

Introduction

For nearly three centuries La Fontaine has been identified with French “classicism.” His *Fables*, in particular, have become one of the cornerstones of that tradition, enjoying success throughout the ages and captivating readers world wide. And yet, despite the popularity of the *Fables*, La Fontaine’s place among the *auteurs classiques* remains problematic; indeed, when we compare him with his contemporaries—Boileau, Moliere, Racine—we find that he occupies a peculiarly marginal position within the canon. This marginality has most often expressed itself in two persistent images of the poet and his work. The first of these depicts him as a writer of charmingly didactic poems to be read and memorized by children at the *école primaire*. The second view portrays him as an essentially derivative artist, an adaptor or elaborator of source material. These representations have, in turn, been subsumed within a tradition of biographical criticism that has sought to understand the *oeuvre* in terms of the man; or, rather, of the mythical “bonhomme.”

While it is not my intention here to offer a full-scale reception history of La Fontaine, I would like to indicate briefly how his reputation has been shaped by a number of influential commentators beginning with the eighteenth century. Voltaire provided one of the earliest assessments of La Fontaine when, in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751), he characterized him as “aussi simple que les héros de ses fables” (56) and, in the *Supplement* (1753), as “le plus simple des hommes, mais admirable dans son genre, quoique négligé et inégal” (237). Some twenty years later, Chamfort and La Harpe elaborated on the idea of La Fontaine’s simplicity in their “Eloge” (1774), written for the Academy of Marseilles. Chamfort spoke of the poet’s “bon sens naturel” (958), and of his “bonté naïve qui.. .le ramène sans cesse a ce genre de poésie simple qui adoucit l’éclat d’une grande idée” (963), while La Harpe described him as “le bonhomme” (985, 987, 988), “l’enfant de la nature” (984) and “l’homme d’une simplicité rare” (975) who possessed “le caractère d’un enfant” (978). Even Rousseau, who in *Emile* (1762) proved to be La Fontaine’s severest critic, agreed that the *Fables* were “toutes naïves, toutes charmantes” (139).

Reacting against Voltaire's generation, nineteenth-century writers and critics recast the discussion of La Fontaine in terms of contemporary debates on pedagogy and nationalism. As a program of public education began to take shape between 1830 and 1850, the *Fables*, once relegated to the status of children's literature, came to be viewed by various quasi-socialist critics—Chaho, Leroux, Souvestre—as cynical and pessimistic. Thus, while Chaho continued to speak of La Fontaine as “un bonhomme,” he nevertheless condemned the *Fables* for their “detestable morale” (Fizaine 233). In a similar vein, Lamartine commented bitterly on his own childhood encounter with La Fontaine:

On me faisait bien apprendre aussi par coeur quelques fables
de La Fontaine; mais ces vers boiteux, disloqués, inégaux,
sans symétrie ni dans l'oreille ni sur la page me rebutaient. ..
.Les fables de La Fontaine sont plutôt la philosophie dure,
froide et égoïste d'un vieillard que la philosophie aimante,
généreuse, naïve et bonne d'un enfant...Que penser d'une
nation qui commence l'éducation de ses enfants par les
lecons d'un cynique? (300-301).

La Fontaine was not, however, without his defenders, and for a number of critics he embodied what was quintessentially French. In his 1853 essay, “La Fontaine,” Sainte-Beuve proclaimed the fabulist “l'Homère de la vieille race gauloise” (206), a point that was repeated and elaborated on by Taine in *La Fontaine et ses fables* (1860): “Si cet esprit est le fond même de la race et reparait à chaque siècle, l'écrivain est un La Fontaine” (345). For the moment, the individual had given way to the nation; “le bonhomme” to “la race.”

Valéry in his 1921 essay on “Adonis” continued the assault on the myth of “le bonhomme.” Although critical of the hunt scene in the poem, Valéry recognized the brilliance of “Adonis,” as well as La Fontaine's *art de la négligence*: “Prenons garde que la nonchalance, ici, est savante; la mollesse, étudiée; la facilité, le comble de l'art...Quant à la naïveté, elle est nécessairement hors de cause: l'art et la pureté si soutenus excluent à mon regard toute paresse et toute bonhomie” (475). Similarly, Ferdinand Gohin sought to demythologize La Fontaine in *L'Art de La Fontaine dans ses fables* (1926). Through an analysis of formal elements such as syllabic rhythm, assonance, and variable verse length, Gohin concluded that La Fontaine's originality lay in “une géniale adaptation” that promoted the use of materials “qui s'offraient lui, pour

de nouveaux arrangements” (294-95).¹ Although Gohin successfully discredited the epithet of “le bonhomme,” he replaced it with another equally unfortunate term: “l'adaptateur.” This view recurs most notably in Antoine Adam's *Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^e siècle* (1949-56). Judging La Fontaine's success by the degree to which he “transformed” his source material, Adam

promoted a system of criticism that privileged in advance the *Fables*, while the *Contes* became little more than inferior verse translations of tales by Boccaccio and Ariosto.

The work done on rhetoric and style came to be significant in another respect, for it served as a point of departure for many of the studies on La Fontaine's aesthetics that appeared between 1960 and 1971.² Resisting the notions of La Fontaine the "didact" and La Fontaine the "adaptor," critics from this period sought to emphasize the poet's originality. Yet their formulations often echoed Valéry's previous judgment, grounding Lafontainian poetics in "un équilibre si délicat" (de Mourges), "la négligence voulue" (Biard), or "une nonchalance savante" (Lapp). At the same time, ties to the earlier paradigm of "adaptor" remained strong. Investigations of La Fontaine's changes in source material continued to be the focal point, even though they were frequently carried on within a biographical framework that highlighted the poet's struggle to overcome his precursors.

If critical interest in La Fontaine grew through 1971, it declined sharply during the next decade. This virtual absence of scholarly attention provoked David Lee Rubin to comment in 1981, "La Fontaine's work runs a grave risk of being taken for granted, underread, misread and finally misjudged. A renewal of La Fontaine studies thus seems overdue" (7). Happily, Rubin's remark came in the introduction to a special issue of *L'Esprit Créateur* devoted entirely to the poet, a volume that sparked new initiatives in La Fontaine criticism.

Successfully breaking with the traditionally sanctioned paradigms of the past, the scholarship of the last fifteen years has been willing to consider and confront the ambiguities in La Fontaine's oeuvre. To this end, studies by Richard Danner (*Patterns of Irony in the Fables of La Fontaine*, 1985), David Lee Rubin (*A Pact with Silence: Art and Thought in the Fables of La Fontaine*, 1991), and Patrick Dandrey (*La Fabrique des Fables. Essai sur lapoétique de La Fontaine*, 1991) have offered significant reassessments of La Fontaine. Danner demonstrates that irony in the *Fables* is highly complex, functioning simultaneously on a variety of levels; Rubin examines the ways La Fontaine problematizes the genre of the fable by requiring the reader to participate actively in the construction of meaning; and Dandrey takes a cultural approach, showing how the poet draws upon the contemporary discourses of physiognomy, zoology, and aesthetics in fabricating his apologues. Complementing this research is the work of Jules Brody (*Lectures de La Fontaine*, 1994),³ Louis

Marin (*Le Récit est un piège*, 1978 and *Food for Thought*, 1989), and Michael Vincent (*Figures of the Text: Reading and Writing [in] La Fontaine*, 1992). Brody uses philological analysis to reveal structures of verbal association and patterning in La Fontaine; Marin explores how the discourse of various fables functions to seduce characters and readers into "narrative traps"; and Vincent

focuses on the ways acts of reading or interpretation open up issues of metafictionality.⁴ At the same time, a growing interest in both the *Contes* and *Psyché* has contributed to the renewal of La Fontaine studies, not only altering the perception of La Fontaine as fabulist, but also revealing the diversity and complexity of his work. Finally, the founding of “Les Amis de La Fontaine” (and its annual *Le Fablier*) in 1989 has provided a welcome forum for ongoing research in the field.

The year 1995 marks the 300th anniversary of La Fontaine’s death, and seems an appropriate time to bring forward a volume, like the book at hand, that seeks to expand upon work already undertaken, stimulate further research, and open up fresh avenues of inquiry. Although the contributors to this volume address a number of issues from diverse theoretical perspectives, they share a common interest in the problems of discourse and figuration as they affect La Fontaine’s work. These problems are explored, from essay to essay, in terms of such concepts as bricolage and heteroglossia, genre-mixing and genre-crossing, metatextuality and intertextuality, narrative and metanarrative, enframing and re framing, language and culture.

The essays in this collection have been arranged in four sections: the first focuses on the way La Fontaine challenges traditional notions of literary structure and boundary; the second deals with problems of rhetoric and relativism in the Fables; the third explores how La Fontaine transforms various literary conventions associated with the *roman* and the *conte*; and the fourth probes the ways in which translation encodes cultural myths.

In the opening essay, Marie-Odile Sweetser argues that La Fontaine should be understood not as a partisan of “les Anciens,” but as a literary nonconformist. Examining La Fontaine’s own metafictional commentary in texts as disparate as the “Epître à Huet,” the “Poème du Quinquina,” and the *Fables*, she underscores the poet’s eclectic taste in literature and philosophy. For Sweetser, this unusual sensibility manifests itself on the level of discourse in La Fontaine’s desire to exceed—and at times even to erase—“les frontières traditionnelles des genres,” and in his efforts to achieve “une interpénétration de divers arts ou moyens d’expression.”

The fluidity of La Fontaine’s discursive boundaries is also studied by Michael Vincent and Martine Debaisieux. Vincent addresses the problem of what constitutes the Lafontainian “book.” Rejecting as organizing principles both

classical *dispositio* and poststructuralist *découpage*, he posits a metatextual and intertextual logic in La Fontaine’s work. This logic, Vincent maintains, grows out of the use of “framing,” “deframing,” and “reframing” devices that allow the poet to construct “books” out of fragments. In examining La Fontaine’s relation to his literary models, Debaisieux takes as her point of departure the “conflit that exists between récit and metanarrative in two liminal texts (“Preface” and “La Vie

d'Esopé") and the first three fables. This "confusion" is closely connected to the multiple images of the poet inscribed within these texts, images that not only extend the discussion of aesthetic issues beyond prefatory borders but also provide an insight into how La Fontaine orders individual fables. In the final analysis, Debaisieux sees "l'ordre et le regroupement des fables.. .comme un principe essentiel de l'originalité de cet adepte des Anciens."

The second group of essays brings together several different perspectives on the question of discourse (didactic, scientific, philosophical) in the *Fables*. Centering on La Fontaine's eclectic and highly cultivated use of language, Richard Danner combines Bakhtinian theory with reader response strategies in a critical approach that he applies to "Les Animaux malades de la peste" and "Les Obsèques de la lionne." For Danner, this methodology enables us to understand better the way in which La Fontaine's heteroglossia qualifies, and at times undermines, the didactic dimension of a fable. Russell Ganim reexamines the La Fontaine-Descartes debate over animal intelligence, arguing that "Le Discours a Mme de Sablière" not only attacks Descartes's theory, but also assaults indirectly *Le Discours de la méthode*. Like Danner, his concern is with language as he shows how La Fontaine employs Cartesian rhetorical practices to undercut concepts fundamental to the philosopher's argument. Ganim, however, goes on to "deconstruct" these practices, and finds that La Fontaine's assault leads to a subversion of his own position. Finally, Catherine Grisé studies La Fontaine's place within seventeenth-century philosophical discourse on relativism. In this continuation of her research on the cognitive framing of mental space (e.g. problems of ocularization and focalization), she constructs a taxonomy of relativism, subdividing its manifestations under the narrower rubrics of cognitive and moral relativism. She contends that the concept of relativism put forth by La Fontaine is not univocal because in each text where it is invoked, he uses it somewhat differently.

The third section treats two texts which are all too often critically overlooked, *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon* and *Les Contes et Nouvelles*. In her discussion of *Psyché*, Twyla Meding explores La Fontaine's reconfiguration of the *locus amoenus* and the myth of a Golden Age. She finds that the use of deliberate gaps in the narrative connects problems of representation with Psyche's fall away from a sense of primal

wholeness. A nostalgia for a prelapsarian bliss, Meding concludes, motivates Psyche's double quest to restore her faded beauty and return to her idyllic life at Cupidon's palace. Passing from *topos* to figure, my own contribution examines the depiction of the nun in six *contes*. Reading these tales as a unit, I show how La Fontaine moves from social issues to metafictional problems as he transforms the nun from an object of religious satire into a figure of the text, making her the focal point of his reflections on the reading and writing of licentious, and thus forbidden, works.

The final section and essay in the volume addresses the crucial, but neglected, issue of translation. Using “Les Deux mulets” (*Fables*, 1.4) as a test case, David Lee Rubin compares three English versions—by Marianne Moore, Norman Shapiro, and John Cairncross—to the French original. This study discloses how ideology informs the rhetorical strategies and aesthetic choices of individual translators, since each rendering projects a different image of La Fontaine as “classical” poet.

While the myths surrounding the poet—children’s author, adaptor, “le bon homme”—may never die, they can be qualified, contested, revised. The essays in this volume represent just such a challenge. Yet more importantly, they represent an invitation to other scholars to continue the process of refiguring La Fontaine.

Notes

1. Equally important as Gohin’s work on style is George Couton’s study on La Fontaine’s indebtedness to Renaissance manuals of rhetoric and to emblem books. See *La Poétique de La Fontaine* (1957).

2. Complementing the research on aesthetics is René Jasinski’s historical study, *La Fontaine et le premier recueil des Fables* (1965-66).

3. Although published in 1994, this volume of essays reflects Brody’s work on La Fontaine over the course of many years.

4. For a more complete review of the present state of affairs in La Fontaine studies see Marie-Odile Sweetser’s *La Fontaine* (Twayne series).

Works Cited

Adam, Antoine. *L’Apogée du Siècle*, vol. 4 of *Histoire de la littérature française au XVII^e siècle*. Paris: Domat, 1954.

Biard, Jean Dominique. *Le Style des fables de La Fontaine*. Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1970.

Brody, Jules. *Lectures de La Fontaine*. EMF Monographs. Charlottesville: Rookwood Press, 1994.

Chamfort. “Eloge de La Fontaine.” In *La Fontaine: Oeuvres complètes 1*. Ed. Jean-Pierre Collinet. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Gallimard, 1991.

Couton, Georges. *La Poétique de La Fontaine*. Paris: PUF, 1957.

Dandrey, Patrick. *La Fabrique des Fables: Essai sur la poétique de La Fontaine*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1991.

Danner, Richard. *Patterns of Irony in the Fables of La Fontaine*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1985.

Fizaine, Jean-Claude. “Du Faux sage au vrai mage: Images de La Fontaine chez Hugo après l’exil.”

In Bideaux, Michel et al. *Fables et fabulists: Variations autour de La Fontaine*. Mont-de-Marsan: Editions InterUniversitaires, 1992.

Gohin, Ferdinand. *L'Art de La Fontaine dans ses fables*. Paris: Gamier Frères, 1929.

Guiton, Margaret. *La Fontaine: Poet and Counterpoet*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1961.

Jasinski, René. *La Fontaine et le premier recueil des "Fables."* 2 vols. Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1965-66.

La Harpe, Jean-François. "Second éloge de La Fontaine." In *La Fontaine: Oeuvres complètes I*. Ed. Jean-Pierre Collinet. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Gallimard, 1991.

Lamartine, Alphonse de. *Méditations*. Paris: Gamier Frères, 1968.

Lapp, John. *The Esthetics of Negligence: La Fontaine's Contes*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971.

Mann, Louis. *Le Récit est un piège*. Paris: Minuit, 1978.

—. *Food for Thought*. Trans. Mette Hjort. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.

Mourgues, Odette de. *O Muse, fuyante proie*. Paris: Corti, 1962.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile ou de l'éducation*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966.

Rubin, David Lee. *A Pact with Silence: Art and Thought in the Fables of Jean de La Fontaine*. Columbus: Ohio State U, 1991.

—. guest ed., *L'Esprit Créateur* 21.4 (La Fontaine) (1981).

Sainte-Beuve. *Les Grands écrivains français (XVII^e Siècle): Les Poètes*. Ed. Maurice Allem. Paris: Gamier Frères, 1927.

Sweetser, Marie-Odile. *La Fontaine*. Twayne World Author Series 788. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987.

Tame, Hippolyte. *La Fontaine et ses fables*. Paris: Hachette, 1905.

Valéry, Paul. *Oeuvres I*. Ed. Jean Hytier. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.

Vincent, Michael. *Figures of the Text: Reading and Writing (in) La Fontaine*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1992.

Voltaire. *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*. 2 vols. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966.

