CHAPTER 3

The Aftermath of Myth through the Lens of Walter Benjamin: Hermes in J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* and in Astrid Lindgren’s *Karlson on the Roof*

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As long as there is still one beggar around, there will still be myth.

WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*

“Mum, do you know what the worst thing about being human is?” asks my eight-year-old son. I say I don’t. “That I can’t fly by myself!” comes the swift reply. Flight is the stuff of myth and fairy tale, but also the perennial dream of humanity in general and of the child in particular. Two lasting fictional characters—J.M. Barrie’s Peter Pan from *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906) and Astrid Lindgren’s Karlson from *Karlson on the Roof* (1955)—embody the modern fulfillment of that dream while hearkening back to the ancient Greek god Hermes. I argue that Hermes, the deity of mediation and liminality, returns in these twentieth-century literary texts both as a sign of the persistence of mythical thinking and, simultaneously, to mark the space where myth

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2 Needless to say, the most obvious mythical allusion present in the figure of Peter Pan is the Greek god Pan. However, as Kirsten Stirling argues in the first chapter of her book *Peter Pan’s Shadows in the Literary Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2012), Pan serves only as a distant and a deferred source for Barrie. Stirling deals mostly with the 1904 play, but in the 1911 novel Peter Pan does have two of Pan’s attributes: the goat and the pipes. Later Stirling points to the contrast between the Greek god’s excessive sexuality and Peter Pan’s refusal of sexuality. The book has a comprehensive bibliography as well as a list of sequels, prequels, and adaptations featuring Peter Pan.
gives way to a modern fairy tale, as in the framework set up by Walter Benjamin in *Der Erzähler* (The storyteller, 1936):

The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest.³

Neither Peter nor Karlson fits the mold of the mythical deity neatly, and yet they both possess enough attributes to be more than mere echoes of Hermes. The enduring power of these uncanny literary characters is due, in part, to the fact that they resonate on a deep level of collective memory and collective imagination. Often classified as fantasy, these two tales do not fit satisfactorily into any single genre. Just as their protagonists are Betwixt-and-Betweens,⁴ so, too, these stories contain elements of both myth and fairy tale, with *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* employing ironic tragedy and *Karlson on the Roof* using comic elements.⁵ Hermes—the god of wit and ambiguity—is a fitting predecessor for the characters of both Karlson—who is funny, eloquent, and shrewd—and Peter Pan, who is the very image of ambiguity. The genre of the two stories, itself ambiguous, is capacious enough to contain the absolutely outlandish and the absolutely necessary. The reader—whether a child or an adult—is the recipient of the counsel that, argues Benjamin, when “woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom”.⁶

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⁴ This term is used in *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* by the bird Solomon Caw to describe Peter:

“Then I shan’t be exactly a human?” Peter asked.

“No.”

“Nor exactly a bird?”

“No.”

“What shall I be?”

“You will be a Betwixt-and-Between,” Solomon said.”


⁵ Maria Nikolajeva succinctly discusses the complex relationship between myth, fairy tale, and fantasy in children’s literature in a subchapter entitled “Myth as Intertext” of Chapter 6 in her *Children’s Literature Comes of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 156–159. Nikolajeva, however, does not mention the character of Peter Pan in this section of her book.