Fairy Tales & Fables from Weimar Days

Collected Utopian Tales

New and Revised Edition

Edited and translated by Jack Zipes

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-69274-6 ISBN 978-3-319-69275-3 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69275-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017962405

Cover illustration: © Sharon Singer

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

The mirror of the fairy tale has not become opaque, and the manner of wish-fulfilment that peers forth from it is not entirely without a home. It all adds up to this: the fairy tale narrates a wish-fulfilment that is not bound by its own time and the apparel of its contents. In contrast to the legend which is always tied to a particular locale, the fairy tale remains unbound. Not only does the fairy tale remain as fresh as longing and love, but the demonically evil, which is abundant in the fairy tale, is still seen at work here in the present, and the happiness of 'once upon a time', which is even more abundant, still affects our vision of the future.

—Ernst Bloch, 'The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own in Time' (1930)

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PART I

Introduction

Recovering the Utopian Spirit of Fairy Tales and Fables from the Weimar Republic

Jack Zipes

Why, all of a sudden, so it seems, did highly political men and women, completely committed to furthering class struggle in Germany during the Weimar period, begin in 1920 to write and illustrate fairy tales and fables for children? What was it that impelled gifted political writers to dedicate themselves to transforming traditional fairy tales and fables into remarkable utopian narratives and provocative social commentaries until the Weimar Republic's collapse in 1933? There are no simple answers to these questions because many of the writers of the utopian tales disappeared, were killed by the Nazis, or were forced into exile, where they left few records about their work. Nevertheless, there are enough traces of their fairy-tale productivity during the Weimar period to enable us to regain an understanding of their efforts, which also means recovering their utopian spirit for the present. After all, we are living in a time of conflicts that bear a strong resemblance to the chaos of early twentieth-century Europe.

The Weimar period (1919–1933) is perhaps one of the most critical epochs in German history, for it marked the first unified democratic German State, and it also gave birth to national socialism. Nothing stood still during the Weimar Republic. It began with financial and political instability, thousands of homeless people, vast experimentation in the arts, and

J. Zipes (ed.), *Fairy Tales and Fables from Weimar Days*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69275-3_1

the reformation of public institutions. The Social Democrats endeavored to prevent the nation from falling apart at the seams and compromised its socialist policies from the beginning. From 1923 to 1929, it appeared that their politics of compromise might work. However, the worldwide economic depression of 1929 dashed the German experiment with democracy, and from 1933 the Nazis brought about a revolution of German society that perverted the utopian dreams of all of those who had sought to revolutionise German society in 1918–1919 and had failed.

The Youth Movements

Paradoxically, the utopian fairy tales and fables were engendered by the failed revolutions of 1918–1919, for these stories reflected the mistakes made by German revolutionaries, and they also depicted the extent to which class conflicts remained unresolved. Once the radical Spartacus group, under the leadership of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and the workers and soldiers' movement were defeated in Berlin and Hamburg by the end of 1918, and once the Munich *Räterepublik* (soviet republic) was overthrown in the spring of 1919 and the Hungarian Räterepublik was vanquished in 1920, the Communists and other radicals were compelled to

withdraw, analyse their mistakes, and set new policies and strategies to recommence their struggle for power in Germany.

Almost all political parties and groups realized after World War I that Germany's destiny would depend on the education and socialisation of the young, and consequently the period between 1919 and 1933 saw the flowering of hundreds of youth groups, along with numerous endeavours to reform the public school system and the living and working conditions for children and teenagers. Of course, the origins of the youth movement can be traced back to the formation of the *Wanderbund* (1896), which led to the *Wandervogel* (hiker) movement in 1900, an uprising against the materialist values and decadence of the upper classes. However, the *Wandervogel* groups, which remained fairly active until the demise of the Weimar Republic, were geared to teenagers and university students of the middle classes. The emphasis was on a return to nature, comradeship, holistic living, and resistance to arbitrary authority. The groups tended to be exclusive and apolitical, so they were easily co-opted by the German regime to serve military interests during World War I; and even though the *Wandervogel* groups became more antiauthoritarian after the war, they never established a political programme that addressed the majority of the young in Germany. Therefore, if anything, this movement provided a retreat from politics and an ideology concerned with the 'purity' of life and nature that eventually benefited the Nazi cause.

In contrast to the *Wandervogel* movement, the three major political alignments that developed after World War I – the Social Democrats (SPD), the Communists (KPD), and the National Socialists (NDSAP) – focused a great deal of their energy on organising the young from the working class and the lower middle class, in other words, the disenfranchised majority. The reasons these political parties took such an interest is clear: the dissatisfaction on the part of young people with the existing conditions in Germany had turned them into potential revolutionaries, and they had shown this in their participation in the November Revolution of 1918 and in their work in the Bavarian *Räterepublik*. During the early years of the Weimar Republic, from 1919 to 1924, thousands of youngsters were homeless; if they did have a home, it was often a room inhabited by several people. Prostitution and crime among the working classes became a 'normal' way to earn a living. The school system neglected the needs of working-class and lower-middle-class children and was geared to

send those children out to work by the time they were twelve, whereas middle-class children were channelled through schools that led to university. Moreover, the school system was run in a bureaucratic and authoritarian manner that permitted corporal punishment and provided little consultation with parents. There was virtually no sex education, and abortions were illegal. The majority of children and teenagers who found work were generally given meagre wages and suffered poor working conditions. Given the devastating inflation from 1919 to 1924 and the chaotic temper of the times, which often led to military conflict and violent strikes, growing up in Weimar Germany led to a feeling of tremendous instability and fear among the young.

To offset the miserable conditions and the disquietude of German youth, the Social Democrats, the Communists and the National Socialists formed extremely effective youth movements to mobilise the young, supposedly in the interests of young people but basically to serve the interests of their respective parties. This is not to deny the fact that a vast number of adults were genuinely concerned about the plight of the young and sought to make their particular political party or social organisation responsive to the problems faced by children and teenagers. Moreover, given that the interests of the young and the political parties often coincided, it would be fair to say that German youth felt in many instances that their needs were being addressed, or might be addressed, and they responded commensurately to the politics and programmes of the parties.

In 1919 the SPD formed its youth group, the *Verband der Arbeiterjugendvereine Deutschlands*, which changed its name in 1922 to the *Verband der sozialistischen Arbeiterjugend* (SAJ, Union of Young Socialist Workers). At the time it had more than one hundred thousand members, mainly teenagers. In 1927 the *Rote Falkengruppen* (Red Falcon Groups) were organized as part of the SAJ movement. In addition, the SPD founded the *Kinderfreunde* (Friends of Children) movement that organized children between the ages of eight and twelve and published two important journals, *Der Kinderfreund* and *Kinderland*. The SPD's focus was not emphatically political, in contrast to the KPD and NSDAP. For instance, it did not seek to create major changes in the tracking system of the schools or in the basic hierarchical structure. The SPD focused on providing 'neutral' cultural conditions in schools and other institutions to allow children of all social classes to develop a moral character and the

virtues necessary for the creation of a genuinely democratic society. Social change was thus dependent on the evolution (not revolution) of society based on human rights such as freedom of speech, religion and thought. However, the SPD youth organisations outside school did try to provide a more critical 'socialist' viewpoint and built youth centres in which important educational, artistic and sports programmes were developed for the young to provide them with meaningful leisure activities. In this regard, the SPD did not endeavour to make political activists out of its members but sought to provide enlightenment on affairs that concerned them. Only towards the end of the Weimar Republic did the SPD youth organisations play a militant role in party politics. In general, the SPD's youth movement supported the liberal humanistic programs of the government without questioning some of the more debatable authoritarian and class-biased institutions geared toward educating the young.

It was just the opposite with the Communist Party. In 1920 it formed the *Freie Sozialistische Jugend* (FSJ), which was transformed into the *Kommunistische Jugend Deutschlands* (KJD, The Communist Youth of Germany) and grew to have more than fifty thousand members. The major focus of the Communists was to make political activists out of the young, and it was for this reason that their platform, even when it shifted somewhat over the years, always included a programme to change the school system and the factories. Because the schools were established according to tracking systems that benefited the rich, the Communists fought for changes that would do away with such tracking and bring about a general education combining vocational, scientific and humanistic programs specifically directed towards overcoming exploitation and hierarchies in the workplace and at home. Everything was to be oriented towards bringing about the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', so the Communist local and cell groups structured their youth-centre programmes around activities that furthered a sense of class struggle. Of course, there were also sports and cultural programmes that were not directly involved in the class struggle. However, for the most part, the young were indoctrinated into party politics and encouraged to develop political plays supporting the Communist programme and to carry on agit-prop programmes up to 1933.

In like manner, the National Socialists intended their youth organisations to be politically active and to reinforce their race and culture programmes. In 1926 the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) and the *NS-Deutscherstudentenbund* (the NS German Student League) were formed, and they copied the youth

work that Communist and Socialist youth organisations had already been doing – obviously with a different emphasis. The National Socialists set up a comprehensive indoctrination programme based on the *Führerprinzip*; it sought through the use of uniforms, symbols, and military discipline to provide a 'nationalistic community' that would oppose the dangers of a Marxist conspiracy and/or a Jewish capitalist takeover. It is interesting to note that almost 40 percent of the NSDAP membership in 1931 was under thirty, for the National Socialists were able to channel the anger and frustration of the young into paramilitary action, with total belief in and obedience to a 'messianic' figure like Hitler. The Nazis were not interested in transforming the school system but in taking it over and cleansing it of the 'filth' that had spoiled Germany. Moreover, they formed tight-knit units throughout Germany in which sports and cultural programs were intended to strengthen the resolve of a pure German youth for the great struggle to save Germany.

Given the grim situation of the majority of young people in Germany from 1919 to 1933, and the intense competition of the different political parties to win their support – and the other conservative and liberal parties had their youth organisations as well – we must ask again: why would the more radical youth groups, leaders and writers want to focus on developing special fairy tales and fables as a means of contributing to the class struggle?

The Status of the Fairy Tale

Though it might seem at first a strange notion to Anglophone readers, the fairy tale has always played a vital role in German politics. The oral folktales and fables told by the peasants over the past centuries have always had a political and utopian aspect, and the literary fairy tales, which originated for adults and children at the end of the eighteenth century, were highly political. For instance, the Romantic writers, who wrote mainly for adults, used the fairy tale to comment on the philistinism of the German bourgeoisie and the perversion of Enlightenment ideals. The fairy tales written for children were filled with Christian references and were intended to socialise children according to the norms of Protestant ethics. Moreover, many of the tales for adults and children contained allusions to the Napoleonic Wars as well as nationalist messages.

Throughout the nineteenth century the literary fairy tale, bolstered by the popularity of the collections of the Brothers Grimm, Wilhelm Hauff, and Ludwig Bechstein, grew in public favour, and by the beginning of the twentieth century it had virtually become *the* German genre. Indeed, if one were to scan the works of the most famous German authors, from Goethe to Günter Grass, one would find very few who had not written at least one fairy tale. Of course, most of these tales were for adults and are vastly different in their themes and styles. But they reflect how seriously Germans take the fairy tale and how significant it is to their education and socialisation. By the 1870s the Bechstein and Grimm fairy tales – and those by others such as Robert Reinecke and the Dane, Hans Christian Andersen – had been introduced into the school system and had become standard reading material for children. The traditional Christmas play, presented in the public theatres throughout Germany since the 1850s, became the fairy-tale play *Peterchens Mondfahrt* (Little Peter's Trip to the Moon); and if that particular play was not produced, another fairy-tale drama would be performed – a tradition that has continued to the present day. All in all, if one were to consider that the oral folktale tradition was still strong in Germany and served as the source for many of the literary fairy tales, it is not difficult to see that the fairy tale had become the most popular genre and served to provide a sense of community. That is, the shared referential system of the symbols and motifs of a cultivated fairy-tale canon gave German readers, young and old, a means to identify themselves with important aspects of German culture.

Certainly, as far as young listeners and readers were concerned, the fairy tale came to be used in a conservative sense that had political overtones. The predominant use of such classical tales as those of 'Cinderella', 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Rumpelstiltskin', 'The Frog King', 'Rapunzel', 'Snow White' and others reinforced the patriarchal order and gender specification in German upbringing. The male hero is the adventurer, the doer, and the rescuer, whereas the female protagonist is generally passive if not comatose. Moreover, the Grimm and Bechstein tales often conserve a medieval notion of 'might makes right' along with typical 'bourgeois myths' of industriousness, cleanliness, and truthfulness as holiness. Generally speaking, the victor at the end of the classical tale is someone who is unique, exceptional, rising above all others.

It was particularly this elitist feature, which admittedly has beneficial psychological aspects for young children needful of positive ego reinforcement, that became cultivated in the literary fairy tales for children during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The major trend in fairy-tale books, largely published for middle-class children, was toward 'redemptive' tales, in which an exceptional protagonist had magical adventures and exhibited a brand of goodness and harmony that conformed to the standards and expectations of conservative German society. The works of Hans Dominik (*Technische Märchen*, 1903), Sophie Reinheimer (*Von Sonne, Regen, Schnee und Wind*, 1907; *Aus Tannenwalds Kinderstube*, 1909), and Waldemar Bonsels (*Die Biene Maja*, 1912) are characteristic of this type of fairy tale, which was developed in three different ways during the 1920s.

Firstly, there were numerous didactic tales, especially those published in children's journals and annuals like *Auerbachs Kinder-Kalender*, *Hahns Kinder- und Märchen-Kalender*, and *Die Jugendlust*, which incorporated orthodox religious notions and furthered conventional social ideas in a seemingly innocent manner. Generally speaking, the fairy-tale garb was used to cloak an ideology that rationalised the use of power in authoritarian ways.

Secondly, there were many idyllic fairy tales intended to divert children from confronting social problems and issues and make it appear that 'magical intervention' could easily resolve conflicts of any kind. These tales were often exotic and sought to transport the young reader to other worlds, as in Clara Hepner's *Der Meister und seine Schüler* (1922). Some

of the tales were ornamental pastiches, such as Frida Schanz's *Schneewittchens Hochzeit* (1928) and Ina Seidel's *Das wunderbare Geißleinbuch* (1925), in which classical tales were playfully patched together in an amusing way, as though the social fragments of children's stressful lives could be as easily reassembled. The best collection tales that sought to address social concerns and revise the classical tradition was *Blaue Blumen* (1927) by Norbert Lebermann, translated into English as *New German Fairy Tales* in 1930. His stories were idealistic endeavours to come to terms with the chaos of the Weimar Republic. Unfortunately, Lebermann, a Jewish professor, had to flee the Nazis in 1938 and spent his last years in Argentina without seeing his idealistic visions for Germany realised.

Thirdly, there were interesting revisions of the folktale tradition by Hans Blunck (*Märchen von der Niederelbe*, 1923; *Kindermärchen*, 1933), Otto Stückrath (*Märchen aus der Heimat*, 1924), Gottwalt Weber (*Neue Deutsche Märchen*, 1926), and Wilhelm Matthiessen (*Der Kauzenberg*, 1933). Here the superstitions and traditional figures of German folklore were employed to show the threats to the peace and order of German communal life. However, the eerie characters are banished, quite often by an innocent, good-natured hero, an archetypal figure representative of the 'good-hearted' German. There were also tales that dealt with peasant heroes who saved their families through hard work and dedication against outside forces threatening the harmony of German society.

Given the basically conservative if not illusionary nature of these fairy tales, and the fact that the fairy tale played such a dominant role in the socialisation of children, it is no wonder that one of the first points on the cultural agenda for children, for both the Social Democrats and the Communists, was the fairy tale, that is, a revision of the fairy tale. To be sure, such politicisation of the fairy tale from a socialist viewpoint was not new. There had been attempts made at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century by F. S. Liebisch (*Ein Märchentraum: Die Königin der Arbeit beim Feste der Zwerge im Erdschatzreiche*, 1870), Friedrich Gottlieb Schulze (*Der große Krach*, 1875), Lorenz Berg and Emil Roßbach (*König Mammon und die Freiheit*, 1878), and Robert Grötzsch (*Nauckes Luftreise und andere Wunderlichkeiten,* 1908), but they remained ineffective because there was very little cultural work being done towards developing a socialist movement for youth. It

took World War I and a revolt by the young that has often been likened to 'patricide' for political parties to address the needs of German youth in a more generalised and concerned manner.

Raising Political Consciousness Through the Fairy Tale

An indication of the great emphasis that the Social Democrats and Communists placed on the fairy tale in their endeavours to shape the perspectives of the young can be gleaned from Edwin Hoernle's essay entitled *Grundfragen proletarischer Erziehung* (Basic Questions of Proletarian Education, 1923):

In general we must learn how to tell stories again, those fantastic, artless stories as they were heard in the weaving rooms and the homes of craftsmen in the pre-capitalist period. The thoughts and feelings of the masses were reflected here in a most simple way and therefore in the clearest way. Capitalism with its destruction of the family and mechanisation of the working people has annihilated this old 'folk art'. The proletariat will create new fairy tales in which workers' struggles, their lives, and their ideas are reflected and correspond to the degree which they demonstrate how they can continually become human, and how they can build up new educational societies in place of the old decrepit ones. It makes no sense to complain that we do not have suitable fairy tales for our children.

Professional writers will not produce them. Fairy tales do not originate at the desk. The real fairy tale originates in an unconscious and collective way in the course of long periods of time, and the work of the writer consists at the most in smoothing over and rounding out the material at hand. The new proletarian and industrial fairy tale will come as soon as the proletariat has created a place in which fairy tales are not read aloud but told, not repeated according to a text, but created in the process of telling.

Hoernle, who was the KPD's head of political education and who had already published innovative tales in *Die Oculi-Fabeln* (1920), was somewhat idealistic because the success of his programme depended on the success of the KPD and other radical political organisations in bringing

about social reform in the schools and families. Yet he was not alone in his idealism, and there was a concerted effort by progressive writers and publishers to 'proletarianise' the fairy tale, especially during the period from 1920 to 1925. For instance, two journals, *Der junge Genosse* and *Jahrbuch für Arbeiterkinder*, which contained stories, poems, articles and games for proletarian children, were founded in 1922. Anthologies with political tales and stories, such as *Proletarischer Kindergarten* (1921) edited by Ernst Friedrich and *Pflug und Saat* (1923) edited by Arthur Wolf, began to appear. Most important were the two series produced by the Malik publishing house in Berlin, which was close to the KPD, and the *Verlag für proletarische Freidenker* in Dresden and Leipzig, which represented a radical movement against organised religion. Under the direction of Werner Herzefelde, who employed such great artists as Georg Grosz to illustrate the books, Malik published a series entitled 'Märchen der Armen' (Fairy Tales of the Poor), which included *Was Peterchens Freunde erzählen* (Hermynia zur Mühlen, 1920), *Ali, der Teppichweber* (Hermynia zur Mühlen, 1923), *Die Dollarmännchen* (Eugen Lewin-Dorsch, 1923), and *Silavus* (Maria Szucsich, 1923).

The leading person behind the *Verlagsanstalt für proletarische Freidenker* was Arthur Wolf, who was concerned with publishing books of an artistic nature that were socialist and antireligious. He was responsible for producing the following collections of fairy tales: *Sternekund und Reinekund* (Jozsef Lengyel, 1923), *Die Träume des Zauberbuchs* (Maria Szucsich, 1923), and *Rote Märchen* (Béla Illès, 1924). It is interesting to note that many gifted writers who had emigrated from Hungary, such as Szucsich, Illès, Lengyel, and Balázs, wrote fairy tales and knew each other. All of their tales were translated by Stefan Klein, who was Hermynia zur Mühlen's lifelong companion, and it was Hermynia zur Mühlen who influenced other German writers to produce radical fairy tales. These political and personal connections between the writers were significant because they brought about a sense of solidarity that continued throughout the Weimar period. However, there was a shift in the general attitude towards the fairy tale by the communist and progressive movements after 1926 that caused experimentation to abate somewhat.

When it became clear that the school reform movement would not succeed and that the proletarian tales and fables would not replace the 'bourgeois' or traditional folktales in schools and libraries, the left-wing political parties began to focus more on oral storytelling within the children's and youth groups, and to emphasise more realistic stories that depicted the actual living conditions of the working classes. The cultural movement entered a strong agit-prop phase in 1926 that lasted until the Nazi takeover in 1933. Not only were travelling agitprop plays produced by youth groups associated with the SPD and the KPD but also large choral performances. Moreover, social workers and psychologists began to organise young people to counter the deplorable living conditions in urban environments. One of the most notable projects was Wilhelm Reich's Sex-Pol organisation (1930–1933) in Berlin, which tried to deal with sexual

problems in working-class families that were caused by socioeconomic deprivation.

The shift towards realism in literature and agit-prop in cultural activities between 1926 and 1933 did not lead to the total abandonment of the utopian and political fairy tale. For instance, Oskar Maria Graf published his collection *Licht und Schatten* in 1927; Robert Grötzsch issued the third edition of *Muz, der Riese* in 1927; Rosa Meyer-Leviné translated *Lenin-Märchen* in 1929; and Hermynia zur Mühlen published *Es war einmal . . . und es wird sein* in 1930 and *Schmiede der Zukunft* in 1933. However, it was clear that Hoernle's initial hopes for a political fairy tale commensurate with the times and interests of the working classes did not take root and no longer had the support of either the KPD or the SPD, as it had in the early 1920s. Still, the early development of the proletarian fairy tale did lead to some interesting experiments that might have had far-reaching ramifications if the Nazis had not come to power in 1933. These were in the area of theatre.

In 1929 Lisa Tetzner, who had become famous as a travelling storyteller, collector of folktales and writer of fairy tales, collaborated with Béla Balázs in composing the play *Hans Urian geht nach Brod*. There had been many other political fairy-tale plays for children during the 1920s, but this drama was the culmination of all of the previous works and the extraordinary work done in the youth groups. It was based on the French writer Paul Vaillant-Couturier's novel for children entitled *Jean sans Pain* (1921), which had been translated into German in 1928.

Vaillant-Couturier's work concerns a young boy named Jean who runs away from the impoverished conditions in his home. His father died during World War I, and his mother, who had worked in an armaments factory, is dying from a disease that she contracted there. It is Christmas, and Jean enters the woods, where he encounters a talking rabbit, who has been delegated by the other animals of the forest to reveal the 'truth' to humankind so that human beings will become good and free. To accomplish this purpose, the rabbit, whose ears are used as propellers, flies to a large city and shows Jean the terrible conditions in a factory that cause the workers to suffer. Afterwards they visit a restaurant where industrialists, generals and clergymen enjoy a sumptuous feast at the expense of the workers. The rabbit explains to Jean how such vast discrepancies in society come about. When Jean and the rabbit are detected in the restaurant, they must flee, and we do not know what happens to them.

Balázs and Tetzner transposed the story to the Depression year of 1929. Their protagonist, Hans, who goes to purchase bread for his starving family, encounters a magic rabbit, who is also seeking food, and the two of them begin a journey around the world to learn why they do not have money to purchase bread. Again the magic ears of the rabbit serve as propellers, and along the way they form a friendship with a young Eskimo and an American, the son of a capitalist factory-owner, who want to help them. In America this unique group of youngsters from different social classes, nationalities and races starts learning more about the actual conditions of production that workers must endure, and they encounter exploitation, militarism and racism. Forced to flee when the rabbit's life becomes endangered, they eventually make their way to the Soviet Union, where they learn how to share and work with others in solidarity. Eventually, Hans and the rabbit make their way back to Germany, resolved to bring about a change in the living and working conditions in their society.

Balázs and Tetzner's play was written at a time when the Stalinsation of the Soviet Union was in an early phase, so the Soviet Union was still considered the homeland of true communism and thus served as a guiding beacon in the play. As a result, the German drama transforms the French novel, which is more of an expressionist and moral outcry, into a much more political statement of solidarity and hope. *Hans Urian geht nach Brod* was produced on November 13, 1929, in Berlin and, given the climate of the times, it was very successful. Tetzner then adapted the play and made it into a novel, which she published in 1929 and 1931. It too enjoyed a popular reception and was translated into several other languages, including English.

In many respects, *Hans Urian geht nach Brod*, both as play and novel, was the result of the concerted efforts of writers from the beginning of the political fairy-tale movement in 1920, and it is important to reconsider the major changes in the genre that had come about since Hoernle issued his call for a new industrialised fairy tale. Two tendencies are apparent in the utopian fairy tales and fables by progressive writers from 1920 to 1933: firstly, old tales are told anew, and secondly, proletarian fairy tales have provocative and utopian implications.

The old tales told anew are generally based on well known folktales and fables that were transformed to correspond to changing sociopolitical conditions. The 'newness' of the tales has more to do with content than with form. For example, Hoernle's 'The Poodle and the Schnauzer', Felix Fechenbach's 'The Triumph of the Wolves', and Béla Illés's 'The Fairy Tale