

## Between Ethos and Moralité: Reading La Fontaine's "Préface" to the Fables

Stephen Bold

Number 117, Winter 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076090ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076090ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (print)

2562-8704 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Bold, S. (2021). Between Ethos and Moralité: Reading La Fontaine's "Préface" to the Fables. *Dalhousie French Studies*, (117), 27–41.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1076090ar>

Article abstract

This paper proposes a reading of La Fontaine's puzzling and coy preface to his first volume of Fables. Presented at the start as a friendly debate between the author and a rival, the "Préface" becomes an ironic sort of performance art that reveals the fabulist's own ambivalence toward a genre that has come to him cloaked in the sober robes of a moralizing pedagogy. La Fontaine tries on the costume and does his best to play the part, composing his role from the illustrious examples of Socrates — a fabulist in extremis — and eventually a crafty Aesop, only to show us little by little that he is more a poet and artist than a moralist. Distrustful of those who would lecture on virtue and rectitude, La Fontaine's teaching anticipates at once Rousseau's negative education in the *Émile* and also Victor Turner's pedagogy of anti-structure.

## Between *Ethos* and *Moralité*: Reading La Fontaine’s “Préface” to the *Fables*

Stephen Bold

In this essay, I approach the questions of didacticism and moral perspective in La Fontaine’s *Fables*, in part, by examining the poet’s own ambivalent considerations of himself as a teacher. For many critics, didacticism and pedagogy are so tightly woven into the *Fables* that taking these issues on directly might well appear either too obvious or too daunting. When the pedagogical question is foregrounded, as for example in Ralph Albanese’s rich and useful *La Fontaine à l’école républicaine* or Robert Grandroute’s “La Fable et La Fontaine dans la réflexion pédagogique de Fénelon à Rousseau,” the question itself is not, in my opinion, adequately problematized and the fables seem to be taken by their very nature to belong, in one fashion or another, to the traditional educational process. Indeed, despite ample evidence to suggest that La Fontaine saw his project primarily as an aesthetic challenge – setting old prose stories into modern French verse – scholars have most often assumed that the *Fables* possess a basic, generic instrumentality and treat the poems individually and collectively as vehicles for delivering a certain moral wisdom, yet to be adequately defined, or in the case of René Jasinski’s famous *lecture à clef* of the first six books, as a cleverly disguised critique of the war waged by Colbert on Fouquet’s ill-fated “Parnassus” at Vaux.

Because of my belief in the fundamental importance of the fables’ aesthetic vocation, I choose to examine, at the start, La Fontaine’s construction of a poetic persona: the ironic, self-aware *poète cum maître de philosophie malgré lui*. This focus on the  *sujet de l’énonciation poétique* will lead us inevitably to considerations of didactic discourse as, at least in part, a product and a function of *character* or *ethos* in the authorial voice. It turns out that the notion of *ethos* can serve as a very effective key for unlocking a reading of the *Fables* that is both consonant and frequently at odds with the moralizing, didactic assumptions typically applied to La Fontaine’s text.

I should add from the outset that an “aesthetic” reading of the *Fables* need not deny the simultaneous presence of a certain didacticism or moralism. While Henri Peyre, for example, asserted that La Fontaine’s “morale [est] très subordonnée à l’élément esthétique,”<sup>1</sup> this is clearly not an *either/or* issue – and perhaps not even a dialectical opposition. Rather, as I have just suggested, the poetic persona is at the same time something of a fiction and also a *habitus* that has a measurable consequence in the discourse at a number of levels. For convenience, it may be best to call this a *rhetorical pose*, because the effects are seen both in the text’s expression and in any illocutionary force that comes from its apparent persuasive aims: if the text is not always (or ever) truly didactic, it certainly seems that it pretends to be so at times.

La Fontaine’s own “Préface” to the first six books of the *Fables*, *le premier recueil*, is less the programmatic or methodical *art poétique* that one might expect, or to which it is sometimes reduced, than a self-reflective and often confounding game of authorial hide and seek.

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1 Peyre, *Qu’est-ce que le classicisme ?* (Droz 1933, 92); cited in Danner (127).

### Paragraph One: A point of contention.

It was common for early modern *préfaci*ers to settle scores or continue debates with colleagues as they presented their work to the public. La Fontaine's young friend Jean Racine was particularly noted for this clamorous kind of preface that accompanied publication of a play, weeks or months after its often tumultuous first stage run was complete. Older and less obstreperous than his playwright friend, La Fontaine finds a calmer tone when, at the start of his "Préface", after an upbeat opening sentence reflecting on the good will and "indulgence" that some readers of his earliest fables had shown him, he laments the harsher judgment of "un des maîtres de notre éloquence" who had criticized the very "dessein de les mettre en vers" (5)<sup>2</sup>, these classical fables whose foremost quality was their unadorned simplicity. Would not the "contrainte de la poésie jointe à la sévérité de notre langue" (5) serve poorly the discreet charm of these modest stories? La Fontaine asks this critic, identified subsequently by scholars as the lawyer Olivier Patru, for his forbearance in hopes that he might eventually be persuaded to his (La Fontaine's) point of view. Although La Fontaine makes no further references to this "maître," I hope to show that his disagreement with Patru serves not only as an initial spark but also as a kind of thesis that he develops in his own way throughout his preface to explain and justify the approach adopted in the *Fables choisies mises en vers*. In his vast introduction to the *Imprimerie nationale* edition of the *Fables*, Marc Fumaroli described the importance of Patru in La Fontaine's own decision to breathe new life into Aesop and Phaedrus.<sup>3</sup> As part of Fouquet's literary circle at Vaux, Patru wrote a brief series of "gallant" *Lettres à Olinde* (dated from 7 October to 12 December 1659) in which prose retellings of classical fables are used to explore moral questions for the benefit of a young lady recently withdrawn from the world. La Fontaine does not exactly refute Patru but rather, through a canny sort of rhetoric that might have amused his lawyer friend, he playfully defends his divergent practice.

### Paragraph Two: Following the example of Socrates.

La Fontaine opens his second paragraph by citing his influences and asserting his faithfulness to credible examples — "Après tout, je n'ai entrepris la chose que sur l'exemple" (5). This is the first occurrence of a word and notion that will be vital for La Fontaine — and for us — throughout this "Préface." The surprise comes when we read: "je ne veux pas dire des Anciens, qui ne tire point à conséquence pour moi ; mais sur celui des Modernes" (5). Not only does the discussion that follows contradict this purported preference but, for those with even a basic familiarity with the coming *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, it clashes with La Fontaine's well-known reputation as an important partisan of these same *Anciens*. Perhaps La Fontaine was trying to thread a very fine needle: establishing his respect for reliable examples, so as not to be seen as a reckless innovator,<sup>4</sup> but at the same time showing that he was not so slavish a traditionalist that he would ignore French poetry's own native traditions. If nothing else, this small mystery forces us to ponder carefully La Fontaine's idea of exemplarity. Essentially in the next breath, he is able to suspend the question, using a reference to the Parnassus as a timeless trope or a cultural fold in time that unites ancients and moderns, before introducing another example of cultural significance: Socrates. Thinking perhaps of Patru's profession as a lawyer, La

2 All references to La Fontaine are from Jean-Pierre Collinet's 1991 edition of the *Fables et Contes* in volume one of the *Œuvres complètes* (Pléiade).

3 Despite their disagreement on the matter of putting the fables into verse, La Fontaine "n'en a pas moins trouvé chez Patru à la fois un goût prononcé pour le genre de l'apologue [et] un premier essai pour le faire entrer dans la littérature mondaine » (Fumaroli xxviii).

4 John Lyons, in his treatment of *exempla* (to which I will return frequently in the coming pages), described the appeal to example in seventeenth-century France as an essential means of guarding against newness (16).

Fontaine might well have seen Socrates as a kind of first character witness in his own case. In this brief narration, Plato's teacher, condemned to death for corruption of innocents (and innocence), uses the final moments of his life to set Aesop's fables to verse, following a vision visited upon him by the gods in his sleep. Specifically, the gods bade him "s'appliquer à la musique" (6), an unlikely task that forces Socrates to work through a short series of paradoxes or syllogisms: first, that music seems unworthy because it is not an *improving* discipline ("la musique ne rend pas l'homme meilleur" [6]), so perhaps the gods had in mind poetry, music's sister art; but if poetry has harmony in common with music, it also has seemingly inextricably ties to fiction and, as all readers will recall, "Socrate ne savait que dire la vérité" (6). The simple solution to this paradox: "choisir des fables qui continssent quelque chose de véritable, telles que sont celles d'Ésope." This process, essentially a negotiation on divine inspiration and, it is assumed, wisdom, is presented by La Fontaine a few lines later, at the start of paragraph five, as part of a *justification* of his project ("je pense avoir suffisamment justifié mon dessein" [7]). We should note, however, that Socrates's "negotiation" is somewhat the reverse of La Fontaine's sought conciliation with Patru: the gods imposed a formal principle (music or poetry) for which Socrates found a material or generic settlement; La Fontaine and Patru were discussing poetry (or musical language) as a form suitable for an agreed upon set of materials (fables). So, despite a certain inconsequence in using Socrates's quandary as an analogy to La Fontaine's argument with Patru, the poet manages, *coûte que coûte*, to align his project to Socrates's and, in so doing, to raise his own standing or credibility through this example of legendary courage and commitment to the truth.

#### **First Digression: Fable and *exemplum* in the rhetorical tradition.**

John Lyons, who has revived and significantly advanced the study of the rhetorical example, can help us situate and appreciate La Fontaine's self-defense in this passage. In his important book *Exemplum*, Lyons traces a long and fairly intricate line of rhetorical theory centering on the "example," from Aristotle to the seventeenth century and beyond. By its simplest definition, provided by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, *exemplum* is one of two types of artistic (or fabricated) proofs used for persuasion, the other one being *enthymeme*. As we have seen, La Fontaine's argument constructed around Socrates combines these two types of proof: the unexpected reference to Socrates and his death (*exemplum*) and Socrates's own process of reasoning that leads him to versify some of Aesop's fables, which I have loosely called *sylogism* but which Aristotle calls *enthymeme*, a form of deductive reasoning that leads to persuasion, rather than scientific conviction (which can be established only through *sylogism*). Lyons's careful inquiry into the theory and practice of *exemplum* brings him to a "classical rhetorical" definition of this tool as "an instance [that] demonstrate[s] a general rule" (12). This formulation is aimed at avoiding the reductive "dominant vernacular usage" by which example is defined as "a short narrative used to prove a moral point" (9), which among other things smells too much of incense and medieval sermonizing (if I may) for the purposes of Lyons's partial survey of *exemplum*'s secular, often "highly ironic usage" (12) during the early modern period.

Although La Fontaine is not one of Lyons's study cases, the *Fables* (and fables in general) play an essential role as examples of *exempla*. Aristotle describes three types of *exempla*: (1) historical examples and (2) fictional examples: (a) comparisons (or parables), i.e. plausible fictions, and (b) fables, or implausible fictions. Once again, La Fontaine's use of Socrates as a historically credible practitioner of devalued poems (fables) seems to be a rather over-determined – and, as such, quite possibly ironic – instance of exemplary practice. Lyons's reservation on the matter as to whether an example (like this one) must "prove a moral point" is similarly apt here as Socrates is twice described by La Fontaine in an ethically positive way: as concerned, even at the approach of death with (1) proper conduct (not misusing his time) and (2) proper writing (choosing appropriate subject

matter)<sup>5</sup> – though the jury that convicted him was certainly not convinced of his character. In fact, we are asked to accept two dubious, or at least unproven, conclusions implied by this *exemplum*: that Socrates and fables are both moral. This example may not satisfactorily “prove a moral point,” but it does dwell on ethical questions even as it appears to be justifying an esthetic *dessein*. One last curious point: having had to consider the question of Socrates’s ethical position – or its irrelevance to his exemplarity –, we should not be surprised to see Erasmus, the canniest of humanists and in many ways a precursor of La Fontaine’s, choose precisely the example of Socrates’s death in order to illustrate the multiple meanings that a single example can convey:

The death of Socrates can be used to show that death holds no fear for a good man, since he drank the hemlock so cheerfully; but also to show that virtue is prey to ill will and far from safe amidst a swarm of evils; or again that the study of philosophy is useless or even harmful unless you conform to general patterns of behaviour.... This same incident can be turned to Socrates’ praise or blame (*De Copia*, CWE, vol. 23-24, p. 639; cited in Lyons 19).

La Fontaine may or may not have had Erasmus in mind when he chose this example but he seems certainly to have sensed its ironic potential.

### Paragraphs Three through Five: The Fable after Socrates.

The Socratic “example” is followed by others: first Phaedrus, then Avianus, and “[e]nfin les Modernes [qui] les ont suivis,” who together form a virtuous series or tradition; “Nous en avons des exemples, non seulement chez les étrangers, mais chez nous” (6). Though for the most part only mentioned in passing, these authors are, to be sure, identified as truncated *exempla*: historical specimens of worthy (literary) conduct.<sup>6</sup> The Roman Phaedrus is in particular described as a supreme example, though ultimately inimitable for a French poet, due to the differences that separate the French and Latin languages. But at this point, even in aesthetics, character is all: “on reconnaitra dans cet Auteur [Phaedrus] le caractère et le génie de Térence” (7). Comparisons to Terence were a kind of “get out of jail free” card for less weighty or comically inclined writers during Louis XIV’s early reign, as one sees repeatedly in *apologias* written on behalf of Molière at that same time. So La Fontaine’s reference to Terence’s *character* is meant to be a morally powerful, even decisive argument in favor of Phaedrus. If La Fontaine confesses that he cannot match Phaedrus’s and Terence’s simplicity, “[i]l a donc fallu se récompenser d’ailleurs; c’est ce que j’ai fait avec d’autant plus de hardiesse que Quintilien dit qu’on ne saurait trop égayer les Narrations. Il ne s’agit pas ici d’en apporter une raison; c’est assez que Quintilien l’ait dit.” The last sentence is remarkably blunt in its rhetorical strategy: La Fontaine is not basing his argument on logic but is rather making an *ethical* appeal, an appeal based on character and the credibility of his source, in this case the author of the standard classical textbook on eloquence, the *Institutio oratoria*.<sup>7</sup> There is, again, a certain irony in La Fontaine’s rhetorically loaded citation of Quintilian – a sort of *rhetoric squared*, so to speak. As for the rhetorical issue at hand, the expression “ethical appeal” is commonly used to refer to the first of three “modes of persuasion” described originally by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*: “Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker [...]. Persuasion is achieved

5 Cf. Lyons: “Most poetic theorists who speak about example in the sixteenth century either attribute to it the function of providing specific models of conduct for imitation by the readers or shift the discussion of example from worldly reference to models for writing” (13).

6 I have omitted discussion of paragraph three as it is rather unremarkable: it posits and imagines a continuation of this tradition in which he will make his faithful contribution, however modest it might be.

7 Quintilian himself recommends the use of fables in order to reach an unrefined audience (Book 5, Chapter 11, 17-21). In the 5.11, he describes fables as simpler, fictional *exempla*.

by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible" (1.2.1356a.1-5). Strictly speaking, La Fontaine's reference to Quintilian could be called a basic appeal to authority<sup>8</sup> but by underlining the source with his proper name – "c'est assez que *Quintilien* l'ait dit" – and putting aside the logical mode of persuasion – "il ne s'agit pas d'en rapporter *une raison*" –, the fabulist is mobilizing the last of a series of credible models of reputable personal character. All in order to justify an aesthetic choice.

### Paragraphs Six and Seven: The Moral and the Message

When La Fontaine pivots to the question of moral usefulness at the opening of paragraph six, the reader might not have the feeling that he has made a very sharp turn at all: "Mais ce n'est pas tant par la forme que j'ai donnée à cet ouvrage, qu'on en doit mesurer le prix, que par son utilité et par sa matière" (7). We are well on our way for a moral defense of the fable. And, in fact, this defense returns immediately to the person of Socrates: "plusieurs personnages de l'antiquité ont attribué la plus grande partie de ces fables à Socrate, choisissant pour leur servir de père, celui des mortels qui avait le plus de communication avec les dieux" (7)– only to use a few lines later this last *periphrasis* as a means of tying pagan wisdom to Christian Truth, through a common narrative strategy: "la parabole [qui] n'est [...] autre chose que l'Apologue, c'est-à-dire un exemple fabuleux" (7).<sup>9</sup> Despite La Fontaine's own embarrassment at making this syncretic link – "s'il m'est permis de mêler ce que nous avons de plus sacré parmi les erreurs du Paganisme" (7) – the point is effectively made and puts us on the threshold of his most direct, most personal and perhaps his most difficult argument for the legitimacy of his fables project in paragraph seven:

C'est pour ces raisons que Platon ayant banni Homère de sa République, y a donné à Ésope une place très honorable. Il souhaite que les enfants sucent ces Fables avec le lait, il commande aux Nourrices de les leur apprendre ; car on ne saurait s'accoutumer de trop bonne heure à la sagesse et à la vertu : plutôt que d'être réduits à corriger nos habitudes, il faut travailler à les rendre bonnes, pendant qu'elles sont encore indifférentes au bien ou au mal. Or quelle méthode y peut contribuer plus utilement que ces Fables ? Dites à un enfant que Crassus allant contre les Parthes, s'engagea dans leur pays sans considérer comment il en sortirait : que cela le fit périr lui et son Armée, quelque effort qu'il fit pour se retirer. Dites au même enfant, que le Renard et le Bouc descendirent au fond d'un puits pour y éteindre leur soif : que le Renard en sortit s'étant servi des épaules et des cornes de son camarade comme d'une échelle : au contraire le Bouc y demeura, pour n'avoir pas eu tant de prévoyance ; et par conséquent il faut considérer en toute chose la fin. Je demande lequel de ces deux exemples fera le plus d'impression sur cet enfant ? (8)

The reminder of Plato's hostile opinion of poets is also another, this time implicit, reference to Socrates's embrace of poetry and their shared taste for Aesop. Socrates was no less concerned with the moral order than was Plato, his pupil. And nowhere is La Fontaine more direct about the didactic potential of his fables than he is in these lines: children should be

8 Authority is what Quintilian calls *ethos* while Lyons says that *exemplum* "becomes the rhetorical figure that, more than any other, is connected with authority" (15). Héléne Merlin-Kajman, writing under the pseudonym "Helio Milner," tries specifically to undo this identification of fabulous examples with a ponderous, we might say today *assomant*, authority by transforming La Fontaine's *Fables* into non-Socratic dialogues rather than lessons. She describes this project, through which she seeks to "interdire l'assertion morale, la sentence" (38) in her recent piece "Ecrire dans la gueule du loup," *Féeries* 13 (2016): 27-45.

9 We have seen that *parabole* was a term that Aristotle used in tandem with *fable* to describe the class of "fictional examples," though he also distinguished them as respectively *plausible* and *implausible*.

taught (through) fables from the earliest age. The strongest argument for his fables comes in contrasting illustrations of moral examples<sup>10</sup>: on the one hand, Crassus's failed offensive against the Parthians, on the other "Le Renard et le Bouc" (the Fox and the Billy Goat) trapped in a well. The first example is a classical historical *exemplum* that one could well imagine finding in Montaigne's early essays<sup>11</sup> or in medieval *libri exemplorum* or *miraculorum*. The second lesson is a succinct specimen of a real Aesopic fable which the reader is certain to find better adapted to the education of a child, because it is "plus conforme et moins disproportionné que l'autre à la petitesse de son esprit" (8).

The moral thread seems to have reached its desired end. But the shift from the aesthetic to the ethical and finally to the didactic principle has been quite deftly hidden, as we have seen. And the final step constitutes a kind of *petitio principii*: only in paragraph six does the question of teaching a juvenile audience appear because only now, presumably, is it needed. The legitimacy of fables was previously tied directly to Socrates and then, indirectly, to a cascade of "adult" authors: Phaedrus, Avianus, Terence, Quintilian, Plato (and soon Aristotle).<sup>12</sup> Just as La Fontaine had been able to invoke Holy Scripture by means of the comparison of *apologue* to *parabole*, so he arrives surreptitiously in the nursery through a reference to Plato and by his authority. Leo Spitzer, who so admired La Fontaine's subtle "transitions," would certainly have found plenty of grist for his stylistic mill in this "Préface". But there is another subtlety in these lines that I would like to turn to now and which will be the primary focus for the remainder of my discussion.

As we have just seen, La Fontaine makes the case for his Fables as being particularly appropriate – or proportioned – for a juvenile audience. He appears to say that a moral education can never begin too early:

[O]n ne saurait s'accoutumer de trop bonne heure à la sagesse et à la vertu : plutôt que d'être réduits à corriger nos habitudes, il faut travailler à les rendre bonnes, pendant qu'elles sont encore indifférentes au bien ou au mal.

### Second Digression: Rousseau on La Fontaine.

On this point, in particular, La Fontaine will raise the hackles of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as the citizen of Geneva contemplates the usefulness of La Fontaine's fables in the education of Emile. As Robert Granderoute has shown, the appeal of the *Fables* as pedagogical tools for the very young was recognized, examined and debated by writers on education beginning in the years just following their first publication.<sup>13</sup> La Fontaine's text was recommended – by booksellers and some pedagogues – during the first part of the eighteenth century before a backlash punctuated, though perhaps not initiated,<sup>14</sup> by Rousseau's *Emile*. In the second book of his *Emile*, Rousseau entirely rejects La Fontaine's *Fables* as being unfit for teaching children, pointing out just how impenetrable and ultimately demoralizing La Fontaine's supposedly moralizing fables really are:

10 Wadsworth suggests that La Fontaine might be thinking here again about Quintilian (Wadsworth 120).

11 Cf., for example, Montaigne's first essay from book I, "Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin," which could be read as a pessimistic twist on the prudential theme.

12 Wadsworth calls these "erudite and sometimes misleading references," used to establish his own rhetorical credentials (117-118).

13 "[T]rès vite après leur parution, les *Fables* de La Fontaine ont trouvé place dans la pratique éducative du temps" (Granderoute, "La fable et La Fontaine dans la réflexion pédagogique de Fénelon à Rousseau." *XVIIIe Siècle* 13 (1981): 335-348. (339)) Granderoute finds, during the last part of the seventeenth century, as early as 1687, an interest teaching through fables, though Phaedrus and Aesop are chosen as sources over La Fontaine at first.

14 "Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, dans son *Avis aux parents et aux maîtres sur l'éducation des enfants* (Nancy, 1750), exprime nettement sa réserve : « Quoique les *Fables* de La Fontaine aient paru jusqu'à ce jour l'étude la plus convenable aux enfants, je voudrais qu'on s'en servît avec beaucoup de circonspection. » Et de préciser le motif de sa réserve : « Dans un cerveau encore tendre, il me paraît qu'on ne devrait imprimer que du vrai » (p. 114-115)" (Granderoute 344).

On fait apprendre les fables de La Fontaine à tous les enfants, et il n'y en a pas un seul qui les entende. Quand ils les entendraient, ce serait encore pis ; car la morale en est tellement mêlée et *si disproportionnée à leur âge*, qu'elle les porterait plus au vice qu'à la vertu. [...] au lieu de s'observer sur le défaut dont on les veut guérir ou préserver, ils penchent à aimer le vice avec lequel on tire parti des défauts des autres" (*Émile* 352 and 356; my italics).

For Rousseau, the child's misprision is in large part the result of the text's difficulty, something which he demonstrates in a nearly word for word reading of "Le Corbeau et le Renard," after which he says: « Suivez les enfants apprenant leurs fables, et vous verrez que, quand ils sont en état d'en faire l'application, ils en font presque toujours une contraire à l'intention de l'auteur » (356).<sup>15</sup> But is this necessarily so? Many, if not most, educators who have had the experience of reading a fable like "La Cigale la Fourmi" in class will likely have found how hard it is even for adult students – or their instructors – to supply the author's missing *moralité*, otherwise known as "l'intention de l'auteur." What precisely is the moral of these fables? This may, in fact, be the wrong way to phrase this apparently vital question.

It seems obvious, at this point, that La Fontaine and Rousseau must have had very different ideas on what is an effective education. And yet, in the passage from the "Préface" that we have just been considering, La Fontaine anticipates, in a way, Rousseau's "negative education" sketched out in the second book of the *Émile* – a benign, protective prolongation of innocence or moral latency until the age of reason. La Fontaine is not so far from Rousseau when he describes a certain pedagogical context for reading the fables, a pre-moral stage of development during which the teacher might employ a prophylactic exposure to the difficulty of life's dilemmas: "plutôt que d'être réduits à corriger nos habitudes, il faut travailler à les rendre bonnes, pendant qu'elles sont encore indifférentes au bien ou au mal" (8). Although La Fontaine frames this process within an early apprenticeship in "sagesse" and "vertu," the child's *indifférence to good and evil* means that s/he is unable to be taught what is moral. Instead, La Fontaine aims to cultivate good *habits* before bad ones have been learned. Even the reference to *sagesse et vertu* is described not as teaching but as *accustoming* ("accoutumer") the child to best practices.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, if La Fontaine can speak of a pedagogy in the *Fables* – and he certainly seems to be doing so, at least in this passage – its goal seems not to be a proper and strict moral education but rather a series of examples useful for the cultivation of good habits, when confronted with a dilemma. Indeed, La Fontaine's lessons are rarely – if ever – illustrations of virtue rewarded but rather of surviving disaster, at best, or more often than not of outfoxing the fox. The *moralité* that concludes the sample fable of "Le Renard et le Bouc," is less *moral* than *ethical*.<sup>17</sup>

This opposition brings us back to the title of this essay and to a crucial point in the present discussion. Up until now, I have not emphasized a distinction of the terms *moral* and *ethical*, following, in this way, common usage and also following what I have suggested to be La Fontaine's implied conflation of rhetorical exemplarity and moral teaching. But I see this conflation as both a product of tradition (as Lyons has shown for the *exemplum*) and something of an authorial sleight of hand used to prepare his reader for

15 Rousseau comes very close to Patru in his critique of the *Fables*: "que le tour même de la poésie, en les lui rendant plus faciles à retenir [pour les enfants], les lui rend plus difficiles à concevoir, en sorte qu'on achète l'agrément aux dépens de la clarté" (352).

16 Cf. Rousseau, *Émile*, Livre II: "La première éducation doit donc être purement négative. Elle consiste, non point à enseigner la vertu ni la vérité, mais à garantir le cœur du vice et l'esprit de l'erreur" (323).

17 See again *L'Émile*: "Ne donnez à votre élève aucune espèce de leçon verbale; il n'en doit recevoir que de l'expérience" (321). This is very close indeed to the spirit of *rites de passage* that I believe is basic to La Fontaine's ethical approach to education.



an intentionally elusive textual pragmatics. It is doubtful that La Fontaine found himself either equipped or inclined to be the *professeur de morale* that posterity has wanted him to be. (The publication of the first collection of fables followed release of a second series of his controversial and decidedly immoral *Contes* by only two years.) The choice proposed between the story of Crassus and that of the Billy Goat (*le Bouc*) brings his reader back to a rhetorical context where certainty – even moral certainty – does not obtain. Indeed, if we return to Lyons’s objection, “Le Renard et le Bouc” does not “prove a moral point” (Lyons 9) but rather provides “an instance demonstrating a general [or generally useful] rule” (12); in other words, an appropriate *ethos* (character, habit or custom) when one is faced with a particular challenge. The *Fables* are far less a secular catechism than a guidebook for a simulated “walkabout” in the cruel world, the jungle.<sup>18</sup>

### Paragraph Nine: Composition of the Fable

After asserting, in paragraph eight, the usefulness of his fables – “Elles ne sont pas seulement morales, elles donnent encore d’autres connaissances” (8) especially of the animal world – La Fontaine comes finally, in the ninth paragraph, to discuss his own vision of the verse fable. Indeed, it should be noted – or noted again – that La Fontaine’s decision to give poetic renditions of the fables has been “justified” from the start exclusively by arguments from example and utility. His refutation of Patru’s objections to poetic “ornement” in the fable gradually becomes an argument in favor of the fable in general. Though it seems late, La Fontaine arrives finally at what appears to be a proper poetics of the fable, where he is prepared at last to “rend[re] raison de la conduite de mon ouvrage” (9). This last phrase seems to be at once a reminder of his debate with Patru and a faint echo of – and amends for – his earlier refusal to “apporter une raison” for enriching narrations (7). The beginning is strong and direct: “L’Apologue est composé de deux parties, dont on peut appeler l’une le Corps, l’autre l’Âme. Le Corps est la Fable, l’Âme la Moralité” (9). He follows this definition by Aristotle’s “rule”<sup>19</sup> that fables should include only animals, not men, nor even plants – but no matter, La Fontaine tells us that this rule is not a necessity, merely a nicety (*bienséance*) and none of the authors respect it anyway – certainly a disconcerting way to present an authority such as Aristotle and his rules! But more alarming yet is what follows: contrary to the loose application of rule number one, La Fontaine cites the faithful observance of rule number two, i.e., the inclusion of “[une] Moralité, dont aucun [auteur] ne se dispense” – to which our fabulist immediately adds this one escape clause: “Que s’il m’est arrivé de le faire, ce n’a été que dans les endroits où elle n’a pu entrer avec grâce, et où il est aisé au Lecteur de la suppléer” (9). If we take this exception literally (as we must), we envision the possibility of a spiritless, carnal sort of fable: all body, no soul. This is a startling, even reckless suggestion, given La Fontaine’s reputation at the time as the author of two bawdy volumes of *Contes*, and he goes even farther when he asserts, “On ne considère en France que ce qui plaît ; c’est la grande règle, et pour ainsi dire la seule” (9). La Fontaine’s doctrine concerning the fable, which began on such a promising note, seems to be brought very dubiously to the ground. Of the two rules given for the composition of a fable, the first is generally ignored and the second, bearing on the *âme* or the moral lesson, is always followed – except by La Fontaine who finds in Horace, classical poetry’s moral voice, his excuse: “Cet auteur ne veut pas qu’un

18 Cf. Albanese’s summary descriptions of La Fontaine’s world: “un monde régi par des besoins physiques, [...] un univers essentiellement hostile, [...] conflictuel, [peuplé de] mangeurs, [...] un monde irrémédiablement voué au mal” (69). The present essay stems from a conference paper of mine on *rites of passage* in La Fontaine which developed briefly the idea of the *Fables* as an extended, fictional “walkabout.” This unsentimental world view is a part of political readings of the *Fables*, as found in Louis Marin’s readings and also that of Olivier Leplatre in his sprawling study on *Le Pouvoir et la parole* in La Fontaine. For this discussion, I put aside the political as too fraught a topic and salute Marin and Leplatre for their incisive views.

19 Collinet calls this rule an invention on La Fontaine’s part (1052 n.3).

écrivain s'opiniâtre contre l'incapacité de son esprit, ni contre celle de sa matière. Jamais, à ce qu'il prétend, un homme qui veut réussir n'en vient jusque-là ; il abandonne les choses dont il voit bien qu'il ne saurait rien faire de bon" (9). Using Horace as an excuse in this case is an especially paradoxical instance of exemplary authority or character reference; what do we remember of Horace in this context if it is not the *utile dulci*, the advice given the young poet to blend the pleasant with the useful? On Horace's authority, La Fontaine gives the fabulist license to provide pleasure and leave out the *moralité*, the lesson in its clearest form. (Rousseau might not have been so wrong.)

La Fontaine's rhetoric, at the conclusion of his presentation, rests on the slightest of logical structures and a very dubious *ethos*: Aristotle's authority counts for little and the author excuses himself from superfluous efforts when it comes to articulating a moral lesson. Between the lofty examples of Socrates at the beginning of the "Préface" and a revised version of Horacian doctrine at the end, La Fontaine's ethical appeal (accompanied by a bracketing of morals and *moralité*) seems, by the end, indeed curious.

### Paragraph Ten: La Fontaine on Aesop's life

Nevertheless, La Fontaine closes his "Préface" with still another discussion of character, in this case that of Aesop. Serving here essentially as a bookend to the well documented last days of Socrates, Aesop's entire life is offered up as an example covered in shadow: his principal biography, written by Planude, is itself considered "fabuleuse," perhaps because its author wished that "son héros [possédât] un caractère et des aventures qui répondissent à ses fables" (10) – an amusing play on words that La Fontaine calls "spécieux" (i.e. appealing by its appearance, according to Furetière) but, in the end, not a sufficient reason to reject the account as a whole, especially because the character it reveals is similar to the one described in Plutarch, "lui qui fait profession d'être véritable partout ailleurs, et de conserver à chacun son caractère. Quand cela serait [i.e. that Plutarch had chosen to falsify this particular portrait], je ne saurais que mentir sur la foi d'autrui" (10). It is hard to do justice to the complexity of this kaleidoscopic interplay of reflected and deformed fragments of a character sketch. Wadsworth is at the very least indulgent when he pardons La Fontaine's "naïv[e] attempt[s]" to defend Planude (117). The "Préface" ends in a crescendo of ambiguity and uncertainty when La Fontaine introduces his own "Vie d'Ésope," admitting from the start that "Quelque vraisemblable que je le rende, on ne s'y assurera pas" (10). Indeed, the image that La Fontaine traces of Aesop is not pretty – literally: "la nature [...] le fit naître difforme et laid de visage, ayant à peine figure d'homme," though he says that he was endowed with a "bel esprit" (12). The lengthy, picaresque narration that follows does not lend itself to an easy summary, beyond the observation that its hero's exploits are more those of a trickster than of a saint. This slave stands up to scoundrels, gets the best of his philosopher-master Xanthus, and finds his only true peer in Lycerus, the King of Babylon. Almost inevitably, however, Aesop falls victim to his own wit (his *bel esprit*, the best part of his character) which prompts him to compare the Delphians to a stick on the sea, thus bringing him to a harsh, unjust death sentence, not entirely unlike the one imposed on Socrates at the beginning of the "Préface".

Socrates's and Aesop's lives stand in this way as responses to Patru's extreme caution on aesthetic ambition in favor of an embrace of sound morality. These examples show the Poet to be fundamentally an outsider and a rule breaker.

### Conclusion.

My aim in this linear reading of La Fontaine's "Préface" has been not so much to *make sense* of the text as to *enact* it as a kind of rhetorical performance. Indeed, Wadsworth writes, "From La Fontaine's scattered and unsystematic observations it can be concluded that he had only limited competence as a builder of literary theories" (126). I have suggested that this may well have been less a matter of *competence* than canny *finesse*. In

his article Wadsworth follows the tendency common among critics to fill in the gaps, to rationalize and to forgive La Fontaine for his lapses, as “he was guided [...] by his own instinct and sureness of taste, by his own creative ability” (126). On La Fontaine’s didactic intentions, he finds them at times half-hearted, if not insincere: “He apparently dwelled at such length on these theories [discussed in paragraph six] in order to please and flatter the royal family but they probably had little effect upon his literary intentions” (120); at other times, casually ingenuous: “he may have believed, rather naïvely, that he was offering lessons in virtue which would have a wholesome effect upon children” (119). Wadsworth’s diffidence on the question of the *Fables*’ didacticism might be explained by his own conviction — and satisfaction — that La Fontaine was really writing for an adult audience. But this is not the best response to a text like the “Préface” which, whatever else one says about it, is suffused with references to and concerns about aspects of useful instruction.<sup>20</sup> To sweep aside *Fables*’ didactic cover is not enough. I share Richard Danner’s wish to see a “study devoted to the interrelationships between didactic elements in the *Fables* and La Fontaine’s ironic artistry” (Danner 168). This essay could be at least another small contribution to this end.

Danner gives the following warning to his fellow readers of the *Fables*: “La Fontaine’s esthetically appropriate verbal craftiness has frequently been underestimated, with a net loss to appreciation of his art — the quicksand art of a master ironist” (49). Especially given the prominence of moral and rhetorical discourse in the “Préface,” it seems very risky in La Fontaine’s case to bet on a passive acquiescence to tradition or the poet’s naïve comfort in the feasibility of his own mission. It seems unnecessary to point this out, but whether we read the “Préface” as a stage act, the *boniment* of an *orviétan* salesman, or as the first meeting between teacher and student, the “Préface” needs and seeks an audience. If we assume a rigid and traditional relationship between teacher and student, the *lecture* (recitation) of the fable will resemble a “lecture” (*cours magistral*) in morals. John Lyons has argued that to assume such a “monopolizing,” “manipulative” use of the exemplary practice is to deny its discursive context. The Erasmian, Rabelaisian ironic overtones of La Fontaine’s “Préface” — he all but compares Aesop to a Silenus! — are meant to awaken the reader and prepare him/her for an engagement with the text; in paragraph eight, he says he will rely on the reader to complete what he cannot.

In this way, my reading of the “Préface” seems to dovetail with Anne Birberick’s in the first chapter of her *Reading Under Cover*. Only Birberick, to my knowledge, has previously focused serious attention on the La Fontaine—Socrates—Aesop nexus and has, in addition, suggested the subtle but intriguing presence of the Silenus as “one of the work’s controlling, but unstated, metaphors” (28)<sup>21</sup>, while accepting, unlike Wadsworth, the challenge of finding a coherent meaning in the “Préface.”

Anne Birberick’s reading of the “threshold” texts that precede the *Fables* anticipates mine in several ways. For example, she points effectively to La Fontaine’s restive or resistant attitude toward the Olivier Patrus of the world. Socrates and Aesop are both presented as brilliant outsiders and, ultimately, pariahs — clearly aspirational models for La Fontaine’s chosen persona in these texts and for the author of the fables that follow. Birberick and I agree on the the importance of La Fontaine’s (apparently) amiable response to Patru’s (putatively) formal critique of his project (“l’un des Maitres de notre Eloquence

20 In contrast, Alain Génétiot has insisted on the importance of a double, ironic reading of the *Fables*: “La résilience du sens littéral, qui s’offre à la pluralité des sens figurés dynamiques et momentanément cristallisés, permet ainsi de faire coexister deux publics, enfantin et adulte - ou mieux, lecteur naïf et lecteur averti, voire déniaisés” (330-331). Génétiot’s argument for the *Fables* as a *plurivocal* text does not directly account for the unmistakable, residual dust of a didactic discourse that the worldly reader will find on the decoded text’s crystalline face.

21 She returns several times to this idea in her book, on pages 31, 43, 56 and 58.

[a] désapprouvé le dessein de les mettre [les fables] en Vers”): La Fontaine’s plea for flexibility (“je demanderais seulement qu’il en relâchât quelque peu”) is also, implicitly, a request for patience because his response will require some development (cf. the beginning of the second paragraph, “Après tout, je n’ai entrepris la chose que sur l’exemple,” etc.). We disagree, however, on the scope or nature of La Fontaine’s resistance to Patru.

For Birberick, the question centers on “audience selection” (23): La Fontaine’s goal is to recuse, even to mock in advance “academic readers” whose “narrow preconceptions” (24) and “prescriptive and ahistorical” rules (22) make them unfit to appreciate his undertaking. As such, we might well say that Socrates and Aesop are examples of what Michael Riffaterre called “archilecteurs,” attentive and capable of reading outside the lines prescribed by classical models. Curiously, the questions of adult or juvenile readers or of ludic or instructive readings are not raised. I believe, on the other hand, that La Fontaine saw in Patru’s restriction of the fable to prose not only a matter of form but also a *prescription* on the moral constraints – and the moral destiny – implied by the practice of the fable. Marc Fumaroli’s wider view of Patru’s role in the Fables may help us to understand how his critiques functions in the “Préface.”

In his introduction to the *Fables*, Fumaroli suggests a strong link between Patru and Le Maître de Sacy whose more extensive, austere prose translation of Phaedrus for the *Petites écoles de Port-Royal* represented the surest example of a modern *mode d’emploi* of the fable. Indeed, Fumaroli maintains that La Fontaine chose the fable, “un genre aussi généralement dédaigné et considéré comme ‘bas,’” as a gesture of *humility*<sup>22</sup>: “Les Fables [...] ont dans leur intention initiale quelque chose à voir avec le goût sévère et simple qui prévaut à Port-Royal et dont La Fontaine, comme tous les vaincus de la Fronde et du procès Fouquet, a senti vivement l’insécable et secrète grandeur” (xvii). No less than Le Maître de Sacy, Patru embodied a long tradition of “l’humanisme érudit et gallican, néo-latin et chrétien [...]. C’est la tradition de la probité de la prose : pour elle la poésie n’est qu’une prose un peu plus ornée ; au-delà, on tombe dans la vanité et la volupté coupables des ‘mots’” (xl). Fumaroli also says that La Fontaine could follow this tradition but so far: the reference to Patru at the start of the “Préface” constituted “la plus difficile des contradictions qu’il [La Fontaine] dut surmonter” because this *maître de notre éloquence* exemplified a “tradition littéraire que le poète respecte, dont il se sent l’héritier, même s’il ne lui obéit qu’en partie” (xl). Patru’s example is chosen over Le Maître de Sacy’s because it is already a compromise: “d’une nuance moins sévère, mieux accordée à une philosophie du Plaisir” (xxviii). Or again: “l’art de La Fontaine [...] s’éloignera de l’augustinisme [trouvé dans l’exemple de Le Maître de Sacy] pour se poser lui-même en évangile du jardin” (xxiii). In other words: the *Fables* should be taken as (Epicurean) gospel, a reading that Jean-Charles Darmon, in many ways, illustrates beautifully in his *Philosophies de la fable*. But Fumaroli’s two phrases – “une philosophie du Plaisir” and “[un] évangile du jardin” – point to a still unresolved contradiction in his reading of the *Fables* and its “Préface,” between thought and doctrine, questioning and instruction. Even Patru, first and foremost an astute veteran of the law courts, would have understood that La Fontaine could not *split the baby*, as it were: the *probité de [sa] prose* in the *Lettres à Olinde* was a dead-end because it denied the poet’s ultimate pleasure, “la vanité et la volupté des ‘mots’” (Fumaroli xl), while flattening the very notion of pleasure into the message of a rather dreary, moralizing didacticism.

22 Fumaroli summarizes a part of his demonstration when he asserts, “la publication des *Fables choisies, mises en vers* [...] eut pour point de départ un souci d’humilité et de patience” (xviii).

### Rereading some exemplary *Fables*

To test this reading of the “Préface” one need go no further than the first pages of the first book. What is “La Cigale et la Fourmi” if not a confrontation between a poet and an austere, moralizing scold? It has been pointed out that the Cicada, La Fontaine’s noisy insect, guilty in the fable of singing all summer (“La Cigale ayant chanté / Tout l’été,” vv. 1-2), was for the Greeks from Homer forward a representation of the poet himself. The reader need only turn back a page to the dedication “À Monseigneur le Dauphin” to hear La Fontaine declare, in mock-epic fashion, “Je chante les héros dont Ésope est le père” – to remind us of Homer or Virgil and also prepare the Cicada’s song. The sober Ant moralizes enough in her brief but cruel rebuke of the Cicada to discourage La Fontaine from moralizing himself (unlike Aesop or Phaedrus in their versions of this fable) — though it seems unlikely that his moral would have been much like the Ant’s.<sup>23</sup> The choice of a spritely heptasyllabic meter – with a light as air trisyllabic verse thrown in for good measure — suggests clearly enough that La Fontaine was joining his voice with the “insouciant” Cicada and, thus, could not subscribe to the Ant’s cold practicality and “prudence.”<sup>24</sup> It seems hard to believe that La Fontaine would not have taken some pleasure in both contradicting his own “doctrine” from the “Préface” by starting precisely with a fable lacking a *moralité* and also representing a cold version of prudence — the moral quality apparently to be learned from the lesson of “Le Renard et le Bouc” in the same text — in such an unfavorable light.

If an explicit *moralité* is lacking in the first fable, “Le Corbeau et le Renard” (I, 2) concludes with a clear lesson about flattery delivered by the Fox himself. The first character named is again a singer and a poet of sorts, but a poor and stupid one in this case: according to Alexandre Cioranescu, Ariosto, from whom La Fontaine borrowed a number of stories for his *Contes*, was the source of this “allégorie [...] des mauvais poètes de cour” (*L’Arioste en France* 250). The fable is built on the irony that the Fox would seem to be more successful both as a flatterer, usually the court poet’s territory, and as the deliverer of unpleasant lessons (“Apprenez... Cette leçon...” [I, 2, vv. 14 and 16]) that are, in the end, fairly useless: “Le Corbeau, [...] / Jura, mais un peu tard, qu’on ne l’y prendrait plus” (17-18). More often than not, especially in the first book, the teacher is not portrayed in a positive way: see, for example, “Le Loup et le Chien” (I, 5) and “Le Chêne et le Roseau” (I, 22), wherein knowing-it-all comes to naught, and again in the “Le Loup et l’Agneau” (I, 10) where the Lamb, in his rational responses to the Wolf’s question, would earn an “A” in hydrology and mathematics but proves to be a failure in the school of hard knocks. Proper discourse, or Stierle’s “esthétique de la lucidité” (243) is generally not enough when, as is just about always the case in the *Fables*, survival is the goal.

23 Karlheinz Stierle, in his examination of “*morale et esthétique dans les Fables de La Fontaine*,” has remarked: “par l’absence de ce charme de la parole qui est à la fois celui de la cigale et de l’apologiste, ils expriment en même temps un manque, un défaut moral. Sans moraliser aucunement, La Fontaine, par son art de la mise en paroles, nous fait comprendre que la raison humaine est plutôt du côté de la parole poétique que du côté de son manque” (“Une morale du Grand Siècle ?” 236). His thesis is that *morale* and *esthétique* go hand in hand, that virtue is found necessarily in “pure” discourse, exemplified by the mirror and the stream in I, 10, “L’homme et son image.” For Stierle: “esthétique et morale se conditionnent mutuellement” (237). Though I agree with Stierle’s idea that the aesthetic is valorized by La Fontaine over the ugly language of force and authority, it seems to me too hopeful to conclude that beauty always defeats the beasts in the *Fables*. See, for example, my discussion of the “Paysan du Danube” below.

24 I borrow these characterizations from Darmon’s “note complémentaire” on the first fable of the first book. Is it possible to hear even a bit of moralizing in Darmon’s depiction of the insect as “oublieux des contingences matérielles et voué à la précarité” ? (426) Or is he casting the Cicada as a prototypical “poète maudit”? For an alternative interpretation of this tradition, one can look to the sample verses cited from a number of poets (Hesiod, Anacreon, Theocritus, as well as Homer) in Jean-Baptiste Dugas-Montbel’s *Observations sur l’Iliade d’Homère* where one finds only appreciation for the *cigale*’s melodious song. Dugas-Montbel’s only reservation is that these poets could be so charmed by a voice that seems to us today “si criarde et si monotone” (I: 153).

“L’Enfant et le Maître d’école” (I, 19) provides the most direct example of a negative depiction of the pedagogue: a child, carelessly frolicking by the Seine, falls in the water, is half-saved by a providential tree limb, then calls out for help to be brought ashore — only to hear the *maître d’école*’s (de)moralizing, castigating response: “petit babouin... fripo[n]... canaille” (12, 14, 16) he calls the child and rues the fate of his “parents [...] malheureux [...]! / Qu’ils ont de maux! et que je plains leur sort ! » (15, 17). La Fontaine, of course, has the last word of “blâme” (19) against the “babillard,” “censeur,” and “pédant” (20) who misuse their authority: “Eh mon ami, tire-moi du danger, / Tu me feras après ta harangue” (26-27). This last, unpoetic word may pique our curiosity a bit. Here as elsewhere in the *Fables*, La Fontaine anticipates the modern, entirely pejorative use of the word “harangue,”<sup>25</sup> typically characterized as “vaine.”<sup>26</sup> La Fontaine uses the word *harangue* sparingly — only a half-dozen times in all twelve books — but it appears at pivotal moments in some his most consequential fables.

- In “Les Animaux malades de la peste” (VII, 1), the Wolf initiates the scandalous condemnation of the Donkey: “Un Loup quelque peu clerc, prouva par sa harangue / Qu’il fallait dévouer ce maudit animal” (vv. 56-7). La Fontaine underlines the doubtful legitimacy of this deliberative, juridical discourse first by means of his ambiguous and understated description of the Wolf as “quelque peu clerc”: a “clerc” can serve many different masters with a more or less great spiritual commitment. The terms used to announce the Donkey’s punishment, “il fallait dévouer ce maudit animal,” are not ambiguous — the Donkey must be sacrificed — but the extremely unusual transitive, non-pronominal use of the verb “dévouer” points to the spiritually grotesque charade by which the Lion’s court hopes to appease “le Ciel” (v. 2). The “harangue” proves nothing but the Wolf’s corrupt intent.

- In “Le Pouvoir des fables” (VIII, 4), the reference to the frustrated “orateur” as “le harangueur” (v. 48) is made in a question — “Que fit le harangueur?” — that marks the turning point in his, until now, ineffectual appeal to the public. It is precisely by questioning the form and address of his vain “harangue” that the orator discovers “le pouvoir des fables,” changes gears, and reaches his audience.

- Finally, after conditioning his reader to distrust *harangues*, in “Le Paysan du Danube” (XI, 7) La Fontaine surprises us — as he promises to do in the modest thesis expressed in the first line: “Il ne faut point juger des gens sur l’apparence.” He shares with us a brief description of the unprepossessing *paysan* in lines 11-19 before he recounts the remarkable “harangue” that this “ours mal léché” delivers to his Roman oppressors. From all appearances (literally) this discourse (“un peu fort” [v. 81], according to the speaker himself) should not succeed, as neither the messenger nor the message is well tempered or tuned to reach the audience. In short, the *harangue* is — or should be — a rhetorical failure, but it is not. In fact, this moving “plainte un peu trop sincère” (v. 84) receives a response as paradoxical as its speaker: “On le créa patrice ; et ce fut la vengeance / Qu’on crut qu’un tel discours méritait” (vv. 88-9). But like all good paradoxes, this speech might well shake but will not topple the doxa: “On ne sut pas longtemps à Rome / Cette éloquence entretenir” (vv. 93-4).

“Le Paysan du Danube” creates a short-lived utopia in the *Fables*, populated by personages of ideal character on all sides, a population that is “founded” around “Le bon

25 In classical French, the principal meaning is still simply “a formal public discourse” (see Furetière). Even Littré still defines the term in this general sense, “Discours fait à une assemblée, à un prince, ou à quelque autre personne élevée en dignité” and provides the following example from the letters of Mme de Sévigné: “Le coadjuteur a fait la plus belle harangue qu’il est possible.” Rather than following the usage rule of his times, La Fontaine senses the *unpleasant* stiffness implied by this rhetorical model.

26 At the beginning of I, 19, La Fontaine promises to reveal “D’un certain sot la remontrance vaine” (v. 2). See also “Le Lion” (XI, 1) : after the Fox concludes his sage warning to the Sultan, we read “La harangue fut vaine” (v. 27).

Socrate [et] Ésope” who are named as character witnesses in order to vouch for our hero, “[un] certain Paysan / Des rives du Danube” (vv. 6-7). If a blatant anachronism might be permitted, it is hard not to imagine a strong resemblance between the paradoxical, bearlike Paysan and Allan Ramsay’s portrait of the exiled Jean-Jacques Rousseau in a fur (Armenian) hat, after his 1766 arrival in England, an outcast from France. La Fontaine would no doubt have been drawn to this *drôle de personnage*, however harsh the *philosophe*’s rejection of his “fabulous” forebear might have been.

Though “Le Paysan du Danube” is not a full conclusion of La Fontaine’s project, one has a feeling of completion at the close of this poem: character, lyricism, eloquence, rule-breaking and survival come together, if only for a fleeting moment.

*Boston College*

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