

INTRODUCTION

“La Fontaine’s connecting vision of the world...reveals relations and correspondences between quite different things...[I]n La Fontaine the thread...is the object of poetic discovery which can lead us, Ariadne-like, through the labyrinth of earthly appearances.”
—Leo Spitzer¹

Philip A. Wadsworth once predicted, alluding to the 1668 edition of La Fontaine’s *Fables*, that “The architecture of the volume, which has never been studied, might yield some of its secrets to a very patient and sensitive investigator” (*Young La Fontaine*, 214). In the years since then considerable patience and sensitivity have been brought to bear, not just on the fables in that edition, but on all 242, distributed in twelve books whose publication stretched to 1693. But we may still ask whether the order in which the fables appear is a meaningful one. It remains an open question.

In a recent survey of efforts to discover the logic of their arrangement, Patrick Dandrey observed that “Le principe qui a réglé la distribution et la succession des apologues de La Fontaine au sein des douze livres des *Fables* demeure encore aujourd’hui un objet de débat autant qu’un sujet de perplexité” (“Le cordeau et le hasard,” 73). No one has come up with a persuasive argument in favor of any particular guiding principle, yet there remains “le sentiment évident et irritant que la disposition des fables au sein de chaque livre ne relève pas du pur hasard, que l’enchaînement des perles au fil de ces douze rangs de collier a dû être d’une certaine façon concerté” (73). The nature of the hidden order, if order there be, seems in this perspective so near that we can almost touch it, yet continues to elude our grasp.

How, then, do we go beyond this “evident and irritating” feeling that there is something more than chance at work? Dandrey’s own approach, like that of many of his predecessors, introduces an unnecessary complication that prevents the extant order from emerging: the presumption that a single “principle” has regulated the “distribution” and “succession” of the fables within each book. By “distribution” Dandrey means “la disposition des fables au sein de chaque livre”—which one appears first, which last, which in the middle, and whether the individual books are organized around specific themes. “Succession” refers to the fables’ sequence—what it may mean that any particular two happen to be neighbors. But must we assume that the same principle will govern two distinct phenomena? “Distribution” could be a significant part of the structure and “succession” not. I suggest that they are each part of separate yet

coexisting structural systems.

Until now attention has tended to focus on the fables' "distribution" within individual books. Readings of books considered separately have yielded much insight, such as Marcel Gutwirth on Book Two, Nathan Gross on Book Six, David Lee Rubin and Maya Slater on Book Seven, Georges Couton on Book Eight, Richard Danner and Patrick Dandrey on Book Ten, Rubin on Book Eleven, and Philip Wadsworth on Book Twelve.² Though not an exhaustive list, it includes some of the interpreters (together with Michael Vincent in his provocative *Figures of the Text*) with whom it has been my pleasure to discuss, agree, and argue in the chapters that follow. Of these studies, Nathan Gross's "Order and Theme in . . . Book VI" is the closest in approach to my own. In reading it, I recognized a fellow traveler in La Fontaine's labyrinth; Gross examines the fables with the greatest attention to nuance and a fine ear for their echoes. I pay due homage to the details of his analysis in my own reading of Book Six. Though written with a *parti pris* that is not always persuasive, René Jasinski's *La Fontaine et le premier recueil des "Fables"*, as an attempt to discover every possible allusion to the persecution of La Fontaine's patron Foucquet, does provide an almost exhaustive commentary on the first six books. From repeated divings into its mass I emerged with fresh solutions to the obstacles my own agenda would encounter.

Herman Lindner, in a 1975 study of narrative technique in the *Fables*, explored the question of whether the *Fables* contain an "architecture secrète" (in French in Lindner) or an "orderly disorder" ("geordnete Unordnung").³ Though he opted for the latter, he did note at least a dozen of the echoes between neighboring fables that I will examine here. Not having found many more than that, he concluded that "Such cases of discrete transitions from one fable to another are not all that numerous, yet happen often enough to be seen by the attentive reader as a conscious principle of style" (165).

In her study of Book Seven, appropriately subtitled "The Problem of Order," Maya Slater asks the important question "whether La Fontaine's patent obsession with the smallest nuance of poetic composition is limited to detailed consideration of style or whether he is equally concerned with broader questions of structure" (573). She focuses to some degree on what Dandrey calls "succession," uncovering many of the same kind of linkages between sequential fables that I will describe. She also cites Nathan Gross's groundbreaking reading of Book Six, which shows in convincing detail that such linkages exist there too. Notwithstanding, Slater limits her findings to Book Seven and concludes that such linkages exist there and nowhere else: "Overall, there are definite links between the poems that make up Book VII, which is thus in many respects different from the other Books of the *Fables*" (586).

Persuaded as I am that all the fables show these successive linkages, I am encouraged when readers like Slater or Gross or Dandrey take a close look at some part of the sequence of the *Fables* and discover the internal echoes, thereby concluding that the book in question has a unified structure. Yet I am puzzled that they should persist in limiting their research to individual books when the architecture they have

Introduction

partially uncovered belongs to something larger and of potentially greater significance.

The traditional focus on individual books has apparently kept anyone from looking to see whether such sequential linkages might exist between the last fable in one book and the first in the next. As I intend to show, this is in fact the case. If these linkages turn out to be just as strong as those within a book, then it would appear that the search for order in the *Fables* needs a change of direction, away from the restrictions imposed by the division into books and toward a vision of the whole. “Le Chêne et le Roseau” (1. 22), for example, shares just as much connective tissue with “Contre ceux qui ont le goût difficile” (2. 1) as it does with “Les Frelons et les Mouches à miel” (1. 21).

Dandrey notes that previous attempts to find the guiding principle of the *Fables*’ arrangement have been riddled with exceptions. Alain Niderst, for example, believes Book Seven to be unified by its preoccupation with the horrors of war, except for “Le Mal marié” (7. 2), whose conflict is purely domestic. But then, Niderst suggests, perhaps the unhappy couple are a microcosm of warring European states. “Cela permettrait d’unifier le livre, tout en reconnaissant la rupture qu’introduit cette fable, et donc la discontinuité qui dissimule (et pourtant insinue) la cohérence profonde” (188). The exception proves the rule, in other words. But if we look for more subtle (yet nevertheless real) connections than the declared subjects of the fables, we will find fables 7. 1 and 7. 2 to be linked in a number of ways. Slater notes that they “contain the only two juxtapositions of *blanc* and *noir* in La Fontaine’s *Fables*” (586n). And I have found that the only “querulous” characters in all the *Fables* are the “gens querelleurs” in 7. 1. 47 and the “Querelleuse” wife in 7. 2. 14.⁴ The Lion in 7. 1. 17 declares that heaven has sent the plague “Pour nos péchés” while the unhappy husband in 7. 2. 47 expresses the wish to be punished in hell “pour mes péchés” if he ever lets his wife come back home, a turn of phrase whose only other appearance in the last fable of Book Twelve (which La Fontaine had not yet written).

I agree with Dandrey when he objects to readings that lead to the “mutilation de la forme, par sacrifice de tous les autres critères à la seule prise en compte du sens” (74). Yet in his own analysis of Book Ten he does not have in mind, as an alternative to the overarching “sens” that Niderst discerns in Book Seven’s preoccupation with the horrors of war, the extraordinary recurrences of individual words that have interested Slater and Gross peripherally, and myself significantly. Dandrey does note, though, one instance of a phenomenon that I have found to be widespread: fables 10. 7 and 10. 8 have identical premises but contrary conclusions (81). On such a microlevel, the search for “sens” can be productive: the fables two by two tend to talk about the same things (either the same premise, or the same vocabulary in different contexts) yet to deal with them in such contrary ways as to suggest that one fable has something of the mirror-reversed image of its neighbor.

In the model he proposes for the *Fables*’ structure, Dandrey seeks to strike a balance between restriction and freedom, order and chaos, “l’uniformité symétrique et l’errance labyrinthique” (80). He proposes that we superimpose “à l’assemblage

des fables au sein des douzes livres, le relevé topographique des palais et des parcs que put fréquenter le poète, Vaux, Versailles ou le Luxembourg” (79). Regularity will be found in “l’association de quelques lignes de force, croisées au centre de l’espace et déterminant des perspectives majeures,” while irregularity will be relegated to the “bosquets encadrés par ces espaces de parfaite lisibilité” (79).

Dandrey assumes that the secrets of the *Fables*’ architecture are to be found within the individual books, and in this instance he concentrates on the structure of just one of them; his interest in the intersection of “lignes de force” leads him to look for a meaningful center where he expects them to intersect. Yet the one he finds in Book Ten is, rather surprisingly, not the center of the “distribution” of the book’s fables after all, but the fable nearest the arithmetical middle of the book’s total number of lines, the ninth of fifteen fables. It happens that “Le Berger et le Roi” (10. 9) does recall elements from the first and last fables of the book. In it, a man encounters a serpent, as in the first, and a prince encounters a shepherd, as in the last. But one could wonder whether his analysis of other books would consistently find the center as well in the number of lines rather than in the numerically central fable. Might it in some instances be the latter? If so, then maybe such a floating center would be part of the role he allows to chance.⁵

A more troubling problem is that although Dandrey claims to seek a model “à mi-distance” between symmetrical uniformity and labyrinthian wandering, he in fact gives precedence to the former, his “lignes de force” exercising a sort of authoritarian prerogative, allowing room for diversity only in the margins. He argues historically, maintaining that these were the sort of gardens La Fontaine would have known and that they therefore served him as a “cadre d’inspiration” (79). But what sort of esthetic model did La Fontaine himself prefer? As John Lapp had done several years previously (30-31), Marc Fumaroli, in *Le Poète et le roi: Jean de La Fontaine en son siècle*, calls our attention to the *Relation d’un voyage de Paris en Limousin*, where the poet makes clear his abhorrence of symmetry. Commenting on the château of Blois, which to him seemed the incarnation of “la grâce, plus belle encore que la beauté,” La Fontaine observes that it displays, “Dieu merci, nulle symétrie.” Its constituent parts “n’ont rapport ni convenance l’une avec l’autre. L’architecte a évité cela autant qu’il a pu.” The section built by François I “me contenta plus que tout le reste: il y a force petites galeries, petites fenêtres, petits balcons, petits ornements, sans régularité et sans ordre; cela fait quelque chose de grand qui plaît assez” (*Oeuvres diverses*, 544). Fumaroli concludes, “La véritable harmonie naissant de la diversité ingénieuse, et non pas de la régularité obtenue sans esprit selon un plan préconçu, telle est la poétique de Chambord et de Blois: ce sera aussi celle des *Fables*” (256).

La Fontaine left us yet another example of his esthetic ideal in the *Voyage en Limousin* through his ecstatic description of a table formed of a mosaic of precious stones that he encountered at Richelieu: “Elle est de pièces de rapport, / Et chaque pièce est un trésor. . . / Le hasard produit des morceaux / Que l’art n’a plus qu’à joindre, et qui font sans peinture / Des modèles parfaits de fleurons et d’oiseaux” (*Oeuvres diverses*, 559). Here, as opposed to the Versailles garden Dandrey proposes as a model

for the *Fables*' arrangement, chance is given a large role while straight lines and symmetry have none at all to play. Instead of occupying the margins, chance is everywhere in the fabric, and is everywhere subject to the art of joining what is already given by chance, a kind of *bricolage*.

Just before La Fontaine described the mosaic of the table, he recounted the impression made on him by another work of the same sort, a portrait of Saint Jerome likewise made of "pièces rapportées, la plupart grandes comme des têtes d'épingles, quelques-unes comme des cirons...; cependant leur assemblage est un saint Hiérôme si achevé que le pinceau n'aurait pu mieux faire" (*Oeuvres diverses*, 558). So great is his fascination for this "art de niveler" that he feels he might pass for such an artist himself: "Mais ne passerai-je point moi-même pour un nivelier, de tant m'arrêter à ce saint Hiérôme?" (558). Pierre Clarac, the editor of the *Oeuvres diverses*, notes concerning "niveler" and "nivelier" that "La Fontaine joue ici...sur les deux sens de ce verbe et de ses dérivés: *niveler*, c'est, au propre, faire un travail de mosaïque, et, au figuré, s'attarder à des minuties, à des vétilles" (913n).

Fumaroli argues that the fabulist's esthetics was also his politics: "Pour La Fontaine, pour Fouquet, pour leurs amis, la méthode en ligne droite introduite en France par Descartes ne présentait pas plus d'attrait que l'autorité administrative et planificatrice de Colbert" (198). How much of a role should be given to chance is therefore of supreme importance in the *Fables*; it is part of La Fontaine's identity not only as a poet but as a man. In this perspective, it is difficult to conceive how the friend of Fouquet could ever have taken Versailles, with its despotic "lignes de force," as a poetic model.

What then, might be the model for the *Fables*' construction? For Fumaroli, they are both a "mosaïque" (233)—like the fabulous table where chance and art work together—and a labyrinth. "Il est possible que le projet des *Fables*" was born "dans les ruines d'un projet de Labyrinthe pour Vaux" (328). After his patron's downfall, the project was brought to fruition at Versailles between 1674 and 1686. "Comme l'orangerie," comments Fumaroli, "c'était peut-être un véritable trophée de Vaux"—a little bit of Fouquet's estate transplanted to the Sun-King's domain (328). It featured a Cupid holding a thread, with the inscription, "Oui, je puis désormais fermer les yeux et rire: / Avec ce peloton je saurai me conduire." A statue of Aesop, scroll in hand, counters: "Amour, ce faible fil pourrait bien t'égarer: / Au moindre choc il peut casser" (328). While La Fontaine played no part in the construction of this labyrinth, Cupid's confidence is not entirely misplaced, despite what Aesop says. For the thread—in the model of reading the *Fables* that I propose—will hold, as long as one enjoys better vision than the blindfolded god of love. The scroll and the thread are both necessary: the continuous scroll *is* the thread, if we have eyes to see.

Among those who have sought to discover the *Fable*'s structure, Alain Bassy argued that they form a labyrinth in which one could take "plusieurs chemins" which "mènent tous à une même issue" (18). Its guiding thread would be a thematic one: a certain wisdom (Dandrey calls it "la sagesse du Jardin" ["Le cordeau et le hasard," 75]), most fully presented in the last fable of the last book ("Le Juge arbitre,

l'Hospitalier, et le Solitaire," [12. 29]). Dandrey rightly questions whether it is likely that La Fontaine would have known what his last fable was going to be when he published the first nearly a quarter of a century earlier. I would take issue with Bassy on other grounds as well, for while it is true that the fables may seem, through the recurrence of the same animals and the same themes, to allude to each other over considerable distances (we could read all the wolf fables together, or all the ones extolling the joys of solitude), I do not believe this does justice to the subtlety with which La Fontaine has woven his text. What unites the fables in their absolute consecutiveness is not that they treat the same topics in any obvious way. The connections are more hidden, and therefore more intriguing. "Le Chêne et le Roseau" (1. 22) has no obvious connection with "Contre ceux qui ont le goût difficile" (2. 1), but it has many concealed ones. This pleasure La Fontaine left for his readers, to discern the connections and to puzzle over their significance, has been largely untapped, until now.

The *Fables* are indeed a labyrinth, whose path—at least the one along which I will try to guide the reader—is quite simple, as long as we do not lose the thread: "Au moindre choc il peut casser," as the Aesop in the Versailles labyrinth warned. That indeed is the difficulty, for the continuities from one fable to the next are not always obvious. My hope is that they will become more apparent through the use of this book. Because it does follow a path, my reading goes at least part of the way with Dandrey. Although I disagree with his hierarchically arranged garden—where the themes as "lignes de force" are given pride of place, and such (seemingly) chance connections as may arise are dismissed as unimportant—I do find attractive his notion that the best way to get through the *Fables* is on foot: "il nous faut apprendre à préférer des formes d'association...déambulatoires, relevant des modèles de la promenade....La structure du recueil" is a sort of "déambulation de miniature en miniature comme devant une galerie de tableaux" (77). His concluding words in "Le cordeau et le hasard" come so near, yet remain so far, from the kind of reading I have in mind: "l'ordre des *Fables* vise à saisir l'occasion en jouant à assouplir une conversation et une déambulation suivies qu'infléchit l'intrusion bienvenue du hasard qui fragmente les continuités" (85). Yes, chance intrudes, and is to be welcomed—but the more interesting continuities are those that chance (or what appears at first glance to be chance) makes possible.

Moving from miniature to miniature in a "galerie d[e] collectionneur" ("Le cordeau et le hasard," 77) can be an exercise of wit in discovering the reasons for the collector's arrangement of them. What transitions did he have in mind? Some time ago, Leo Spitzer wrote an essay on La Fontaine's "transitions," though what he had in mind took place only within individual fables. He takes as his point of departure Horace's Satire ii. 6, in which "the key-word *Maecenas*," mentioned in an offhand way earlier in the text, "secretly prepares the reader for the ensuing narration of Horace's relationship with Maecenas, which itself leads on through more hidden transitions to other matters" (171). Similarly, in the prefatory section of "Le Bûcheron et Mercure" (5. 1), Spitzer finds that "Jupiter first appears simply as an example, an addition to a

Introduction

democratic list implying the equal participation of all beings,” but will play so prominent a role in the fable itself as to displace Mercury from the centrality the fable’s title implies. “All this cunning game of poetic deceit,” Spitzer continues, “all this artful *suavitas* which switches foreground into background and vice-versa . . . makes the mind a little dizzy” (175).

Yet equally smooth transitions can occur *between* the fables, as Herman Lindner argues, asserting that Spitzer’s “Art of Transitions” also works “on the next level up: the *Fables* as sequence” (165). In “Le Bûcheron et Mercure” (5. 1), a fable Spitzer cites, a Woodcutter who has lost his axe wisely declines Mercury’s offer of gold and silver replacements, settling for a wooden axe just like the one he lost; other woodcutters, hearing of this, purposely lose their axes, accept gold ones, and have their heads bashed in by the god. The plot is thus about (besides limiting one’s desires) the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the raw material out of which a particular object is made. But so too is the plot of the next fable in the sequence. In “Le Pot de terre et le Pot de fer” (5. 2) a Pot made of clay unwisely lets himself be persuaded by a Pot made of iron to venture into the world under his protection; not far down the road this “protection” proves a liability, as the iron Pot, too close to his traveling companion not to keep bumping into him, soon shatters his protégé to bits. A fuller discussion of what results from the proximity of these two fables appears later in this book. But already we can see that the meaning of the fables may include more or less hidden allusions to the structure of the collection: a too close association with a fellow traveler made of different stuff is risky, not just for clay pots but for fables as well. Considered separately, the fables have their own lovely qualities, like the pieces of the mosaic that so impressed La Fontaine, of which each piece was a “trésor” in itself because it was a precious stone; yet when considered in connection with the neighboring pieces, surprising patterns emerged. La Fontaine’s art consists not just in writing the fables but in assembling them; indeed, in forcing them into certain relationships that cannot help but change how they are perceived. For if some of the words, images and events in a given fable should suddenly seem to find their *raison d’être* in relation to counterparts in a neighboring fable, the individual poems could cease to be self-enclosed systems. It would be as if from their proximity to their fellow fables their integrity—like the clay Pot’s—had been shattered and they were no longer quite the well-wrought urns we took them to be.

Heretofore La Fontainian criticism has privileged the internal coherence of the discrete fables. Richard Danner warns us that “while paying close attention to an encompassing verbal design that may link poems with each other, critics must not lose sight of the governing dynamics responsible for making every fable an integrated act of creativity” (*Patterns of Irony*, 133). And Spitzer himself affirms that “each fable” remains “a self-enclosed whole with an individual construction, its own specific proportions and its own set of internal correspondences” (205-6). Yet La Fontaine’s surprisingly self-referential linkages clearly raise the possibility that their self-enclosure may be broken. The tension between the fables as the work of art or their sequence as the work of art may itself be part of his art.

But more intriguing than academic questions about the boundaries of the work of art is the self-referentiality that emerges from a careful consideration of the *Fables*' sequence. At the intersection of 5. 1 and 5. 2 proximity itself breaks the containers and allows what is inside to spill out. The sequence 6. 3 / 6. 4, where the "climat pour lui seul" (6. 4. 17) that Jupiter awarded the Farmer but not his neighbors in "Jupiter et le Métayer" (6. 4) evokes not just the local climate of each fable but also the connection with its neighbors. The local climate of 6. 4 recalls the private climates that the Sun and the North Wind inflicted on the traveler in the immediately preceding "Phébus et Borée" (6. 3). We are suddenly made aware that the local climates these fables enjoy are not so local after all. The Farmer's divinely furnished weather was so local that his neighbors felt it "non plus que les Américains" (6. 4. 18), residents of as distant a clime as one could imagine. Yet, as La Fontaine's combinatorial art would have it, not all that distant, for it immediately reappears in "Le Cochet, le Chat et le Souriceau" (6. 5) when the young Mouse describes his first rooster as something so foreign to his experience as to be "un animal venu de l'Amérique" (6. 5. 17). No other allusion to America appears in the 1668 edition (comprising Books One through Six)—only in this pair of neighboring fables, where it connotes something quite far away, but is ironically quite near at hand. Does it not seem that the fabulist is playing with us?

The self-referentiality takes many forms, alluding in the sequence 5. 8 / 5. 9 to the pleasures of concealment. The Wolf in "Le Cheval et le Loup" (5. 8) asks the Horse to "*Ne point celer*" (5. 8. 17) what is bothering his hoof, and offering to examine it carefully, promises a cure; this finds its echo in "Le Laboureur et ses Enfants" (5. 9) in the revelation that there was nothing hidden in the Plowman's field even though the dying man had told his sons there was: "*D'argent, point de caché*" (5. 9. 16). The sons turned over the dirt with such zeal that the field produced a greater harvest than expected, and so they learned the valuable lesson that work itself is a treasure. No form of *celer* or of *cache* (or of any verb meaning to conceal) is modified by the adverb *point* in any fable but these two. Like "Maecenas" in Horace's *Satire* ii. 6 or "Jupiter" in Spitzer's reading of "Le Bûcheron et Mercure," "not-hiding" ("point celer") plays a relatively minor role in its first appearance in fable 5. 8 (just part of the Wolf's failed strategy), but assumes center stage when it reappears as the "not-hidden" ("point de caché") in fable 5. 9, the surprising revelation of the planted lie. There is a lot to puzzle over here: what lay hidden in the common linguistic ground of 5. 8 and 5. 9 was, paradoxically, the *not* hidden.

Just how self-referential is this meant to be? Are we being invited to mine the *Fables* as the sons dug the field? "Creusez, fouillez, bêchez, ne laissez nulle place / Où la main ne passe et repasse" (5. 8. 11-12). Are the *Fables* the field we inherit, and are we to leave no sod unturned in our search for buried treasure, and will the happy result not be that the spadework itself will produce a greater harvest? One would be hard put to imagine a more fitting parable for the way interpretation can enrich the site of the text, or a better way for an author to encourage his readers to look for more than meets the eye without absolutely guaranteeing that something more is there.

But clearly there is something there, and with a certain amount of assiduous

Introduction

digging it can be brought to light. Using J. Allen Tyler's *Concordance*, I find that four-fifths of the 239 pairs of contiguous fables share at least one verbal link (*all* of the contiguous pairs have either a situational or verbal link); that nearly half share two or more; that more than one in seven share at least three. Of these verbal links, thirty percent are sufficiently rare to appear nowhere else in the "recueil" (of which there are two: Books One through Six and Books Seven through Eleven; Book Twelve came later). Twenty-five percent are rarer still, being composed of words or word combinations that appear nowhere else in the *Fables*.⁶

This information suggests intention on the part of the poet. Furthermore, in many instances La Fontaine altered material from his sources in ways that enrich the linkages. For example, Phaedrus, the source for "Le Loup et le Chien" (1. 5), has nothing about having the Wolf first think of attacking the Dog, then change his mind when he realizes that the canine looks strong enough to "*se défendre hardiment*" (1. 5. 9). But La Fontaine put it in, with the result that a link emerges with the immediately preceding fable "Les Deux Mulets" (1. 4), where the Mule, attacked by robbers, "*en se défendant / Se sent percer de coups*" (1. 4. 11-12). Even that too was a change he made from his source for *that* fable, for in Phaedrus's version the mule does *not* try to defend himself.⁷ Of 100 of the 239 pairs, or forty-two percent, La Fontaine departs from his source in a way that enhances the linkage.⁸ In twenty-seven pairs, two, three, and sometimes even four linkage-enhancing departures from the source can be detected; I have found a total of 140 such changes.

What I propose, in sum, is that we read the *Fables* in light of the way La Fontaine joined them, enjoying a wealth of subtlety hidden till now. Enjoying as well the witty game to which he invites us through his planting of clues in the words themselves, and also from the way the resulting echoes sometimes point in ironically self-referential ways to their very existence. Such a reading as this one is inscribed in the text; inscribed as well in its subtext, in what we read when we read between the fables.