

Tough Magical Nuts to Crack

Cristina Campo's Reflections on Fairy Tales

Although the Italian fairy tale has garnered increasing attention outside Italy in recent years, Italo Calvino (1923–1985) may still be its best-known disseminator.¹ In his classic *Italian Folktales* (1956), Calvino collected 200 narratives and wrote a seminal introduction in which he claimed that fairy tales are true because they are “the catalog of the potential destinies of men and women, especially for that stage in life when destiny is formed, i.e., youth, beginning with birth, which itself often foreshadows the future” (xviii). Not nearly as well known as Calvino, his contemporary Cristina Campo (the pseudonym of Vittoria Guerrini [1923–1977]) also devoted her literary and critical attention to fairy tales. Like Calvino but more insistently than him, Campo had an acute awareness of the bond between fairy tales and our human destiny. Campo was a poet, essayist, and literary translator; her first book of poetry, *Passo d'addio* (Goodbye Step), was published in 1956; her first collection of essays, *Fiaba e mistero* (Fairy Tale and Mystery), was published in 1962; and she translated for publication in Italian William Carlos Williams, John Donne, and Virginia Woolf, among others. Born in Bologna and raised in Florence, Campo lived most of her adult life in Rome, where she died at the age of 53 of a heart disease that had severely limited her activities throughout her life. Campo remained relatively unknown until the 1990s—when some influential friends and publishers reevaluated her slim body of work (which was eventually collected into two volumes of prose and one of poetry) and presented it to the Italian reading public. Of herself, Campo wrote: “She wrote little, and would like to have written less” (Centovalli 35).² Campo's writings, published between the 1950s and 1970s, show an increasing concern with spiritual and religious matters: Campo notoriously embraced traditionalist Catholicism in

the 1960s, rejecting the renewals of Vatican II. Campo's model writer for a long time was the Austrian Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who was beloved for his lyrical style and whose work Campo also translated into Italian. But, beginning in 1950, the greatest influence by far on Campo's thought, spirituality, and writing was the French social activist, philosopher, and religious mystic Simone Weil (1909–1943), whose work Campo was instrumental in bringing to the attention of the Italian public.

Campo's essays repeatedly turn to fairy tales with the conviction that these undervalued texts are in reality parables holding philosophical, religious, and spiritual teachings. In this, Campo was inspired and confirmed by Weil's own theories and beliefs: "In mythology and folklore there are a great many parables similar to those in the Gospel; they only need to be picked out" (Negri, "Simone Weil" 2).³ (Although Weil, who was raised as an agnostic Jew, never entered the Catholic Church officially, her work is profoundly Christian and very much engaged with Catholic doctrine and mysticism.) The teachings of fairy tales, according to Campo, include beauty as the sign of grace, and patience and hope as the keys to salvation and as the invitation to belong to another world—one ruled by different laws and filled with unimaginable rewards.⁴ To properly discern the teachings of fairy tales, Campo believes that readers must practice "attention," as it is defined by Weil: a contemplative awareness consisting of a patient, detached, self-denying, and humble readiness and openness to the other—in this case, to the words and meaning of fairy tales. Attention is made of waiting rather than searching; discernment, in the practice of attention, is attained through the suspension and the quieting of personal thought.⁵

Campo's theoretical elaboration of fairy tales was preceded, like Weil's, by more personal realizations, expressed in the childhood stories these writers told about themselves.⁶ Thus the title of Campo's only overtly autobiographical text, "La noce d'oro" (The Golden Walnut), refers to the magical nuts of fairy tales, capable of rescuing their owner when all seems lost (magical walnuts appear in one of Campo's favorite fairy tales, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's "The White Cat," as well as in Weil's beloved "Black Bull of Norway"). "La noce d'oro" first came out twenty-one years after Campo's death in *Sotto falso nome* (Under a False Name), the later of the two posthumous collections of Campo's prose issued by the Milanese high-brow publisher Adelphi. Campo worked on "La noce d'oro" off and on between 1951 and 1969. In it she tells of a childhood whose every element belonged to a fairy tale. Her godmother acted like a fairy bearing gifts; the twelve dancing princesses in book illustrations resembled her cousins; the family kitchen reproduced the sounds of the Queen Mother's; Campo's own skin reminded her of the Snake King's cast-off one; and her family's prohibition to speak at table was a magical interdiction overseen

by her doctor-uncle, an all-powerful magician. Finally, family visits to the cemetery appeared to her as veritable journeys into fairyland, where tomb inscriptions read as the Goose Girl's admonitions, and family tragedies reminded her of Bluebeard's own. Campo's past, in this infancy narrative, speaks of the future through the interpretive key of fairy tales—the key, as she often writes in her essays, to personal destiny. Throughout Campo's early years, she concludes, "The fairy tale was there, terrible and radiant, resolved in an instant and yet unsolvable: the eternal one, always returning in dreams, provisions for the pilgrimage, a golden walnut to be kept in one's mouth, to be cracked between one's teeth at the moment of extreme danger" (*Sotto falso nome* 232).⁷ If it is true that Campo cracked fairy tales between her teeth as one of the protagonists of this genre would a magic walnut at a time of mortal danger, then throughout her writings this writer must have felt constantly menaced: the fairy tale appears repeatedly in Campo's work as the golden nut that, once it is crushed between one's teeth, saves its bearer.

In *Sotto falso nome*, "La noce d'oro" appears as an appendix: the uniqueness of this text prevents it from fitting in with the rest of the volume, which is made up of short reviews, literary introductions, notes to translations, and interviews. The autobiographical musing that makes up "La noce d'oro" is more closely related to the essays collected in the 1987 volume, *Gli imperdonabili* (The Unforgivable Ones), where Cristina Campo develops an interpretation of fairy tales as spiritual stories depicting the mystical relationship between human and divine—a relationship hinging on each human being's recognition of his or her particular destiny.⁸ Fairy tales are among the first guides to this process.

It clearly does not make sense to take a chronological approach when analyzing Campo's prose writings. As Federica Negri notes, these texts are "spiral-shaped," returning time and again to themselves in a vertical movement (*La passione* 124). It is significant that even *Gli imperdonabili*, posthumous and therefore with easy access to an accurate chronology, does not proceed that way and even reverses the order of the two prose collections that Campo published during her lifetime. The book opens with the essays from *Il flauto e il tappeto* (The Flute and the Carpet, published in 1971) and continues with the only two essays from *Fiaba e mistero* (Fairy Tale and Mystery, published in 1962) that had not been revised and republished in *Il flauto e il tappeto*: even within Campo's lifetime, her essays frequently returned upon themselves, with publishing choices that underscore the spiral-like movement of Campo's writings.

Campo's critics have often discussed her ideas about fairy tales. What is missing from the growing body of criticism on Campo, which is written almost exclusively in Italian, is a more systematic analysis of fairy tales in her oeuvre,

complete with the identification of the specific fairy tales, often quickly alluded to and unrecognizable to nonspecialist readers, that Campo examines and/or that influence her theories on this genre. In what follows I strive to provide such an overview by following the order of Campo's essays established in *Gli imperdonabili*—a book that is much more widely available than Campo's earlier volumes, although unfortunately it has not yet been translated into English.

The essay that opens *Gli imperdonabili*, "Una rosa" (A Rose), takes its title from the central magical object in "Beauty and the Beast." "Una rosa" originally appeared in both *Fiaba e mistero* and *Il flauto e il tappeto*, underscoring, despite its brevity (it is less than three pages long), its centrality to Campo's oeuvre. It begins by asserting the superiority of French fairy-tale authors (Campo mentions by name Madame d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault) to the Brothers Grimm, despite the frivolity of which the French writers have been accused.⁹ As Elizabeth Wanning Harries confirms, "Although the tales by French women from the 1690s are also sometimes called 'wonder tales,' as if to emphasize an otherworldly marginality, I believe that they are fully involved in the paradoxes of human life in this world" (62).¹⁰ Thus Campo briefly and cryptically describes "Cinderella" as a reflection on the mystery of time and the law of miracle: in her willingness to lose her slipper, Cinderella demonstrates her detachment from earthly things, and her loss will turn out to be her gain. Campo does not refer to the found slipper as the means to identity recognition, as critics usually do (see, e.g., Scott 156), but focuses instead on the slipper's significance as it is voluntarily lost: "Her voluntary loss will become her gain" ("Una rosa," *Gli imperdonabili* 10). This willingness to lose one's treasure, or even one's life ("He who throws away his life will save it," Campo cites, adapting from Mark 8:35), connects, for Campo, Perrault's Cinderella to the protagonist of "Beauty and the Beast."

Cinderella's and Beauty's common loss—of a slipper for Cinderella, of childish illusions for Beauty—lead into the second part of "Una rosa," which provides a brief but intense reading of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast." This is the "perfect fairy tale" to which the botanical title refers. By asking her father for a rose in the middle of winter, Beauty (whom Campo calls Belinda, inspired perhaps by similar Italian tales such as Italo Calvino's Tuscan "Bellinda and the Monster") is not a victim of circumstances or a casual choice on the part of fate. Rather, Belinda is herself responsible for calling the Beast to her side. Her desire for a rose signifies her acceptance of her own vocation, of the destiny life has in store for her (I return later to the role of destiny in Campo's interpretation of fairy tales).¹¹ The Beast, in Campo's understanding, is none other than God, pictured as an insistent lover undeterred by rejection and unafraid of ridicule, whose transformation from horrid monster into handsome prince reflects—and rewards—the young

woman's own change from fantasy-prone adolescent into an "attentive naked soul." Here too the reference to attention points to Campo's profound indebtedness to Weil (who believed, however, that Beauty represented God and the Beast the human soul transformed by God's love [*Intimations* 5–6]). The nakedness of Belinda's soul represents the fairy-tale protagonist's necessary detachment with respect to the world, or, to quote from Fozzer, her "cheerful indifference to oneself and to one's destiny; this detachment is faith, or to have perfectly left oneself. . . . To love without desire, to want nothing, to be in perfect peace in God's will, without any impulse of one's own will" (79).¹² Once the Beast no longer needs to be attractive—once Belinda realizes she loves him even though he is ugly—this very beauty becomes the superabundant joy promised to those who sought first the kingdom of God (an allusion to Matthew 6:33 and 13:12).

Perfect fairy tales such as "Beauty and the Beast," Campo claims, share with readers the loving reeducation of a soul—of an "attention," she specifies. One must learn to go beyond earthly sight and learn to perceive what alone exists and is valuable, namely, that which does not belong to this world: "Like every perfect fairy tale, this one also shares with us the loving reeducation of a soul—of an attention—so that from sight it might raise itself up to perception. To perceive is to recognize that which alone has value, that which alone truly exists. And what else truly exists in this world if not that which is not of this world?" ("Una rosa," *Gli imperdonabili* 9). This attention to the educational ends of fairy tales makes up an important reason for the connection between fairy tales and childhood. As Gianfranco de Turreis reminds us, "This transformation is not only the fairy tale protagonist's, but also the reader's: the passage from 'sight' to 'perception,' from seeing to perceiving, must also be experienced by the one who listens to or reads the fairy tale" (110).

Childhood is implicitly evoked in discussions of fairy tales, even though this genre did not originally contemplate an exclusively young audience. The second essay in Campo's *Gli imperdonabili*, "In medio coeli" (In the Middle of Heaven), opens with the well-worn scriptural allusion that only through childhood can we accede to heaven. This essay privileges the relationship of childhood with old age and, through old age, with death, because the "tenacious bond between childhood and death" (18) affects every level of our existence. To stay in the context of fairy tales, an important but by no means sole thread in this essay, Campo notes—in one of her rare allusions to the relevance of gender—that the teller of fairy tales was traditionally the grandmother, the wise woman of the house. The reading of fairy tales, then, here defined as "these gospels that are so lightly called moralities" (15), is both the secret language of old people and the indelible event of childhood: fairy tales initiate children to the power, if not yet to the meaning, of symbols; fairy tales provide

for children both a miraculous encounter with their future and the possibility of deciphering it (22).

"In medio coeli" weaves together this rapport between old age and childhood with the symbolism of the journey, implying that the journey represented in fairy tales mirrors the journey every human being must walk from birth to death. It is a journey undertaken straight ahead of us, but without a road or even a known destination. As Alfred Messerli puts it, "The hero always goes unerringly straight on (whether up or down or horizontally). Accordingly, space in a fairy tale is a narratively built accretion and strung along as if on a straight line" (278). What calls each person to this mysterious journey is the word, "the abstract, full word, stronger than any certainty" ("In medio coeli," *Gli imperdonabili* 17). Campo gives the example of "The Dancing Water, the Singing Apple, and the Speaking Bird" (featured in Thomas Crane's *Italian Popular Tales*; Campo also uses the example of "The Fine Greenbird," featured in Italo Calvino's *Italian Folktales*), three mysterious entities that one can only know as words before actually encountering them. So also the rules given in fairy-tale journeys are impossible to follow, because they stand for other, hidden rules.¹³

The rhythm of the journey in fairy tales corresponds, according to Campo, to the rhythm of the journey in mystical writings, such as Saint John of the Cross's *Spiritual Canticle*. Like fairy tales, this spiritual masterpiece tells of one man's quest for the "incomparable Prince." In this journey the landscape offers symbols decipherable through faith, symbols through which we will have "*unlearned how to seek, learned how to find*" ("In medio coeli," *Gli imperdonabili* 24–25). The mysteries and secrets of fairy tales are expressed through symbols. The point of arrival may turn out, for example, to be the same one that we left from, making the notion of journey and effort both exact and paradoxical: we travel toward the immobile center of our life, at the crossroads between eternity and time (18). Fairy tales, like life itself, are circular both in their narrative structure and in the way they are told.

Like "Una rosa" and unlike every other essay in *Gli imperdonabili*, the next essay is devoted exclusively to fairy tales, as the title announces: "Della fiaba" (About Fairy Tales). Although the complete text came out in *Il flauto e il tappeto* in 1971, an early draft titled "Fiaba e mistero" had already been published in the eponymous *Fiaba e mistero* nine years earlier—its importance underscored by its being the title essay of Campo's earliest published prose volume. The first fairy-tale author cited is Madame d'Aulnoy. Campo claims that her work, like the work of fairy-tale writers more generally, abounds in hidden content because of the constant use of metaphors in this genre. Mystery is at the root of every fairy tale worth remembering, as the tragic poles of fairy tales, namely, beauty and fear, confirm: not even the greatest of fears is able to distract the

fairy-tale hero from seeking the most unreal and therefore the most mysterious of beauties.¹⁴

Campo then goes on to claim that, just as saints are the heroes and heroines “of the absolute fairy tale, the fairy tale of fairy tales” (“Della fiaba,” *Gli imperdonabili* 31), so also are fairy tales parables: their protagonists must be ascetic and use all seven virtues in order to make trips that hold no earthly hope. Campo cites here Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast” and d’Aulnoy’s “White Cat” (both involve a transformation from beast to human) and goes into more depth about Sophie, Comtesse de Ségur’s “Blondine, Bonne Biche, and Beau Minon” and “Good Little Henry.” These two tales are described as “two perfect mystical itineraries”; “Blondine” is an account of a redemption from original sin, and “Good Little Henry” is a version of the ascent of Mount Carmel. Campo believes de Ségur’s work to be especially noteworthy because in the nineteenth century the bond between fairy tales and mystery was lost (“Della fiaba,” *Gli imperdonabili* 31).

Fairy-tale heroes refuse to believe that what is visible is all that exists, because their adventure begins precisely when all earthly hope is gone. Campo’s emphasis on the role of hope in fairy tales is echoed by other scholars of the genre, even when their focus is less metaphysical: Wolfgang Mieder says, “Fairy tales are based on the principle of hope” (753); Jack Zipes writes, “It is this earthy, sensual, and secular sense of wonder and hope that distinguished the wonder tale from other oral tales such as the legend, the fable, the anecdote, and the myth” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 50–51); and, most famously, Bruno Bettelheim, after stating in his classic *The Uses of Enchantment* that “only hope for the future can sustain us in the adversities we unavoidably encounter” (4), notes some of the ways in which fairy tales give the child hope—for example, “the hope that even the meekest can succeed in life” (10) and the “hope that someday the kingdom will be his” (133).

Fairy-tale heroes, according to Campo, must belong to two worlds at once. This has been noted by other scholars of the genre. Messerli, for example, writes that “the European fairy tale creates two nonhomeomorphic worlds—a magical world of supernatural beings from the beyond, and a nonmagical one of normal human beings—worlds that are divided from one another through occasionally fluid but sometimes also inflexible boundaries and frontier regions” (274). Torn between these two worlds, Campo’s fairy-tale protagonists must draw strength from the memory of the supreme good toward which they are moving and learn from angels, patrons, sacraments, and sacramentals—for the only teaching of fairy tales is victory over the law of necessity (in Weil’s philosophy, necessity is the power the world has over us, experienced as “contradictions, sorrows, ills, obstacles” [*Intimations* 101]; Campo returns to the law of necessity in the essay “Parco dei Cervi,” which I discuss later).

Victory over the law of necessity is the only lesson worth learning, the only lesson there is. Nevertheless, like Scriptures, fairy tales do not offer advice valid in all circumstances because the infinite variety of life would be denied if the precepts of fairy tales were the same in all situations. Each enigma is as new and unique as each destiny: the prince or princess represents the chosen soul ("Della fiaba," *Gli imperdonabili* 36–38). As Campo had begun to say in "In medio coeli," children often begin to recognize their future in their early obsession with certain fairy tales: "On every fairy tale, as on every life, weighs that impenetrable and central enigma: destiny, choice, guilt" (35); the fairy tale is "horoscopic"—it speaks of the future as if reading it among the stars.

Also like Scriptures, fairy tales are radically nonsentimental: the two directions toward which life tends—its dark roots and heaven—are scandalously complementary. This paradoxical connection, however, does not lead to a comfortable synthesis of opposites but rather to powerful and frightening mystical substitutions. Ambiguity may even result, as in the case of the youngest brother in the Grimms' "Six Swans"—a marginal character that Campo transforms into the tale's protagonist (unlike Weil, who focuses instead, in her discussion of this same tale, on the sister, who is the more obvious protagonist [*First and Last Notebooks* 321]). The boy's nettle-shirt is missing a sleeve, and he is never fully turned back into a man: instead of an arm, he will keep, for life, a swan wing—a physical memory of his "dark night."¹⁵ The transformations of maturity have their own timing and may not be rushed. Before this time, however, in childhood, we are capable of mysterious premonitions upon reading fairy tales; we thus return, as if hypnotized, to the images that we will only later recognize as our own destiny (Campo further develops this idea in another essay, "Il flauto e il tappeto," discussed later). At the end of each fairy tale the protagonists' long faithfulness (like the mystics'), their hope and utter trust in what is beyond hope, is rewarded with an overflowing measure of life: their loved ones' life as well as the life of all those whom the protagonists were able to give up for the sake of love, including their own.

Fairy tales abound in understatements; it is for this reason that they are briefly evoked in Campo's next essay in *Gli imperdonabili*, "Les sources de la Vivonne."¹⁶ Fairy-tale kings may appear less glorious than the child expects them to be, and yet they are all the more awe-inspiring because of their unexpected smallness.¹⁷ More important, however, in terms of Campo's reflection on fairy tales, is a brief comment appearing in parentheses: "The reign of the fairy tales, someone said, could be ecstasy but it is above all a land of pathos, of symbols of pain" (46). Campo stops here, but it is clear to which fairy tale symbols of pain, recurrent in her essays, she is alluding: Belinda's plucked rose that brought the Beast's heartache in "Beauty and the Beast"; the swan wing with which the youngest brother is sorrowfully burdened for life in "The Six

Swans”; the horse’s decapitated head causing daily grief to its former owner in “The Goose Girl.” The ecstasy of the happy ending in fairy tales comes only after, and at the cost of, much pain.

The second part of “Notti” (Nights), the essay that follows “Les sources de la Vivonne,” is titled “Tappeti volanti” (Flying Carpets), and it also addresses the genre of fairy tales.¹⁸ Carpets are objects on which one sleeps, loves, and, especially, prays. They are moving pieces of spiritual land, devotional spaces allowing visionary as well as literal flights. But a carpet is also a structure of knots and threads of wool, the iconographic complexity of which makes it a privileged figure of destiny. Persian carpet makers used to travel from town to town, like the tellers of fairy tales. Campo reflects that, like fairy tales and parables, carpets too deal only with what is real, thus touching “geometries of the spirit, contemplative mathematics” (“Tappeti volanti,” *Gli imperdonabili* 64). It would therefore be reductive, Campo continues, to speak of symbolism when discussing carpets, fairy tales, and parables: in the matter and spirit that are indissolubly tied together in all three (in the threads of the carpet and in the narratives of fairy tales and parables), we may read a message that is addressed to each of us alone and to no one else.

The essay that gives *Gli imperdonabili* its title follows. “Gli imperdonabili,” the “unforgivable ones,” are all those who seek perfection in what they do, be they writers, artists, mystics, or scientists. Although fairy tales are not explicitly mentioned, they are implicitly included every time Campo mentions perfection: in “Una rosa” she had spoken of “Beauty and the Beast” as a “perfect” fairy tale, and in “Della fiaba” she spoke of “Blondine” and “Henry” as “perfect” mystical itineraries.

After the brief literary reflection titled “Una divagazione: Del linguaggio” (A Digression: About Language), the perfection of fairy tales, including their linguistic perfection, comes up again in “Con lievi mani” (With Light Hands). This essay is dedicated to *sprezzatura*, that studied carelessness and self-confident elegance, that way of making difficult things seem easy, of which Campo underlines the moral rhythm and the internal grace. *Sprezzatura* involves the willingness to give up all that belongs to this earth, an obvious indifference to death, a reverence for what is higher than oneself and its precious figures on earth—first of all, beauty (which Campo had described in “Della fiaba” as the only motive impelling the action of every fairy tale [*Gli imperdonabili* 30]). In fairy tales *sprezzatura* has “its total reign, beginning with the sovereign use of language” (107). *Sprezzatura* is a youthful gift expressed through a smiling inclination to asceticism and through the distracted, raging heroism proper to youth; these are traits characteristic of fairy-tale protagonists, pure and fearless heroes who are figures of the human soul: like the human soul, they cheerfully throw themselves toward that ultimate meeting with the divine. The grace of

sprezzatura belongs to a supernatural grace, the very stuff that fairy-tale heroes are made of when “with a light heart, with light hands,” they throw their life into “the Unchanging One” (108–9).

Returning to the symbolism of the carpet she had already explored in “Tappeti volanti,” Campo concurs with the many “poets and sages” who regard this object as a representation of human destiny in the next essay, “Il flauto e il tappeto” (The Flute and the Carpet). This literary reflection corroborates what Marie-Louise von Franz has said, from a Jungian perspective, in *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*—that is, that the “carpet with its designs is often used as a symbol for the complex patterns of life and the secret designs of fate. It represents the greater pattern of our lives, which we do not know as long as we live it” (78). Although we usually see our life as the apparently meaningless back of a carpet, Campo says, tangled with multicolored, knotted threads, nevertheless some of us (the more “introspective” ones, von Franz would say) are occasionally given a glimpse, a vision, an intuition of the marvelous and complicated design that makes up the carpet’s front: our destiny.¹⁹ Fairy tales, in Campo’s view, facilitate this glimpse. Thus all peoples create fairy tales—“that magnetic field of visions, of prodigious symbolic economies” (“Il flauto e il tappeto,” *Gli imperdonabili* 128)—because all peoples love destinies. A fairy tale tells of the slow formation of a destiny, and fairy-tale protagonists need to be as flexible as snakes to the flute. The flute is the other figure for destiny evoked in the essay’s title: that remote melody which is different for each of us and which we must learn to recognize and follow, like snakes follow the flute, is once more our destiny.

The snake’s own unique melody is akin to that single fairy tale that, as children, we never tire of hearing over and over again because it speaks to our present and of our future. Campo notes that the little boy whose difficult path requires painful metamorphoses will prefer Hans Christian Andersen’s “Ugly Duckling,” whereas the little girl who awaits the discovery of her inner treasure will never tire of the Grimms’ “Goose Girl”; this is the fairy tale that, as a child, Campo had identified as telling her own story, although she never explains the reasons for this choice when she alludes to it in “La notte d’oro” and “Della fiaba” as well as in the earlier essay, “Il parco dei cervi” (see later discussion), and here in “Il flauto e il tappeto” (specifically, Campo is enthralled by the dialogue between the protagonist—a princess betrayed by her servant and wrongfully given the lowly job of guarding geese—and the decapitated head of her magical horse, Falada). The protagonists of fairy tales are required to practice the negative virtue of a monk, as when the sister in “The Seven Swans” must be silent for years while making the magical shirts that will transform her swan brothers back into human beings, or when the Beast’s lovely prisoner in “Beauty and the Beast” must submit herself to the ordeals of beauty and of fear in order to know love.

Finally, it is also in the essay “Il flauto e il tappeto” that Campo asserts most explicitly the bond she sees between fairy tales and Christianity, when she writes that, during Lent, one should only tell, and listen to, two types of stories: the lives of saints and fairy tales (“Il flauto e il tappeto,” *Gli imperdonabili* 128). Campo then speaks of “that destiny of destinies, that fairy tale of fairy tales which the uncontaminated ear cannot resist, towards which all the fairy tales in the world converge and covertly allude: the story of a god on earth” (131). Campo’s identification of fairy tales as parables and gospels (“In medio coeli,” “Della fiaba,” and “Tappeti volanti”), her recognition of the mystical qualities of these texts (“In medio coeli” and “Della fiaba”), her assertion that in the two worlds of these texts hope is central and mystery unavoidable (“Della fiaba”)—all come together in this statement: that fairy tales, in the end, tell the story of the Incarnation.

“Il flauto e il tappeto” ends the first part of *Gli imperdonabili*, the part that reproduces the book *Il flauto e il tappeto*. The second part consists of two essays previously published in *Fiaba e mistero* (and thus older than the essays discussed so far). In the first of these, “Parco dei cervi” (Park of the Deer),²⁰ Campo autobiographically alludes to her 6-year-old self, when she used to spend all day reading fairy tales and returned time and again to “The Goose Girl,” as noted earlier. From autobiography, through the mediation of fairy tales, Campo extrapolates an entire worldview: the current time, she believes, is the time of fairy tales, a time when beauty, grace, and mystery are fleeting objects, seemingly lost and forgotten—and yet worth giving up everything else for, at the risk of life itself. The compact image for this nexus of meanings is, according to “Parco dei cervi,” Belinda’s rose, which the young protagonist of “Beauty and the Beast” desired, against all odds, in the middle of winter (see “Una rosa”). From this reflection the step from fairy tales to mystical texts is a small one. Campo evokes John of the Cross once more (as she did in “In medio coeli”), because she believes that the tellers of fairy tales speak, like the mystics, of dark nights and of ascents up steep mounts—they just leave out the commentaries, which are up to us to reconstruct. (In the sixteenth century John of the Cross wrote *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*.)

Like mystics, fairy-tale heroes overcome Weil’s “law of necessity” (defined earlier in my discussion of “Della fiaba”) by playing according to other rules, by seeking salvation in an altogether different order of relationships: the eponymous valiant little tailor conquers the horrific giant not by throwing a heavy rock—the giant would have found a heavier one—but by casting up in the air a flying bird.²¹ Likewise, the prince who wins the crown in d’Aulnoy’s “White Cat” is the one who chose for a wife not a beautiful princess—one more beautiful would have been found—but rather an enchanted cat. Campo would have abhorred being labeled as either feminist or communist. Yet noted Italian

feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro, in the article “Oltre gli aut-aut” (Beyond Ultimatums) published in the communist newspaper *Il Manifesto*, enthusiastically appropriates this argument of Cristina Campo’s, specifically citing Campo’s work on fairy tales as immediately political: we must get out of “the system of relationships based on force,” Muraro believes, in order to overcome it, because as long as we stay within it, there will always be someone stronger.

That each human destiny can be foretold is confirmed by the fact that fairy tales, as we have read in “Della fiaba,” are “horoscopic”: the fairies at the royal baby’s baptism in “Sleeping Beauty” are planets and constellations among whom an evil Saturn hides; but the evil fairy’s deathly malediction is tempered by her younger peer’s benign influence, so that even one’s misfortune in fairy tales may become one’s strength. Campo again returns to a point made in “Della fiaba” (*Gli imperdonabili* 35) when she writes that the fairy tale is the golden needle of a compass pointing to an oscillating north. Maria Tatar made a similar point in more scholarly terms: “Recognizing and appreciating the fairy tale’s instability—its penchant for moving from one extreme to the other—is vital for understanding its characters, plots, and thematic orientation The fairy tale . . . overturns notions of immutability and creates a fictional world in which the one constant value is change” (44–45). The answer to each fairy-tale enigma, Campo contends and fairy-tale scholars confirm, varies and is eventually produced by daily patience and silence (“Parco dei cervi,” *Gli imperdonabili* 159). Campo also reiterates, on this same page, what she had claimed in “Con lievi mani” as well as in “Della fiaba”: that writers, when they compose fairy tales, give the best of themselves and of their verbal skills—conceding that perhaps only those writers who have a liturgical sense of language are able to dominate the symbols required of fairy tales.

“Attenzione e poesia” (Attention and Poetry) is the other essay from *Fiaba e mistero* reproduced in *Gli imperdonabili*.²² Inspired by Weil’s concept of attention, as in “Una rosa,” Campo briefly engages the symbols of fairy tales (along with those of myth and Scriptures), using as examples Pinocchio’s talking cricket and Cinderella’s pumpkin. Campo does not provide any specific meaning for the cricket (usually interpreted as Pinocchio’s conscience) or for the pumpkin (traditionally an image of female containment). Rather, cricket and pumpkin are, in Campo’s estimation, concrete, physical shapes generally alluding to the mysterious, or the inexpressible, which can be accessed only through the Weilian practice of attention (167).

“Il sapore massimo di ogni parola” (The Utmost Taste of Every Word), the third part of *Gli imperdonabili*, is made up of four brief literary essays unrelated to this discussion. The fourth and final part of this volume, “Sensi soprannaturali” (Supernatural Senses), begins with Campo’s introduction to “Detti e fatti dei padri del deserto” (Sayings and Facts of the Desert Fathers, 1975, Campo’s last

publication during her lifetime), short spiritual texts from the early Christian period that Campo compares to the “hardest, unscratchable walnuts” of fairy tales—the image through which Campo, as we have seen, remembers her childhood (most notably in “La noce d’oro”). Like the magic nuts of fairy tales, these sayings must be carried within oneself throughout one’s life so that they can be cracked between one’s teeth at the moment of greatest danger (*Gli imperdonabili* 212). In addition, Campo refers here to the holy *sprezzatura* (the subject, as we have seen, of “Con lievi mani”) of the Christian Scriptures and of fairy tales, overtly naming the latter “those smalls gospels” (218)—as they also were called in “In medio coeli.”

Campo’s “Introduzione a *Racconti di un pellegrino russo*” (Introduction to *The Way of a Pilgrim*, 1973) appears next in *Gli imperdonabili*. This nineteenth-century Russian book is described at once as a great spiritual treatise and a classic fairy tale. Indeed, Campo claims that in this text the fairy tale shows itself, for once, without masks—thus revealing what all great fairy tales covertly are: “a quest for the Kingdom of Heaven, the pursuit of an unknown and inexplicable vision, often only of an arcane word, for which one suddenly abandons one’s beloved land and every good, one becomes, precisely, a pilgrim and a beggar, a blessed fool whose heart is in flames” (*Gli imperdonabili* 223–24). More specifically, Campo compares this Russian pilgrim to that fairy-tale hero of the Brothers Grimm who wanted “to learn how to shiver and shake” and, in order to do so, traveled without rest (this fairy tale fascinated philosophers Søren Kierkegaard and Ernst Bloch, who saw in it a reflection on the importance of, respectively and antithetically, fear and hope [Moltmann 50–52]). What the Russian pilgrim really sought, however, was the meaning of Saint Paul’s words, “Pray without ceasing”; the pilgrim discovers Paul’s meaning while he is “held tight in the arms of this invisible princess who kidnaps him in flight” (*Gli imperdonabili* 225): if life is a fairy tale, then prayer is its princess.²³

Throughout her personal and professional life, from the texts she first read as a child to the last she wrote shortly before dying, Cristina Campo turned to fairy tales to understand herself and the world. Because the resurgence of critical interest in Campo’s work has focused on its style and spirituality and because Campo’s work is available only in Italian, her reflections and insights on fairy tales, although absolutely central to understanding Campo’s oeuvre, have not yet had a significant impact on the international or even the Italian field of fairy-tale studies; it has indeed been one of the purposes of this essay to bring Campo’s theories to an English-speaking fairy-tale-loving audience.²⁴ Likewise, because Campo saw her essays as creative more than critical pieces, she does not refer to previous criticism of fairy tales as a genre; her religious interpretation of these texts is indeed unique, influenced more by spiritual texts—the Desert Fathers, John of the Cross, Simone Weil—than by the writings of

folklorists or literary critics. Nor are Campo's sources limited to, or even mostly made up of, Italian writers. Gianfranco de Turreis's important essay on Campo's fairy-tale interpretation, "Della fiaba," points out some parallels with the fairy-tale theories of Mircea Eliade, René Guénon, Rudolf Steiner, and Ananda Coomaraswamy (108–11). A resemblance has been noted between Campo's emphasis on the two worlds of fairy tales—an empirical and a metaphysical one—and Georg Lukacs's realization that the accidental and anarchic nature of the fairy-tale universe holds a significance that must be found beyond its facts (Lattarulo 49–50). Adele Dei defines the ideas about fairy tales of writers Hugo von Hofmannsthal (on the surprising presence of God in this genre) and Jorge Luis Borges (on the revelation of destiny through the dual temporal dimension of fairy tales) as reference points for Campo's own elaborations (119).²⁵

In a 1962 letter to her friend Margherita Pieracci Harwell, who was pregnant with her first child, Cristina Campo wrote: "To think of you immersed in fairy tales!—What better welcome could you have prepared for your child? I continue to seek out those books in every intense moment, as one seeks out the miraculous water, the grass of life" (*Lettere a Mita* 151). I mentioned earlier Campo's personal and professional life; it is in fact futile to try to distinguish clearly between the two. In "The Goose Girl" Campo believed to have glimpsed her own destiny—that of a woman whose true identity will be revealed eventually and who must, for now, bide her time in humble tasks and hopeful expectation. In "Beauty and the Beast" Campo saw the human need for transformative love through a correct perception of the divine achieved by patient waiting. In "The Six Swans" she recognizes that spiritual suffering may be incarnated in bodily deformity as the sign of a bond with what is wholly other. In "The Valiant Little Tailor" and "The White Cat," that success, like salvation, can be found only by seeking an alternative, noncompetitive path. These lessons, indissolubly tied to each other and to the rest of Campo's oeuvre, draw liberally from Simone Weil's concepts of attention and perception, necessity and force; they are also founded on Campo's more original emphasis on style and perfection, as indicated by her preference for literary fairy tales over folktales; by her turn to hope and trust, even in the impossible, as essential to the hero's success; and, above all, by her impassioned insistence on the need, for those interested in knowing more about their place and their path, to crack between their teeth the tough nuts that are these stories.

Notes

1. For recent scholarly work in the United States on the Italian fairy tale tradition, see, for example, Canepa; Magnanini; Miele; Canepa's translation of Basile's *Tale of Tales*; Zipes's translations of a tale by Capuana ("Luigi Capuana's Search") and of

- Gonzenbach's *Beautiful Angiola*; and Zipes and Russo's translation of Giuseppe Pitrè's *Collected Sicilian Folk and Fairy Tales*.
2. An excellent biography of Cristina Campo is De Stefano's *Belinda e il mostro*.
 3. On the role of fairy tales in the work of Simone Weil, see Andic and Avery.
 4. The first book of Weil's read by Campo, in 1950, was *Gravity and Grace*, edited by Weil's Catholic friend Gustave Thibon. Thibon set out to prove the Catholic nature of Weil's beliefs and therefore gave the book a Catholic slant.
 5. On Weil's concept of attention, see Cameron; and Weil, *Gravity and Grace*.
 6. Weil believed that the Grimm Brothers' "Mother Holle," told by her mother when 4-year-old Simone was recovering from an appendectomy, affected her whole life (Pétrement 9).
 7. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. An introduction in English to Cristina Campo can be found in Di Nino.
 8. Alessandro Scarsella has called fairy tales "the axis around which the thought of *Gli imperdonabili* rotates" (135), and Giovanna Fozzer regards them as "the chosen place for the fearlessness of attention-humility-love, the chosen place of destiny" (78).
 9. Whereas for Weil fairy tales belong to folklore, for Campo they are part of literature; therefore Weil favors the Brothers Grimm and Campo the French women writers from the previous two centuries.
 10. Campo's choice of authors is well thought-out: "In light of current scholarship, it is not too presumptuous to say that the French tales of the 1690s, and notably those written by women, established the genre that we now know as fairy tale" (Jones 55); furthermore, "frivolity is not a theme, but an aesthetic principle in the work of the conteuses. . . . It is precisely the goal of trifling that constitutes the women's artistic innovation" (Jones 56).
 11. Belinda's desire for a rose in the middle of winter mirrors Saint Rita of Cascia's, one of Italy's most beloved saints, who, bedridden and close to death because of her fasts and self-mortifications, asked a relative to bring her roses and fresh figs in the middle of winter; the relative overcame her skepticism and, after traveling to Rita's native town, Roccaporena, found a blooming rose bush and two ripe figs (Giacalone 18–19).
 12. In this essay Fozzer compares Campo's work on fairy tales with the mystical theology of medieval beguine Marguerite Porete.
 13. Campo cites the interdictions from the Grimm Brothers' "Golden Bird": "Buy no gallows'-flesh, and do not sit at the edge of any well" (Grimm 278).
 14. Campo gives two examples: "The Three Citrons," which first appeared in Basile's *Pentameron* (*The Tale of Tales*) and which includes numerous variants; and the daughter of the king of the golden roof, from the Grimm Brothers' "Faithful John."
 15. "The youngest brother retains his swan's wing because his sister is not given the time or freedom to finish her work of retrieving all of his self into the human sphere" (Scott 154); through the image of the "white shirt made of nettles," this fairy tale appears also in one of Campo's poems, "Devota come ramo . . ." (Devoted as a Branch . . . [*La tigre assenza* 29]): Campo draws from both the Grimm Brothers' version and Hans Christian Andersen's. Andersen's young boy has a shirt made of nettles, as is Campo's, and the shirt blisters the sister's hands as she works.
 16. The title of "Les sources de la Vivonne," which was first published in *Paragone* (August 1963) and then collected in *Il flauto e il tappeto*, refers to Proust's

description of his first encounter with the spring of the river Vivonne, found to be disappointingly small after a lifetime of idealization.

17. Campo reminds her reader of the gnome monarch of the Dolomites, King Laurino: "Three spans tall, his gaze grave and wise, King Laurino terrifies and moves; Goliath's destiny, or Polyphemus's, is laughable" (*Gli imperdonabili* 50).
18. The first part of "Notti," "La storia della Città di Rame" (The Story of the City of Copper), was first published as the introduction to *Storia della Città di Rame*, Alessandro Spina's 1963 Italian translation of the 556th tale from the *1001 Nights*; the second part of "Notti," titled "Tappeti volanti" (Flying Carpets), first came out in *Il flauto e il tappeto*.
19. As von Franz continues to echo Campo's theories, "It is only in old age when one looks back that one sees that the whole thing had a pattern. Some people who are more introspective know it a bit before the end of their lives and are secretly convinced that things have a pattern, that they are led, and that there is a kind of secret design behind the ephemeral actions and decisions of a human being" (78).
20. Of this three-part essay, parts 1 and 2 were first published as "Diario d'agosto" (August Diary) in the literary journal *La posta letteraria del Corriere dell'Adda* in 1953 and then in *L'approdo letterario* of January–March 1960.
21. "Tailors appear in several of Grimms' and Andersen's tales and may be significant figures possessed of special personal characteristics, such as a cunning intelligence, a cheerful assertiveness that overcomes all obstacles, excellent luck, or even a magic needle that can sew together everything in the world" (Scott 152).
22. Before appearing in *Fiaba e mistero*, this essay was published in *L'approdo letterario* in the January–February 1961 issue.
23. "Sensi soprannaturali," the last part of *Gli imperdonabili*, ends with the essay by the same name (first published in *Conoscenza religiosa* in 1971), an explanation of the inseparable connection between the spiritual life and the life of the flesh, the epitome of which lies in the mystery of the Incarnation; there is no discussion of fairy tales in this essay.
24. In a 1966 essay on Propp's "Morfologia della fiaba" (Morphology of the Fairy Tale), famed literary critic Mario Praz quotes from Campo's poetic insistence on the mysterious narrative and linguistic treasures in fairy tales to contrast Propp's taxonomic approach to this genre (36–37). Beatrice Solinas Donghi, in her 1976 book on literary fairy tales in Latin, Italian, French, and English literature, briefly mentions Campo's mystical reading of fairy tales, only to reject it (13–14). In her 2002 book on Collodi and Pinocchio, Rossana Dedola refers to Campo's authority in order to praise French women writers of fairy tales (theirs are some of the texts Collodi translated before writing his masterpiece, *Pinocchio*) (110–111). In my 2008 essay "The Loving Re-Education of a Soul," I analyze an 1899 fairy tale by the Nobel-prize-winning writer Grazia Deledda ("Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio," Our Lady of Good Counsel) through the lens of Campo's theories on fairy tales, particularly, how Campo's notions of attention, hope, and symbols shape the formation of the protagonist's identity.
25. It would also be useful, although there is no time to do it here, to compare Campo's theories of fairy tales with Chesterton's analogously Christian ones in the fourth chapter of *Orthodoxy*.

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