemaking and then by the realization that her hymen cannot be broken, the prince is moved to believe that the evil queen has plotted the whole story to free herself from the mirror and lead him—her true love—"away from the merely visible to vision, from the image to the imaged, from reflections to the projecting miracle itself, the heart, the pure snow white" (DQ, pp. 312-13). He kisses the dead queen's rubbery and cold lips twice, hoping to disenchant her, and, when nothing
happens, he leaves wounded in his pride and as nauseated as his spectators are. The story closes on his last reflection: "If this is the price of beauty, it's too high. I was glad she was dead." (DQ, p. 313)

Unlike traditional Märchen princes, Charming (if we can presume to be, as Snow White is, on a first name basis with him) is not a flat, one-dimensional character who fulfills his role and mission unquestioningly, rather, he has an inquiring mind and his self-conscious speculations seem to take the place of the traditional hero's feats. At the wedding, for instance, he is troubled, among other things, by "the true meaning of [his] bride's name" and "her taste for luxury and collapse." (DQ, pp. 307-8) The prince’s questions about Snow White challenge the truthfulness of the process of female initiation, as the traditional tale presents it, and ask us to re-examine the meaning of her name, that is, the metaphor around which that same tale is built.

Marriage, which plays an important role in folktales—particularly if they are tales of female development—is certainly a climactic moment of revelation in "The Dead Queen," but it does not function as a symbolic reconciliation of oppositions which arise out of social and psycho-sexual conflicts. Rather, it intensifies differences and it magnifies the "frozen" and ideological nature of Snow White as a metaphor. "Thrice around the world we'd gone in a bucking frenzy of love and lubricity, seven times we'd died in each other, and at last, in a state of delicious annihilation, I'd lost consciousness," recalls the prince, but the following morning they awaken to find "the bed unmussed and unbloodied, her hymen intact" (DQ, p. 312) Why?

To answer this question and clarify the implications of Charming's new understanding of Snow White's name, I find the distinction made by Paul de Man in The Rhetoric of Romanticism between trope and anthropomorphism particularly useful.

anthropomorphism is not just a trope but an identification on the level of substance. Anthropomorphism freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence which, as such, excludes all others. It is no longer a proposition but a proper name, as when the metamorphosis in Ovid's stories culminates and halts in the singleness of a proper name, Narcissus or Daphne or whatever.21

Or Snow White— as the prince senses before he enters the nuptial chamber, his bride is a proper name, an anthropomorphism, "a frozen void named Snow White." (DQ, p. 309) Her very essence, then, precludes the completion of her cycle of initiation; if she is her name, Snow White is not an anthropomorphism of "snow" or "whiteness," but of whatever "freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations" her tale claims to narrate.

Consequently, Snow White—whose name no longer appears in the title of Coover's story—is exposed as an empty and frozen signifier
that has been abused, but not marked, by time. What in the Märchen is levity and stylization becomes vacuity: completing the cycle of initiation always involves a loss and, as the prince sees it, Snow White has "suffered no losses, in fact that's just the trouble, that hymen can never be broken...this is her gift and essence" (DQ, p 305). In order to be the Snow White whose image the mirror reflects and cherishes, Snow White must, paradoxically, be denied the normalizing process of growth the tale overtly proposes, if Snow White were to become "whole" and experience her sexuality as reproduction, she would undoubtedly become like her stepmother, whose flailing image, in fact, the prince sees when, in bed with his bride, he gazes "into the mirrors to see, for the first time, Snow White's paradigmatic beauty" (DQ, p 310). Coover's tale confronts us with the ideological, and therefore entropic, nature of the metaphor to conform to an authoritative idea of what woman "is," Snow White is condemned to be a heartless and unconscious child who cannot change and who has no understanding of her name. She is as "dead" as the dead queen.

If Charming's questions about his bride move us to perceive her as the monster-woman rather than the angel-woman, his questions about the story he is in unsettle the well-ordered and absolutely functional universe of the traditional tale. As a narrator who is troubled by "the compulsions that had led [him] to the mountain, the birdshit on the glass coffin when [he]'d found her," the prince self-consciously wonders: "why did things happen as though they were necessary?" (DQ, p 308). Marie Louise Teneze has convincingly argued that the tale of wonder is "la narrativisation de la situation du héros entre la 'réponse' et la 'question,' c'est-à-dire entre le moyen obtenu et le moyen employé." In this world, chaos and contingency are denied and the hero's success is generally guaranteed since he is helped in advance, that is, with an end in mind. By asking questions about events we have learned to expect in this context, the prince uncovers the restrictive logic of the tale and makes it impossible for its apparently innocent magic to occur; he has broken the spell and what seemed to be a "true" if not "real" story, to use Bruno Bettelheim's definition of fairy tales, is shown to be yet another artifice.

Through the use of a self-conscious and inquisitive narrator, Coover uncovers the ideological implications of sexual and narrative production in the tale of "Snow White." Consequently, the conflict between the Queen and Snow White is presented not in moral, but in aesthetic terms. The Queen is a schemer not so much because she hates Snow White per se, but because she is, as Gilbert and Gubar point out in their essay, a "plot-maker,... an artist" (MA, p. 39). Snow White, on the contrary, is "innocent" because she "doesn't even know there is a mirror on the wall" (DQ, p 305) and not because she is morally superior to the Queen. There is, in fact, something disquieting about her squealing and applauding at her stepmother's macabre dance, comments the prince, as if she had "become the very evil she'd been saved from" (DQ, p 304). The Queen has lived and died in full awareness of the authority of the mirror, while Snow White has been unconsciously
framed by it. In the prince’s and in Coover’s interpretation, the difference between the two characters lies here, and not in their relationship to good and evil.

Charming recognizes the role that the mirror plays in the rivalry between the Queen and Snow White, but he is not fully aware of the authority of the mirror at work in the tale as a whole. And he ultimately fails to change the outcome of the story, despite his understanding of its mechanisms and his questioning attitude, precisely because he underestimates the power of the mirror on the level of social behavior and narrative production.

The *moven* of Charming’s version of “Snow White” is, quite explicitly in his mind, the dead Queen. As the narrative opens, the prince comments:

> The old Queen had a grin on her face when we buried her in the mountain, and I knew then that it was she who had composed this scene, as all before, she who had led us, revelers and initiates, to this cold and windy grave site, hers the design, ours the enactment, and I felt like the first man, destined to rise and fall, rise and fall, to the end of time (DQ, p 304)

This reading of the tale certainly acknowledges the Queen’s creative energy, but fails to see that the Queen’s actions and plots don’t break away from the mimetic and conventional imagination of the *Marchen*. The Queen has internalized the cultural and narrative norms which regulate this genre and wants to use them to her advantage in her struggle with the “innocent” Snow White. Therefore, in contrast to the Prince’s view of her, the Queen has no real power in the traditional tale since, even when she goes against the mirror’s verdict, she does so by using the mirror as her magic helper in order to establish the truth: “Looking-glass, Looking-glass, on the wall, Who in this land is the fairest of all?” (in another translation “Tell me, glass, tell me true! Of all the ladies in the land, Who is the fairest? Tell me who?”) Hoping for liberation, “she [uses] the mirror as a door, tries to” (DQ, p 312) and remains within a narrative logic which demands her death.

The narrator also falls victim to a failure of the imagination which resembles that of the Queen when, hoping to make other plots and solutions possible, he kisses her corpse. His kiss mirrors all princes’ disenchanting kisses in other tales of magic. It comes “naturally” to him, in the sense that he acts within the established norms of princely behavior. “Why hadn’t I been allowed to disenchant her with a kiss like everybody else?” (DQ, p 310), he wonders thinking about the removal of the “fateful apple” from Snow White’s throat. Having missed his chance with Snow White, Charming (unconsciously) makes an attempt at fulfilling his role in the most conventional way (motif D735), precisely when he is trying to break away from it. If the Queen had been brought back to life by his kiss, the power of the *Marchen’s* conventions would have been fully renewed for there would have been yet another “they lived happily...”
ever after" and that is what matters in a narrative world where, as Propp teaches us, functions are constant and characters are not. Not surprisingly, when his rather egocentric interpretation of the Queen’s plotmaking proves itself wrong, Charming quickly abandons his quest for a different aesthetics and re-enters the world he never really left. "If this is the price of beauty, it’s too high" (DQ, p. 313), he thinks, confirming an earlier, but not fully understood thought: "It was the mirror that had fucked [the old Queen], fucked us all" (DQ, p. 305).

Since he fails to recognize the framing power of the mirror as it applies to himself and the narrative as a whole, the prince’s version of the traditional tale is finally unsettling, but not subversive. Coover’s "The Dead Queen," however, tells a different story by allowing readers to distance themselves from a narrator whose questioning attitude and ultimate failure are an invitation to further questioning. The narrative implicitly points to strategies which might truly disrupt the well-made fictional world of the Märchen, but doesn’t test them. Charming is on the right track when he includes his confusion, his alienation, the birdshit on the glass coffin, and his mixed feelings about Snow White and the Queen in his narrative, since these elements—which have no place in the traditional tale—disrupt our expectations of what a Märchen is. But when he shrouds all the mirrors in the nuptial room, "smashing not a few of them" (DQ, p. 310) and makes love to Snow White in the dark, he misses his chance to record on the mirror—which is responsible for Snow White’s "frozen void"—her loss and her changes. Rather than effectively challenging the power of the mirror, he denies it and annuls Snow White’s potential for transformation since the spell can never be broken unless the authorized and static reflections in the mirror are juxtaposed to, and transformed by, other images. "The Dead Queen," then, is a clever and sophisticated uncovering of the authority of the mirror in the traditional story of "Snow White" and in Charming’s self-conscious, but still conventional, version of it. No solutions are offered and no alternative norms are explicitly proposed.

Barthelme’s Snow White makes an attempt at proposing a solution, even if only a solution in progress. By employing a strategy which parallels Roy Lichtenstein’s enlargements of popular cartoons, Barthelme amplifies a narrative segment of the tale of "Snow White"—the heroine’s stay with the dwarves—and invites his readers to become aware and beware of their expectations. The novel has three parts which represent on a narrative level Snow White’s three-fold nature and the three phases of her traditional initiation process. While one would expect such a tripartite structure in the retelling of a tale of magic, most of the other narrative devices in Snow White are puzzling and non-fairy-tale-like: the little story there is (for nothing much happens) is told by several narrators, including Snow White, thereby dismembering the voice and authority of the traditional omniscient narrator. The unity of style is also disrupted as the text moves from the language of comic books, cartoons and film to that of social science and philosophy, "from the language of business and technology to that of advertising and hip lingo, from flat, vulgar street talk to inflated political, academic, and
even church diction". Finally, in spite of Bill’s and Paul’s sacrificial deaths, there is no happy ending, in fact, there is no recognizable ending. Part I culminates in a self-parodying questionnaire which makes it impossible for readers to be passive, but gives them no reliable direction to follow.

2. Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember? Yes ( ) No ( )

9. Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension? Yes ( ) No ( )

10. What is it (twenty-five words or less)?

14. Do you stand up when you read? ( ) Lie down? ( ) Sit? ( )

15. In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? ( ) Two sets of shoulders? ( ) Three? ( )

The “conclusion” the the second part shows Snow White still hanging her beautiful hair out of the window, just as she did at the beginning of Part II, and lamenting “’No one has come to climb up. That says it all. This time is the wrong time for me.’. There is something wrong with the very world itself, for not being able to supply a prince. For not being able to at least be civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story’” (SW, pp 131-32) Part III mocks traditional expectations of a dénouement or epilogue, by presenting us with an inconclusive series of possible endings (SW, p 181)

THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE’S ARSE
REVIRGINIZATION OF SNOW WHITE
APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE
SNOW WHITE RISES INTO THE SKY
THE HEROES DEPART IN SEARCH OF A NEW PRINCIPLE
HEIGH-HO

In other words, Barthelme systematically refuses to provide a linear narrative with a satisfying ending. He also makes use of those “key fairy tale characteristics” which Halden identifies in his novel not to make his “modern retelling” of the tale “somewhat ‘real’” to his audience, but to produce disrupting anti-fairy tale effects. For instance, particularly interesting is Barthelme’s transgressive use of externaliza-
tion, a stylistic feature typical of the Märchen. Snow White’s seven companions’ dwarfed height serves as a comment on their moral and aesthetic stature (without any potential for their growth, as individuals or as a group), but ironically their washing of buildings is immediately related to “the idea that man is perfectible” (SW, p. 8). Snow White’s beauty, which in the traditional tale reflects her inner qualities, is described in such a literal way that its symbolic significance is lost: “SHE is a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots: one above the breast, one above the belly, one above the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttock, one on the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side, more or less in a row, as you go up and down” (SW, p. 3) and a schematic representation of those beauty spots follows on the page. Instead of functioning as a device which shows the truthful and reassuring continuity between inner and outer world as it does in the Märchen, externalization is used to question the text’s own vraisemblance by presenting a world of meaningless or over-abundantly meaningful surfaces and by mocking readers’ expectations of coherence and effortless intelligibility.

In Barthelme’s Snow White language, structure, and style, then, are already a challenge to the conventions which regulate its intertext “Snow White.” Within this framework, the authority of the mirror is actively threatened in more than one way. First of all, the text seems to delight in showing us what the mirror (because of its allegiance to bienséance and vraisemblance) refuses to: from the very beginning of Barthelme’s novel, its readers are exposed to Snow White’s “tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots,” those very human spots which the mirror fails to reflect/acknowledge since they would be blemishes on her snow-white skin. Furthermore, the text exposes the gap between woman as artistic object in a male-inscribed text and woman as subject of her own imagination by showing how the dwarves’ reification of Snow White parallels the one operated by the mirror and is, in fact, authorized by the mirror’s logic. How do the dwarves reify Snow White? In Dan’s words:

Now, what do we apprehend when we apprehend Snow White? We apprehend, first, two three-quarter-scale breasts floating towards us wrapped, typically, in a red towel. Or, if we are apprehending her from the other direction, we apprehend a beautiful snow-white arse floating away from us in a red towel. Now I ask you: What, in these two quite distinct apprehensions, is the constant? The factor that remains the same? Why, quite simply, the red towel. I submit that, rightly understood, the problem of Snow White has to do at its center with nothing else but red towels. We can easily dispense with the slippery and untrustworthy and expensive effluvia that is Snow White, and cleave instead to the towel (SW, p. 100-01)
Because he wants something "constant," something he can possess and use as an unchangeable and unproblematic point of reference, Dan reduces Snow White to a red towel, just as the little girl is reduced metonymically to a "red riding hood" in an equally popular tale. Chang's response is a more common form of sexual reification: "I don't want a ratty old towel; I want the beautiful snow-white arse itself!" (SW, p. 101).

Another dwarf, Clem, objectifies his sexual encounters with Snow White in the shower: "I would like to make love in a bed, just once. It is not Snow White that I would be being unfaithful to, but the shower. Only a collection of white procelain and shiny metal, at bottom." (SW, pp. 22-23)

Snow White is reduced to a rather absurd collection of fetishized objects: the dwarves' versions of Snow White are no different from the mirror's and just as lifeless. By juxtaposing one fetish to another and underscoring the reified nature of Snow White in the dwarves' and the mirror's versions of her, the text calls our attention to the ideological process by which, as Barthelme writes in the preface, "Woman is an imaginary being, a fabulous animal kin to the manticore, the hippogriff, the anti-lion. Woman does not exist. What exists in the space 'woman' would occupy if she existed, is a concentration of ideas about women." But the text does more than expose the nature of the mirror's power; it also voices a potentially "other" imagination, dérégléée and so far excluded, that of Snow White. And in this world which the mirror does not frame, I see her "beauty spots," the blague in the initiation process she is expected to complete, her displeasure with the fiction she is locked into, her anger and her attempt at escaping, and finally the failure of her fragile imagination. I also see how she has fully realized the close connection between sexual reproduction and narrative production at work in the tale tradition has told of her, but how she is not powerful enough to unsettle it. The move is Barthelme's fragmentary plot is Snow White's dissatisfaction with language. "Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear." (SW, p. 6) Confronted with the failure of the script she has been handed, Snow White self-consciously decides to write her own and, in taking some charge of her own story, she challenges the framing power of the mirror. The result is a poem, the first word of which is "'bandaged and wounded'" ("run together" as one word, Snow White insists) and the theme of which is loss (SW, p. 59). The dwarves—who are not allowed to read it—describe it as "a dirty great poem four pages long," while Snow White defines it as "'Free, free, free, free'" (SW, pp. 10 and 59). As a deferred presence, the poem remains between the dwarves and Snow White; for them it is "an immense, wrecked railroad car," for her it's a sign that her "imagination is stirring." (SW, p. 59). The dwarves comment: "'Something was certainly wrong, we felt'" (SW, p. 60). And from their point of view, it most certainly is Snow White finds out that she does not like their world, that she is "'tired of being a horsewife'" (SW, p. 43), and that she is angry at "male domination of the physical world" and of language. "Oh if I could just get my hands
on the man who dubbed those electrical connections male and female. He thought he was so worldly. And if I could just get my hands on the man who called that piece of pipe a nipple. He thought he was so urbane. By letting down her ebony hair from the window—a symbolic gesture which belongs to another of her imprisoned sisters, Rapunzel—our heroine tries to enact her traditional role and exclaims: "Someday my prince will come." By this Snow White means that she lives her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of one who will 'complete' her." (SW, p. 70) But she discovers that "'waiting as a mode of existence is a darksome mode'" (SW, p. 77) and cries out: "'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Thy daughters are burning with torpor and a sense of immense wasted potential, like one of those pipes you see in the oil fields, burning off the natural gas that it isn't economically rational to ship somewhere!"" (SW, p. 102) Snow White is fully aware of being a prisoner of her own fiction, as John Leland insightfully remarks in his essay, "she wishes to escape from 'her' fiction—the words which speak her and which she must speak—to find an existence beyond the voices articulating her existence." Snow White's story has never been her own, she realizes, and in that story she is as reified as she is in her assigned sexual role, since the authority of the dwarves is yet another manifestation of the mirror's.

Quite explicitly, in fact, Barthelme's no longer muted Snow White criticizes the idea of sexuality as procreation (i.e., production, authorship, authority) and contrasts a different kind of pleasure, her own, to it. Referring to one of her sexual rendezvous with the dwarves in the shower, Snow White says to herself: "Everything in life is interesting except Clem's idea of sexual congress, his Western confusion between the concept, 'pleasure,' and the concept, 'increasing the size of the herd."" (SW, p. 34) To minimize her dissatisfaction with her role as textual and sexual object, Snow White insists that all sexual activities with the dwarves take place in the shower. Why? Because, she says, "the water on my back is interesting. It is more than interesting. Marvelous is the word for it." (SW, p. 34) Alan Wilde suggests an explanation for Snow White's choice of words when he argues that one of the projects of Barthelme's fictions is to disenchant "the cultural imperatives (scientific, religious, psychological, governmental, and aesthetic) of the present and the past of everything from Batman to the American dream" and that this disenchantment of the aesthetic makes "of it something not less special but less extraordinary." "Marvelous"—the word Snow White uses to describe something as mysterious and yet visibly ordinary as the water falling on her back—derives etymologically from mirabilis and suggests both "wonder at" (mirari) and "visible" (the mir root indicates "to see"). What is "marvelous" arouses the imagination to wonder/wander, to speculate curiously, but it does so without being "extraordinary." In the flow of water, in its "thousand points of perturbation," Snow White finds the same kind of freedom and pleasure she found in her own free-flowing poem and, perhaps, starts to realize that she need not live "her being as 'not with' " (SW, p. 70)

Snow White's imagination has certainly stirred, but as the novel
"progresses;" this new awareness does not enable her to create a fictional and sexual role for herself. No longer able to fulfill her assigned role, she is nevertheless bound to try to sustain it because she has no viable alternative at hand and the world expects her to put on her ready-made mask. Snow White's disenchanted and "free" attempt at experiencing the word and the world on her own leaves her just as powerless as she was and more afraid of "being out" than of "being home" (SW, p 117). At the height of confusion, she surrenders the beginnings of her new sexual and fictional role—of a new "Snow White"—to the mirror, that is, she knowingly lets herself be kept in a tower under surveillance by Paul through a system of mirrors and trained dogs. Snow White's imagination reverts to being a "long-sleeping stock certificate" (SW, p 59) and, following Paul's death, becomes nostalgic. "Snow White continues to cast chrysanthemums on Paul's grave, although there is nothing in it for her, in that grave" (SW, p 180). She, of course, knows there is nothing but a grave for her in the world of traditional expectations, but is also aware of how difficult it is to imagine another world.

What can be done to avoid this impasse and break away from the images that the power of the mirror frames as true? In "The Snow Child," Angela Carter's strategy is to take the politics of disenchantment to its extreme in exposing the intertwined coercive cultural and narrative norms which the authority of the mirror has magically made us think of as natural therefore "true." There is no mirror in her telling of the tale and yet "The Snow Child" represents the authority of the mirror as mover of the traditional "Snow White" quite accurately and explicitly by utilizing mirroring as a narrative ploy, in other words, by "playing with mimesis." In This Sex Which Is Not One, Luce Irigaray notes that

to play with mimesis is... for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/b a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language."

Carter's "biting" story, which is part of the collection The Bloody Chamber, does precisely that. It mimics the logic of the mirror and employs mirroring as its controlling narrative strategy, and yet in its "playful repetition" it cannot be reabsorbed in that logic. "The Snow Child" proposes no inspiring symbols, no romantic ideals, no magic transformations, rather, in looking always behind the mirror, it traces the roots of its power in a way that allows for no more nostalgia. For Carter, myth and, of course, "mythic versions of women" are "consolatory nonsense" and as such they deal "in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances"; in contrast to them, the tales
in *The Bloody Chamber* are a sharp critique of "the mythic schema of all relations between men and women" and of the imagination which authorizes them.  

"Midwinter—Invincible, immaculate" (*BC*, p. 116) The first words of the two-page long "The Snow Child" provide a critical context for the telling of the tale. Apparently descriptive and objectively so, this phrase seems to conform to the *Märchen*’s use of abstractly symbolic elements of nature. In his analysis of "Little Snow White," Girardot explains that midwinter is "a transitional period in the cosmic round of the year... a solstice period—a period during the season of death but, at the same time, the moment, marked ritually in many traditions, which turns toward the coming of spring and new life." The old cycle is completed and the new one starts—the Queen must die for Snow White to be born. Carter sets her tale in "midwinter" because of its strong transitional and symbolic resonance, but she also shows the cycle of which this period is part as something unnatural. Its "immaculate" state is a fiction, we soon realize, and its "invincible" nature, we hope, is too. This tale suggests a transition to new life which the "natural" cycle cannot contain. Carter argues convincingly in her "Polemical Preface" to *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* that pornography (which uses some of the narrative strategies of myth) does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers, as if sexual relations were not necessarily an expression of social relations, as if sex itself were an external fact, one as immutable as the weather, creating human practice but never a part of it. In a similar way, the initiatory and narrative cycle of the traditional "Snow White" has allowed for no radical changes, only transformations within its naturalized boundaries.

Persisting in its demystifying strategy, "The Snow Child" has as its intertext not the Grimm version of "Snow White," but the one explicitly presenting the heroine’s birth as the outcome of her father’s desire. And this change from "Snow White" to "Snow Child" is significant because it points to the complicitous relationship between the Count and the mythic midwinter landscape (i.e., between sexual and narrative discourses):

The Count and his wife go riding. Fresh snow fell on snow already fallen; when it ceased, the whole world was white. "I wish I had a girl as white as snow," says the Count. They ride on. They come to a hole in the snow: this hole is filled with blood. He says: "I wish I had a girl as red as blood." So they ride on again; here is a raven, perched on a bare bough. "I wish I had a girl as black as that bird’s feather." As soon as he completed her description, there she stood, beside the road, white skin, red mouth, black hair and stark naked. She was the child of his desire and the Countess hated her (*BC*, p. 116).
There is no Countess to voice the Count’s desire; there is no mirror or huntsman later on to indicate where the Count’s sympathies lie and there are no “false universals.” Rather, “the pain of particular circumstances” is portrayed in a complex game of refracted and reverse images where sexual, social, and economic relations are explicitly linked together. The Count tells his wife, “I’ll buy you new gloves” so that the girl will escape the trap/task the Countess has set up for her and “at that, the furs [spring] off the Countess’s shoulders and [twine] round the naked girl” (BC, p. 117). Since she is no longer the primary object of the Count’s desire, his wife has very little power left and finds herself “bare as a bone” while the girl is “furred and booted” (BC, p. 117).

The Snow Child does not accomplish any of her tasks and dies, but she does, at least partially, complete her process of initiation. This is where the disruption of the Märchen’s cultural norms takes place. She picks a rose, the ‘eternal’ symbol of femininity in its mystical and sexual connotations, “pricks her finger on the thorn,” somewhat mirroring Sleeping Beauty’s coming of age, and “bleeds, screams, falls” (BC, p. 117). Having physically come to completion (i.e., puberty), the Snow Child is ready for the Count who rapes “the dead girl” just as in a seldom told version, Sleeping Beauty is raped in her sleep, rather than romantically kissed. As far as the Count is concerned, the Snow Child has lived her life and fulfilled her function as object of his desire because of him, she has experienced some sexual and social transformation, but no psychological growth. And the absence of such growth in this version makes the inherent shallowness of her traditional cycle of transformation all the more dramatically visible.

The Snow Child is clearly an “imaginary being” (one of those Barthelme describes in his preface to she) whose symbolic ‘ingredients’ remain on the snow when she melts, a black feather, a bloodstain, a rose (the color of which remains mysterious throughout the tale) in a gesture that mirrors the one the Snow Child was to make, the Count bows and hands the rose to his wife, who touches it and drops it: “It bites!” she said” (BC, p. 117). Is this an indication that the Countess will no longer accept the fiction of romantic love and almost mystical adoration conventionally suggested by the rose? That she recognizes the myth of the vagina dentata for what it is? That she understands that in the world of the mirror she, the aging one, is bound to wear black furs and boots “with scarlet heels, and spurs” (BC, p. 116), bound to struggle with and scheme against some Snow Child for survival, and bound to find out that some kind of non-existence is the fate they share? Does it suggest that she will not accept the ready-made sexual identity the Count presents her with when she is once again the primary object of his desire? That she will not be consoled by the promise of Spring and of other new, but not different, fictions? That she knows her “victory” is only framed as true? Perhaps. In its Märchen-like style, the text does not answer this question. However, when the Countess says the rose “bites,” pain, loss, fear, uncertainty enter the functional world of the survivors, those who should “live happily ever after” there is no promise of happiness in the end and there is no well-made narrative.
we can look back upon to confirm our ideas of what the world should be like. It is accurate to say, then, that, whatever the Countess’s words mean, they disrupt in a final and radical way our expectations as readers of “Snow White” and make it possible for a different voice to emerge.

And, finally, quite to the contrary of what Judith Halden argues in her discussion of Barthelme’s retelling of traditional fictions, the Marchen-like style adopted by Carter in this tale is the very condition for that radical disruption to come into being. “The Snow Child” takes on the abstract style of the Marchen deliberately so as to undermine the authority of the mirror; i.e., unlike Coover’s and Barthelme’s revisions of “Snow White,” Carter’s does not employ any modern point-of-view techniques and relies on the mirror exposing its own fraud once a context is provided for it. She is playing with mimesis and in order to make visible what Irigaray calls “the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language,” in other words, Carter style mimics that of the folktale and finds in that mimicry its very difference. For instance, the Snow Child is, as expected, silent and passive, the Count is apparently generous and quite “normal” in his discourse and, if rape is a shocking action, it is only the “logical” consequence of that same discourse, the Countess’s jealousy is a sufficient motivation for her to kill her rival. These characters are no more rounded than they are in the traditional tale and Carter exploits these and other stylistic parallels to make the semantic and affective differences between the two tales all the more incisive. Carter’s opening lines—which, as we have seen, resemble those of “The Snow Child”’s intertext so closely—are perhaps the best example of the radical effects of this “playful repetition.” The mirror, which reflects the mythic landscape as if it were “invincible, immutable,” is the movens of it all, but has lost its credibility because, precisely when the tale tells the truth about sexual and social relations, it has no vraisemblance. It is in its deliberate mimicry of the logic of the mirror that “The Snow Child” encourages us to question our assumptions about the world and about the narratives which claim to “mirror” it. And, in doing so, it calls for the demystification of the “immutable” midwinter the mirror authorizes as our only possibility for change.

In spite of its use of some of the Marchen’s stylistic features then,—better, because of its “playful repetition” of the Marchen’s style in the context of different sexual politics—“The Snow Child” forms a relentless critique of its intertext’s ideology, the same, I hope to have shown, can be said of Coover’s “The Dead Queen” and Barthelme’s Snow White. If in Genette’s terms the traditional “Snow White” is vraisemblable, these fictions are arbitraires, that is, they are not authorized and justified by a system of behavioral and narrative norms commonly believe to be true. As Genette shows, “plausible” and “arbitrary” narratives are similar on a purely formal level, since they are both unmotivated; that is, silent, but their rapport with the world and the reader is radically different. The “plausible” tale of “Snow White” fulfills “le contract tacite entre l’œuvre et son public” and implicitly reassures its readers of the value of their cultural and narrative norms by legitimizing those images the mirror presents as true, these twentieth
century "arbitrary" re-visions of "Snow White" systematically violate the "grammar of motives" typical of legitimate, plausible narratives, and yet do not provide any other explicit norms to account for their socially and narratively transgressive strategies. Their silence does not confirm readers' expectations of the world and of the text, but rather questions the "truth" of those expectations by making the ideological frame of the mirror visible. Looking at "Snow White" through the eyes of writers like Barthelme, Carter, and Coover, then, involves more than renewing this narrative's powerful image in the modern world, it necessitates the cracking of that mirror so as to begin to imagine female initiation and its narratives anew.

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NOTES


2 Halden, "Barthelme's Snow White," p 153


5 Recent studies of "Snow White" (AAT 709) which I have found particularly insightful are N J Girardot's "Initiation and Meaning in the Tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" in Journal of American Folklore, 90 (1977), pp 274-300 and Steven Swann Jones's "The Structure of Snow White" in Fabula, 24 No 1/2 (1983), pp 55-71 Since Girardot is "a historian of religions" and Jones is a folklorist it is not surprising to see that they have approached the tale from different perspectives and this makes their exchange of ideas about methodology in the Journal of American Folklore, 92 (1979) all the more interesting. For the purposes of the present discussion, it is sufficient to say that, even though they argue about its semantic and structural weight, both scholars agree on the presence of the initiatory process in the tale and that earlier "Snow White scholars" also do.

6 In "The Pitfalls of Snow White Scholarship" Journal of American Folklore, 92 (1979), pp 69-73 a critique of Girardot's article — Jones, who wrote his dissertation on AAT 709, provides a useful and thorough account of previous research on the tale of Snow White. Of the sources he discusses, I will list in chronological order the ones I use and refer to in my own work: Ernst Boklen, Sneewittchenstudien, Mythologische Bibliothek, vol 3 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1910), Johannes Bolte and George Polivka, Ammerkungen zu den Kinderund Hausmarchen der Bruder Grimm, 5 vols (Leipzig: Th Weicher, 1913-32) in particular vol 1, pp 450-84, Antti Arne and Silith Thompson, The Types of the Folktales, Folklore Fellow Communications, no 184 (Helsinki, 1961), Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York: Knopf, 1975) pp 199-215 in particular Jack Zipes's observations on stylistic changes made by the Grimms in the different editions of their collection of tales ("Who's Afraid of the Brothers Grimm? Socialization and Politization through Fairy Tales" in The Lion and the Unicorn, 3.2, 1979-80) and, of course, Gilbert's and Gubar's reading of "Snow White" were also helpful and provided yet another perspective on the tale.
Two excellent studies which are relevant to this discussion appeared between the time I wrote this essay and its publication for an examination of nineteenth-century German attitudes towards women in relationship to the Märchen, see Ruth Bottigheimer, "Silenced Women in the Grimm's Tales: The 'Fit' Between Fairy Tales and Society in their Historical Context," in Fairy Tales and Society, ed Ruth Bottigheimer (Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), for a historical analysis of the Märchen and shifts in gender ideology. See Jack Zipes, Don't Bet on the Prince (New York: Methuen, 1986). Like Bottigheimer, I found Priscilla Robertson, An Experience of Women Pattern and Change in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982) to be informative and useful.


This would seem to be proved by the mutations or accidents that occur when the imagination of the mother is deranged and when some violent passion changes the natural disposition of her brain, for then this communication changes the conformation of the child's body, so that the mother sometimes aborts a fetus more similar to the fruits she has desired, because the spirits find less resistance in the fibers of the child's body (p. 118).

Malebranche, Oeuvres, pp. 179-80. In translation:

It has not been more than a year since a woman, having attended too carefully to the portrait of Saint Pius on the feast of his canonization, gave birth to a child who looked exactly like the representation of the saint. He had the face of an old man, as far as is possible for a beardless child, his arms were crossed upon his chest, with his eyes turned toward the heavens, and he had only a little forehead, because the image of the saint being raised toward the vault of the church, gazing toward heaven, had almost no forehead. In short, this child strongly resembled the tableau after which its mother had formed it by the power of her
imagination. This is something that all Pans has been able to see as well as me, because the body was preserved for a considerable time in alcohol (Lennon and Olscamp, *The Search*, p. 116).

Giambattista Vico also discusses the quality of the imagination of the “first nations” in relation to tropes and monsters in his *New Science*. He reminds us that children born of prostitutes were called “monsters because they have the nature of men together with the bestial characteristic of having been born of vagabond or uncertain unions” (chapter II, vi 410, p. 91). For Vico poetic monsters are born out of the “putting together of ideas” (which produces confu- sion, *dérèglement*) while metamorphoses are created out of the “distinguishing of ideas.”

In the late sixties some literary scholars extended their interest to folktales in pursuit of the construction of narrative models. The famous issue of *Communications*, 8, for instance, reflects this trend. Barthes and other contributors try to identify narrative universals while drawing from folk, popular, and literary forms in particular see Roland Barthes, “Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits” *Communications*, 8 (1966), pp. 1-27. In other words, structuralists have recognized Western literature's debt to folk tales quite explicitly. It is not surprising that many contemporary writers of fictions have also recognized this debt and tried to transform today's literature by questioning its “roots.”

Coming from a different perspective, Jack Zipes has effectively argued in *Breaking the Magic Spell* that the Grimms's tales have contributed to the socialization and normalization of bourgeois children of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More importantly in this context, he has shown that the Grimms “sanitized” the tales and elaborated on them stylistically to fit bourgeois norms of social behavior and narrative plausibility. For instance, in the 1810 manuscript of “Snow White” he finds:

When Snow White awoke the next morning, they asked her how she happened to get there. And she told them everything, how her mother the queen had left her alone in the woods and went away. The dwarfs took pity on her and persuaded her to remain with them and do the cooking for them when they went to the mines. However, she was to beware of the queen and not let anyone in the house.

In the 1812 edition, the passage has changed:

When Snow White awoke, they asked her who she was and how she happened to arrive in the house. Then she told them how her mother wanted to have her put to death, but that the hunter spared her life, and how she had run the entire day and finally arrived at their house. So the dwarfs took pity on her and said “If you keep our house for us, and cook, sew, make the beds, wash and knit, and keep everything tidy and clean, you may stay with us, and you will have everything you want. In the evening we come home, and dinner must be ready. During the day we are in the mines and dig for gold, so you will be alone. Beware of the queen and let no one in the house.”

When we join the structuralist and the sociological perspectives together, we see that the folktale (at least in the Grimms' written version) confirms and rein forces Western narrative and social norms.
James Rother, "Parafiction: The Adjacent Universe of Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, and Nabokov," Boundary 2, 5 (Fall 1976), p. 36

Robert Coover, "The Dead Queen," Quarterly Review of Literature, 8 (1973), pp. 304-313, hereafter cited as QRL. Some versions of "Snow White" continue to tell us about the heroine's misfortunes as a Calumniated Wife before coming to a final dénouement. Coover's rewriting clearly belongs to that tradition, but mocks it since there is no dangerously alive antagonist to make trouble for Snow White after her marriage with the prince. In my essay "'The Dead Queen' ovvero la fraba alla ricerca di una nuova magia," which accompanies my translation of Coover's story into Italian in Il postmoderno in America: testo e contesti (Roma la goliardica, 1986), I discuss in more general terms the relationship between "The Dead Queen" and the Märchen as a genre. While there is some overlapping, the focus of the present essay is more specifically Coover's transformation of the tale of "Snow White" in relation to metaphor and ideology.

Paul de Man, The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 242. Paul de Man's definition and analysis of anthropomorphism is the starting point for his reading of Nietzsche's "Was ist also Wahrheit?: Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen." On the basis of the description I quote, de Man focuses on the disruption at work in Nietzsche's definition: "Truth is now defined by two incompatible assertions: either truth is a set of propositions or truth is a proper name" (p. 241), but it is also clear that "the tendency to move from tropes to systems of interpretations is built into the very notion of trope" (pp. 241-42) since anthropomorphism is structured like a trope.

One should keep in mind that in older versions there is no stepmother. See Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, for a rather convincing psychoanalytical explanation of the reassuring function of having two distinct characters, the "good" mother and the "evil" stepmother.


Since there can be no "innocent" telling, Coover says in an interview, all stories "are mere artifacts—thafs is, they are always in some way false, or at best incomplete. There are always other plots, other settings, other interpretations. I like to undermine their authority a bit, work variations, call attention to their fictional natures." From Larry McCaffery, "Robert Coover on His Own and Other Fictions: An Interview," in Novel Vs Fiction, eds. Jackson I. Cope and Geoffrey Green (Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1981), p. 50.

Grimm, Fairy Tales, p. 249. Ambiguously enough in one version (Bolke and Polivka, Ammerungen, p. 451), the Queen questions Snow White's dog whose name is Spiegel and the dog answers her just as the mirror does. Perhaps here the complex relationship between the authority of the mirror and Snow White is externalized in a clearer way: the mirror allows for her image to come into being, but also frames her, the dog is a friendly, if not faithful, animal but it is also used to guard one's possessions. As discussed earlier in this essay, Spiegel's voice is that of its and Snow White's owner. I will not push my argument any further than to say that it is clear that the Queen should not trust the dog or the mirror. I also want to point out that in Barthelme's novel, the prince figure uses mirrors and trained dogs to keep Snow White under surveillance.

I want to thank Robert Coover for making this point in a personal letter.


Donald Barthelme, Snow White (New York: Atheneum, 1967), pp. 82-83. Hereafter cited as SW.
Halden, "Barthelme's Snow White;" p 153 In particular, focusing on some of the categories that Halden identifies (flat characterization, supernatural setting, and isolated characters), characters in Snow White are flat, but this does not contribute to the clarity and balance of the fiction. The dwarves state, "Snow White has added a dimension of confusion and misery to our lives. Wherever once we were simply bourgeois who knew what to do, now we are complex bourgeois who are at a loss" (SW, pp 87-88). Paul, the poet who is expected to sustain his princely role and make Snow White come back to life, is, the heroine soon discovers, one-dimensional but disappointedly so: "Paul is frog. He is frog, through and through. I thought he would, at some point, cast off his mottled wetish green-and-brown integument to reappear washed in the hundred glistening hues of princeliness. But he is pure frog." (SW, p 169). Similarly, the supernatural setting and the isolation of characters in a world of extremes and of sharply defined objects do not mark the heroine's or the hero's belonging to, and communication with, the world of nature, as they do in folktales (see Max Luthi's Once Upon a Time and The European Folktale where he describes man in the Märchen as an outwardly isolated wanderer, therefore capable of entering into universal relationships). Rather these narrative strategies expose a certain inadequacy in our language and fictions. The multiple reactions and lack of reactions to Snow White's ebony hair hanging out of the window are but one example of that breaking down of the signifier/signified relationship which all fragmented discourses in Snow White enact. Unambiguous communication is not possible and even when he saves Snow White from the deadly vodka Gibson on the rocks Jane (the monster-woman) is offering her, Paul acts out of a fateful misunderstanding (SW, pp 174-75). These characters are truly isolated for they do not feel they belong to the world of washing buildings and making Chinese baby food any more than they belong to the world of those heroic roles they are still tragicomically trying to fulfill.


When they approach Snow White, most of these studies, as Judith Halden remarks in her essay, focus on the more general question of language. For Jerome Klinkowitz, Barthelme's main concern in the novel is "language with and without the force of the imagination" (Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions, p 68), that is, as he clarifies, the opposition between the world of the dwarves and that of our unimaginative modern society. What Klinkowitz refers to as "the imagination," however, is merely one concept of imagination, the one traditionally linked...
with the *Märchen* (and with Romanticism) Barthelme’s text also shows its readers glimpses of another somewhat frail imagination, that of Snow White, and this allows for a potentially different aesthetics.

“Snow White,” we said, “why do you remain with us? here? in this house?” There was a silence. Then she said “It must be laid, I suppose, to a failure of the imagination I have not been able to imagine anything better.” We are pleased by this powerful statement of our essential mutuality, which can never be sundered or torn, or broken apart, dissipated, diluted, corrupted or finally severed, not even by art in its manifold and dreadful guises “But my imagination is stirring,” Snow White said (SW, p 59).

Snow White’s imagination is not the same as the imagination and the roots of its failure are, as I have pointed out different from those of the *Märchen*’s failure.


Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, pp 3-4, my emphasis.

I want to thank Carter for commenting in a letter on the connection between the biting rose and the *vagina dentata*.

The relation between tales of magic and a modern storyteller like Carter is similar to the one between pornography and the “moral pornographer” as she describes it in her “Polemical Preface” “If we could restore the context of the world to the embraces of these shadows then, perhaps, we could utilise their activities to obtain a fresh perception of the world and, in some sense, transform it” (Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, p 17). See Ellen Cronan Rose’s “Through the Looking Glass When Women Tell Fairy Tales” in *The Voyage in Fictions of Female Development*, eds Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (Hanover University Press of New England, 1983) for a good analysis of other tales in *The Bloody Chamber*.