

## ■ Introduction

It was prettily devised of Aesop;  
“The fly sat upon the axle-tree  
of the chariot wheel, and said,  
‘What a dust do I raise?’”  
—Bacon: “Of Vain-Glory”

**Q**uoting Sir Francis Bacon quoting “Aesop” quoting a fly,<sup>1</sup> I admit that this project, though not actually making much of little, may be thought to do so. Whenever during its development its subject has been mentioned in casual conversation, it has met with some incredulity. Everybody has been, since childhood, familiar with Aesop’s fables, and almost everyone, consequently, believes them to be children’s literature. As Marcel Gutwirth put it, “pedagogical practice did more than its bit in creating an indissoluble bond between our notion of childhood and our notion of fable,” the latter now commonly thought of as “a place where the archaic and the puerile meet.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, the fable’s use in elementary pedagogy was only one branch of the educational practice initiated by the Renaissance humanists who recovered the great texts of classical antiquity and made them the staples of early modern philology and rhetoric. And long after the boys of the sixteenth century had been taught what they could learn from the fable as a form—grammar, the essentials of narrative fiction, the relation between moral and exemplar—they were reading and rewriting fables for their adult sagacity and cogent, real-world applicability.

This book describes the Aesopian fable as a hitherto underestimated function in Renaissance culture and subsequently. Partly thanks to their traditions of origin—how fables came to be written, by whom, and why—traditions which (whether or not

they believed them) were deeply interesting to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers, the stories of the beasts, the birds, the trees, and the insects quickly acquired or recovered their function as a medium of political analysis and communication, especially in the form of a communication from or on behalf of the politically powerless. As Lydgate had put it for the late middle ages:

Of many straunge uncouth similitude,  
Poetis of olde fablis have contryvid,  
Of Sheep, of Hors, of Gees, of bestis rude,  
By which ther wittis wer secretly appevid,  
Undir covert [termes] tyrantis eeke reprevid  
Ther oppressiouns & malis to chastise  
By examplis of resoun to be mevid,  
For no prerogatiff poore folk to despise.<sup>3</sup>

In England the tradition of political fabling was well established by the end of the fourteenth century, when Lydgate, it is thought, produced his own selection from Aesop and several non-Aesopian fables. Arnold Henderson has traced an increasingly explicit tradition of social commentary in the fable from the twelfth century through the fifteenth, culminating in those of Robert Henryson.<sup>4</sup> Not coincidentally, the late fifteenth century, with its terrible history of baronial strife, also produced one of the most famous editions of Aesop in England, William Caxton's translation of the French version of Steinhöwel, which Caxton carefully dated as being finished in "the fyrst yere of the regne of kyng Rychard the thyrdde." But the period of the fable's greatest significance was approximately the one hundred and fifty years from the last quarter of Elizabeth's reign through the first quarter of the eighteenth century; a long historical moment whose pivot was, of course, the English civil war, which not only provided one of the strongest motivations for the discovery and development of new forms of analysis, or for making old forms perform new tricks, but established for at least the next half century a structure of opposed political values, along with a supporting symbolic vocabulary. In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, and particularly in the wake of the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, there devel-

oped what one might reasonably call a craze for political fables, whose modishness was eventually recognized by Aesop's personal transformation into a fashionable man about town.

At least for the purpose of this inquiry, it is important to distinguish the fable in the strict sense from parables, or even, more loosely, fictions. Yet the Aesopian tradition did acquire additional authority from the fact that fables, as distinct from parables, occasionally occur in scripture. Significantly, biblical (or apocryphal) fables also carry a strong political valence. In 2 Esdras 4:13–18 we are told that the angel Uriel illustrated the proper limits to human understanding by a cosmic fable:

I came to a forest in the plain where the trees held a counsel, And said, Come, let us go fight against the sea, that it may give place to us, and that we may make us more woods. Likewise the floods of the sea took counsel and said, Come, let us go up and fight against the trees of the wood, that we may get another country for us. But the purpose of the wood was vain: for the fire came and consumed it. Likewise also the purpose of the floods of the sea; for the sand stood up and stopped them.

This early indictment of militant expansionism could clearly also be used in conservative political arguments; but a far more powerful model appeared in Judges 9:8–15, where Jotham reproached the Israelites for having made Abimelech their king. Somewhat comically, Jotham describes this event as a failed system of political nomination, whereby only the last and least qualified candidate will accept the position:

The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said to the olive tree, Reign thou over us. But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my

wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.

As a threatening contrast between two types of government, and one that questioned the wisdom of the plebiscite, Jotham's clever narrative sponsored a whole series of tree fables in the seventeenth century, when the origins and sanctions of monarchy were being publicly debated, and became in its own right a commonplace of republican theory.

In certain instances, a fable could acquire a range of pertinence that gave it still greater durability. Such is the case with the famous *The Belly and the Members*, attributed to a Roman patrician of the fifth century B.C., but early assimilated into the Aesopian canon. Because it articulated in symbolic terms some of the most intransigent problems in political philosophy and practice, this fable was still going strong as a symbolic text in the mid-nineteenth century. In the seventeenth century those problems were primarily stated in terms of *natural* superiority as a basis for rule, supported by faculty psychology; the head's authority over the body, high over low, reason over the passions, was unquestionable; but whether the analogy worked in the body politic could reasonably be a matter of opinion. In the nineteenth century the analogy reappeared with a clearly capitalist and pragmatic inflection—as the need for a strong and decisive central government versus the rights of workers to participate in the system. What both formulations shared was the image of the human body and its nutritional needs as a symbol of the distribution of wealth in the body politic or socioeconomic. And what both periods shared was the recognition that the fable's meaning was not fixed but contestable, that the organicist argument had much, including custom, going for it, but that the rebellious members within the text also had a case that was constantly worth remaking.

This concept of the fable's functionality is evidently connected to my previous work on the relationship between literature and

ensorship in the early modern period.<sup>5</sup> Built into the poetics of the fable, which emerges explicitly at the end of the seventeenth century and before that, as Sir Roger L'Estrange then put it, "by Hints, and Glances," is the notion that the fable had from its origins functioned as a self-protective mode of communication, whether by a slave addressing the Master society, or by an aristocrat whose political party is currently in defeat. As L'Estrange saw it from the latter position, "Change of Times and Humours, calls for New Measures and Manners; and what cannot be done by the Dint of Authority, or Perswasion, in the Chappel, or the Closet [the authorized routes to the ears of the powerful], must be brought about by the Side-Wind of a Lecture from the Fields and the Forest."<sup>6</sup> When I wrote *Censorship and Interpretation*, I left the fable out of my account of functional ambiguity. I intuited that it could not be managed in a single chapter. Yet when I originally planned this present book, I made the opposite mistake. I began by thinking it would be possible to cover the fable's history, from Aesop and Phaedrus to the development of Aesopian writing in heavily censored modern cultures, and simultaneously to interrogate the most important exemplars to discover exactly how their symbolic language operated.

Obviously, this book retracts that proposition, both as overweening and perhaps not finally as useful, given the swiftness with which it would have had to move, as this much narrower study. I begin with a chapter on the legendary *Life of Aesop*, its cultural history and philosophical implications, a topic which involves such widely separated figures as La Fontaine, Hegel, and Vygotsky. But after that I confine myself and my readers to the political fable in England, and predominantly to the century and a half defined above. By so doing, it has seemed possible to write the fabulist grammar in enough detail that one can tell precisely when and how its semantic level is called into operation. In order to see, for example, what Milton was doing when he rewrote *The Belly and the Members* in his first pamphlet on church reform in the rush of intellectual excitement generated by the then brand-new Long Parliament, one needs to have a clear idea of what the "base" text of the fable was thought to be, and how it had been deployed in English culture before it occurred to Milton as a useful polemi-

cal tactic. One of those previous deployments was, of course, by Shakespeare in *Coriolanus*, itself a topic that requires extensive explanation, since Shakespeare's choice of this play, and his decision to make the Belly fable its opening premise, can best be understood in the light of the major agricultural disturbances his region had just experienced, namely the Midlands Rising of 1607.<sup>7</sup>

I would like to think that, as well as excavating and exhibiting an important cultural artefact whose use seems largely to have been forgotten, this book could serve also as a reminder that the Aesopian tradition stands for something many people would like to forget. One of the most striking facts about the fable's history in Western culture is that Aesop and his fables appear in one of Plato's dialogues, in such a way, it might at first seem, as to grant them maximum respect. In the *Phaedo*, on the day appointed for Socrates's execution, his friends visit him in prison, and one of them asks Socrates, who had never previously composed poetry, why he had spent his time in prison producing metrical versions of Aesop's fables. Socrates replied that this peculiar behavior was a late response to the repeated injunctions he had received in dreams:

The same dream came to me often in my past life, sometimes in one form and sometimes in another, but always saying the same thing: "Socrates," it said, "make music and work at it." And I formerly thought it was urging and encouraging me to do what I was doing already . . . because philosophy was the greatest kind of music and I was working at that. But now, after the trial and while the festival of the god delayed my execution, I thought, in case the repeated dream really meant to tell me to make this which is ordinarily called music, I ought to do so and not to disobey. . . . So . . . since I was not a maker of myths, I took the myths of Aesop, which I had at hand and knew, and turned into the verse the first I came upon.<sup>8</sup>

Not only does this passage provide an apparently authoritative statement that a prose version of Aesop existed at the end of the fifth century B.C.; it also places Aesop in a curiously intense and superior relation to Socrates, whose concept of wisdom he is here invoked to modify. The relation is all the more interesting in that

both shared, in legend, a remarkable physical ugliness, and both were victims of an unjust execution.

That Socrates in his last days should, as a kind of spiritual insurance, have been brought to consider the Aesopian fable as what the gods had in mind—an intellectual harmony finer than that of idealist philosophy—is worth more meditation than the *Phaedo* actually gives it. It is part of the episode’s silent intelligence that Socrates had himself invoked his friend’s inquiry by mentioning Aesop in the context of a strong physical sensation—the removal of the fetters prior to his execution. Rubbing his leg, he proposed to his friends that pain and pleasure have themselves some mysterious physical connection:

They will not both come to a man at the same time, and yet if he pursues the one and captures it, he is generally obliged to take the other also, as if the two were joined together in one head. And I think . . . if Aesop had thought of them, he would have made a fable telling how they were at war and god wished to reconcile them, and when he could not do that he fastened their heads together. (60:209–11)

Despite the fact that this is both a more human and a more surreal image than any included in the basic Aesopian canon, Socrates here in effect provided the first “reading” of that canon: preparing to separate his own philosophical soul from the body, and to present that separation as a manumission from a slavery to the body, he has nevertheless used as an instrument of that preparation the extremely corporeal and anti-idealistic fables of Aesop, the Phrygian slave.

In the long run the idealist, Platonic tradition triumphed, or, rather, chose to suppress that aspect of its own dialectic. Aesop himself was subsequently conceived not as Socrates’ teacher but as Plato’s antithesis, at least on the subject of education. In Richard Mulcaster’s *Elementarie*, an important manifesto of Elizabethan humanism, linguistic nationalism, and pedagogic theory, Aesop became a symbolic figure of the challenge from below to the social theory of good government that the work promoted. Like so much of Tudor educational theory, Mulcaster’s largest objectives were the support of public peace and the maintenance

of social stratification. His third chapter, therefore, tackled the question of who in Elizabethan England deserved an education, and his answer was, not surprisingly, “chiefly . . . the principall and subaltern magistrates.”<sup>9</sup> From the group beneath them, in order to avoid “too manie bookmen,” the choice of the educable was to “respect libertie and not bondage, abilitie and not povertie, to have learning liberall, where learners be no slaves, and the execution uncorrupt, where nede is not to festur” (p. 19). By “liberall” here, which Mulcaster made cognate with his own definition of “liberty,” he meant gentlemanly; by “ability” he clearly meant financial independence; and he proceeded to dispose of what might have seemed a counter-example to the Platonic barrier between education and the slave class.

In the fabulous *Life of Aesop* (described in chapter 1) the Renaissance read how intelligence could empower the disenfranchised, a lesson which Mulcaster sought severely to qualify. “And tho slaves be somtimes learned,” he wrote, “yet learning is not slavish”:

neither when the parties demeanor doth procure his freedom, is learning manumised, which was never bond. Which two reasons, for libertie, and nede, the old wisdom . . . must nedes confesse, if ye look but to Aesop among slaves, & Plato among writers: whereof Aesop fought still for the fredom against servilitie, & Plato for nature against mutable fortun, measuring not even princes by their place, but by their propertie, by naturall power, and not by casuall event. (Pp. 19–21)

Thus Aesop’s learning, because of its social motivation, its relation to the “casuall event,” was less valuable than Plato’s more purely speculative endeavors, which are twice identified as more “natural” than those that arise out of necessity, or the desire for personal liberty in the stronger political sense. In addition, Mulcaster wished to believe that the category of “need” could be redefined by the society. Slaves have no need for education, having “no voice nor part in the state, being held but for catle, tho reasonable withall” (p. 20). As for “abilitie,” or economic power, its value as a criterion for the selection of the educated class should be “the respect of the people, which will obeie best, where theie be over

topt most.” And since learning has the “best voice in anie estate,” it should be entrusted to only such an “utterer, as is part of the state and capable of best state” (p. 20; italics added). These are strong statements, probably in response to a strong and disturbing stimulus; a print culture, difficult to control; and a rapid increase in literacy and in the demand for education.

Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*, first published in 1957, a series of essays on contemporary myths and cultural icons, ends with a difficult philosophical essay, entitled “Myth Today.” Discussing semiology, Barthes paused to give two examples. In the first, he imagined himself a pupil in the second form in a French lycée:

I open my Latin grammar, and I read a sentence, borrowed from Aesop or Phaedrus: *quia ego nominor leo*. I stop and think. . . . I am even forced to realize that the sentence in no way signifies its meaning to me, that it tries very little to tell me something about the lion and what sort of name he has; . . . I conclude that I am faced with a particular, great, semiological system, since it is co-extensive with the language.

In his second example, Barthes is waiting in a barbershop, and picks up a copy of *Paris-Match*:

On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.<sup>10</sup>

Subtly working these two examples together, Barthes explains how the signifier (the naming of the lion, the Negro’s salute) becomes in each case a myth (for him, a negative term), by the emptying out of original meaning and replacement in another formal system:

As a meaning, the signifier . . . has a sensory reality . . . there is a richness in it . . . it belongs to a history, that of the lion or

that of the Negro: . . . [it] could very well be self-sufficient if myth did not take hold of it and did not turn it suddenly into an empty, parasitical form. The meaning is *already* complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decision. . . . When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains. (P. 117)

For Barthes, the original richness resides, in the case of *quia ego nominor leo*, in remembering the original fable from which the grammatical instance was taken: “I am an animal, a lion, I live in a certain country, I have just been hunting, they would have me share my prey with a heifer, a cow and a goat; but being the stronger, I award myself all the shares for various reasons, the last of which is quite simply that my name is lion” (p. 118); in other words, the Aesopian fable of *The Lion, the Cow, the Goat, and the Sheep*, which in Caxton’s translation concludes with the lion’s witty self-justification to his hunting companions: “My lordes . . . the fyrst part is myn be cause I am your lord / the second by cause / I am stronger than ye be / the thyrd / by cause I ranne more swyfter than ye dyd / And who so ever toucheth the fourthe parte / he shalle be myn mortal enemy.” And therefore, concluded Caxton, “this fable techeth to al folk / that the poure ought not to hold felauship with the myghty.”<sup>11</sup> For all his desire to recover the historical richness of his example, therefore, it is not clear whether Barthes remembered the social force of this fable (he slightly misremembered its participants), which would have served his argument better than he knew. At the beginning of my third chapter, I show how well it was remembered in the early seventeenth century in England, so well, in fact, that a member of the House of Commons could rewrite its text in a parliamentary debate on the royal prerogative in the full confidence that his audience would recognize the adjustments made to the original. For Barthes, the memory, slightly hazy, is preserved by a set of chances: “Time, which caused me to be born at a certain period when Latin grammar is taught; History, which sets me apart, through a whole mechanism of social segregation, from the children who do not learn Latin; pedagogic tradition, which caused this example to be chosen from Aesop or

Phaedrus; my own linguistic habits, which see the agreement of the predicate as a fact worthy of notice and illustration” (p. 119). But the most important fact has escaped him; that between Aesopian tradition, with its stress on unequal power relations, and the sign of the “Negro-giving-the-salute,” which in Barthes’s modern narrative are themselves merely connected by chance, lies the saving myth of Aesop the Ethiopian, black, ugly, who began as a slave but became both free and influential, a source of political wisdom. It is my hope, therefore, to make the Aesopian tradition recoverable by less chancy means than these, and to recover it definitively as an alternative to the Platonic tradition, with its strong elitist bias.

Finally, as a gesture toward the vast body of fables that were not attached to the Aesopian corpus as such, though they may have been influenced by it, I invoke the example of Leonardo da Vinci, whose library contained a copy of Aesop,<sup>12</sup> and whose notebooks include a small collection of extremely intelligent fables.<sup>13</sup> Apparently an outcome of his period of employment by the Sforzas in Milan in the late quattrocento, these fables are, as Sir Kenneth Clarke remarked, a dark reflection of Leonardo’s view “of contemporary politics, and indeed of life in general, where nature only allows man to reach some pinnacle of self-esteem in order to deal him a more shattering blow.”<sup>14</sup> Several of these are fables of personal liberty, or, more accurately, of its equivocal character; several restate the Aesopian themes of excessive ambition, or of excessive trust, in a new animal or more often vegetable key; Leonardo was particularly interested in trees. But one has a decidedly urban, contemporary edge, holding to the series the same relation as the fabulous *Life* of Aesop held to the Aesopian canon: that is to say, of the hermeneutical key to the code.

It is only chance, but a fine one, that as Barthes’s analysis of myth began partly in a barbershop, Leonardo’s fable concerns a razor:

which, having one day come forth from the handle which served as its sheath and having placed himself in the sun, saw the sun reflected in his body, which filled him with great pride. And turning it over in his thoughts he began to say to himself: “And shall I return again to that shop from which I have just come? Certainly not; such splendid beauty shall not,

please God, be turned to such base uses. What folly would it be that could lead me to shave the lathered beards of rustic peasants and perform such menial service! Is this body destined for such work? Certainly not. I will hide myself in some retired spot and there pass my life in tranquil repose.” And having thus remained hidden for some months, one day he came out into the air, and issuing from his sheath, saw himself turned into the similitude of a rusty saw while his surface no longer reflected the resplendent sun. With useless repentance, he vainly deplored the irreparable mischief, saying to himself: “Oh! how far better was it to employ at the barbers my lost edge of such exquisite keenness! Where is that lustrous surface? It has been consumed by this vexatious and unsightly rust.”<sup>15</sup>

Leonardo partly provided his own moral: “The same thing happens,” he wrote, “to those minds which instead of exercise give themselves up to sloth. They are like the razor here spoken of, and lose the keenness of their edge, while the rust of ignorance spoils their form.” But he left unspoken the more trenchant application of this fable to those like himself. His razor articulates the dilemma of the intellectual whose mind has been honed to the point of aesthetic pleasure in itself, and is reluctant to waste its sharpness on what the world calls useful. It was a brilliant touch, also, to render this conceptual narcissicism by making the blade its own mirror, which for lack of exercise becomes incapable of reflection (“*la superfitie non vi spechiare piu lo splendente sole*”); but even more telling is the fable’s candor about class, the “*barbe de’ rustici villani*” and the “*mecaniche operationi*” that seem to the razor (fatally) beneath him. A good fable, too, should not corrode, but should keep itself sharp by constant application. And if Leonardo were capable of such self-consciousness in quattrocento Milan, where artists were still struggling to establish their dignity and to differentiate their products from mere artisanal work, his fable (which equally applies to those whose profession is reflection) is certainly no less pertinent today.