

THE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF  
LA FONTAINE

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of Arts, University of London, in  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Ph. D. for  
internal students

by

BASIL S. C. NWAUZUZU

BEDFORD COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON.

ProQuest Number: 10098305

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 10098305

Published by ProQuest LLC(2016). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All rights reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ABSTRACT

La Fontaine's literary and intellectual evolution is characterized by a hesitant and conscientious exploring of side-tracks which require to be analysed in order to appreciate the complex realities behind the poet's literary creation. His life which spanned three quarters of a century is divided in this study into six broad stages, corresponding more or less to the major events and influences on his career: childhood education, the search for literary models, the creation of intellectual poetry, the approach to maturity, intellectual maturity, old age and decline. These stages are considered as a series of intellectual experiences culminating in the formation of La Fontaine's personality as a literary artist and an epicurean moralist.

The poet became an intellectual after undergoing various experiences from the world around him. His curious and eclectic temperament made him highly susceptible to all sorts of influences as well as kept his mind constantly on the move, from one literary genre to another, from literature to philosophy, philosophy to science, science to history and thence back to literature. This intellectual mobility drew inspiration from various sources, both ancient and modern, to which La Fontaine was exposed. Thus the formation of his mind and art owes a lot to the complex and interacting influences of such ancient writers and thinkers as Plato, Homer, Epicurus, Horace, Lucretius, Ovid, Apuleius, Virgil, Seneca, and nearer home, Montaigne, Marot, Malherbe, Gassendi, Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz and others. La Fontaine took something from each of these thinkers for the building of his own intellectual personality. It mattered little to him whether their influences were of the past or of his own generation; he submitted to them in his own particular manner so long as they represented his ideal and conception of life.

La Fontaine was generously endowed with the innate powers of imagination, observation and sensitivity which, coupled with his amiable disposition, won him numerous admirers, friends and influential patrons who aided his intellectual growth. This growth, the subject of our study, is reflected in the mature reaction of the poet's particular genius to the problems posed by his age.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE.....	1
ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
CHAPTER I.     FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD (1621 - 47)	
1.     Early Education.....	16
2.     Natural disposition and vocational awareness	28
CHAPTER II.    THE SEARCH FOR LITERARY MODELS (1647 - 61)	
1.     Readings in French literature from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century.....	43
2.     The impact of ancient Greek and Latin literatures.....	60
3.     The literary take-off : Attempt at dramatic and heroic poetry : <u>L'Eunuque</u> , <u>Adonis</u> .....	81
4.     Enlargement of the social horizon.....	95
CHAPTER III.   THE CREATION OF A LITERARY GENRE (1661 - 68)	
1.     Evolution of the theory of <u>Contes</u> : <u>Clymène</u>	116
2.     The early volumes of <u>Contes</u> .....	132
3.     The Conception of the verse fable.....	155
4.     From traditional apologue to intellectual poetry	173
CHAPTER IV.    TOWARDS MATURITY (1668 - 78)	
1.     La Fontaine painter of the passions and poet of "Volupté" : <u>Psyché</u> .....	202
2.     Interlude of Stoic idealism : <u>Poème de la             captivité de Saint-Malc</u> .....	235
3.     The Circle of Mme. de La Sablière.....	249
CHAPTER V.     INTELLECTUAL MATURITY (1678 - 84)	
1.     The Second Collection of Fables.....	263
2.     The manifestation of providentialist tendencies	307
3.     The poet as philosopher : <u>Discours à Mmè. de             La Sablière</u> ; .....	344
4.     From philosophy to scientific speculation : <u>Le             Poème du Quinquina</u> .....	370
5.     Election to the Academy.....	393



CHAPTER VI.	OLD AGE AND DECLINE (1684 - 95)	
1.	The poet <sup>as</sup> historian and biographer : <u>Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince</u> .....	398
2.	The Return to Ovid : <u>Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée</u> .....	419
3.	The Last Collection of <u>Fables</u> .....	443
CONCLUSION.....		464
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		482

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish first of all to express my thanks and deep appreciation to Dr. Eva Jacobs of the University of London for her unfailing and invaluable guidance, useful suggestions and criticism throughout the preparation of this thesis.

My gratitude is also due to Dr. J. D. Biard of the University of Exeter, from whom I have never ceased to learn since he first supervised my Master's work and kindled my interest in La Fontaine.

I am indebted to the Federal Ministry of Education, Lagos, Nigeria whose generous financial assistance made my researches possible, and to the authorities of the University of Nigeria Nsukka for granting me study leave which enabled me to pursue two years full-time research.

Lastly but not the least, I wish to thank my wife for her patience and her constant moral support, the French Departmental Secretary, Bedford College, London, for her kind co-operation and encouragement during the preparation of this work and Dr. P. A. Nwachukwu of the Institute of Oriental and African Studies, London, for his helpful suggestions.

## INTRODUCTION

La Fontaine is certainly one of the successful French poets whose works have been the subject of much critical study. It seems that a new researcher can hardly have anything more to say about him. The spectacular success of his Fables and so much work devoted to their study are proofs of his popularity. The original and fascinating character of his style has been brilliantly described by many scholars among whom one can mention Remy de Gourmont<sup>1</sup>, Ferdinand Gohin,<sup>2</sup> Odette de Mourgues,<sup>3</sup> Margaret Guiton,<sup>4</sup> and Jean-Dominique Biard.<sup>5</sup> On the purely aesthetic level, Felix Boillot,<sup>6</sup> Pierre Clarac<sup>7</sup> and René Kohn<sup>8</sup> have studied his love of nature and his vivid representation of it in his works, while his message as a moralist has been analysed by a brigade of other writers including H. Taine,<sup>9</sup> le Vte. de Broc<sup>10</sup> and Baudin.<sup>11</sup> All these writers have done much to show what La Fontaine was, but little to explain how he came to be what he was.

- 
1. Gourmont, Remy de, La Vie des animaux et la morale dans les Fables de La Fontaine, Article in Mercure de France, LVII, Paris, 1905, pp. 510-523; LVIII, pp. 24-29.
  2. Gohin, F., L'Art de la Fontaine dans ses Fables, Paris, 1929.
  3. Mourgues, Odette (Mme. de), La Fontaine Fables, London, 1960.  
                                   O Muse, fuyante proie, essai sur la poésie de La Fontaine, Paris, 1962.
  4. Guiton, M., La Fontaine : Poet and Counterpoet, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1961.
  5. Biard, J-D., The Style of La Fontaine's Fables, Oxford, 1966.
  6. Boillot, F., Les Impressions sensorielles chez La Fontaine, Paris, 1926.
  7. Clarac, P., La Fontaine, l'homme et l'œuvre, Paris, 1947.  
                                   La Fontaine par lui-même, Paris, 1961.
  8. Kohn, R., Le Goût de La Fontaine, Paris, 1962.
  9. Taine, H., Essai sur les Fables de La Fontaine, Paris, 1853.  
                                   La Fontaine et ses Fables, Paris, 1860.
  10. Broc, (le Vte. de), La Fontaine Moraliste, Paris, 1926.
  11. Baudin, E., La philosophie morale des Fables de La Fontaine, Neuchâtel, 1950.

It is perhaps surprising that at a time when a whole literature has been assembled about La Fontaine, scarcely any critic has given adequate attention to the formation of the poet's mind and art. Philip Wadsworth<sup>12</sup>, René Jasinski<sup>13</sup> and, more recently, Jean-Pierre Collinet<sup>14</sup> have made useful studies in this direction. But their works, though quite brilliant and admirable, are limited in scope. Wadsworth, for example, stops with the first collection of fables; Jasinski is more interested in the historical background to the fables; and Collinet's work tends to be more of a general or a comprehensive study of La Fontaine's works than a specific investigation of the poet's intellectual growth. An appreciation of the beauty and charm of his literary works should be accompanied by a systematic study of the process through which his ideas and art developed if the complex realities behind his literary creation are not to be ignored. As Paul Laumonier has pertinently observed,

On ne peut bien connaître et juger équitablement l'œuvre d'un écrivain que si on l'étudie en fonction de sa biographie, autrement dit si l'on en possède tous les éléments bio-bibliographiques. La chronologie des ouvrages de l'esprit rapprochée de la chronologie des autres actes de la vie est la base de toute étude littéraire sérieuse; si cette base manque, les efforts du critique n'ont d'autre résultat qu'une appréciation dogmatique ou impressionniste, toujours sujette à caution.<sup>15</sup>

There is therefore a pressing need for a study which throws more light on La Fontaine's intellectual background, discloses his relationship with his numerous predecessors and contemporaries and permits a better understanding of his works. Such a study would also help to correct certain erroneous impressions which some people still have about the poet's personality and attitude to life.

The aim of the present study is to utilize previous works and the results of recent research to spotlight and estimate the impact of the forces, ideas and influences which contributed towards La Fontaine's intellectual evolution. The study has no pretensions to

12. Wadsworth, P.A., *Young La Fontaine*, Evanston, Illinois, 1952.

13. Jasinski, R., *La Fontaine et le premier recueil des Fables*, Paris, 1966.

14. Collinet, J-P., *Le Monde littéraire de La Fontaine*, Paris (Presses universitaires de France), 1970.

15. Laumonier, P., *Tableau chronologique des œuvres de Ronsard*, Paris, 1911, p.vi.

filling all the gaps left in the life of the poet nor providing definite answers to every problem raised by his long and complex career. It is motivated rather by the belief that by sifting the works and ideas of La Fontaine, and correlating them to the main trend of the literary and intellectual history of France, it could be possible to discover which of the poet's predecessors and contemporaries had a lasting influence on him, which works left the greatest impression, and which ideas formed the corner stones of his thinking.

In the treatment of intellectual development, if we are to give full weight to the creative and underived element in the individual concerned, we must supplement the general tendency of the time with the organic evolution of the personality under consideration. Thus due attention is given here to La Fontaine's innate disposition conducive to his intellectual progress and to the formation of his literary and philosophical ideas. This approach is adopted, believing that we can only obtain the best insight into men and things when we actually see them growing from the beginning. It is only in this way that La Fontaine the creative artist and intellectual can be distinguished from La Fontaine the legendary fabulist.

The poet's literary and intellectual evolution gives an impression of a wandering star, of a hesitant, conscientious and sometimes felicitous exploring of side-tracks. To explain this fact by merely falling back on the popular metaphor of "Papillon du Parnasse" would amount to reducing the poet's conscious effort in several directions to an inherent fickleness in his personality. An attempt is therefore made here to follow the successive development of his literary skill and ideas and to establish as far as possible the essential chronological unity of his works insofar as this helps to show the stages of his evolution, that is, the itinerary which took the poet from Château-Thierry to Vaux, then after a brief stop at Limousin, from the palace of Luxembourg to the sophisticated salon of rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, bringing him finally to the French Academy. The main stress is laid on the literary and intellectual evolution of the poet's mind. There is no deliberate attempt, for example, to provide a complete biography of La Fontaine. Biographical details are introduced only where they help to reveal why the poet's career or line of thought took the line it did.

Similarly, it has not been possible within the limits of this study to examine in detail every literary work composed by La Fontaine. Such a detailed analysis is provided selectively and only as it elucidates some change of pattern or explains some improvement in skill in the poet's artistic and intellectual evolution.

An author's intellectual personality consists in the thoughts he has, the way he expresses them and how he interprets them in action. This personality is nurtured by experience from the surrounding world which offers to each person a challenge and elicits from each a response or a reaction. La Fontaine became a creative artist and an intellectual after being subjected to various vicissitudes in life. These changes came from the external world, from others who had lived or were living with him in that world, and from thoughts which they had, or actions to which these thoughts led them. To get an insight into his intellectual development, therefore, one must examine the forces producing the movement of thought, the coherent way in which predecessors and contemporaries organized these ideas, and finally the organisation which La Fontaine created within himself out of these heterogeneous intellectual forces.

His literary career, the centre of his intellectual personality, has one dominant characteristic, namely, an intense mobility. The poet was constantly on the move from one genre to another, from literature to philosophy, from philosophy to scientific speculation, from science to history and thence back to literature. This intense mobility of ideas gave rise to three other characteristics: clandestinity, humanism and the search for new art forms and models. These characteristics were symptomatic of the conflict between traditional beliefs and scientific knowledge, between dogmatism and the forces of liberty, and between sectarian prejudices and the desire for a life of organic unity in which all parts of life would have a reasonable place in the whole. Clandestine literature was a direct result of this situation. Authors masked their ideas and intentions under an ironical and witty style to achieve certain ends. Thus most of La Fontaine's controversial fables, particularly those connected with the fall and trial of Fouquet, circulated clandestinely before being published and even when published, their contents and meaning remained disguised under a disarming sort of irony

and wit, understood only by the author's intimate associates and closest friends.

Another important characteristic of the poet's intellectual mobility is his humanism, based upon the belief that continuity of life depends upon an infinite series of life experiences, upon the fact that, although the source of being derives from man's awareness of himself, this awareness itself depends upon man's ability to interact meaningfully with the external world around him. Thus La Fontaine's curiosity and eclectic temperament led him to make a genuine and conscious effort to augment his relationship with the universe as a means of increasing his knowledge of nature and deepening his awareness of himself. This attitude is only natural. To be human, as the poet and his epoch understood it, requires an ability to understand the working of man's inner psychology and an effort to pursue a maximum functioning of that psychology in order to create ever more important possibilities for living dynamically. This simple faith in knowledge as power is a mark of La Fontaine's humanism. The focus of his intellectual growth is the gradual evolution and affirmation of this faith.

The application of knowledge to the expression of the human condition led to the next characteristic of La Fontaine's humanism, namely, the constant search for literary models and new art forms. The increase in his knowledge and self-confidence led to a situation in which certain traditional prejudices, such as the Classical theories frowning at the versification of fables, had to be discarded because they could no longer stand the scrutiny of reason. It was in response to this search that the poet brushed aside the opinion of the literary "docte", Patru, and went ahead to versify the aesopic apologues, turn them into intellectual poetry and create a new literary genre out of them.

The tracing of the process of literary and intellectual evolution by which he accomplished this task is by no means easy. His life was comparatively long, varied and this complicates matters. For the purpose of this study, however, the poet's life which spanned three quarters of a century, has been divided into six broad periods, corresponding more or less to the major events and influences on his life and career. The first period (1621 - 1647) witnessed La Fontaine's passage through a series of formative influences in his early childhood and

adolescence. His early education culminated in his withdrawal from the Oratory, his vocational awareness and his trip to Paris for further studies. His arrival in Paris (1647) marks the beginning of the second period (1647 - 1661) during which the poet cultivated useful acquaintances, became more familiar with the facilities in Paris and intensified his readings in ancient and modern literature in search of literary models and a poetic pattern. The publication of L'Eunuque in 1654 was already a visible result but its failure decided La Fontaine to try his hand in writing heroic poetry, the result of which was Adonis, presented to Fouquet in 1658. The literary take-off has been made. The acquaintance of Fouquet brought the poet in contact with a galaxy of eminent writers, artists and aristocrats whose influence broadened his mind and social outlook. On the professional side, the effort made to fulfil the poetic contract with Fouquet, particularly the composition of the unfinished Le Songe de Vaux furnished La Fontaine with valuable materials for his Contes and Fables. Fouquet's fall and the poet's consequent departure from Vaux led to the third stage of his career (1661 - 1668) when he was introduced to the splendour of the palace of Luxembourg where he became the gentleman-servant to the dowager duchess of Orleans. During this period the poet conceived almost simultaneously the twin genres of Contes and Fables and created what was virtually a new literary genre. With Clymène and the first two parts of the Contes he illustrated and defended his subject matter and technique of story-telling (1666), just as he elaborated his poetics in the creation of the fable in verse (1668). The later creation ushered La Fontaine from traditional apologue into intellectual poetry. The next ten years which followed the publication of the first collection of fables (1668 - 1678) constitute a very fruitful period. This fourth stage of the poet's life was one of transition towards maturity, marked by the publication of Psyché, another blending of prose and poetry similar to the pattern tried out earlier in Le Songe de Vaux, which was to serve as the converging point for all the literary genres and styles so far attempted by the poet (1669). This was followed by an interlude of stoic idealism, represented in the Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc (1673). Meanwhile the death of the dowager duchess of Orleans a year earlier led to the patronage and protection of Mme. de La Sablière with whom La Fontaine was to spend the next twenty years of his life.



The entry into Mme. de La Sablière's circle accelerated the speed of the poet's advance towards maturity. This period of his career is the most productive as well as the most significant for his overall development and maturity. Apart from witnessing the publication of the Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc, the period also saw the composition of the ill-fated opera, Daphné (1674), the publication of the last volume of tales (1674) and the second collection of fables (1678). At Mme. de La Sablière's salon La Fontaine cultivated the acquaintance and association of well-known literary men like Charles Perrault, medical doctors, scientists and disciples of Gassendi among whom were Bernier, Menjot, Roberval, Sauveur and others whose influences enlarged the poet's intellectual horizon and kindled his interest in philosophical, sociological and scientific problems, reflected in the fables of 1678. The fifth and the most crucial period of La Fontaine's career (1678 - 1684) has now begun. With the second collection of fables he established his intellectual maturity which is demonstrated not only in the philosophical Discours à Mme. de La Sablière but also in such works as Le Poème du Quinquina. This literary and intellectual maturity was universally acknowledged in the poet's election to the distinguished French Academy in 1684 thus bringing to a befitting climax some forty years of literary aspiration and intellectual development. The period 1684 - 1695 constitutes the last eleven years of La Fontaine's career during which the twelfth and last book of fables appeared (1693). Although these years were a period of comparative decline in literary production, they were, nevertheless, rich in ideas and maturity for the poet. He took an active part in the intellectual discussions of the Academy, demonstrated a high degree of maturity and independence in the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, and remained intellectually alert until his death in 1695.

The method of approach adopted in this study is to consider these periods as a series of intellectual experiences culminating in the formation of La Fontaine's personality as a literary artist, a humanist and a moral philosopher. Previous biographers of the poet have tended to present him under one or the other of these titles, suggesting that the literary element in him prevented him from making any original contribution to the growth of ideas. What this assumption seems to ig-

nore is the fact that there is a natural and progressive continuity in the poet's passage from poetry to philosophy. Consequently, it regards these aspects of his development as opposed to each other. Thus most critics feel that the poet must have been either a literary artist or a moralist and that whenever he turned from one field of endeavour to the other it was a clear indication of a deficiency or defeat, or at least a confession of weakness. Accordingly, there is a tendency to believe that La Fontaine became a moralist because of his awareness of his weakness or deficiency in dramatic poetry. But when one seeks to define what kind of moralist he was, one is forced to admit that he was, before anything else, a poet who expressed his apprehension of the universe artistically.

The universe is a realm where man exists within a social order, structured by morality. He must adapt to conditions designated as good or evil; and must live with a developing self, he must give major priority to some and relative priority to others. That is, he must create with them a viable framework which will offer him the maximum satisfaction in living. Thus in submitting to the weight of tradition, to the momentum of the present activities, he naturally submits to those influences which in his opinion have best interpreted life in his own terms, whether these influences be of the past or of his own generation. La Fontaine is like everybody else in this respect. Immersing his own existence in the stream of history, he associated himself with the movements which seemed important to him and with the people who had something to say about their importance. The stream may have been small and the people of consequence few, but still he used them according to his ability and desires. By implication, he used what they created: the works they produced, the organizations they formed, the tendencies they initiated and the goals they set. So what he was intellectually consists partly of what other people had been and what they had thought, said and done, plus the way he himself utilized this heritage.

His intellectual development must therefore be studied in the context of the tradition in which he lived, with an awareness of predecessors who had meaning for him and of contemporaries who shared his intellectual task. He must be seen in a perspective which encom-

passes his whole personality and which sees him as an individual aspiring to live a full life in his own way and endeavouring therefore to integrate its many aspects in order to impart to it coherence, unity, harmony and meaning. Viewed from this angle, the poet will be seen to be less complicated than certain of his contemporaries. He profited greatly from groups that preceded him and, to a lesser extent, from individuals also. But he often chose to follow individuals who were representative of groups. Thus Racine whom he regarded as a personification of the Homeric culture and tradition remained his constant guide and interpreter of Greek literature.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Bernier was for him an embodiment of gassendism. La Fontaine had a way of explaining to those who were willing to listen, his problems of literary integration and he disclosed clearly at times, particularly in his forewords and prefaces, how he understood a given literary or intellectual problem and what plans he had for tackling it.<sup>17</sup> An intellectual biography of La Fontaine must therefore be compiled in the light of the contemporary social and intellectual situations. He did not live in isolation. Far from being an island apart, he was open to all sorts of influences, ideas and events. The history of his intellectual development is the study of his particular genius working on the problems set him by his age.

Philological criticism is subservient in this study to philosophical inquiry, since the study is concerned not only with the outward condition of La Fontaine's work, but mainly with the revelation which this condition makes of the driving energy of his thought. This is not to say that the poet can be ranked among the great philosophers of the world in the same way that he can be among the best literary artists. But an attempt is made as far as possible to situate him in the seventeenth century current of thought and to discover what the directing motive of his thought was. The study is partly historical and partly analytical. But it is necessary to emphasize that the philosophy of the important writers other than La Fontaine, treated in this study, can only be handled synthetically. It would be vain and idle even in

---

16. Racine, Jean, *Œuvres*, (édit. Mesnard), Paris, 1865-1873, t.I, p. 334.

17. La Fontaine, Jean de, *Œuvres complètes*, (édit. Jean Marmier) Paris (Seuil), 1965, pp. 178-179, Cf. *Ibid.* pp. 66-68.

an essay of a more considerable dimension to discuss each philosopher exhaustively. It is rather hoped that each author will be seen in a truer perspective as he takes his proper place in the complex interacting currents of seventeenth-century intellectual history. It is this picture of inter-relationship, this affinity of thought within the living matrix of a moment of cultural history, rather than exhaustive detail, that forms the nucleus of the present study, thus making it possible to visualize how La Fontaine's ideas arose from a certain context, under its influence or in reaction to it.

CHAPTER I

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD (1621-1647)

1. Early Education

La Fontaine's intellectual foundation was laid by three dominant factors in his youthful development, which deserve to be analysed: his family background, his literary training at the "Collège de Château-Thierry", his experience at the Oratory. Each of these factors played an important part in shaping his artistic and intellectual personality.

His family background is relatively easy to delineate, although it is not so easy to assess its importance. He was born at Château-Thierry on 7th July, 1621. His father, Charles de La Fontaine was a Commissioner of the Royal Forests and Waters, and his mother, Françoise Pidoux, came from a wealthy Poitevin family, the Pidoux of Poitiers who were noted for their long noses and their longevity.<sup>1</sup>

La Fontaine's family was an ancient one and had some pretensions to nobility. But in reality it belonged to the prosperous middle-class that was coming up and acquiring a new social importance in the community, a class of functionaries or administrators whose source of strength and independence lay not only in the functions they exercised but also in their being directly responsible to the king rather than to the feudal lords. This class was made up of people who were simple, uninhibited and easy-going and among whom food, love and hunting were important preoccupations. Life was gay and carefree; friends and families exchanged visits and enjoyed copious meals amidst lively conversation, broad stories and hilarious laughter. But the stories were not told only for the sheer joy of story-telling. More often than not, they were pithy

---

1. Clarac, P., La Fontaine par lui-même, Paris, (Seuil), 1967, pp. 6 - 7.

anecdotes intended to inculcate a moral lesson or illustrate some aspect of human life. Naturally the type of fairy tales attributed to the legendary Greek fabulist, AEsop, were popular on such occasions. According to Walckenaer, children in particular enjoyed sitting by the fireside and listening to these stories being told by their parents or elder relatives.<sup>2</sup> There is little doubt that La Fontaine's earliest contact with fables was made through this oral tradition.

Despite their relative independence and easy-going attitude, the middle-class citizens were apprehensive and constantly concerned with the vagaries of the ruling classes which they considered unjust and tyrannical, particularly when forced labour, heavy taxes and fines were imposed on them.<sup>3</sup> Medical science was still dangerously primitive and death an ever-present threat. It is little wonder, therefore, that these problems featured prominently in the writings of an adult La Fontaine.<sup>4</sup> Consoling pastimes were sought in hunting and love-making and La Fontaine as a growing young man does not seem to have hesitated in enjoying the best in love and literature as offered by the provincial community in which he grew up. Some of his amorous adventures with Amarille, Chloris, Clymène and a host of other pretty women, represented in his poems, took place in this atmosphere.<sup>5</sup>

The poet had numerous uncles and cousins among whom was Pierre Pintrel whose translation of Seneca's Letters to Lucilius was known to him, and who probably introduced him to the Latin author. Added to this influence was the rather instinctive interest of La Fontaine's father in poetry. He encouraged his son's childhood love of poetry and showed much enthusiasm for the maiden verses composed by him.<sup>6</sup> Given this situation, it is hardly sur-

---

2. Walckenaer, A.C., *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de Jean de La Fontaine*, Paris, 1820. pp. 95 - 98

3. La Fontaine, Jean de, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 471-473, "A Monseigneur le Duc de Bouillon".

4. *Ibid.*, p. 79. Fables, I, 15 and 16

5. *Ibid.* pp. 478 - 481.

6. Perrault, Charles, *Les Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle*, Paris, 1696, t.I, p. 83

prising that the growing child became interested in poets like Marot, Ronsard, Desportes, Régnier and Malherbe, all of whom were to have a great impact on La Fontaine's future writings through their immortal works.<sup>7</sup> Our poet had therefore the advantage of a childhood spent in cultured surroundings. Already this was a good start. His position as the first son of an enlightened middle-class civil servant afforded him the chance of having a good liberal education in one of the best schools of the time.

This leads to the second important factor in La Fontaine's early training, namely, the quality of staff and teaching at the "Collège de Château-Thierry". This school was reputed for its good teaching and strict discipline which made parents from far and wide send their children to the school. The school strove to form its pupils into cultured men of the world through the study of the humanities, based on the teaching of the art of drama, satire, rhetoric and the Latin classics as represented in Phaedrus, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Terence and Ovid. The theatre was popular at the time and pupils were familiar with the plays of Corneille, Rotrou, Scarron and Du Ryer. Arrangements were often made by the school authorities for the students to watch the actual performance of plays by some of these authors, particularly Corneille. We can now understand why the stage had such a strong attraction for La Fontaine. He not only began his literary career with dramatic poetry<sup>8</sup> but consciously aspired to be a dramatic poet.<sup>9</sup> The study of the satirical style of some of these playwrights was augmented by what the pupils saw and learned from the goings-on in the provincial milieu of Champagne. The people of Champagne were temperamentally light-hearted, critical of people's behaviour and fond of humorous gossip. Taine has given an exact portrait of their natural character :

---

7. Pellisson, F.P., et d'Olivet, Histoire de l'Académie Française, Paris, 1858, t.II, pp.304-306.

8. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., pp.297-322 , L'Eunuque.

9. La Fontaine's known dramatic works include L'Eunuque, Les Rieurs du Beau-Richard, Daphné, Galatée, Astrée and Achille.

Ces bourgeois, sur le pas de leur porte, clignent de l'oeil derrière vous; ces apprentis derrière l'établi se montrent du doigt votre ridicule et vont gloser. On n'entre jamais ici dans un atelier sans inquiétude, fussiez-vous prince et brodé d'or, ces garmins en manches sales voûs auront pesé en une minute, tout gros monsieur que vous êtes, et il est presque sûr que vous leur servirez de marionnette à la sortie du soir.<sup>10</sup>

That was the milieu in which the germs of La Fontaine's satirical humour were developed amidst the traditionally perceptive, critical but humorous natives of Champagne. Back at school, pupils were encouraged to entertain their classmates with stories of their experiences in the town or with their favourite fairy tales, and anyone who had none to narrate was usually regarded as a dullard. Most schools initiated their pupils into Greek and Latin literatures with the fables of AEsop and Phaedrus respectively. Numerous school editions of these works were produced by the publishers and booksellers in Paris, Lyons, the Low Countries and Germany. The most popular of the editions was, of course, Nevelet's collection, published in 1610. It grouped the Greek fables attributed to AEsop with their Latin translations together with those of Aphantonius, Babrias, Avienus and Abstemius. These were supplemented with texts selected from the writings of philosophers like Plato, historians like Herodotus, and moralists like Plutarch, all of which existed in French translations. It was usual to give quotations taken from the fables as topics for composition and amplification, and students were encouraged to compose their own apologues by imitating the models they had read. This systematic training in the art of imitating the Ancients did much to condition the literary styles of the French Classical writers, particularly those of La Fontaine, Racine and Boileau. As Georges Couton has rightly noted, the success of La Fontaine's literary career owed much to the skill acquired during these early, formative years :

L'écrivain est toute sa vie resté fidèle à des méthodes acquises pendant ses années d'études.<sup>11</sup>

---

10. Taine, H., *La Fontaine et ses Fables*, Paris, (Hachette), 1911, p.7.

11. Couton, G., *La Poétique de La Fontaine*, Paris, 1957, p.27.



The scheme of work was divided into grammar, humanities and rhetoric, designed to inculcate correctness of speech, elegance and eloquence. The overall objective was the formation of an accomplished man of character, with sufficient discernment and ability to unite purity of taste with delicacy. The desired goal was to be achieved by studying appropriate texts extracted from selected works and analysed as a unit. The lesson thus became an exercise and at the same time an interpretation, an imitation, an amplification and was supposed to develop memory, judgement and imagination. All these were major influences in the formation of a student of the 'Collège de Château-Thierry' into a man of taste and talent. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the three outstanding traits of La Fontaine's literary talents turned out to be his devotion to the purity of language, his love of drama (even though he did not excel in it) and his inimitable satirical skill. His fidelity to the principles of his early education is evident from his adherence to the tastes of the age<sup>12</sup>, his analysis of the merits and defects of a work of art in Clymène,<sup>13</sup> his insistence on a proper balance between imagination on the one hand and sensibility and discernment and judgement on the other and his emphasis on that taste which instinctively perceives correctness of speech as well as elegance of expression and eloquence of presentation.<sup>14</sup> All these traits of style had their germs in the lessons of his early college education. Further reading out of school merely served to illustrate and fertilize them in the mind of the poet. The importance of this basic training in the subsequent development of La Fontaine's mental personality has been noted by at least two of his well-known biographers. Nayrac states that the poet owed his love of classical antiquity and ancient literature to his early college education :

---

12. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op. Cit., pp. 178 - 179, 66 - 68.

13. Ibid., pp. 249 - 257.

14. Ibid., p.155, Fables, X, 14, ll. 55 - 56. Cf. pp. 66 - 68

Nous ne pouvons savoir, au juste, à quel âge le jeune collégien termina ses études secondaires. Quoiqu'il en soit de cela, nous devons reconnaître que ses maîtres lui ont enseigné autre chose qu'une rhétorique ampoulée; ils lui ont appris à aimer l'antiquité. Aussi, par la suite, il ne cessera de lire et de relire ces immortels auteurs, dont il deviendra un des défenseurs les plus ardents lorsqu'ils seront attaqués.<sup>15</sup>

Nearly half a century later, Philip Wadsworth confirmed the observations made by Nayrac. He writes :

No matter how pedantic his teachers were, and even if he paid little attention to them, he must have absorbed some knowledge and above all a thorough mastery of Latin. Students spoke this language..... they wrote themes in it, they studied Latin grammar and rules of rhetoric, they read and imitated authors from the whole range of Roman literature.<sup>16</sup>

This initiation into Latin literature and training in rhetoric were to play an important role in La Fontaine's future career as a poet. This helps to explain why he began his literary career with an imitation of Terence.<sup>17</sup> Although he does not seem to have known much Greek, he was, according to d'Olivet, an avid reader of Greek literature in Latin translation.<sup>18</sup> This keen interest in Greek literature and civilisation was at the root of the poet's great admiration for Plato. As a mature literary man he was to translate one of Plato's dialogues into French.<sup>19</sup>

Between 1635 and 1636, La Fontaine proceeded to Paris to continue his studies. Paris was then as now the attraction of every young Frenchman anxious to further his education and improve his social status. Information on the poet's studies at this time (1635-1636)

15. Nayrac, J.P., La Fontaine, ses facultés psychiques, sa philosophie, sa psychologie, sa mentalité, son caractère, Paris, 1908, p.21.

16. Wadsworth, P.A., Op. Cit., pp. 5 - 6.

17. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op. Cit., pp. 297-322, L'Eunuque.

18. Pellisson, F.P., et d'Olivet, Op. Cit., pp. 303-306.

19. La Fontaine, Jean de, Recueil de poésies chrétiennes et diverses, 1671, (Préface). This work (now lost) was probably accomplished with the aid of a Latin translation and was presented to the Grand Condé for comments.

is scarce, for available records on La Fontaine's life and career seem to have totally ignored this period. The exact school he attended in Paris is not even known; all that one can infer from the general pattern of education at the time is that the range of subjects taught there as well as the teaching method may have been similar to what obtained in other comparable institutions such as the "Collège de Château-Thierry". Invariably there was the teaching of humanities, grammar and the art of rhetoric in all schools, but there were slight modifications from one school to the other in the range of additional subjects added to the general list.<sup>20</sup> In Paris La Fontaine met and became friends with a number of students among whom was Antoine Furetière who was later to become a well-known poet, novelist, philologist and member of the French Academy. His circle of associates, however, was yet small; although he may have succeeded in improving his knowledge to some extent, we have reasons to suspect that the young student from the provinces was not quite happy during those early days in Paris. The surviving portion of his comments about his teachers alludes to their artificial eloquence, rigorous discipline and pedantry:

Je hais les pièces d'éloquence  
Hors de leur place, et qui n'ont point de fin,  
Et ne sais bête au monde pire  
Que l'écolier, si ce n'est le pédant.....<sup>21</sup>

This suggests that La Fontaine was not as comfortable as he had expected in the new, unidentified school. He tended to be sensitive and reserved. But this tendency did not produce a completely negative impact, for it enabled him to devote more time to his studies. How far his evident discomfort here contributed to his withdrawal from the school after four years is not easy to assess but he seems to have been only too glad to leave, and we find him next at the seminary of the Oratory.

The next important influence in La Fontaine's early education was therefore the Oratory. There has been a lot of speculation about what made him enter the seminary. Wadsworth suggests among other

20. Barrière, P., *La Vie intellectuelle en France du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle à l'époque contemporaine*, Paris, (Albin Michel), 1961, pp. 134 - 156.
21. La Fontaine, Jean de, *Op.Cit.* p.141, *Fables*, IX, 5; p.77, (I.9); p.108 (V.11).

factors the zeal of adolescence, the example of some friends such as François de Maucroix and Antoine Furetière, both of whom were to become clerical men, the advice of some pious teacher or clergyman.<sup>22</sup> In an entry which Adry, the librarian of the Oratory made in the register of the establishment on 27 April, 1641, he notes that the canon of Soissons, Héricart, gave some religious books dealing *with the* priestly vocation to the young aspirant :

Ce goût pour l'état ecclésiastique pouvait lui avoir été inspiré par G. Héricart, Chanoine de Soissons, qui à cette époque lui fit présent, entre autres livres de piété, d'un Lactance de l'édition de Tournes...<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to ignore the impact of these factors on La Fontaine's decision to enter the seminary. But the major influence was certainly the contemporary situation and attitude to clerical vocation. The first half of the seventeenth century was a period during which the Catholic Church enjoyed overwhelming influence and authority in France. Religious orders, monasteries and seminaries were scattered all over the country. These orders controlled education at all levels. The "Collège de Château-Thierry", for example, was supervised by the Jesuits and many of the teachers were members of the local clergy who were always on the look-out for potential recruits into the various religious orders. Most of their recruits were young men who were interested in literature. It was a common practice for literary men to secure a clerical appointment which would pay their livelihood and allow them ample time for writing. La Fontaine's entry into the seminary was therefore quite in line with the attitude of the age and merely served to indicate his intention to be a literary man. From the materialistic point of view too, his action is defensible. The Church was one of the surest ways to a position of power and influence in contemporary society and many of the leading figures of the time were clerical men. These considerations were, no doubt, the main factors that decided La Fontaine to enter the seminary of the Oratory.

He studied first at the home establishment of the Oratory in Paris but was soon sent to the "Académie royale de Juilly", a school which was newly opened by the Oratorians near Meaux. This institu-

---

22. Wadsworth, P.A., Op.Cit., p.8

23. Régnier, A.D., Oeuvres de J. de la Fontaine, Paris (Hachette), 1883, t. I, p. xiii.

tion was famous for the excellent quality of its staff and teaching programme.

Juilly, le principal établissement de l'Oratoire, devient un centre de première importance où enseignent de vrais savants. On y pratique le français, l'histoire, les langues vivantes au moins par leçons particulières, les mathématiques; .... l'éducation est l'apprentissage de la vie, unissant humanités, religion, morale, droit, exercices physiques, travaux manuels, voyages, dans la tradition de Ponocrate et de Montaigne.<sup>24</sup>

Many well-known writers of the seventeenth century ~~passed through~~ passed through this establishment during their formative years. The highly reputable academic and disciplinary standards of the school were, as Raymond Picard puts it, due to a judicious introduction of innovations in teaching methods

dont la nouveauté et la hardiesse sont la gloire de la pédagogie au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle..... Le rythme des études était laborieusement calculé; l'emploi du temps précis et la discipline rigoureuse.<sup>25</sup>

In October 1641, La Fontaine was transferred to the establishment of Saint-Magloire, supposedly to improve his knowledge of theology. But already his vocational enthusiasm was waning. Left to himself, he devoted more time to reading profane than religious authors. His book of predilection was L'Astrée, a pastoral novel by Honoré d'Urfé.

Thus his zeal for the priesthood was short-lived :

Le confrère Jean de La Fontaine resta peu de temps au noviciat de l'Oratoire. Plus tard, il avouait à son ami Boileau qu'il s'occupait plus volontiers à lire des poètes que Rodriguez.<sup>26</sup>

As his natural tendency to diversity asserted itself, he betrayed his disgust for the seminary and his desire for a change of scene by making fun of the more devout members of the Brotherhood, including his spiritual director, Desmares, the Jansenist theologian noted for

24. Barrière, P., Op.Cit. p.136

25. Picard, R., La Carrière de Jean Racine, Paris, (Gallimard), 1956, p.25.

26. Radouant, R., La Fontaine Fables, Paris (Hachette), 1929, "Introduction". Rodriguez was a Spanish theologian (1451-1524) who published penetrating theological treatises.

his ability to preach. Following La Fontaine's easy nature, his changeable mood and characteristic resignation of himself to his whims and fancies, he took the only easy and honest way out of a situation that had become manifestly unbearable to him, and left the seminary as quietly as he had entered, after barely eighteen months. That La Fontaine left the Oratory is hardly surprising. What is more surprising is that he ever succumbed to the temptation to enter it at all. In fact the indulgent life of pleasure which he led immediately after leaving the seminary proved how little fitted he would have been for the priesthood.

The importance of the seminary adventure for the purpose of the present study, however, lies in the role which that brief experience played in the poet's intellectual development. Part of the teaching programme of the Oratorians was to introduce their pupils to the theory of fables and the technique of using them to illustrate one's religious preaching. As in the ordinary secondary school, the students of the seminary studied the principles of rhetoric, composed essays from a given outline and practised literary appreciation with texts selected from the works of eminent theologians and famous Latin authors. Thus La Fontaine as a seminarist must have been familiar with such works as the Progymnasmata eloquentiae or the Gymnastics of Eloquence, written by the celebrated Greek rhetorician, Aphthonius. Several translated editions of this work, containing the author's theory of fables as well as eighty of his apologues were at the disposal of the students of the Oratory. Two of those fables, L'Ivrogne dans le cercueil and Les Enfants du laboureur were very popular with the priests of the Oratory who often quoted them in their sermons and sometimes gave them to their students for literary appreciation. These same fables were to feature in La Fontaine's first collection of fables as L'Ivrogne et sa femme and Le Vieillard et ses enfants.<sup>27</sup>

Another popular work used by the Oratorians was Le Traité de rhétorique, published by le P. Pomey. This book dealt with the technique of composing short stories and witty anecdotes in both prose and verse as well as providing several examples of passages written

---

27. La Fontaine, J. de, Op. Cit., p. 92, Fables, III, 7; p. 102 (IV, 18)

in various styles ranging from rough and simple to studied and flowery styles. The seminarists, particularly the new entrants, were rigorously drilled in the basic literary skills involving amplification of themes, use of figures of language and style and the art of explanation. These were to constitute indispensable literary instruments for an adult La Fontaine as we shall see later. On the purely personal level, his contact with the erudite priests and monks such as Arnauld d'Andilly and Desmares stimulated his interest in learning, developed his imaginative powers and inspired him with a taste for good musical poetry. He also acquired a volume of detailed knowledge about the Catholic Church, the Orders and religion as a whole which he uses satirically and even lasciviously in Part IV of his Contes and other writings.<sup>28</sup>

Further traces of his experiences as a seminarist can be seen in his Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc in which he treats the theme of marital chastity,<sup>29</sup> in the Ballade sur Escobar,<sup>30</sup> in his handling of the poem on purgatory<sup>31</sup> and in his paraphrasing of the Psalms and translation of the Dies Irae.<sup>32</sup> We shall return to these works in the chapter on the manifestation of providentialist tendencies in the works of La Fontaine.

He took no active part in the controversy between the Jesuits and the Jansenists, but often showed sympathy for the latter from whom he received his only known religious education as a seminarist. For example, two poems composed fairly early in his career, and circulated clandestinely in manuscript, were inspired by Pascal's Provinciales, and they ridicule the casuistry and easy-going moral teaching of the Jesuits.<sup>33</sup> He was later to collaborate with his Jansenist friends

28. La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., pp.258 - 259; 261 - 277.

29. Ibid., p.367. This poem is based on a text by Arnauld d'Andilly, stressing the Jansenist theme of marital chastity.

30. Ibid., p. 476

31. Ibid. p. 265

32. Ibid., pp. 477, 499

33. Ibid., p. 476.

in editing and publishing the Recueil des poésies chrétiennes et diverses (1671). There is a deeply religious undertone in his praise of solitude;<sup>34</sup> and his portrayal of hermits in Psyché owes something to his memories of the "solitaires" of Port-Royal.<sup>35</sup>

But these traces of Jansenist sympathy and influence in La Fontaine's writings should not be taken to mean that the poet was slavishly tied to Port-Royal or that he saw no fault in the Jansenists. In fact he also gives them their due share of criticism. In a comment on them in a letter to the duchesse de Bouillon, he pays them due tribute and respect but recoils at the severity of their moral teaching:

Le mal est que l'on veut ici  
De plus sévères moralistes;  
Anacréon s'y tait devant les Jansénistes.  
Encor que leurs leçons me semblent un peu tristes,  
Vous devez priser ces auteurs           36  
Pleins d'esprit et bons disputeurs.

Indeed the Jansenist doctrine of the fallen human race was at the same time to influence his pessimistic view of man in the collections of fables.

It can thus be seen that, although La Fontaine's stay at the seminary of the Oratory was brief, the experiences he acquired there were far-reaching in their influence on his future literary and intellectual development. This fact is evident from the indelible mark which they have left in some of his literary works. As Léon Petit pertinently remarks, the impact created upon the poet's thinking by his contact with Port-Royal can be appreciated from the fact that the last and the greatest of his fables, namely Le Juge arbitre, l'Hospitalier, et le Solitaire (xii, 24) was inspired by a member of the Brotherhood.

Bien des années après, la fréquentation des Messieurs  
de Port-Royal le marquera d'une empreinte profonde,  
au point que la dernière de ses fables, son chant<sub>37</sub>  
du cygne, c'est à l'un d'eux qu'il en devra le sujet.

We shall take up this particular fable when we come to discuss the last collection of fables. Meanwhile it is important to note that the seminary experiences afforded La Fontaine some useful training in the

34. La Fontaine, J. de, Op. Cit., p. 158, Fables, XI, 4, ll. 22-38

35. Ibid., p. 428

36. Ibid., p. 48

37. Léon, Petit, La Fontaine à la rencontre de Dieu, Paris (Nizet), 1970, p. 10.



basic skills which he would need for his future career as a literary man. Later in his life, he recalled with some element of nostalgia the quiet months spent within the secluded walls of the Oratory.

Je vous ai fait récit quelquefois de ces heures  
 Qu'en des lieux séparés de tout profane abord  
 Je passais à louer l'arbitre de mon sort.  
 Alors j'avais pitié des heureux de ce monde.  
 Maintenant, j'ai perdu cette paix si profonde  
 Mon cœur est agité.....<sup>38</sup>

How faithfully this confession represents the poet's disposition at the Oratory is difficult to determine. Perhaps he realized how conducive the quiet and peaceful atmosphere of the establishment was to his natural love of solitude. Perhaps he sincerely regretted the brief spell of spiritual joy and tranquillity which contrasted sharply with worldly agitations. Whichever is the case, one thing stands out clearly: his contact with the Church through the Oratory helped to broaden his view of life; the quiet milieu of the seminary fostered meditation and mental cogitation, awakened his imagination and thus contributed to his mental growth.

It must be remembered that the extent of this awakening, this stimulation of the literary and intellectual powers depends largely upon the degree to which the natural talents, the innate faculties of imagination, perception and sensitivity are active in the individual. Natural talents must be present before they can be developed. In the next section, therefore, we shall examine as part of the formative influences on La Fontaine, those aspects of his natural disposition which were conducive to his intellectual development.

## 2. Natural Disposition and Vocational Awareness

On leaving the seclusion of the Oratory at the end of 1642, La Fontaine returned to Château-Thierry and quickly readjusted himself to the social conditions already noted. He was apparently working hard to cover the ground lost during his period of confinement at the Oratory, and did not hesitate to claim his arrears of love and fun, as we can infer from the themes of the Elégies.<sup>39</sup> At 21, he was beginning to manifest

---

38. La Fontaine, J. de, Op. Cit., p. 371, Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc, ll. 401-406

39. Ibid., pp. 478-481.

those traits of character, which are of special interest to our study, for the insight they give into the psychology of the developing personality. The success or failure of the education of any individual depends largely upon his natural disposition, that is, upon the presence in the individual of certain basic faculties or powers without which the educative process cannot function. Intellectual development does not operate in a vacuum. Latent talents must be present in one's natural disposition before they can be developed by formal education. Thus if La Fontaine's early masters succeeded in instilling in him devotion to purity of language, love of drama and the technique of satire; if they were able to furnish him with the basic literary skills, it was precisely because he was naturally educable. His teachers had merely to stimulate the growth of certain innate qualities which the young student already possessed in germ. To benefit from the college programme the student must be endowed with four natural gifts needed for the practice of the "belles-lettres", namely, intelligence, imagination, sensitivity and discernment or the ability to distinguish the good and the beautiful in nature and in the arts. In the case of La Fontaine, these faculties are so significant that they require an analysis.

La Fontaine has often been portrayed as an unimpressive and egoistic epicurean, living in the world of imagination and day-dreaming. Instances of his absent-mindedness and selfish dependence upon the benevolence of others have been cited by many critics to prove his voluptuous indolence, his calculated effort to escape from social obligations and to live only for poetry. Le vicomte de Broc writes :

Il n'y a rien d'un homme de cour dans cet indépendant qui ne sait pas plier aux caprices des autres et ne veut suivre que les siens. Pourvu de la charge de Maître des Eaux et Forêts, il se défit d'un emploi qui était encore une chaîne, et dont il s'acquitta sans le moindre zèle. La charge de conteur est la seule qui semble faite pour lui, et il n'a jamais songé à s'en démettre. Il prend femme à vingt-six ans, puis il quitte sa femme comme il avait quitté son emploi.<sup>40</sup>

---

40. Broc, le Vte. de, Op.Cit., pp. 17-18.

Broc then recounts other anecdotes on how the poet shook off his conjugal responsibilities and even failed to recognize his own son, and declares :

De pareils traits peignent l'homme tout esprit, tout imagination, qui sait être ni mari, ni père, oublieux des graves devoirs de la vie, fidèle seulement à la Muse et toujours poète.<sup>41</sup>

Lamartine is less sympathetic in his judgement of La Fontaine. Describing the poet as a cynical and selfish lout, he comments :

Cet homme qui ne connaissait pas son fils, qui vivait sans famille, qui écrivait des contes orduriers en cheveux blancs pour provoquer les sens de la jeunesse, qui mendiait dans des dédicaces adulatrices l'aumône des riches financiers du temps pour payer ses faiblesses; cet homme dont Racine, Corneille, Boileau, Fénelon, Bossuet, les poètes, les écrivains, ses contemporains ne parlent pas, ou ne parlent qu'avec pitié comme d'un vieux enfant, n'était ni un sage ni un hom<sup>m</sup>e naïf. Il avait la philosophie du sans-souci et la naïveté de l'égoïsme.<sup>42</sup>

The exaggerated tone of this criticism, particularly the bitter animosity which Lamartine has not succeeded in moderating, betrays the naïve sentimentality of the critic himself and his ignorance of La Fontaine's real personality. What Lamartine sees as the poet's cynical philosophy is no more than the candid exposition of the bitter realities of life as the penetratingly observant "bonhomme" saw them. Who would have La Fontaine's encyclopaedic knowledge of life's illusions and contradictions and yet fail to be sceptical? The poet has merely shown the world as it is so that the wise may adapt themselves to what they cannot help. In fact it is this very frankness and sincerity in dealing with the complex problems of existence that endeared La Fontaine's works to the reading public. It is also not true that the poet's contemporaries did not regard him or only spoke of him apologetically. The truth is that he was quite popular and his company was frequently sought by all classes of people. The secret of his personal magnetism was not pity felt for him by his admirers but his frankness and the fame of his literary creation.

---

41. Broc, le Vte. de, Op.Cit., p.19.

42. Lamartine, Méditations, Paris (Garnier), 1968, p.300.

Closely related to the accusations of cynicism and parasitism is the legend of laziness built around the poet, depicting him as a sort of indolent and idle fellow. This disturbing impression created of La Fontaine has been seriously challenged by well-meaning critics among whom is the respected poet, Paul Valéry. He writes :

Il court sur La Fontaine, une rumeur de paresse et de rêverie, un murmure ordinaire d'absence et de distraction perpétuelle qui nous fait songer sans effort d'un personnage fabuleux, toujours infiniment docile à la plus douce pente de sa durée.<sup>43</sup>

But the volume and quality of work produced by the poet, argues Valéry, totally disprove this opinion about La Fontaine. One cannot avoid agreeing with Valéry on this point. The author of Adonis in particular must have had a singularly attentive mind. The beauty, delicacy and artistic embellishment lavished on this poem, as we shall see later on, can only be the fruits of extensive research and hard work which a really indolent and absent-minded person could not have accomplished. Throughout the period during which La Fontaine was silently drilling himself in the skill and technique which resulted in Adonis, he gave his friends and contemporaries the impression of being idle, lazy and abstracted. His contemporaries, particularly the superficially observant ones, took the poet the way he presented himself, and without due reflection, passed on this impression to generations of readers. Poetry, like all works of art is a time-consuming task, requiring a steady application of the mind, if success is to be achieved. That La Fontaine achieved this success belies the charges of laziness and perpetual abstraction levelled against him. One cannot help wondering why people should for one moment imagine an author like our poet to be indolent and absent-minded. Fortunately the poet's admirers greatly outnumber his critics. A representative of the former is Léon-Paul Fargue. Commenting on certain critics' misunderstanding of La Fontaine's personality he writes :

Rien ne montre mieux à quel point les hommes sont injustes. Pour moi... Ce que je vois ici, c'est un poète complet avec quelque chose de définitif et d'imperceptible, une sorte d'envoyé de la Poésie sur terre, et beaucoup plus divin, beaucoup plus puissant qu'aucun autre.<sup>44</sup>

---

43. Valéry, Paul. *Œuvres*, Paris, (Pléiade), 1959, t.I, p.474

44. Fargue, Léon-Paul, and Others, *Tableaux de la littérature française XVII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris (Gallimard), 1939, pp.65-77.

The surprising thing, however, is that La Fontaine himself appears not to have challenged this label of indolence stamped on his character. More often than not, one has the impression that the poet even delighted in it. How then can we explain this strange attitude of indifference even in matters affecting his own image and personality? Do his characteristic nonchalance and his tendency to see the funny side of things suffice to explain this attitude? We think not. There is a more important and certainly more utilitarian reason for the poet's acquiescence in the legend of his laziness. It served him as a sort of escape route, a master artifice which he knew was necessary for his inner freedom and tranquillity because he took refuge in it when confronted with something he did not like to do. He needed these two factors, namely peace and freedom for his own survival and intellectual development, and the popular idea that he was a lazy man spared him the disturbances and worries from unwanted sources, thus enabling him to maintain his peace and personal independence. The effectiveness of this clever artifice in extricating the poet from embarrassing situations is demonstrated in the easy forgiveness of his comrades of the "Round Table" when, following his own fancy, he took French leave of them during one of their meetings. They almost unanimously attributed his obviously ungentlemanly conduct not to any calculated bad intention or slight on his part but to his "characteristic" absent-mindedness and indolence.

La Fontaine est un bon garçon  
 Qui n'y fait pas tant de façon.  
 Il ne l'a point fait par malice :  
 Belle paresse est tout son vice.  
 Et peut-être quand il partit,  
 A peine était-il hors du lit.<sup>45</sup>

The relevance of this artifice to the literary and intellectual development of La Fontaine is that he resorted to it at will whenever he wanted to safeguard his mental composure, a factor which was indispensable to the type of imagination and reflection that created the world of the Contes and Fables.

---

45. Clarac, P., La Fontaine, p.13.

Another factor or character trait which contributed to the poet's success was his dread of monotony. This explains the ephemeral nature of his affections as well as the diversity of his literary creation.

Mais quoi! je suis volage en vers comme en amours.<sup>46</sup>

This trait of character is usually considered as one of La Fontaine's shortcomings. But again, in this very fault, if indeed a fault it is, lies the essence of his genius. It explains his versatility or the infinite variety of his literary themes and styles. These vary from pithy anecdotes as in Fables, I, 2 and 3, to serious philosophical treatises as in IX, 18 and XII, 24; from simple comic scenes as in L'Eunuque to disturbing dramatizations of life's tragic realities as in Psyché. The Poème du Quinquina is the work of an amateur scientist and physician.

Implicit in the poet's confession of the diversity of his tastes is his deep self-knowledge which made him aware of his own powers and limitations. For him, self-knowledge is not only a cardinal tenet of nature but a necessary condition for progress and ultimate success in any endeavour. Thus it was the awareness of his own potentialities and talents that made him choose the Contes and Fables as the genres best suited to his own temperament. He chose them for their conciseness and brevity.

Les longs ouvrages me font peur.....  
Loin d'épuiser une matière,  
On n'en doit prendre que la fleur.<sup>47</sup>

Having sewn his coat according to his size, his rate of development was accelerated and his ultimate success made more possible. It is no wonder, therefore, that at the climax of his maturity he was to offer the virtue of self-knowledge or self-awareness as the focus of his moral teaching by making it the theme of the last and the greatest of his fables.<sup>48</sup>

46. Maucroix, F.de, et La Fontaine, J.de, Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine, Paris, 1685, p.133.

47. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., p.117. Fables, VI, (Epilogue)

48. Ibid., p.174, XII, 24, ll. 39-40.

With self-awareness came forthright humility and simplicity :

Jamais homme ne fut plus simple, mais de cette simplicité ingénue, qui est le partage de l'enfance... Il n'est point touché des richesses; il n'est pas capable de s'attacher longtemps au même objet... et pour ce qui est de ses mœurs, il se laisse guider par une sombre lumière, qui lui découvre en partie la loi naturelle. Voilà, <sup>49</sup> trait pour trait, ce qu'a été M. de La Fontaine.

It speaks eloquently for La Fontaine's humility that even at the moment of his greatest triumph and professional success he conducted himself with exemplary modesty. In the address he read to the members of the French Academy on the occasion of his election to that solemn assembly, he humbly owned his past errors and expressed the hope for a better future.<sup>50</sup> But hidden underneath this simple humility was a formidable reserve of inner freedom and dignity which sustained him in his own tastes as he advanced slowly but steadily towards literary fame and intellectual maturity. The importance of this absence of affectation to the poet's progress and the achievement of his goal is that it endeared him to many people including the Bouillons, Fouquet, the Dowager Duchess of Orleans, and later Mme. de La Sablière and the Hervarts, the dukes and princes of Vendôme and Conti respectively all of whom readily accepted him at one time or the other and gave him the moral and material support which he constantly needed to push ahead.<sup>51</sup>

On the purely professional level, La Fontaine was endowed with three precious natural faculties among many others which were vital to his career, namely, imagination, observation and sensitivity. He possessed tremendous imaginative powers which linked him with the world of plants, animals and mythology from which he drew inspiration for his poetic works. The poet's imagination had what looks like an unlimited power of compounding, separating and dividing ideas in all the varieties of fiction and vision. It could feign a train of events with all the appearances of reality, ascribe to them a particular time and place, conceive them as existent and point them out to itself with

---

49. Pellisson et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., p.297.

50. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit. pp.490-491, Discours à Mme. de la Sablière (1684).

51. Cf. Chapter II, 4 : Enlargement of the social horizon.

every circumstance that belongs to reality. This phenomenon is probably what the poet's contemporaries associated with his so-called absent-mindedness. He derived too much literary and intellectual benefit from imagination not to indulge in it at will. If his critics found him looking sleepy and dreamy, it is not without reason, for this apparent dreaminess was the source of the irresistible reality of his characters. Taine clearly sees the importance of this special gift in the literary and intellectual development of La Fontaine :

Cette imagination lucide et féconde est comme une sève intarissable qui produit partout la vie poétique. Vous allez la suivre dans les récits, les descriptions et les discours. Elle porte sa vertu jusque dans les moindres organes; il n'est aucun trait dans la fable inerte d'Esope qu'elle ne transforme et n'anime.<sup>52</sup>

The poet's imaginative process was corrupted neither by conventional education nor by extensive readings in literature, nor even by the prevailing wave of "preciosité". If anything, these forces rather stimulated it to the fullest and its effect was heightened by the twin faculties of observation and sensitivity. With a stroke of the pen, he translated whole scenes and ideas in his imagination into observable realities. Examples of these include the poet's penetrating portrayal of the rabbit, Janot Lapin, as the early riser pays his court to the rising sun, with all the traits and movements characteristic of his race :

.....un jour  
Qu'il était allé faire à l'Aurore sa cour  
    Parmi le thym et la rosée.  
Après qu'il eut brouté, trotté, fait tous ses tours,  
Janot Lapin retourne aux souterrains séjours.<sup>53</sup>

and his vivid and delicate depiction of the dawn :

A l'heure de l'affût, soit lorsque la lumière  
Précipite ses traits dans l'humide séjour,  
Soit lorsque le soleil rentre dans sa carrière,  
Et que, n'étant plus nuit, il n'est pas encore jour...<sup>54</sup>

52. Taine, H., Op.Cit., pp. 230-231

53. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., p.125. Fables, VII, 16, ll. 5-9.

54. Ibid., p.169, XII, 14, ll. 10-13.



These images show the dual powers of imagination and observation at work in the mind of a gifted poet. While endowing his characters with human qualities, passions and sentiments, he conserves for them the essential traits of their animal character. We are thus presented with "la tortue qui va son train de sénateur" (VI, 10), "le saint homme de chat bien fourré, gros et gras" (VII, 16) and with countless other creatures sketched in their traditional attitude, with all their wiles and tricks. All unnecessary idealism, exaggeration and conventional adornment likely to mislead the reader are absent in these descriptions. The poet remains faithful to his own imagination and observation and in so doing remains true to nature itself. Gohin is particularly struck by the incredible extent to which these twin faculties are active in La Fontaine, and his reaction is one of wonderment and admiration for the poet :

Sensations, impressions, souvenirs de toute nature  
se transforment aisément dans l'imagination et la  
sensibilité du poète en visions et émotions artistiques!<sup>55</sup>

All that our poet needed to reproduce in words the exact image of anything was to see that thing. His poetic sensitivity does not seem to have shared the contemporary prejudices which rigorously and arbitrarily divided humanity into hostile classes and denied the least measure of feeling to the lower animals. He was sympathetically disposed towards both men and animals and even plants. He never liked to see other people suffer nor did he turn away with indifference from an oppressed man or beast. He stood by Fouquet when the latter was struck by misfortune,<sup>56</sup> wrote letters of sympathy to sick and unfortunate people.<sup>57</sup> His literary masterpiece, the Fables, is an eternal testimony of his deep sensitivity by the way the fables shine with sympathy for the poor, the outcast, the weak and the oppressed and with condemnation of despotism, greed and social injustice.<sup>58</sup> All these qualities of humanity endeared La Fontaine to many people who were attracted to him and who made it possible for him to prosper in his career. It is

55. Gohin, F., Op.Cit., p.18

56. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., pp.469, 470

57. Ibid., p.497, "A Monsieur de Vendôme".

58. Ibid., p.79, Fables, I, 15.

therefore not for nothing that Chamfort gives prominence to this aspect of the poet's life, in his prize-winning essay, Eloge de la Fontaine. Commenting on the vital role which La Fontaine's simple, genial and amiable disposition played in the poet's life and career, Chamfort declares :

Cher au public, cher aux plus grands génies de son siècle, il vécut en paix avec les écrivains médiocres, ce que paraît un peu plus difficile. Pauvre, mais sans humeur, et comme à son insu; libre de chagrins domestiques, d'inquiétude sur son sort; possédant le repos, de douces rêveries et le vrai dormir, dont il fait de grands éloges, ses jours parurent couler négligemment comme ses vers.<sup>59</sup>

Chamfort's comment leads us to the next vital factor in the poet's natural disposition without which his development would have been hampered, namely, a good and robust health. In spite of La Fontaine's gluttony, his predilection for drink and love-making, his career was never seriously interrupted by attacks of illness, at least not before he had reached the climax of his development. It was not until 1692, when he was already 72, that he had his first serious attack of illness from which he eventually recovered. The second and last attack came three years later in 1695, when he finally died. Thus his strong physical constitution and robust health were as instrumental to his intellectual and overall development as his conscientious mental effort in various directions. A healthy mind, says a popular Greek adage, can only grow in a healthy body. This was particularly true of La Fontaine. Good health preserved the latent talents from the multiple pathological accidents of life thus ensuring their steady and smooth evolution. Here then was a man naturally suited to his profession, with a combination of talents well adapted to produce a poet, if we go by the opinion of Mary Morrison that poets are born before they are made.

Great poets have never been common, and have always been greatly praised. The reason why they should be few is that, in the case of other skills, there is no one who, by applying himself diligently, cannot confidently expect to attain a modest degree of competence; but in poetry nothing can be achieved by toil, or diligence, or midnight study, unless by those whom nature has specially created for it.<sup>60</sup>

---

59. Chamfort, N., Œuvres choisies, (édit. De Lescure) Paris, 1879, t.I, p.261.

60. Morrison, M., "Ronsard and Catullus : The influence of the teaching of Marc-Antoine de Muret". Article published in Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance, Paris 1956, vol.XVIII, p.250-251.

Although Miss Morrison makes personal effort unduly subservient to natural disposition, her hypothesis has some element of validity, and points to the fact that, given La Fontaine's natural talents and flair for poetry, he had a good chance of success in a literary career. But the poet still needed stimulation and direction. These were to be found in his diligent search for literary models in ancient and modern literature, a search stimulated by his vocational awakening about this time.

The same period that saw the sprouting of adult characteristics in La Fontaine also witnessed the first recorded awakening of his poetic vocation. According to an anecdote narrated by d'Olivet, La Fontaine heard one of Malherbe's odes read aloud by an officer in the winter quarters at Château-Thierry :

Que direz-vous, races futures,  
Si quelquefois un vrai discours  
Vous récite les aventures  
De nos abominables jours? <sup>61</sup>

He listened to this poem, continues the anecdote, with a sort of trance-like exaltation and was charmed by its music. The effect of this experience is said to have been spontaneous. La Fontaine began at once to read Malherbe, spending the nights *in* learning his poems by heart and declaiming them by day in the woods. Soon he began to write his own imitations of Malherbe's verses. <sup>62</sup>

This episode sounds too smooth to be entirely true, even though it may have some authentic basis. D'Olivet surely does not mean to suggest in the anecdote that La Fontaine, endowed with such superior qualities of mind as already noted, was not attracted to poetry until his twenty-second year. After all, was not his father a lover of poetry, and did young La Fontaine not study some poetry at the "Collège de Château-Thierry" and at the Oratory? Indeed, we know that he started practising his skill at writing verses as far back as his days in the seminary when, according to Léon Petit,

On le pria de se retirer de l'Oratoire parce qu'il  
fit des vers sur la manière de prier de l'Oratoire. <sup>63</sup>

---

61. Malherbe, F., Œuvres, (édit. Antoine Adam), Paris, 1971,  
p. 49

62. Pellisson et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., pp. 303-304

63. Léon Petit, Op. Cit., p.17.

The truth in d'Olivet's story may be that it was about this time that La Fontaine was first exposed to the musical qualities of the vigorous and imperious odes of Malherbe. Every genius has his moment of self-realization when he takes full stock of himself and discovers his goal in life. Malherbe's poetry may have set La Fontaine on the study of poetic patterns and techniques as well as opened his eyes to his own interests and talents.

As the first son of the family, La Fontaine had the right of succession to his father as Administrator of the Royal Forests in the duchy of Château-Thierry. But to assume this role, some form of legal education was a necessary qualification. Consequently, he left home for Paris around 1646 presumably to study law. A law degree was usually easy to obtain at that time after paying the prescribed fees and passing some token examination. La Fontaine seems to have acquired sufficient legal knowledge to carry on his duties when he eventually succeeded his father. That he did so is evident from some traces of legal practice left in his literary works. His description of a court case in the Conte du Juge de Mesle suggests some knowledge of contemporary legal proceedings and court practices :

Deux avocats qui ne s'accordaient point  
 Rendaient perplexe un juge de province:  
 Si ne put onc découvrir le vrai point,  
 Tant lui semblait que fût obscur et mince.  
 Deux pailles prend d'inégale grandeur;  
 Du doigt les serre; il avait bonne pince.  
 La longue échet sans faute au défendeur,  
 Dont renvoyé s'en va gai comme un prince.  
 La cour s'en plaint et le juge repart :  
 Ne me blâmez Messieurs pour cet égard:  
 De nouveauté dans mon fait il n'est maille;  
 Maint d'entre vous souvent juge du hasard,<sup>64</sup>  
 Sans que pour ce titre à la courte paille.

In the Fables too he leaves some evidence of legal knowledge, particularly in the Testament expliqué par Esope. Here, he first makes a subtle reference to the Will of a dead man or the "testament selon les lois municipales". Then he describes in standard legal terms the attempt to establish "la volonté du testateur" through the approved legal process :

---

64. La Fontaine, Jean de. Op. Cit. p.188. Contes, I, ix.

L'affaire est consulté, et tous les avocats,  
Après avoir tourné le cas  
En cent et cent mille manières,  
Y jettent leur bonnet; se confessent vaincus. <sup>65</sup>

La Fontaine's knowledge of the incompetence of contemporary jurists, the sluggishness of the entire legal system, and his ridiculing of the situation are implied in the inability of the lawyers to find a rational settlement. Certainly it is against this background that the poet was later to admonish his readers to refrain from constant recourse to legal proceedings since the lawyers and judges, like the cat of the fable, fed fat upon their clients. <sup>66</sup> Our poet never became a practising lawyer, and one can infer from his frequent and vehement attacks on the law officers and the slow-moving, costly machinery of the law, that the profession held little charm for him. Nevertheless, he acquired sufficient legal knowledge to be an alert and law-abiding citizen, conscious of his own rights and duties.

His stay in Paris during this period was more fruitful in other directions, particularly with regard to his literary pursuits and the widening of his social contacts. It was about this time that he was initiated into the circle of the "Chevaliers de la Table Ronde". This seems to have been a private circle, grouping some six young and aspiring writers, and named after the Parisian cabaret in which they usually met to discuss literature. They sometimes met also in the house of Paul Pellisson, the idol of young writers. Members of the circle included Antoine Furetière who probably introduced La Fontaine to the group, François Cassandre, François Charpentier, Talle- mant des Réaux, a perceptive and critical young man whose stock of local stories were useful to La Fontaine, Antoine Rambouillet de la Sablière whose future wife was to provide a home and a wider field of experience for the poet. These new contacts were rich in significance for the shaping of La Fontaine's future as a poet.

"The Knights of the Round Table" who also included François de Maucroix, loved pleasure, good literature and pretty women. It was in this circle that our poet consolidated his independent and easy-going attitude. The group frequented many taverns and enjoyed life

---

65. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., p.88, Fables, II, 20.

66. Ibid., p.125, (VII, 16).

as they pleased but without losing sight of their main objective, namely, literary excellence. Their steady contact with the established and more elderly writers such as François Maynard, Jean Ogier de Gombauld, Michel de Marolles, Gilles Ménage, Jean Chapelain, Valentin Conrart and, above all, Oliver Patru, showed the seriousness of their vocational ambition. The circle of the "Round Table" would sometimes invite one or other of these literary "doctes" to give them a talk on poetry and general literature. Oliver Patru seems to have been one of their most cherished mentors.

Parmi eux, le docte Patru fait figure de Mentor. Il enseigne la haine de la boursoufflure, la pureté rigoureuse de la langue, la sèche précision de la phrase, la fidélité aux modèles antiques.<sup>67</sup>

The last three of the literary men mentioned above were very influential figures in seventeenth-century literary circles, from whom La Fontaine was to seek advice and approval as he prepared his first collection of fables in verse. Another well-known poet, scholar and disciple of Ronsard, Guillaume Colletet, guided the young and aspiring writers in their readings in early French poetry, introduced them to the works of Villon and awakened their interest in Marot and Ronsard. It was also through him that La Fontaine came to know of Louise Labé from whom he drew inspiration for the fable entitled L'Amour et la Folie.<sup>68</sup>

The Parisian milieu, to which we shall return later on, also played a great part in this process of literary initiation through which our aspiring young writer was undergoing at this time. In the great metropolis of Paris, the libraries, the lectures on all kinds of subjects, the active ferment of ideas, the performance of the dramatic works of Corneille, Rotrou and Scarron attracted La Fontaine like so many magnets. For example, he watched the performance of Rossi's Orfeo the reminiscences of which he records in one of his poems.<sup>69</sup>

The poetic works of Gombauld, Boisrobert, Saint-Amant and Tristan l'Hermite were there for the asking and so were the philosophical works of Descartes and Gassendi. These offered useful sources of knowledge which La Fontaine was to exploit as the need arose.

---

67. Adam, Antoine., Histoire de la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris, 1954, t.iv, p.19

68. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., p.169, Fables, XII, 14

69. Ibid. p. 483-484 : "A M. de Niert sur l'opéra."<sup>11</sup>

But more than anything else, it was the comradeship, mutual encouragement and stimulation from his friends and associates of the "Round Table" that set him on the road to his career.

Cette académie privée produit les plus heureux effets sur le génie du fabuliste. Combien doivent être intéressantes les conversations de ces immortels! Ils causent de tout, de la bagatelle et de la science, et leur conversation a toujours un commencement et, parfois, jamais de fin.....<sup>70</sup>

Thus, with the awareness of his vocational calling and this initiation into an ambitious literary circle, La Fontaine now intensified his readings in ancient and modern literature in search of literary models, poetic patterns and techniques.

---

70. Nayrac, J-P., Op.Cit., pp.181-182.

## CHAPTER II

THE SEARCH FOR LITERARY MODELS (1647-1658)1. Readings in French Literature from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century

La Fontaine as an aspiring young writer in search of poetic pattern and inspiration was an avid reader and conscientious student of literature. He explored ancient and modern sources, patiently tried out several authors and genres to choose those that would serve him as models. As Gohin remarks,

Aucun humaniste peut-être n'a lu davantage ni avec plus d'avidité, ni avec plus de fruit, ni, tout en volant comme l'abeille de fleur en fleur, amassé tant de sucs pour faire son miel.<sup>1</sup>

But his reading, extensive though it was, does not give the impression of having been systematic. He would switch from Malherbe to Virgil or Horace and perhaps end up with a Latin translation of Homer, depending upon what he was looking for. He cherished particularly the authors who had a taste for diversity in style and themes, such as Horace and Théophile de Viau.

Les poètes qu'il préfère sont ceux qui, comme Horace, ont su prendre tous les tons. Il a un goût très vif pour les conteurs gaulois du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, mais aussi pour l'Astrée et les chastes romans de la préciosité. Il est nourri de Rabelais, de Montaigne, de Régner. L'influence de Raçan et de Théophile est manifeste dans son œuvre.<sup>2</sup>

Traces of the poet's early reading technique are scarce and this makes it rather difficult to determine with some degree of certainty the point from where he began his search. But if the educational principle of proceeding from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the strange, is anything to go by, one can infer that he set out on his literary adventure by reading the more familiar and accessible books, that is by studying the mediaeval and Renaissance French authors whose works were popular in the seventeenth century. It has therefore been

---

1. Gohin, F., *La Fontaine Etudes et Recherches*, Paris (Garnier) . 1937, p.13

2. Clarac, P., *Littérature française*, Collection dirigée par Claude Pichois, Paris, 1969, t.II, p.187.



thought convenient and appropriate to begin the review of La Fontaine's study of literature with the mediaeval and Renaissance works which he is certain to have read.

It is necessary to state at the onset that this discussion is more of a review, a general survey of the poet's readings in ancient and modern literature than an exhaustive analysis of the full impact of the selected authors on seventeenth-century literature. It would not only be pretentious but vain to imagine that such a comprehensive study would be possible in an essay of this dimension, particularly as volumes could be written on the influence of any of these authors on contemporary literature and thought. We are therefore guided in our choice of authors and in the amount of detail given about each of them by their relevance to La Fontaine's literary and intellectual growth and by the evidence available in the works of the poet himself. Authors not mentioned in this review will be treated later along with the discussion of the themes and doctrines which La Fontaine adopted from them. For example, the impact of Descartes and Gassendi on the poet's thinking will be analysed together with his theories of knowledge and animal intelligence. This approach has been found necessary in order to follow the natural evolution of La Fontaine's thought and maintain the chronological unity of his works.

Although the poet was an avid reader, the evidence furnished by the actual text of his work suggests that he did not delve very deep into mediaeval literature. Few traces of his readings in this direction have survived in his writings. It is known, for example, that he read one of the mediaeval romances entitled Perceval le Gallois and written by Chrétien de Troyes. This novel had seventeenth-century editions. La Fontaine not only lists it among his favourite works<sup>3</sup> but makes a reference to Merlin the enchanter, a character in the novel:

Tel, comme dit Merlin, cuide engeigner autrui  
Qui souvent s'engeigne soi-même.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of any other evidence, such as listing a particular work as his favourite or stating clearly that he actually drew some inspiration from it, casual references like the one quoted above should, how-

---

3. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., p.191, Contes, I, xiii: "Ballade"

4. Ibid., p.100, Fables, IV, ii, ll. 1 - 2.

ever, be viewed with caution. Such references are poor guides to what the poet actually read, particularly in the case of mediaeval literature. Thus, if we had no other specific proof of his familiarity with Chrétien de Troyes' novel, the brief allusion to Merlin would not constitute a conclusive evidence of the poet's knowledge of the work, for the legend of Merlin the enchanter is part of the popular folk-lore which anyone could pick up without necessarily reading Perceval le Gallois. La Fontaine's knowledge of mediaeval literature does not seem to have gone beyond what he gleaned from Marot's edition of the Roman de la Rose and of the works of Villon. This view is borne out by some comments about mediaeval authors, made in Clymène. Speaking to one of the characters, Clio, Apollon who represents La Fontaine himself declares :

Montez jusqu'à Marot, et point par delà lui;  
Même son tour suffit.<sup>5</sup>

Marot edited quite a number of mediaeval works and made them fairly readable for seventeenth-century readers. Thus he served more or less as a link between the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century, particularly as much of his own work was revived by Voiture, one of our poet's mentors. This being so, it is rather difficult to determine with precision how much of La Fontaine's poetic inspiration was drawn directly from mediaeval sources. There is no doubt that he consulted the works of the better-known mediaeval poets, such as Villon, to lift some verses that appealed to his fancy. But even then, there is no appreciable trace of Villon's direct influence in his poetry. What looks like Villon's stylistic traits in La Fontaine's writings : flashes of wit and sarcastic humour, flexibility of tone and ironical turn of mind may have been derived from Marot who had a close literary affinity with Villon.

Three complete editions of Marot were in existence at this epoch: the edition established by J. de Tournes and published in Lyons in 1603, that of R. du Petit Val which appeared in Rouen in 1607; it was published in two volumes as an "édition revue et corrigée de nouveau" and was followed in 1615 by yet another edition, published by

---

5. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., p.252, Clymène, ll. 321 - 322.

Le Villain in the same city. In 1636 an edition of the Déploration sur la mort de Florimond Robertet, Secrétaire d'Etat, was also made public in Paris. The poet's Epigrammes also appeared in Poitiers in 1647. These standard editions were supplemented by various pieces of Marot's verse, published in mixed collections of poems. Thus twelve of his three hundred and twelve poems appeared in Le Jardin des Muses (1643), two in La Fine galanterie (1661) and seventy in the Recueil Barbin (1662). It can be seen from the frequency of these editions and the wide diffusion of his single works that Marot was too popular in the seventeenth century to escape the attention of an avid reader and aspiring poet like La Fontaine. Many literary critics of the time admired his sagacious, witty and bantering style. Mlle. de Scudéry, for example, writes of him :

Regarde en suite Marot à la mine sage, tu le prendrais sans doute pour quelque homme qui ne serait propre qu'à enseigner la morale. Cependant il n'y aura jamais d'esprit plus ingénieusement badin que le sien. Il y aura toujours du bon sens dans sa plus folle raillerie, et des choses plaisantes dans ses plus graves discours.

And Boileau in his Art poétique urges :

Imitons de Marot l'élégant badinage,  
Et laissons le burlesque aux plaisants du Pont-Neuf.  
Villon sut le premier, dans ces siècles grossiers,  
Débrouiller l'art confus de nos vieux romanciers.  
Marot bientôt après fit fleurir les ballades,  
Tourna des triolets, rima des mascarades,  
A des refrains réglés asservit les rondeaux  
Et montra pour rimer des chemins tout nouveaux. 7

Explaining further the secret of Marot's popularity during this epoch,

Mlle. de Scudéry concludes :

Son caractère sera galant, aisé, naturel, et divertissant. Ce poète aura l'avantage d'être imité par tous les poètes qui voudront être plaisants, et d'être pourtant toujours inimitable.

6. Scudéry, M. (Mlle. de), *Clélie, Histoire romaine*, Paris (Augustin Courbé), 1660, Part IV, Livre II, p. 851.
7. Boileau-Despreaux, N., *Oeuvres complètes*, (édit. Françoise Escal) Paris, (Pléiade), 1966, p. 159 : "Art poétique", I, chant I.
8. Scudéry, M., *Op. Cit.*, p. 852.

La Fontaine falls precisely within the class of poets to which Mlle. de Scudéry alludes. The subtle blending of humour, wit and banter in his verse shows how closely he imitated his model.

Marot's "élégant badinage" and air of naïvety appealed to our poet's tastes. Besides, the Renaissance poet's life and temperament had much in common with his own. Both had an early provincial upbringing; both were enamoured of solitude and personal independence; they were somewhat dissolute and irresponsible, tormented by financial and amorous problems, yet humorous and easy-going. As writers, both excelled in the shorter genres where they combined the gift of observation with intelligence and delicacy of style. La Fontaine could not have been unaware of the affinity of interests between himself and Marot. It was from the latter's epistle, Au roi pour avoir été dérobé, that our poet derived the notion of guaranteeing his poetic contract with Fouquet.<sup>9</sup> Part of Marot's epistle reads :

Et si sentez que soys foible de reins,  
 Pour vous payer, les deux princes Lorrains  
 Me plegeront. Je les pense si fermes  
 Qu'ilz ne faudront pour moi à l'un des termes.<sup>10</sup>

The poem in which La Fontaine discusses the conditions of the "pension poétique" retains Marot's familiar, discursive style. The reference to Pellisson as the guarantor of the contract :

Pour sûreté, j'oblige par promesse  
 Le bien que j'ai sur les bords du Permesse;  
 Même au besoin notre ami Pellisson<sup>11</sup>  
 Me pleigera d'un couplet de chanson.

is certainly based upon inspiration drawn from Marot. The fables, Le Lion et le Rat and La Colombe et la Fourmi<sup>12</sup> recall the anecdote in Marot's Epître à son amy Jamet.<sup>13</sup> According to a pertinent remark by d'Olivet, Marot is the one poet among La Fontaine's many Renaissance masters whose influence contributed most to shape the fabulist's poetic style.<sup>14</sup> And Walther de Lerber categorically declares our poet a disciple of Marot in both style and tastes :

---

9. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op. Cit., pp. 458-459, "A. M. Foucquet".

10. Marot, C., Œuvres complètes, (édit. Abel Grenier), Paris (Garnier) 1920, t.I, p.177 .

11. La Fontaine, Jean de, Op.Cit., pp. 458-459.

12. Ibid., p. 85, Fables, II, 11 and 12.

13. Marot, C., Op.Cit., pp. 140-142.

14. Pellisson et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., p.306.

La verve de Marot, ses genres, son style seront de nouveau repris par La Fontaine qui est un moraliste convaincu. Il connaît et a lu les auteurs du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, surtout Marot,....Il reconnaît Marot comme l'initiateur du genre badin qu'il va cultiver dans ses poésies diverses et dans ses contes; c'est le style marotique qu'il va prendre.

What La Fontaine imbibed from his model in this domain includes a sort of studied negligence of the rules of conventional poetry when these did not suit his purpose or were likely to impair the delicacy and naturalness of his style, lightness and naturalness of expression, flexibility of tone, charming naïvety and irony or what Lerber has described as

la grâce, la naïveté, l'enjouement, ...  
quelque plaisanterie un peu forte de la  
poésie de Marot.<sup>16</sup>

Another sixteenth-century poet in whose works La Fontaine showed interest was the Renaissance humanist and poet of love, Pierre de Ronsard. The latter's influence is particularly noticeable in La Fontaine's elegies, addressed to Clymène. These love poems come quite close both in style and content to Ronsard's Discours amoureux de Genève, in which he discusses his previous amorous experiences with a certain Marie and Cassandre, and celebrates his new passion for the beautiful widow, Genève. The author's obsession with the fear of disappointment is one of the main thoughts permeating the entire poem.<sup>17</sup> Following this pattern, La Fontaine's first elegy recounts his past failures in love. Like his model, he is beset with the fear that he may yet fail again, as Clymène could not be consoled for the death of her former lover.<sup>18</sup> More will be said about the elegies later. We have merely mentioned them here just to illustrate the fact that the striking resemblance between them and Ronsard's Discours amoureux de Genève suggests that La Fontaine read the work. His Elégies exhibit much of the forcefulness and enthusiasm of Ronsard's style without pandering to

---

15. Lerber, Walther de, *L'Influence de Clément Marot aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris et Lausanne, 1920, p.56.

16. Ibid., p.59.

17. Ronsard, Pierre de, *Œuvres complètes*, (édit. P. Laumonier) Paris, 1914, XII, pp. 256 - 277.

18. La Fontaine, J. de, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 478-479.

archaism. Apart from their fidelity and natural grace, they retain the music, rhythm and flexibility of Ronsard's poetry.

An even more striking reminiscence of the Renaissance poet is found in La Fontaine's fable Contre ceux qui ont le goût difficile. In one of his odes, Ronsard attacks the prejudiced critics of the Court who were bent on disparaging his new poetry before Henri II :

Mais ces rimeurs qui ont appris  
Avec travail, peines, et ruses,  
Tousjours ils enfantent des vers  
Tortu<sup>s</sup> et courans de travers  
Parmi la carrière des Muses :  
Eus éga<sup>l</sup>és à nos chants beaux,  
Ils sont semblables aus corbeaus  
Lesquels desous l'ombre quaquetent  
Contre deus aigles, qui aguetent  
(Portans la foudre du grand Roi)  
Le tens de ruer leurs tempestes  
Desus les miserables testes  
De ces criards palles d'éfroi.... 19

In the same vein, but in a more passionate tone, La Fontaine reproaches the unduly critical readers and fellow writers who are moved by sheer jealousy and envy to vilify the works of superior authors :

Maudit censeur, te tairas-tu?  
Ne saurais-je achever mon conte?  
C'est un dessein très dangereux  
Que d'entreprendre de te plaire.  
Les délicats sont malheureux :  
Rien ne saurait les satisfaire. 20

Throughout his long literary career, La Fontaine was to return again and again to the praise of Ronsard as the poet who revived Homeric, Pindaric, Virgilian and Horatian poetry in Renaissance French literature.

But his interest in the literature of this epoch was not restricted to poetry alone, though as an aspiring poet, he tended to be more interested in authors who excelled in his intended domain. As an apostle of diversity,<sup>21</sup> he explored almost all the literary genres in vogue and had a predilection for some non-poetic works, particularly Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles and the tales of Rabelais. The collection entitled

19. Ronsard, P., Op.Cit., t.I, pp. 111 - 112.

20. La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., p. 82, Fables, II, 1, ll. 51 - 56.

21. Ibid., p. 274, Contes, IV, xi, "Paté d'anguille".

Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles, usually attributed to Antoine de La Sale, dates back to the middle of the fifteenth century. The exact date of its publication is not known. Certain similarities in phrase pattern or sentence structure between some passages in this collection and those in La Fontaine's Contes suggest that the poet was familiar with the work. One example of such similarities is found in the tale of Jøconde. The passage in which Joconde expresses his astonishment when he surprises the queen making love to an ugly dwarf :

Qui fut bien étonné? ce fut notre Romain.<sup>22</sup>

reveals the same turn of phrase and even plot as in parallel passages of Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles :

Qui fut bien esbahy? qui fut estonné? ce fut....<sup>23</sup>

The themes covered in this collection include various aspects of social life, particularly the satirical exposition of feminine intrigues, the naive credulity of husbands, the amorous escapades of nuns, priests and monks. These were the type of stories well-suited to appeal to the tastes of our curious "bonhomme" and to attract him to the work containing such tales. The nature and content of the stories leave no doubt that they were the remote ancestors of La Fontaine's Contes. What they have in common is their sensual undertone and voluptuous interest in relations between the sexes.

Rabelais' stupendous imagination, "pantagruelic" erudition and ability to combine facts with fantasy never failed to impress our poet. Two of his tales, namely, L'Anneau d'Hans Carvel and Le Diable de Papefiguière<sup>24</sup> were inspired by Rabelais. The Rabelaisian episode in which Panurge drowns Dindenault and his flock is recalled by La Fontaine in his Contes and Fables.<sup>25</sup> Equally evident are the reminiscences of Picrochole in some of the fables. A case in point is La Laitière et le pot au lait :

Quel esprit ne bat la campagne?  
 Qui ne fait château en Espagne?  
 Picrochole, Pyrrhus, la laitière, enfin tous;  
 Autant les sages que les fous.<sup>26</sup>

22. La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., p.179, Contes, I, 1.

23. La Sale, Antoine de, Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles, pp.90, 162, 174.

24. La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., pp.211, 291, Contes, II, (xii), V, (v).

25. Ibid., p.258, IV, (ii); Cf. also p.110, Fables, V, 20.

26. Ibid., p.122, Fables, VII, 10, ll.30 - 33.

The experience of the milkmaid was La Fontaine's representation of Picrochole's ambitions, flattered by his military advisers.<sup>27</sup> Other instances of Rabelais' influence on La Fontaine's writing are found in Les Femmes et le Secret<sup>28</sup> and Les Membres et l'Estomac.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, La Fontaine's vivacity of style, his love of nature, his voluptuous disposition and tastes, and his realistic view of life owe something to the impact of Rabelaisian influence on his literary personality.

More significant still, particularly in helping to condition the poet's moral philosophy in the Fables, was the influence of Montaigne's Essais. Montaigne had common literary ancestors with La Fontaine in Seneca and Plutarch. Apart from this fact, the Renaissance moralist possessed a number of kindred qualities of taste and temperament which could not fail to draw our poet's attention to his works. Both authors adopt an epicurean approach to life, to pleasure and to religious belief. They abhor all forms of dogmatism and tyranny, while advocating rational judgment, moderation and tolerance. Since people of identical temperament or taste tend to attract each other, it is hardly surprising that a strong literary affinity should exist between Montaigne and La Fontaine. One instance of this affinity is the fable of La Mort et le Mourant.<sup>30</sup> Although the inspiration for this fable was drawn from several sources, including AEsop and Abstemius, the pattern of thought followed by the poet recalls Montaigne's epicurean attitude to the phenomenon of death and his belief that the essence of all philosophy is to learn to meet death without flinching.<sup>31</sup> Another striking example of kindred thinking is their views on friendship. La Fontaine's postulate to the effect that

..... un ami véritable est une douce chose!<sup>32</sup>  
Il cherche vos besoins au fond de votre cœur....

has a parallel in Montaigne's view that

27. Rabelais, F., Pantagruel, I, chapt. xxxiii.

28. La Fontaine, J. de., Op.Cit., p.129, Fables, VIII, 6; Rabelais, Pantagruel, III, chapt. xxxii.

29. Fables, III, 2; Pantagruel, III, chapt. xxxv.

30. La Fontaine, J. de., Op.Cit., p.126, Fables, VIII, 1

31. Montaigne, M. de, Œuvres complètes, Paris, (Pléiade), 1962, pp. 79 - 95.

32. La Fontaine, J. de. Op.Cit., p.131, Fables, VIII, 11, ll.26-27.



Nos âmes.....se sont considérées d'une si ardente affection, et de pareille affection découverte jusques<sup>33</sup> au fin fond des entrailles l'un de l'autre.....

More of Montaigne's influence on La Fontaine's thinking will come to light during the discussion of the poet's ideas on human nature, its hopes and contradictions. For the moment, one cannot but admit that the development of our poet's literary personality and indeed that of many of his contemporaries, Molière and La Bruyère, for example, owed much to inspiration drawn from the Essais of Montaigne. Albert Peyre puts it thus :

Sans les Essais, Molière, La Fontaine et La Bruyère ne seraient aussi complètement ce qu'ils sont : ces purs génies du 17<sup>e</sup> siècle ont participé, comme Montaigne, à la vaste enquête sur l'homme que l'auteur des Essais, sous prétexte de se peindre, avait inauguré au 16<sup>e</sup> siècle... La Fontaine, cet enfant chéri des Muses, a dû se pencher souvent sur les Essais... Comme Montaigne, le grand fabuliste ne s'intéresse à rien tant qu'à lui-même.<sup>34</sup>

Considered as a whole, Renaissance literature provided La Fontaine with a rich reserve of culture, and indeed the foundations of the vivacity of style and involvement with human nature, which characterized seventeenth-century literature were laid by the Renaissance writers.

La littérature du siècle de Louis XIV repose sur la littérature française du XVI<sup>e</sup>; ... elle y a pris naissance, y a germé et en est sortie; c'est là qu'il faut se reporter si l'on veut approfondir sa nature, saisir sa continuité et se faire une idée complète et naturelle de ses développements. Pour apprécier, en toute connaissance de cause, La Fontaine et ses ouvrages on doit remonter à Montaigne, à Rabelais, à Marot, à Ronsard....<sup>35</sup>

What made the Renaissance poets and humanists particularly well-placed to influence future French writers such as La Fontaine has been pointed out in a general way by James Hutton :

33. Montaigne, M. de, Op.Cit., p.188

34. Peyre, A., Du Prestige de la Pensée, Paris (René Debresse), 1936, pp. 219-221.

35. Sainte-Beuve, Les Grands Ecrivains français XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, t.I, Paris, (Garnier), 1927, pp. 156 - 157.

The interest of the Renaissance scholars in poets of antiquity made them well-placed to influence the classical poets. The latter, having seized upon the ancient idea of the "vates" and the "doctus poeta", remained close to the world of scholarship throughout their lives. In the high sense of their calling, they set French poetry upon a new plane.<sup>36</sup>

Commenting on La Fontaine in particular, Nayrac defines in precise terms what the development of the poet's literary style owes to Renaissance literature :

S'il prend le fond, le squelette de ses idées générales chez les anciens, il emprunte à nos poètes du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle leur verve et leur sel; il en est imbu profondément; il est même l'écrivain qui s'en est le mieux nourri et allaité. Il leur a emprunté ce style alerte, vif, pétillant et gouailleur. Ses dénouements si prompts, si brusques, avec leur saveur légendaire, qui caractérisent ses œuvres, ne nous rappellent-ils pas la langue sautillante et spirituelle d'un Marot ou d'un Ronsard?<sup>37</sup>

If Renaissance literature was for La Fontaine a rich mine of literary and cultural information, that of the seventeenth century was even more so, in view of its greater diversity and wealth of ideas. The literature of the seventeenth century exposed the poet to the dramatic works of Corneille, Rotrou, Scarron, Du Ryer, Molière and Racine. He could read the works of these playwrights as well as personally watch the actual performance of their plays on the stage. In a letter he wrote to his friend, Maucroix, he describes the spectacular success of one of Molière's comedies, Les Fâcheux, performed at the Court of Vaux :

C'est un ouvrage de Molière :  
Cet écrivain par sa manière  
Charme à présent toute la Cour,  
De la façon que son nom court,  
Il doit être par delà Rome :  
J'en suis ravi, car c'est mon homme.<sup>38</sup>

The diversity of seventeenth-century literature made it possible for La Fontaine to come into contact with various literary genres ranging from different forms of satirical poetry to pastoral and philosophical novels.

36. Hutton, J., "The Classics in sixteenth-century France", Article published in the *Classical Weekly*, vol. 43, No. 9, Paris (January 30, 1950), pp. 131-138.

37. Nayrac, J-P, *Op.Cit.*, p.77

38. La Fontaine, J.de, *Op.Cit.*, pp.22-24 : "A M. de Maucroix".

Such works as the Satires of Mathurin Régnier popularized satirical literature. This work was within reach of our poet, judging from the fact that it was frequently reprinted between 1640 and 1660. In fact, he concludes one of his fables with a quotation from the Satires:

..... Corsaires à corsaires,  
L'un l'autre s'attaquant ne font pas leurs affaires.<sup>39</sup>

This quotation was adapted from Régnier's French rendering of a Spanish proverb used in one of his satires.<sup>40</sup> The fable, La Fortune et le jeune enfant (V, 11) is aesopic in its theme, but the pattern of thought followed by La Fontaine resembles the one developed by Régnier in his fourteenth satire. It is also to be noted that Régnier's literary style, shown in his effective use of humorous sarcasms, fast-moving dialogue and popular adages is adopted by La Fontaine.

Honoré d'Urfé's novel, L'Astrée, was particularly cherished by the poet. We have already mentioned how he spent most of his time at the Oratory reading this book. He treasured it more than any other contemporary novel probably because of its rural setting and poetic images.

Après Marot et Rabelais, La Fontaine n'estimait rien tant que l'Astrée de M. d'Urfé. C'est d'où il tirait ces images champêtres, qui lui sont familières, et qui font toujours un si bel effet dans la poésie.<sup>41</sup>

La Fontaine recalls memories of this novel in a ballet he composed in 1678,<sup>42</sup> and the libretto of his lyric tragedy, Astrée, was also imitated from it.<sup>43</sup> In a ballade published together with the Contes et nouvelles en vers in 1665, the poet lists out his favourite novels and explains why he was interested in them:

.....Non que Monsieur d'Urfé n'ait fait une œuvre exquise:  
Etant petit garçon, je lisais son roman,  
Et je le lis encore, ayant la barbe grise...  
J'ai lu maître Louis mille fois en ma vie...  
Clitophon a le pas par droit d'antiquité;  
Héliodore peut par son prix le prétendre.

39. La Fontaine, J. de, Op.Cit., p.100. Fables, IV, 12, ll.73-74

40. Régnier, M., Satires, Paris, 1658, XII.

41. Pellisson et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., p.306.

42. La Fontaine, J. de, Op.Cit. p.486, "A M. Raymond des Cours".

43. Ibid., pp. 343-353.

Le roman d'Ariane est très bien inventé;  
 J'ai lu vingt et vingt fois celui du Polexandre;  
 En fait d'événements, Cléopâtre et Cassandre  
 Entre les beaux premiers doivent être rangés.  
 Chacun prise Cyrus et la carte du Tendre,  
 Et le frère et la sœur ont les cœurs partagés.  
 Même dans les plus vieux je tiens qu'on peut apprendre :  
 Perceval le Gallois vient encore à son tour;  
 Cervantes me ravit; et, pour tout y comprendre,  
 Je me plais aux livres d'amour.<sup>44</sup>

The novels listed here include, besides d'Urfé's book, Ludovico Ariosto's Roland furieux; two Greek novels : Les Aventures de Leucippe et de Clitophon by Achilles Tatios (translated into French by Jean Baudoin 1635) and Les Ethiopiques ou Histoire de Théagène et Chariclée by Heliodorus (translated by Amyot, 1547); then Desmarets' Ariane (1632), Gomberville's Polexandre (1637); two novels by La Calprenède : Cassandre (1642-1645) and Cléopâtre (1646-1657); two novels by Madeleine de Scudéry : Artamène ou le Grand Cyrus (1649-1660) and La Clélie (1654-1660). Both books were published under the name of her brother, Georges. In the case of these works, La Fontaine was little concerned about their moral or religious implications. All he was looking for was a series of plots or outlines upon which to construct his own tales according to his fancy. In the process he learnt to appreciate the qualities of a good and well-told story as well as enlarged his intellectual horizon.

If La Fontaine's interest in novels owed something to the influence of Honoré d'Urfé's work, the development of his elegiac style was aided by his reading of Voiture. He needed to cultivate the literary devices of this poet in order to be an effective writer and story-teller. The influence of Voiture never entirely disappeared from La Fontaine's poetry. In Clymène he affectionately addresses his mentor as "Maître Vincent"<sup>45</sup> and pays him a warm tribute as a master of "bagatelle" :

.....Cependant chantez-nous,  
 Non pas du sérieux, du tendre, ni du doux,  
 Mais de ce qu'en français on nomme bagatelle,  
 Un jeu dont je voudrais Voiture pour modèle :  
 Il excelle en cet art. Maître Clément et lui  
 S'y prenaient beaucoup mieux que nos gens d'aujourd'hui.<sup>46</sup>

44. La Fontaine, J. de, Op.Cit. pp. 191, Contes, I, xiii, "Ballade"

45. Ibid., p.253, Clymène, l. 370.

46. Ibid., p. 254, ll. 495-500.

Indeed, traces of Voiture's love poems are discernible in La Fontaine's Elégies pour Clymène. For example, the name, Philis, which our poet gives to the pretty shepherdess in his first elegy<sup>47</sup> was first used by Voiture for the heroine of his elegy entitled Belle Philis, adorable merveille.<sup>48</sup> The litany of passions enumerated by Voiture in this elegy is particularly striking for the light it throws into the psychology of people involved in amorous adventures :

Lors tout à coup je revis en moy-mesme,  
 Le Repentir et la Peur au teint blesme,  
 Les prompts Souhairs, les violens Désirs,  
 La fausse Joye, et les vains Desplaisirs,  
 Les tristes Soins, et les Inquiétudes,  
 Les longs Regrets, amis des Solitudes,  
 Les doux Espoirs, les bizarres Penses  
 Les courts Despits, et les Soupirs legers,  
 Les Desespoirs, les vaines Défiances,  
 Et les Langueurs, et les Impatiences,  
 Et tous les biens, et les maux que l'Amour  
 Tient d'ordinaire attachés à sa Cour.<sup>49</sup>

This association of love impulses with mental disturbance is imitated by La Fontaine in the concluding lines of his second elegy and the same pattern of enumeration of the feelings that go with love is maintained :

De ma part les respects et les soumissions,  
 Les soins, toujours enfants des fortes passions,  
 Les craintes, les soucis, les fréquentes alarmes,  
 L'ordinaire tribut des soupirs et des larmes,  
 Et, si vous le voulez, mes langueurs, mon trépas,  
 Clymène, tous ces biens ne vous manqueront pas.<sup>50</sup>

The close resemblance in the pattern of thought and style of expression between these two passages suggests our poet's conscientious adaptation of Voiture and one cannot avoid the conclusion that Voiture considerably influenced the formation of La Fontaine's elegiac style. Voiture revived such genres as the ballade and the rondeau as well as composed several epistles full of flattery, archaisms and flowery expressions for the pleasure of his aristocratic audience and benefactors. It will also be recalled that it was he who resuscitated Marot in the seventeenth century. This explains why La Fontaine often associates the two names of "Maître Clément" and "Maître Vincent". In the preface to Part Two of the

47. La Fontaine, J. de, Op.Cit., pp.478-479 : Elégie première, ll.37-38.

48. Voiture, V., Les OEuvres de M. de Voiture, Amsterdam, (Daniel Elzevir), 1679, t.II, p.12

49. Ibid., p.12, ll. 185 - 196.

50. La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., pp.479-480 : "Elégie deuxième", ll. 55-60.

Contes he defends his imitation of Marot's familiar, discursive style by citing the example of Voiture :

Feu M. de Voiture en est le garant : il ne faut que lire ceux de ses ouvrages où il fait revivre le caractère de Marot.<sup>51</sup>

All these go to reveal our poet's familiarity with the works of Voiture. The most obvious traces of the latter's influence on his poetic style include the use of licentious innuendoes, combination of flattery with impertinence when the occasion demands, an air of sophistication and spontaneity, archaic flavour and subtle twist of poetic rhythm. Many of these qualities which distinguish La Fontaine's best poetry may have been derived from other sources, as we shall see when we come to discuss his search for literary models in ancient Greek and Latin literatures. But the fact remains that Voiture's works were among his principal sources of poetic inspiration.

It must be recalled that La Fontaine's first awakening to the music of poetry came not from Voiture but from Malherbe. The discussion of the latter's influence on our poet has been deliberately left out until this stage for organisational reasons. La Fontaine regarded Malherbe very highly and lists him among the nine most highly-rated poets of the world :

.....et les poètes sont Homère, Anacréon, Pindare, Virgile, Horace, Ovide, l'Arioste, le Tasse, et Malherbe.<sup>52</sup>

Malherbe's position as a reformer and literary model was unassailable to many seventeenth-century writers. This view is confirmed by the records of no less a person than the gifted literary critic, Jean Chapelain. Commenting on the poet's contribution to the reforming of French poetry, Chapelain declares :

Ce qu'il a d'excellent et d'incomparable, c'est l'élocution et le tour du vers et quelques élévations nettes et pompeuses dans le détail qu'on pourra bien imiter, mais jamais égaler.<sup>53</sup>

In the Ode au roi, written on behalf of Fouquet two years after the latter's fall, La Fontaine appears to have deliberately and consciously imitated Malherbe.

51. La Fontaine, J. de, Op. Cit., pp. 192-193, Contes, II, (Préface).

52. Ibid., p. 338, Daphné

53. Chapelain, J., Lettres, (édit. Tamizey de Larroque), Paris, 1880-83, t.I, p. 637.

J'ai donc composé cette ode à la considération du Parnasse....Or ce sont les traits de poésie qui font valoir les ouvrages de cette nature. Malherbe en est plein, même aux endroits où il parle au roi. <sup>54</sup>

The fact of his conscious imitation of Malherbe, at least, during his early, formative years, is further borne out by a wide selection of Malherbe's verses which he tried to render in his own way. A few of these examples will serve to illustrate his technique of imitation :

A

Souffre à ta juste douleur  
Qu'en leurs rives elle imprime (Malherbe, p.34, v.182)  
Et que ta juste douleur  
Dessus leurs rives imprime (La Fontaine)

B

Si quelquefois un vray discours  
Vous récite les aventures.... (Malherbe, p.18, v.2)  
Si jamais par un vray discours  
Vous apprenez les aventures... (La Fontaine)

C

Et qui peut nier qu'après Dieu,  
Sa gloire, qui n'a point d'exemples,  
N'ait mérité que dans nos temples  
On luy donne le second lieu? (Malherbe, p.19, v.27)  
Et quels courages envieux  
A son mérite sans exemples  
Refuseroient l'honneur des temples  
Si nous estions au temps des Dieux? (La Fontaine) <sup>55</sup>

Although these pieces, taken at random from a very wide selection, represent the juvenile efforts of a fledgling poet, they reveal the meticulous care with which La Fontaine drilled himself in his art during the long years of literary apprenticeship. He studied his models to penetrate the secrets of their technique and to rival or even surpass them.

Further traces of Malherbe's influence can be seen in La Fontaine's mature compositions. His reflections on the inexorable march of death, for example,

---

54. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.25.

55. Page references are to the Garnier edition of OEuvres complètes de Malherbe, Paris, 1926. La Fontaine's early imitations of Malherbe's verse are contained at the end of the Recueil des poésies chrétiennes et diverses. Paris, (Le Petit), 1671, t.II.

Alléguez la beauté, la vertu, la jeunesse,  
La mort ravit tout sans pudeur.<sup>56</sup>

are reminiscent of certain thoughts of Malherbe in Consolation à du Périer :

Et la garde qui veille aux barrières du Louvre  
N'en défend point nos rois.<sup>57</sup>

In Le Meunier, son fils et l'âne, he refers to Malherbe and Racan as the "Horaces" of French poetry :

....Autrefois à Racan Malherbe l'a conté :  
Ces deux rivaux d'Horace, héritiers de sa lyre,  
Disciples d'Apollon, nos maîtres, pour mieux dire...<sup>58</sup>

And in Clymène, he pays him and Voiture a handsome tribute as the twin fathers of classical French poetry :

..... Essayez  
Un de ces deux chemins qu'aux auteurs ont frayés  
Deux écrivains fameux : je veux dire Malherbe,  
Qui louait ses héros en un style superbe,  
Et puis maître Vincent, qui même aurait loué  
Proserpine et Pluton en un style enjoué.<sup>59</sup>

Finally in a letter to Saint-Evremond, dated 18th December, 1687, La Fontaine acknowledges his indebtedness to the three influential poets of French literature :

J'ai profité dans Voiture;  
Et Marot par sa lecture  
M'a fort aidé, j'en conviens...

Then he adds in prose :

J'oubliais maître François, dont je me dis encore le  
disciple, aussi bien que celui de maître Vincent, et  
celui de maître Clément. Voilà bien des maîtres pour  
un écolier de mon âge.<sup>60</sup>

Here then are revealed, the three great French masters of La Fontaine's poetic art. Their influence on his literary formation can be measured by his frequent references to their works and the degree of tender affection he seems to harbour for their persons. What he appears to have retained from Malherbe in particular is purity and elegance of style, conciseness and precision in the use of words, effective manipulation of rhyme and rhythm which produces the delightful music of his poetry.

56. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.127, Fables, VIII, 1, ll.14-15.

57. Malherbe, F, Œuvres, (édit. Antoine Adam), Paris, 1971, p.43, ll.79-80.

58. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.89, Fables, III, 1, ll.8-10.

59. Ibid., p.253, Clymène, ll.366-371.

60. Ibid., p.49 : "A M.de Saint-Evremond".



## 2. The Impact of Ancient Greek and Latin Literatures.

Despite La Fontaine's interest in Malherbe, he could not restrict himself to the imitation of the great reformer, for he soon turned his attention to ancient literature. This switch of interest is hardly surprising, in view of our poet's tendency towards eclecticism. Added to this tendency was the need to cultivate more of what Chamfort has described as "une naïveté fine et piquante" which was better suited to the poet's temperament than the elevated and rather emphatic style of Malherbe.

Dans son admiration pour Malherbe, auquel il doit, si je puis parler ainsi, sa naissance poétique, il le prit d'abord pour son modèle; mais, bientôt revenu au ton qui lui appartenait, il s'aperçut qu'une naïveté fine et piquante était le vrai caractère de son esprit...<sup>61</sup>

One of the frequently quoted indications of the poet's involvement with ancient literature is the evidence of Charles d'Olivet who claims to have seen La Fontaine's jottings on some ancient Greek authors including Plato and Plutarch.

.....il faisait ses délices de Platon et de Plutarque. J'ai tenu les exemplaires qu'il en avait; ils sont notés de sa main à chaque page; et j'ai pris garde que la plupart de ses notes étaient des maximes de morale ou de politique qu'il a semés dans ses fables.<sup>62</sup>

As the poet knew little Greek and could not have read the original texts in the same way that Maucroix or Racine could do, for example, such jottings are no sure guides to what he actually read in Greek literature, particularly as they were mainly popular adages and moral maxims which could be lifted from several other sources.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that La Fontaine was familiar with Greek literature. Whether or not he read the original texts of Plato and Plutarch before making his jottings is irrelevant. The important thing is the use he made of such maxims to increase his knowledge, improve his professional skill and strengthen the expressive force of his poetry. He may have relied much on Latin or French translations but he certainly read enough to serve his needs as can be

---

61. Chamfort, N., Op.Cit., t.I, p.245.

62. Pellisson et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., p.306.

inferred from his frequent allusions to incidents and characters in ancient Greek literature. The framework of most of his fables was, as we shall see later, borrowed from the apologues attributed to the legendary Greek fabulist, AEsop. In fact about 166 out of his 240 fables were from this source of inspiration.<sup>63</sup> The poet not only refers to AEschylus in one of his fables,<sup>64</sup> but pays tribute to Pindar as one of the outstanding poets of all time.<sup>65</sup> What attracted him most to Greek literature was the humanist element in Greek culture and civilization which he wished to imbibe from the works of Theocritus, Plutarch, Homer and Plato.

There is a remarkable parallel between Theocritus' twenty-third idyll and La Fontaine's Daphnis et Alcimadure. The Greek model narrates how a young maiden's failure to respond to her suitor's amorous advances drives the suitor to frustration, despair and suicide, while the scornful herself meets her death in unusual circumstances shortly after. The episode concludes with an exhortation to young lovers to be tender and affectionate because love will never fail to punish those who scornfully reject genuine admirers.

Rejoice, O lovers, since the scornful fell;  
And, maids, be kind, for Love deals justice well.<sup>66</sup>

La Fontaine, wishing to impress upon the young widowed daughter of his beloved protectress the need for tenderness towards new admirers, recalled the idyll of Theocritus as a suitable spring-board from which he could tell the beautiful young widow some home truths :

Aimable fille d'une mère  
A qui seule aujourd'hui mille coeurs font la cour...  
Gardez d'environner ces roses  
De trop d'épines : si jamais  
L'amour vous dit les mêmes choses,  
Il les dit mieux que je ne fais.  
Aussi sait-il punir ceux<sup>67</sup> que ferment l'oreille  
A ses conseils.....

---

63. Bornecque, P., La Fontaine Fabuliste, Paris, (édit. d'Enseignement supérieur), 1973, p.71

64. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.133-134, Fables, VIII, 16.

65. Ibid., p.338 : Daphné.

66. Theocritus, Idyll, (transl. by C.S. Calverley), London, 1883, pp.133-134.

67. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.379, Daphnis et Alcimadure, (Prologue)

Like Daphnis et Alcimadure, the prose work entitled Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince, and composed in honour of the Great Condé, was mainly of Greek inspiration. Part of the material used in this work came from Plutarch's Parallel Lives. The similarity in motivation and in outline between Plutarch's Life of Alexander and Life of Caesar<sup>68</sup> on one hand and La Fontaine's work on the other suggests strongly that the poet adapted the relevant information in the Greek model to the details of Condé's life and career. As we shall see later, when we come to discuss this work in detail, our poet even quotes Plutarch in support of his reflections on the attitude to adopt towards the conclusion of the work.<sup>69</sup>

Judging from d'Olivet's statement on La Fontaine's favourite Greek authors, the influence of Plutarch would naturally suggest that of Homer. References to the latter in Le Songe de Vaux:

Homère épand toujours ses dons avec largesse.....<sup>70</sup>

and in the Epître à Huet :

Homère et son rival sont mes dieux du Parnesse.<sup>71</sup>

reveal that Homer's contribution to our poet's literary growth went beyond mere collections of moral maxims. The spirit of La Fontaine's unfinished tragedy, Achille, and many of its literary devices such as elegance of style, brusqueness and rapidity in the movement of thought, and the portrayal of psychological conflicts among the principal characters<sup>72</sup> were derived from Homer's Iliad.<sup>73</sup> But in adapting his model, our poet contrives to have Briséis returned unconditionally to her former master instead of her being offered as the price of reconciliation. In addition, he assigns a major role to the young woman whose presence in the original Greek model is indicated only in three lines.<sup>74</sup> Achilles' tone in the third scene of the first act of La Fontaine's play, where the hero addresses Briséis, is marked by that brusqueness and rapidity of movement characteristic of Homer's style.

68. Plutarch, Le Vite parallele, (transl. by A.H. Clough), London, (Macmillan & Co.), 1902, Vol. IV, pp. 159-255, 256-328.

69. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 520.

70. Ibid., p. 391, Le Songe de Vaux, II.

71. Ibid., p. 493, Epître à Huet, l. 38.

72. Ibid., pp. 353-360.

73. Homer, The Iliad, Chant IX, ll. 130-134.

74. Ibid., ll. 666-668.

Vos traits n'ont plus besoin de me solliciter,  
 Le seul devoir le fait; je hais les cœurs frivoles:  
 Mes principales lois sont mes simples paroles.  
 Vous vous dites esclave; et de qui? d'un amant.  
 C'est moi qui suis lié par les nœuds du serment.  
 Reposez-vous sur eux, attendez sans alarmes:  
 J'aurai devant les yeux ce serment et vos charmes. 75

Achilles' confrontation of the delegates :

Princes, je ne sais point trahir mes sentiments. 76

recalls a parallel scene in Homer's Iliad (IX, 1.314).

La Fontaine pays tribute to his model poet as the great ancestor of all good poets and the spring from which the Greek literature of antiquity flowed.

Car Homère n'est pas seulement le père des dieux,  
 C'est aussi celui des bons poètes. 77

Accordingly he refers to famous poets of all ages as disciples of Homer when he alludes to

Homère et les siens.... 78

since in his own estimation the Greek poet represents all that is great and beautiful in poetry. Indeed he compares the poetic elegance of Homer and Virgil with the majestic charm of the Hebrew scriptures :

C'est là que la Sagesse divine rend ses oracles avec  
 plus d'élévation, plus de majesté et plus de force que  
 n'en ont les Virgiles et les Homères..... 79

His description of the ravages of the plague among animals in Fables, VII, 1 owes something of its vividness and imagery to a similar portrayal of pestilence in Homer's Iliad :

.....the God,  
 Down from Olympus with his radiant bow...  
 Marched in his anger; shaken as he moved....  
 Mules first and dogs he struck, but at themselves  
 Dispatching soon his bitter arrows keen,  
 Smote them. Death-piles on all sides always blazed. 80

The same parallelism exists between La Fontaine's fable, Les Compagnons d'Ulysse<sup>81</sup> and the tenth Book of Homer's Odyssey.

75. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.354-355, Achille, Acte I, scène 3,  
 ll. 106-112.

76. Ibid., pp. 355-356. Acte I, scène 5, l.221.

77. Ibid., p. 69.

78. Ibid.p.86 . Fables, II, 13, l.11

79. Ibid. p.368.

80. Homer, Op.Cit., (translated by W.Cowper), London, 1847, Vol.I, p. 5.

81. La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., pp.162-163, Fables, XII, 1.

The goddess opened wide her splendid gates  
 And bade them in; they, heedless, all complied,  
 All save Eurylochus, who feared a snare.  
 She, introducing them, conducted each  
 To a bright throne, then gave them Pramnian wine,  
 With grated cheese, pure meal, and honey new,  
 But medicated with her poisonous drugs  
 Their food, that in oblivion they might lose  
 The wish of home. She gave them and they drank,  
 When smiting each with her enchanting wand,  
 She shut them in her sties. In head, in voice,  
 In body, and in bristles they became 82  
 All swine, yet intellected as before....

This literary affinity with Homer reveals that, although La Fontaine could not read Greek, he imbibed much of the spirit and literary devices of the Greek model.

La Fontaine aimait Homère, bien qu'il ne pût pas le lire dans le texte; Louis Racine, Madame Dacier, d'autres encore sont d'accord pour l'attester.<sup>83</sup>

The best summary of the tremendous influence of Homer on La Fontaine's literary style and thought is perhaps the one given by Sainte-Beuve when he writes :

Notre véritable Homère, l'Homère des Français, c'est La Fontaine.....C'est vrai.<sup>84</sup>

It was in Plato that our poet discovered the philosopher-poet whose easy-flowing dialogue and style charmed him. His earliest contact with the ideas of Plato dates back to his days at the Oratory where, as Gilson remarks,

On respirait un air platonicien.<sup>85</sup>

Platonic ethics permeated the intellectual organisation of the seminary. The ideas of gentlemanly behaviour, "savoir-vivre" and of courteous love or "amour courtois" which its authorities upheld against villainy and sensual debauchery are really contemporary projections of Platonic idealism. La Fontaine must have been exposed to these ideas before he actually read the works of Plato.

82. Homer, *Odyssey*, X., (transl. by W. Cowper), London, 1847, Vol. III, pp. 223-246.

83. Hepp, Noémi, *Homère en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris (Klincksieck), 1968, p. 489.

84. Sainte-Beuve, *Op. Cit.*, p. 191.

85. Gilson, *La Liberté chez Descartes et la théologie*, Paris, 1913, pp. 166, 208.

Around 1667, Lamoignon used to bring together every Monday evening a group of writers and intellectuals among whom were Huet, Pellisson, Rapin, Boileau and Fleury. These met in his house to discuss literature, morals and the philosophy of Plato. There is no suggestion that La Fontaine ever attended these meetings, but his very close friends, such as the ones named above did, and through them he was well-acquainted with the ideas held by the circle, particularly their admiration for Plato and other ancient philosophers. It was therefore not by sheer chance that our poet was later to address his epistle in support of the Ancients to no other a person than Huet.<sup>86</sup>

Another factor that contributed further to La Fontaine's familiarity with the ideas of Plato was the influence of his two other friends, Maucroix and Racine, both of whom were avid readers and translators of Plato. There is no doubt that some of these translations were shown to him, for the literary friends usually exchanged manuscripts for comments and mutual corrections. Indeed the poet wrote a foreword for Maucroix's translation of three dialogues of Plato. In the foreword he defends Plato's style and pays tribute to the translator for the admirable effort he made to retain some traits of that style : elegant and noble tone, propriety in speech and characterization, and the use of captivating images :

Les circonstances du dialogue, les caractères  
des personnages, les interlocutions et les bien-  
séances, le style élégant et noble, et qui tient  
en quelque façon de la poésie : toutes ces choses  
s'y rencontrent en un tel degré d'excellence, que  
la manière de raisonner n'a plus rien qui choque :  
On se laisse amuser insensiblement comme par une  
espèce de charme.<sup>87</sup>

In the first Discours à Mme. de La Sablière the poet recalls Plato in his description of the intelligence of the beavers the excellent organization of whose kingdom surpasses that of Plato's Republic :

La république de Platon  
Ne serait rien que l'apprentie  
De cette famille amphibie.<sup>88</sup>

---

86. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 493.

87. Cf. Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine (Avertissement).

88. La Fontaine, J. de, Op.Cit., pp. 147-148, Fables, IX, "Discours à Mme. de la Sablière".

The metaphor of "Papillon du Parnasse" with which he describes his poetic versatility :

Papillon du Parnasse, et semblable aux abeilles,  
 A qui le bon Platon compare nos merveilles.  
 Je suis chose légère et vole à tout sujet,  
 Je vais de fleur en fleur et d'objet en objet...  
 Je suis volage en vers comme en amour.<sup>89</sup>

was derived from Plato's reflections on the souls of poets. The Greek philosopher compares poets to honey bees. Like the latter, poets wander from flower to flower, over the gardens, the meadows and the honey-flowering fountains of the Muses from where they return, arrayed in the plumes of rapid imagination and laden with the sweetness of poetic melody which they transmit in their verses :

Car les poètes nous disent, qu'en buvant aux fontaines,  
 d'où procède le miel abondamment, qu'ils nous apportent  
 les carmes, lesquels ils ont cueillés du vergier et montaigne  
 des Muses, ainsi que les mouches cueillent le miel des  
 fleurs : et disent, qu'ils volent comme lesdites mouches  
 à miel, en laquelle chose ils disent la vérité. Car un  
 poète est une chose légère, volage et sacrée, qui ne  
 peut chanter avant qu'il soit rempli de la grâce du dieu  
 Apollo, comme roi hors de soi-même et privé de la  
 pensée humaine.<sup>90</sup>

With age and greater maturity, La Fontaine's attachment to the works of Plato was to grow stronger, for as late as 1680 he actually embarked upon translating one of his model's dialogues which he intended to present to the Prince of Condé. In a letter to the prince, dated May 29, 1680, M. de Mondion who was the chief secretary to the prince writes :

J'envoie à Votre Altesse Sérénissime une traduction  
 que M. de La Fontaine a faite d'un dialogue de Platon.  
 Il m'a chargé de demander à V.A.S. que si Elle croit  
 qu'il mérite d'être achevé, il y travaillera pour l'amour  
 d'Elle.....<sup>91</sup>

This life-long interest in Plato was concentrated more on Plato's qualities as a literary man than as a philosopher. This is only to be expected, given the fact that La Fontaine, though a versatile intellectual, was essentially a literary man, a poet. The literary devices

---

89. Maucroix, F. et La Fontaine J. de, Op.Cit., p.133.

90. Plato, Le Dialogue de Plato, Philosophe divin, intitulé Io...,  
 Texte établi et traduit en français par Richard de Blanc, Paris,  
 (Chrestien Wechel), 1546, pp. 10-11.

91. Quoted in Gohin, F., Op.Cit., p.40

which he esteemed most in his model's works were his supple and elevated style, his sharp wit, extensive use of allegories and myths, and his biting but amusing irony. Any wonder, then, that he himself became a master of vivid imagery, elegance and poise in verse, sarcastic wit, coupled with a moderating tone of humour! These were the qualities, the aspects of Plato's technique which he endeavoured to cultivate. He admired these stylistic traits not only in Plato but in other Greek and Latin authors who appealed to his fancy. His literary works are full of references and allusions to these authors. But it is important to reiterate that La Fontaine's allusions to the ancient Greek culture and civilisation must not be taken as a sure index of what he actually read in Greek. In fact much of what he knew of the ancient Greek world came through his study of French and Latin translations. It was particularly the Latin literature that provided him with wider and more varied models as well as conditioned the character of his literary philosophy.

Encouraged by his cousin, Pintrel, La Fontaine learned to appreciate the beauty, elegance and realism of Latin poetry, particularly the poetry of Horace, Virgil, Lucretius, Seneca, Cicero, Terence and Ovid. Pintrel advised him that :

Pour se former, il ne devait pas se borner à nos poètes français : qu'il devait lire, et lire sans cesse Horace, Virgile, Terence. Il se rendit à ce sage conseil. Il trouva que la manière de ces Latins était plus naturelle, plus simple, moins chargée d'ornements ambitieux.<sup>92</sup>

The most influential of the Latin poets, judging from the degree of popularity his works enjoyed in seventeenth-century France, was certainly Horace. Fragments of his satires translated by one of La Fontaine's friends, Furetière, appeared in Marolles' Horace, published in 1652. Pellisson, another friend of the poet, was noted for carrying his copy of this book in his pocket wherever he went, and he often discussed the Latin poet with La Fontaine and other literary associates. In a letter to Doneville, quoted by Marmier, Pellisson writes :

---

92. Pellisson et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., p.304.



Horace est partout grand, partout aimable, et ne dégoûte jamais ni n'ennuie jamais son lecteur; mais ce que j'admire le plus en lui, c'est la liberté de sa poésie, qui n'est pas assujettie comme la nôtre à mille scrupuleuses maximes. Il entre dans sa matière et en sort comme il lui plaît, passe d'un sujet à l'autre, s'élève et se rabaisse à sa fantaisie, toujours maître de lui-même, avec une vérité si grande et d'une manière si agréable que personne ne l'en saurait blâmer.<sup>93</sup>

Pellisson's opinion was almost universally shared by seventeenth-century French writers including La Fontaine. There is a strong rapport between the ideas of Horace, who sang in measured verse the life of the Golden Mean, and the basic beliefs of the French who are lovers of moderation. His writings embody the virtues cherished by them: sense of proportion, clarity of thought, precision of expression, tendency to banter and inclination to satire. Our poet's attraction to Horace is therefore not surprising in view of the fact that few people, if any, were more typically French in these respects than he was. As Antoine Adam puts it, the reading of Horace opened his eyes to the inexhaustible wonders of life:

Parmi les poètes de l'Antiquité, il goûtait surtout Horace..... Il lui avait ouvert les yeux sur la beauté du monde; il lui avait appris à découvrir, dans les animaux les plus humbles et dans les plantes, le miracle de la vie.<sup>94</sup>

The first word of La Fontaine's admiration for Horace is recorded in Clymène where, speaking through the mouth of Apollon, the poet declares:

Horace en a de tous.....,  
J'aime fort les auteurs qui sur lui se conduisent:  
Voilà les gens qu'il faut à présent imiter.<sup>95</sup>

Indeed he considered his discovery of Horace as a turning point in his literary career.

.... A la fin, grâce aux dieux  
Horace, par bonheur, me déssilla les yeux.<sup>96</sup>

The Latin poet opened his eyes to the dangers of artificial poetry, of "préciosité", which threatened the disciples of Malherbe and led

93. Pellisson, Lettre à Doneville; quoted in Marmier, J., Horace en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris, (PUF), 1962, pp. 314-315.

94. Adam, A., Op. Cit., t. IV, p. 22.

95. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 253, Clymène, ll. 415-419.

96. La Fontaine, Ibid. p. 493.

to affectation in literature and social behaviour. Against the uncontrolled cultivation of conceitism, multiplication of hyperboles and conventional vocabulary, which characterized the verses of Malherbe and his followers, Horace's poetry opposed the qualities of simplicity, precision, variety and naturalness. In La Fontaine's mind, Horace represented poetic perfection. The Latin poet's limited lyricism, regulated with the same sort of precision as his code of ethics, appealed to La Fontaine. The apportionment of just the proper amount of thought and feeling, with an insight and insistence on a rational rather than a sentimental approach to life, and the desire that the finished product should exhibit delicacy rather than sublimity, qualities rather than a single supreme quality, taste rather than enthusiasm, were as fundamental to Horace as they were to La Fontaine. It is little wonder, then, that he was quick to identify his own tastes and turn of mind with the Latin satirist and selected him as the symbol of his poetic aspirations.

He shared Horace's identification of art with the pursuit of pleasure itself. The De Arte poetica which served as a model for the lyrical poets from Théophile de Viau to Chaulieu, as well as directly influenced the formation of the classical doctrine, exercised a profound impact on La Fontaine's literary ideas and tastes. To succeed as a poet, Horace prescribes that poets should adapt their subjects or themes to their talents and ability. Select a theme proportioned to your powers, he insists, and ponder long and with the nicest care how much your shoulders can or cannot bear. Once a poet is right in this, his words will flow freely and his thoughts will follow lucidly and in an orderly manner :

Prenez, vous qui écrivez, un sujet égal à vos forces  
et pesez longuement ce que vos épaules refusent, ce  
qu'elles acceptent de porter. A-t-on choisi sa matière  
en sachant ce qu'on pouvait? L'expression aisée ne  
manquera point, non plus qu'un ordre lumineux.<sup>97</sup>

In addition, Horace emphasizes the fact that conciseness and clarity of thought must be the ideal. Your style must be concise so that what

---

97. Horace, F., Epîtres, Texte établi et traduit par François Villeneuve, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1934, p.204 :  
"Art poétique".

you write may flow smoothly. You must pass from grave to gay, alternate vehement strikes with lighter hits, and couch your thought in easy playfulness and polished wit, for men are, as a rule, more impervious to slashing censure than to ridicule :

Ce n'est donc pas assez d'épanouir par le rire la bouche de l'auditeur, bien qu'il y ait, là aussi, un certain mérite; il est besoin de brièveté pour que la pensée coure et ne s'entrave pas de mots qui chargent et fatiguent l'oreille; il est besoin d'un langage âpre quelquefois, enjoué souvent, soutenant le rôle par moment d'un orateur ou d'un poète et, par moment, d'un homme de bonne compagnie qui ménage ses forces et les affaiblit de propos délibéré. La plaisanterie tranche bien des fois les questions importantes plus fortement et mieux que l'énergie rude. C'est par là que les maîtres de l'ancienne comédie tenaient la scène, c'est sur ce point qu'il faut les imiter....<sup>98</sup>

That was the doctrine of the Horatian school of poets that influenced La Fontaine's approach to poetry. It is now easy to understand why he chose the genre of fables in the first place; it suited his talents and temperament. We can also see why he opted to turn vice and folly into ridicule rather than attack them with the fist of a Hercules,<sup>99</sup> as well as endeavoured to acquire that art of veiled censure, that technique of raillery so reminiscent of Horace's best satires. But La Fontaine's study of Horace did not stop with the imitation of his model's literary devices. He also cultivated Horace's tendency to turn his verse into intellectual poetry. Horace was one of the poets of antiquity who blended poetry with philosophy. His verse, whether it takes the form of ode, epistle or satire is often designed to celebrate the good life, to reveal the possibilities it offers for happiness, while not ignoring its inevitable but endurable discomforts, to criticize those forces that render its full enjoyment difficult, and sometimes to suggest ways of increasing its joys and creating for future generations equal opportunities for pleasure. This is precisely what La Fontaine does so often, and particularly in his Ballade sur le mal d'Amour.<sup>100</sup> More will be said on the intellectual character of La Fontaine's verse in our discussion of his progress from traditional apologue to intellectual poetry.

---

98. Horace, F., Satire I, 10. Texte établi et traduit par François Villeneuve, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1934, p.104.

99. La Fontaine, J. de, Op. Cit., p.104, Fables, V, 1, (Prologue)

100. Ibid., p. 505.

The moral of Horace's sixth fable in the second Book of Satires, stressing the superiority of personal freedom and inner tranquillity over material wealth is worth mentioning here. Commenting on the reaction of the country mouse to the uneasy splendour of his city counterpart, the Latin satirist stresses the fact that it is better to be poor and happy than to be rich and live in constant fear.

Ho! cries the country mouse : This kind  
Of life is not for me, I find.  
Give me my woods and cavern. There  
At least, I'm safe! And though both spare  
And poor my food may be, rebel  
I never will; so fare ye well!<sup>101</sup>

This episode has a parallel in La Fontaine's fable, Le Rat de ville et le Rat des champs :

C'est assez, dit le rustique;  
Demain vous viendrez chez-moi.  
Ce n'est pas que je me pique  
De tous vos festins de roi;  
Mais rien ne vient m'interrompre :  
Je mange tout à loisir.  
Adieu donc. Fi du plaisir  
Que la crainte peut corrompre.<sup>102</sup>

Our poet borrowed the framework of this story from Æsop's apologues which probably inspired Horace too. But the epigrammatic force, sternness of moral rebuke and sarcasm which he displays in this fable were imitated from the Latin satirist. In the same way, the opening lines of Les Animaux malades de la peste<sup>103</sup> retain the vividness of expression and realistic touch characteristic of the Odes of Horace; particularly the third ode of the first Book. Here, he vividly sketches how wasting agues and hectic fevers smote the earth, and spread terror and death among men and beasts :

Et des Fièvres parut le lugubre cortège;  
La pâle Maigreur a suivi,  
Et la Mort, lente encor dans sa marche fatale,  
Triomphante, pressa ses pas....  
Dans les plaines de l'air, sur des ailes, Dédale  
Osait affronter le trépas.<sup>104</sup>

101. Horace, F., Op.Cit., Satires, II, 6.

102. La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., p.78, Fables, I, 9, ll. 25-28.

103. Ibid., p.118, VII, 1, ll. 1 - 3.

104. Horace, F., Les Odes d'Horace, Texte établi et traduit en vers français par Edouard Bourette, Paris, 1895, pp. 6-8, Odes, 1, 3.

Other instances in La Fontaine's works which suggest a direct influence of Horace include :

(Fables, I, 3 : Horace, Satires, II, 3); (Fables, II, 4 : Epistles, I, 2);  
 (Fables, II, 18 : Epistles, I, 10); (Fables, III, 17 : Epistles, I, 7);  
 and (Fables, VI, 14 : Epistles, I, 1).

Horace's witty epigrams offered La Fontaine the means for meditating and expatiating upon basic moral problems. The Latin author condenses important moral and philosophical thoughts in the clearest and most concise forms. From La Fontaine's days at the college, when texts for explication and commentary were quite often selected from Horace's writings, he memorized these finely constructed verses which summarized human experiences, the precepts of human wisdom and behaviour in daily life. Their universal application to everyday situations, their elegance and effectiveness in evoking the eternal desires and various responses of man, their pithy conciseness, and their sharp, witty, ironical character engender a mood which is refined, cultivated, carefree and happy; hence La Fontaine was strongly attracted to them. He found it easy to translate his model's philosophical and literary attitudes into the facile life-style of his own epoch, famous for its aristocratic mentality that was complaisant, more worldly-wise than serious, superficial rather than profound. Above all, he cultivated Horace's discriminating taste, eternally modern spirit, delicacy of thought and refinement of the intellect. These qualities of mind become progressively manifest in La Fontaine's works as he perfects his literary instruments and delves deeper into the realm of ideas.

But the poet does not owe the development of these qualities to the influence of Horace alone. Other Latin authors also played some role in the formation of his mind and art. This is particularly true of Virgil. La Fontaine admired in Virgil the same literary excellence which he cherished in the works of Horace, for the former also symbolized for him the ideal combination of poet and philosopher. According to Clarac, he read Virgil with pen in hand :

Pour s'initier au métier de poésie, il lit Virgile...la plume à la main, selon le conseil qu'ont dû lui donner ses maîtres de rhétorique.<sup>105</sup>

---

105. Clarac, P., La Fontaine par lui-même, p.12.

His earliest contact with Virgil's works dates back to his early college days when he read texts drawn from the Æneid which was among the prescribed reading list for most of the colleges. But his really serious study of the poet began around the year 1665 when he collaborated with Louis Giry in translating the first five Books of St. Augustine's The City of God into French. The work to be translated was full of quotations from Virgil's poetry which Louis Giry requested La Fontaine to turn into modern French verse. The preface of the finished work contains the following statement by Louis Giry himself :

Comme il y a beaucoup de vers des poètes latins que j'ai été bien aise de faire voir en notre langue, Monsieur de La Fontaine, qui a joint à beaucoup de vertu et à un grand mérite, un fort beau génie pour la poésie française, a bien voulu les traduire pour honorer mon travail.<sup>106</sup>

Our poet no doubt did justice to the assignment but not without taking something out of the famous work for his own literary and mental development. The need to translate accurately or to convey the spirit of the Virgilian quotations in St. Augustine's work compelled him to read both Virgil and The City of God with greater attention. Thus his ideas on charlatanism, judicial astrology and divine Providence, as expressed in L'Astrologie qui se laisse tomber dans un puits (II, 13) retain the spirit of St. Augustine's reflections in the opening chapters of the fifth Book of The City of God. In the same way, Virgil's meditation on Nature in the Georgics<sup>107</sup> helped to inspire certain lines of La Fontaine's fable, L'Aigle et l'Escarbot.<sup>108</sup> He adopted his model's technique of personifying mythological figures, animals, plants and natural phenomena.<sup>109</sup> His description of the Greek capture of the city of Troy by means of a clever ruse<sup>110</sup> retains all the expressive force, flavour and vividness which distinguish a similar episode in Virgil's Æneid. The Latin model narrates how the weary but clever Greeks constructed the monstrous wooden horse of Troy which enabled the most formidable and daring of their warriors, hidden inside it, to penetrate the strong walls of Troy and take the city by storm :

---

106. Saint Augustine, La Cité de Dieu, Texte traduit en français par M. Louis Giry, Paris, 1665, (Préface).

107. Virgile, M., Œuvres complètes, traduites en vers par Hippolyte Cournot, Paris, 1859, t. I, Georgiques, I.

108. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 85, Fables, II, 8, ll. 51-55.

109. Ibid. pp. 84, 111; II, 8; VI, 3.

110. Ibid., p. 82, Fables, II, 1, ll. 18-28.

.....Lassés de leurs trop longs combats,  
 Les chefs des Argiens, inspirés par Pallas,  
 Construisent, au milieu de la verte campagne,  
 Un monstrueux cheval, grand comme une montagne.  
 C'est, disent-ils, un vœu pour leur départ prochain.  
 Mais aux flancs du colosse un perfide dessein  
 De leurs meilleurs guerriers a renfermé l'élite,  
 Et de soldats armés une nombreuse suite...<sup>111</sup>

La Fontaine's meditation on solitude (XI, 4, ll. 22-40) and his description of natural phenomena (I, 22, ll. 24-32) reveal some traits of Virgil's elegance and delicacy of style, while the philosophical reflection to the effect that

Fortune aveugle suit aveugle hardiesse (X, 13)

re-echoes Virgil's hypothetical assertion in the tenth Book of the Æneid that

Fortune befriends the bold.<sup>112</sup>

The most strikingly Virgilian technique traceable in La Fontaine's writings is the device of concluding his works with an epilogue alluding to parallel political and social events. Thus the spirit of Virgil's epilogue in the fourth Book of Georgics :

Travaux féconds des champs, arbres, essaims, troupeaux,  
 Ainsi je vous chantais, tandis qu'à ses drapeaux  
 Auguste, vers l'Euphrate, enchaînait la victoire,  
 Donnait des lois au monde ébloui de sa gloire,  
 Et marchait vers l'Olympe où l'attendent les dieux.  
 Alors m'abritait, moi, Virgile inglorieux,  
 La belle Parthénope; et, dans la solitude,  
 Je charmais doucement mes loisirs par l'étude,  
 Moi qui, jeune, essayai, sur des pipeaux légers,  
 De chanter, en jouant, les amours des bergers.<sup>113</sup>

was adapted by La Fontaine in his epilogue at the end of the eleventh Book of Fables :

C'est ainsi que ma muse, aux bords d'une onde pure,  
 Traduisait en langue des dieux  
 Tout ce que disent sous les cieux  
 Tant d'êtres empruntant la voix de la nature....  
 Je les faisais servir d'acteurs en mon ouvrage :  
 Car tout parle dans l'univers;  
 Il n'est rien qui n'ait son langage...

---

111. Virgile, M., Op.Cit., t.II, p. 88, Enéide, II

112. Ibid., t.II, Enéide, X.

113. Ibid., t.I, pp. 346-347, Georgiques, IV.

Pendant le doux emploi de ma muse innocente,  
 Louis dompte l'Europe, et d'une main puissante  
 Il conduit à leur fin les plus nobles projets  
 Qu'ait jamais formés un monarque.<sup>114</sup>

These examples of graceful and harmonious verse, ability to express in simple, natural terms a wide range of human emotions, technical skill and masterful command of poetic devices, which distinguish La Fontaine's best poetry, owe something to the influence of Virgil's verse. Horace too could achieve similar effects. But whereas he did so without dropping the conversational tone, Virgil employed all his powers of eloquence to endow with dignity and elegance the simplest event of everyday life. This is what he shares in common with La Fontaine.

But if our poet's literary tastes and poetic style suggest the influence of Virgil and Horace, his scientific curiosity and epicurean approach to life make him a disciple of Lucretius. The clearest evidence of Lucretian influence on the intellectual development of the poet is seen in the Poème du Quinquina. In an evocative introductory prayer to the Muses, he modestly confesses his incompetence to handle so scientific and sophisticated a theme, and asks for inspiration and guidance in his task as a disciple of Lucretius, the model of scientifically orientated poets.<sup>115</sup>

The introductory lines of the Fable, L'Alouette et ses petits (IV, 22) recall Lucretius' invocation of Nature in The Nature of Things.<sup>116</sup> La Fontaine shares Lucretius' love of solitude and mental peace, as can be seen from the affinity of thought between the following reflection on the theme by Lucretius :

Car il faut nécessairement que la Nature des Dieux  
 jouisse par elle-même de l'heureux avantage de  
 l'immortalité, dans une tranquillité parfaite, sans  
 altération, et qu'ils soient exempts de douleurs,  
 sans crainte des périls; ils sont satisfaits de leurs  
 propres biens...<sup>117</sup>

and the prologue of La Fontaine's opera, Daphné :

---

114. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.161, Fables, XI, (Epilogue)

115. Ibid., p.373.

116. Lucretius, C.T., De la Nature des Choses, (édit Edouard Miélet), Paris, 1889, Livre I.

117. Ibid., Livre I.



Ce qui fait le bonheur des Dieux,  
 C'est de n'avoir aucune affaire,  
 Ne point souffrir,  
 Ne point mourir, 118  
 Et ne rien faire.....

The epicurean attitude and intellectual conception of death which the poet adopts in the second collection of fables was due to the influence of Lucretius. For the latter, death is only a final and undisturbed rest which should neither be feared nor regretted. People should depart from this life as if from a banquet hall, thanking their mother nature for the quiet rest granted to them. He writes :

.... Pourquoi ces deuils, mortel, et ces effrois?  
 Et pourquoi sur ta mort gémir avec des larmes?  
 Les jours de ton passé n'eurent-ils point de charmes?  
 Le bonheur, comme l'eau dans un vase fendu,  
 A-t-il fui tout entier, tout entier répandu?  
 Alors, que ne sors-tu, convive soûl de vie?<sup>119</sup>  
 Insensé, prends enfin ton repos sans envie.

La Fontaine was to take up this idea in the fable of La Mort et le Mourant.<sup>120</sup> We shall return to it in our examination of the poet's attitude towards death in the fables of 1678.

Meanwhile it is important to note that his tendency to sympathize with the oppressed and the underdog (VII, 1; XII, 21), his aversion for all forms of dogmatic philosophy, charlatanism and occult speculations (VII, 15; VIII, 16), his love of moderation and rational judgement as opposed to sentiment, and his identification of pleasure with the judicious enjoyment of the simple things of life : games, music, reading, conversation, love and the beauty of nature,<sup>121</sup> all these traits of character have something to do with the poet's imbibing of the spirit of the Lucretian philosophy of life.

Whereas the influence of Lucretius on the literary and intellectual development of La Fontaine can be clearly assessed, the same assertion cannot be made in the case of the fabulist's relationship with

118. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.326.

119. Lucrèce, C.T., Op.Cit., p.117, Livre III, ll. 904-910.

120. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.127, Fables, VIII, 1, ll. 51-53.

121. Ibid., p.453. Psyché, II, ll. 775 - 778.

Seneca. The latter was among the ancient Latin authors, often quoted by Renaissance moralists, particularly Montaigne. The popularity of Seneca continued far into the seventeenth century when many of the leading writers found in his sharp and sagacious mind a fountain of inspiration

Au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, en France, Sénèque est estimé de tous, particulièrement de Montaigne. On le préfère même à Cicéron, et les grands lettrés du XVII<sup>e</sup>, comme Corneille, Racine, Boileau, Descartes, Malebranche, La Mothe le Vayer, pour ne citer que ceux-là, lui font des emprunts, s'inspirent de ses pensées, si bien que ses Lettres à Lucilius trouvèrent, en ce siècle, trois traducteurs érudits : Malherbe, Du Ryer et Pintrel.<sup>122</sup>

The third translator of Seneca, named above, it will be recalled, was La Fontaine's cousin, and it was through him that the poet became more familiar with the Epistles of Seneca. He collaborated with Pintrel by supplying the French renderings of the Latin verses quoted by Seneca. But this collaboration, significant though it is, does not make it any easier to assess the degree of influence which Seneca's work exercised on the formation of La Fontaine's mind and art. This is particularly so because of the close affinity of thought between the Latin author and Montaigne both of whom were our poet's mentors. Thus it is not easy to say for sure whether his sceptical turn of mind, his ideas on death in the first collection of fables and his prudent approach to life in general were due to a direct influence from his reading of Seneca or were transmitted through Montaigne. The truth seems to be that he drew inspiration from both authors. In the course of his collaboration with Pintrel he delved deep into Seneca's Letters to Lucilius. One of the striking passages in this work is the author's emotive reflection on death :

Paralyse ma main! paralyse mon pied, rends moi  
boiteux, entasse sur mon dos le relief d'une bosse,  
ébranle mes dents chancelantes, pourvu que la vie  
me reste, c'est bien!<sup>123</sup> Conserve la moi, dussé-je  
être cloué en croix!

122. Godchot, C., La Fontaine et Sénèque, Paris, 1930, p.42.

123. Sénèque, L.A., Lettres à Lucilius, Texte établi, traduit et annoté par François et Pierre Richard, Paris, (Garnier) 1932, t.III, p.123 :(Lettre C 1).

These lines inspired the philosophical meditation with which La Fontaine concluded his fable, Le Mort et le Bûcheron :

Le trépas vient tout guérir;  
 Mais ne bougeons d'ou nous sommes.  
 Plutôt souffrir que mourir  
 C'est la devise des hommes. 124

In one of his writings on nature, Seneca conceives thunder as a punishment from the gods to mankind

Les premiers disent que la foudre est lancée par Jupiter. Ils attribuent à ce dieu des carreaux de trois espèces. Le premier, affirment-ils, donne des avertissements bien-faisants et Jupiter, pour l'envoyer, ne prend conseil que de lui-même. Il est vrai qu'il lance aussi le second; mais il agit sur l'avis de son conseil, car il se fait assister de douze dieux. Cette foudre n'est pas sans produire quelquefois un heureux effet; mais même alors elle cause des dommages et les services qu'elle rend ne sont pas gratuits. C'est encore Jupiter qui envoie le troisième carreau, mais il ne le fait qu'après avoir convoqué ceux que les Etrusques appellent dieux supérieurs et voilés. Ce carreau ravage en effet les objets qu'il frappe; en tout cas, il ne laisse jamais telles quelles les conditions de la vie privée et de la vie publique. Car le feu ne permet à rien de rester ce qu'il était jusque-là. 125

A recollection of this passage was certainly at the back of La Fontaine's mind when he delved into the following mythological symbolism :

Jupiter, voyant nos fautes,  
 Dit un jour du haut des airs :  
 "Remplissons de nouveaux hôtes  
 Les cantons de l'univers  
 Habités par cette race  
 Qui m'importune et me lasse.  
 Va-t-en, Mercure, aux enfers :  
 Amène-moi la Furie  
 La plus cruelle des trois.  
 Race que j'ai trop chérie,  
 Tu périras cette fois." 126

This piece and many other verses of La Fontaine conserve something of Seneca's rhetorical finish, epigrammatic brevity and mordant wit.

124. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.80, Fables, I, 16, ll. 16-20.

125. Sénèque, L.A. Questions Naturelles, Texte établi et traduit par Paul Oltramare, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1929, t.I, pp. 90-91.

126. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.135, Fables, VIII, 20, ll. 1-13.

This, however, does not mean that the poet necessarily acquired these skills from Seneca's works alone. Other authors already mentioned also influenced the formation of these aspects of his poetic style, given the fact that his diversified readings produced a cumulative effect.

But when it comes to discussing the formation of La Fontaine's prose style, it is to Cicero, the great essayist and orator, that we must turn. The latter was a serious student of Greek literature and philosophy, much of which he translated in his works. There is no doubt that the predominantly Greek character of his writings contributed to attracting our poet to his works, for La Fontaine usually approached Greek literature through Latin translations. In a letter to Maucroix, dated October 26, 1693, he discusses a number of Latin authors whose works he would like to have translated into French, and specifically mentions the Offices of Cicero, giving reasons for his preference.

C'est pour cela que je t'exhorte à traduire les Offices  
de Cicéron...<sup>127</sup>

Although he quotes Cicero in support of his argument on the licentiousness of the Contes,<sup>128</sup> he does not seem to have fully appreciated the orator's diversified and penetrating mentality until later in life, when he imitated the essayist's prose style in the Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince (1684).<sup>129</sup> Cicero, though a less profound thinker than either Lucretius or Seneca, captivated La Fontaine's old-age fancy. The expressive prose and powerful oratory of the Latin essayist and politician impressed him so much that he became enamoured of his style and regarded him as a model worthy of emulation.

It is necessary to point out, in conclusion, that La Fontaine's search for literary models was a life-long preoccupation. What we have surveyed above were the authors with whose works he came in contact during the initial stage of the exploration which took the better part of a dozen years (1642 - 1654). He took something out of nearly

127. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 63 : "A M. de Maucroix".

128. Ibid., p.178.

129. Ibid. p. 520.

every work he read for the improvement of his professional skill.

But his vocational take-off was to wait for the significant contact with the works of Terence and Ovid from which he was to draw inspiration for his earliest known effort in dramatic and heroic poetry respectively.

### 3. The Literary Take-off

#### Attempt at Dramatic Poetry : L'Eunuque (1654)

The earliest, tangible product of La Fontaine's search for literary models was his adaptation in 1654 of Terence's comedy, the Eunuchus. His choice of Terence is hardly surprising. The latter was one of the few Latin comic playwrights whose works inspired several French comedies. As early as 1566, Bourlier produced a beautiful translation of the Eunuchus and in 1573, another French writer, Baïf, published a French verse adaptation of the same comedy. In 1647, the Oratorian, Le Maistre de Sacy also translated three other plays of Terence, and Ménage published his famous Miscellanea on the subject of his controversy with d'Aubignac over Terence's comedies (1652). There is little doubt that these works served La Fontaine as useful sources of information on his Latin model as well as influenced his handling of his own version of the play. The texts established by Bourlier and Baïf are particularly pertinent, considering the striking parallels between them and our poet's L'Eunuque. A few examples of this similarity may help to illustrate the point :

C'en est fait, vous êtes perdu.... (Bourlier, I, ii)

C'est fait : vous en allez être perdu... (Baïf, I, ii)

C'en est fait, votre perte est certaine. (La Fontaine, I, 1)

Un certain marchand fit présent à ma mère d'une fille,  
Elle disait le nom de son père et de sa mère...(Bourlier, I, ii)

A ma mère un marchand donna une petite fille,  
Elle nous dit les noms de père et mère....(Baïf, I, ii)

On leur fit un présent d'une fille inconnue... 130  
Elle nous dit son nom, celui de ses parents...(La Fontaine, I, ii)

These similarities in phrase pattern and even in the use of words suggest that La Fontaine had not only the Latin original but also the French models of the comedy open before him as he wrote his own version.

The theme of Terence's play centres around prostitution, corruption and violence. Two rivals, Phædria and Thraso are vying for the favours of a woman of easy virtue, Thais. Each of the rivals has a collaborator in the persons of Parmeno and Gratho, respectively. All

---

130. Baïf, Jean-Antoine de, Œuvres, (édit. Marty-Laveaux), Paris, 1568, t.Iv, pp. 6, 11.

possible means including gifts are used to flatter and seduce Thais. Phaedria gives her a pretty slave girl, Pamphila, and Thraso offers a eunuch. Pamphila's charms attract the lustful eyes of Phaedria's younger brother, Chaerea, who disguises himself as a eunuch, steals into Thais' room and rapes Pamphila. Then there is a "Coup de théâtre" which ushers in a happy conclusion: Pamphila is after all not a slave and is married to Chaerea and Thais to Phaedria.<sup>131</sup>

Terence's *Roman* audience enjoyed the comedy without the least sting of moral conscience. But the same degree of acceptance could not be expected from the seventeenth-century French public for whom La Fontaine wrote. Taken as it was, the Latin model would violate the classical rules of decency and probability. So in adapting it, our poet carefully removed any aspect of its plot or characterization which would appear to his highly sensitive French audience as vulgar, indecent or improbable. In place of prostitution and rape, he substitutes a love intrigue between two pairs of lovers: Thais and Phaedria on one side, Pamphila and Chaerea on the other. Thais is no longer a courtesan but a young widow, beautiful and respectable enough to be Phaedria's wife. Pamphila's part too, becomes more pronounced in her new role as Thais' adopted sister whom she is trying to free from Thraso's tyranny by tolerating the latter's amorous advances towards herself without compromising her true love for Phaedria. Pamphila is no longer taken by force but is gently wooed and loved by Chaerea before being married to him.

This skill in adaptation is already a promising start for our aspiring young writer. There is no doubt that *L'Eunuque*, as a product of La Fontaine's formative period, does not seem to have quite successfully recaptured the excellence and penetrating psychological analysis of the Latin model. Indeed the poet himself speaks rather apologetically of his own version of the comedy as

Une médiocre copie d'un excellent original<sup>132</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of its deficiencies and apparent inconsistencies, the comedy was a significant beginning. Apart from the training it

131. Terence, P.A., *The Comedies of Terence*, (trans. by John Sargeant), London (Macmillan & Co.), 1912, vol. I., p.235, EUNUCHUS

132. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.297, L'Eunuque, (Avertissement)

gave the poet in love poetry, L'Eunuque also helped to reveal what his attitude towards love was to be. For example, it was not by sheer chance that he faithfully transcribes his model's reflections on love vis-a-vis personal convenience and liberty :

L'Amour a ses plaisirs aussi bien que ses peines. <sup>133</sup>

However great the pleasures of love may be, insists Terence, they are poor exchanges for one's personal liberty; this is precisely the idea which our poet expresses in the following lines :

Quant aux biens, ce souci n'entre point dans mon âme;  
Et je ne prétends pas me vendre à quelque femme  
Qui, m'ayant acheté pour me donner la loi, <sup>134</sup>  
Se croirait en pouvoir de disposer de moi.

La Fontaine could easily have modified or completely changed this line of thought as he did the other details of the Latin comedy. But he did not, and the reason is simple. The idea suits his own temperament and natural attitude to the subject of love. This attitude will become clearer as we examine the philosophy behind his Contes and views on marriage. By imitating his model in this direction the poet was also giving himself some useful training in the art of blending poetry with moral philosophy, a device which is the vital factor or the yardstick for measuring his literary and intellectual growth.

As a work of art, L'Eunuque is neither lacking in poetic adornment nor excessively embellished. Following the example of his Latin mentor, La Fontaine maintains a happy medium. In this sense, this adaptation began the development of that judicious use of poetic adornment which the poet was to call into play in the vital question of poetic embellishment in the Fables. Against the opinion of the "docte" Patru that fables should be composed in bare prose, <sup>135</sup> he would versify and judiciously embellish Æsop's dry apologues.

Although L'Eunuque was not particularly successful as a comedy, its sensual tone announced the Contes and at the same time afforded La Fontaine a good deal of practice in the dual technique of condensation

133. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.298, L'Eunuque, Acte I, scène I, l. 58

134. Ibid., p.298, Acte I, scène 1, ll. 80-83

135. Ibid. pp. 66-68, Fables, (Préface, 1668)



and amplification which he would need for the tales and fables. From the point of view of the development of themes too, L'Eunuque was a forerunner of the Contes. Phædria, for example, exploits the seductive power of money and gifts over valets in order to secure their co-operation in his scheming to gain the favours of Thais.<sup>136</sup> And the latter herself accepts flirting, deceit and hypocrisy as legitimate feminine weapons in love intrigue :

Mais quoi! la tromperie est permise en amour.<sup>137</sup>

These attitudes were prototypes of the series of tricks, scandalous sexual twists and turns that were to be chronicled in the Contes. The scene in which Pythias overhears the tail end of Chaerea's intimate conversation with Pamphila<sup>138</sup> already enacts the situation in which Joconde was to surprise Curtade and the Queen.<sup>139</sup> Less perceptible but equally real is the importance of L'Eunuque as the incubator in which many ideas and attitudes, developed later in the Fables, were hatched. Thais, for instance, was the first of the series of young widows who would feature in the fables. She is half-way between Clymène who is obstinately faithful and almost insensitive to Acante's adoring passion,<sup>140</sup> and the heroine of the fable who is easily consoled.<sup>141</sup> For Phædria, absence is a painful experience; his separation from the loved one is not permanent; but it lasts long enough to make him feel the agony of separation. It is the same story that was to continue in the fable, Les deux Pigeons.<sup>142</sup>

Transposed into animal comedy, the dialogue between the parasite, Gnatho and his half-starved companion, would become the fable of Le Loup et le Chien.<sup>143</sup> Gnatho's reflection on "le bel art de flatter"<sup>144</sup> anticipates the episode of Le Corbeau et le Renard.<sup>145</sup> In the

136. La Fontaine, Op.Cit, p.302, L'Eunuque, Acte I, scène 5, l.400.

137. Ibid., p.313, Acte IV, scène 4, l.1236.

138. Ibid., p.312, Acte IV, scène 3.

139. Ibid, p.179, Contes, I, (i).

140. Ibid., pp. 249 - 257.

141. Ibid, p.116, Fables, VI, 21.

142. Ibid., p.140, Fables, IX, 2.

143. Ibid, p.78, I, 10.

144. Ibid., pp. 302-303, L'Eunuque, Acte II, scène 1, l.471

145. Ibid., p.75. Fables, I, 2.

same vein, the "leçons de la plus fine étoffe" which Gnatho gives his eventual disciple<sup>146</sup> have a parallel in the bitter lesson which the fox would teach the crow.

It can thus be seen that L'Eunuque, this trial shot, which passed almost unnoticed, already contained the germs of La Fontaine's future literary creations. All that the poet needed at this time was more encouragement, greater stimulation and confidence in himself. These were to follow in the wake of his epic poem, Adonis.

The poem of Adonis gave La Fontaine the necessary training in the cultivation of the heroic pattern of writing. The La Fontaine that one meets in this work is a more confident poet than the author of L'Eunuque. Although he is still feeling his way in search of a pattern or genre that would suit his taste, temperament and talents, he is now comparatively more experienced, more familiar with antiquity and better able to manipulate his poetic devices. The application of the latter to heroic poetry was to produce better results than in the case of the dramatic genre. These results, the poet himself tells us, are due not only to his own creative imagination but mainly to his long and arduous apprenticeship in the technique of handling the heroic genre.

Quand j'en conçus le dessein, j'avais plus d'imagination  
que je n'en ai aujourd'hui. Je m'étais toute ma vie  
exercé en ce genre de poésie que nous nommons héroïque.<sup>147</sup>

There is no doubt that this conscientious preparation made him more at home with the heroic than the dramatic genre. Accordingly, he has nothing but praises for the former :

C'est assurément le plus beau de tous, le plus fleuri,  
le plus susceptible d'ornements, et de ces figures nobles  
et hardies qui font une langue à part, une langue assez  
charmante pour mériter qu'on l'appelle la langue des  
dieux.<sup>148</sup>

This contrasts sharply with the tone of uncertainty and regrets of inadequacy which introduced the dramatic genre, L'Eunuque.

Adonis was composed with materials from numerous sources covering ancient and modern literature. Inspiration was probably drawn

146. Ibid., p. 303, L'Eunuque. Acte II, scène I, l. 471.

147. Ibid. p. 362, Adonis, (Avertissement)

148. Ibid. p. 362.

from Mellin de Saint-Gelais' Elégie sur la mort d'Adonis<sup>149</sup> and from the Adonis of Ronsard.<sup>150</sup> But the central theme of the poem as well as the bulk of the philosophical meditations in it was adapted from the Metamorphoses of Ovid, based on the voluptuous love of the goddess, Venus and a handsome young mortal, Adonis.<sup>151</sup> Like Terence, Ovid was popular with French writers from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century. As a man, he loved pleasure and tended towards loose living. He was neither a successful husband nor favoured of the Roman Emperor, just as La Fontaine was not, for most of his life, in the good books of Louis XIV. Here then was a fortuitous relationship which could hardly fail to attract La Fontaine to the works of Ovid. His handling of the latter's work was different from the way he treated that of Terence. Unlike in the Eunuchus, where he tried to remain faithful to his model, he took greater liberties with Ovid's work and transformed it into a completely new piece. His own version of Adonis, for example, shows a shift in emphasis from love and <sup>the</sup> hunting expedition to deep meditation on the brevity of mortal life. In this sense, his Adonis is much more than a mere adaptation of a work of antiquity.

The poem, La Fontaine's maiden effort in the heroic genre, is doubly heroic because of the mythological heroes who act in it and the dignity of the personage to whom it was offered. Fouquet was to all intents and purposes a hero in the eyes of our poet, a mortal hero whose praises he sings in the language of gods

Votre esprit est doué de tant de lumières, et fait voir un goût si exquis et si délicat pour tous nos ouvrages, particulièrement pour le bel art de célébrer les hommes qui vous ressemblent avec le langage des dieux....<sup>152</sup>

The foreword to the poem is divided into two parts. The first part which gives a complex definition of the heroic genre, and explains how Adonis fits into it, reveals the relationship between the poem and the Fables.<sup>153</sup> The second part where the poet justifies its publication

149. Saint-Gelais, Mellin de, Œuvres, Paris, 1628, t.I, pp.127-132.

150. Ronsard, P., Op.Cit., t.IV, pp. 26-37.

151. Ovid, P., Metamorphoses, X, (Transl. by G.Sewell), London, 1733, ll. 537-552.

152. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.361, Adonis, (Dédicace).

153. Ibid., p.362.

immediately after Psyché and his severing it from the latter, underlines the essential affinity and difference between the two works.<sup>154</sup>

Considered as a unit, the foreword gives a coordinated definition of heroic poetry as La Fontaine conceived it. The genre is defined here, not according to the contents, nor according to the laws of the genre, but according to the unique dignity of the work itself. This dignity is achieved through a judicious blending of elegance of language and diction with the appropriate mythological figures and settings. Conceived in this way, the heroic genre becomes a meeting point for men and gods. It is no wonder, therefore, that our poet thought it appropriate to dedicate Adonis to a person of Fouquet's calibre. Less surprising still is the fact that he exhausted his stock of literary devices in the embellishment of this single poem.

Le fonds que j'en avais fait, soit par la lecture des  
anciens, soit par celle de quelques uns de nos modernes,  
s'est presque entièrement consumé dans l'embellissement  
de ce poème, bien que l'ouvrage soit court, et qu'à  
proprement parler, il ne mérite que le nom d'idylle... 155

Although both men and gods meet in Adonis, the miraculous element is minimized or made subservient to philosophical meditation. No mysterious intervention occurs to alter the necessary course of destiny and even the supernatural power surrenders to the inflexible laws of nature. Thus Venus, though a goddess, can neither escape the fatality of love nor save mortal Adonis from inevitable death. In this sense, La Fontaine's philosophy in the poem of Adonis is quite clear. It represents a deploration of the fragile beauty of the human body and the brevity of mortal life.

J'ai voulu célébrer l'amant de Cythère,  
Adonis, dont la vie eut des termes si courts... 156

The theme of death which was to occupy much of the poet's attention in the first and second collections of fables, was thus first rehearsed in Adonis. The same ephemeral character of human life, stressed

154. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.362.

155. Ibid., p.362.

156. Ibid., p.362, Adonis, ll. 12-13.

here, for example, was to form the theme of Le Vieillard et les trois jeunes hommes in the second collection of fables.<sup>157</sup> The successive stages of the hero's struggle with death, as visualized by La Fontaine's humanist imagination, are vividly traced: from exposure to injury, from swoon to eternal sleep which turns the hero's day into an "éternelle nuit de ténébreux empire" where the "noires divinités" dwell.<sup>158</sup> This solemn meditation upon the inexorable march of death has all the touching nuances of the fable, La Mort et le Mourant.<sup>159</sup> One can infer from the prominence given to the idea of the fragility of human beauty and life in this poem that La Fontaine was obsessed early in life with the thought of death. Viewed in the light of later shifts in the poet's trend of thought, the lamentable end of Adonis reflects the tragedy of pagan heroism conquered by death. Against this dismal picture of despair, the poet will oppose the Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc, the triumph of Christian heroism over the power of evil. It was no accident therefore that the two poems came at the time they did. One was a product of La Fontaine's youthful exuberance (1658), the other an outcome of the stoic serenity of his more mature years (1673).

The intellectual problem involved in Adonis can thus be seen to be much graver than that in L'Eunuque. But around the central theme of mortality revolves a number of episodes that make Adonis appear like a continuation of L'Eunuque, thus illustrating further the cumulative nature of La Fontaine's intellectual evolution. For example, the amazement of Adonis at the sudden appearance of the goddess, Venus:

Cet objet le surprend, l'étonne et le confond....<sup>160</sup>

is a repetition of the stylistic device used in L'Eunuque to bring about the excitement of Chaerea on catching sight of the pretty slave-girl, Pamphila.<sup>161</sup> The grief which overwhelms the hero when the

157. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.160, Fables, XI, 8.

158. Ibid., p.367, Adonis, ll. 569-588.

159. Ibid., pp. 126-127, Fables, VIII, 1.

160. Ibid., p.363, Adonis, l.67.

161. Ibid., pp.304-306, L'Eunuque, Acte II, scene 4.

goddess vanishes has a parallel in the anguish of separation suffered by Phaedria when he is compelled to leave Thais for some time. More interesting still, is the poem's reflection of the author's dual personality. The hero's melancholic reverie before meeting Venus, and his gaiety when charmed with love, correspond to the two aspects of La Fontaine's temperament, namely, his tendency to melancholy and moodiness when alone and his lively enthusiasm when aroused.

The most significant contribution of Adonis to the professional development of La Fontaine is the training it afforded him in the technique of story-telling, involving the humanization of animals, plants and inanimate objects. It is perhaps in this poem more than in any other work that the poet exploits his experiences as "Maître des Eaux et Forêts" and as "Capitaine des chasses". The boisterous invasion of the forest by the hunting party and the tenacity of their dogs are delicately portrayed and made real.

La jeunesse voisine autour du bois s'assemble : 162  
Jamais tant de héros ne s'étaient vus ensemble.

Each hunting dog is given an appropriate name according to the degree of its sagacity, its speed and ability to scent and track the game, and according to the locality and popularity of the breed :

Dryope la première évente sa demeure :  
Les autres chiens, par elle aussitôt avertis,  
Répondent à sa voix, frappent l'air de leurs cris,  
Entraînent les chasseurs, abandonnent leur quête;  
Toute la meute accourt, et vient lancer la bête,  
S'anime en la voyant, redouble son ardeur;  
Mais le fier animal n'a point encor de peur.  
Le coursier d'Adonis, né sur les bords du Xanthe,  
Ne peut plus retenir son ardeur violente : 163  
Une jument d'Ida l'engendra d'un des Vents...

The vivid reality of this image, heightened by the tempo and rapid movement of the verse, brings out clearly the crisis and tension of the moment, as experienced by someone who either has watched a real hunting expedition or supervised one himself. The reader is made to visualize the panic-stricken denizens of the forest (ll. 321-326), the fighting tenacity of the mongrels (ll. 383-390) and the heroic resistance of the formidable boar who stands his ground till the end.

---

162. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 364. Adonis, ll. 267-268.

163. Ibid, p. 365, ll. 336-345.

.... Que d'hommes terrassés:  
 Que de chiensabattus, mourants, morts, et blessés!  
 Chevaux, arbres, chasseurs, tout éprouve sa rage.<sup>164</sup>

For the first time in La Fontaine's poetry, animals are taking their place alongside human beings, thus anticipating the role they will play in the Fables.

The technique of portraying or evoking delicate human passions, of psychological analysis of the emotions and thoughts, a technique which our poet admired most in both Virgil and Terence, was also rehearsed in Adonis. A few examples of some of its most striking passages may help to illustrate the evocative force which La Fontaine's poetic style has up to now acquired. In this connection, one can hardly imagine a better example than the admirable analysis of Venus' passion made by Collinet. He follows systematically the turbulent upsurge of emotions in the frustrated goddess from the time Adonis dies to the final farewell.<sup>165</sup> At the moment of narrating the death of Adonis, Venus apostrophizes the hunters, reproaching them for their belated valour. This apostrophe, rendered more pathetic by pressing repetition, and turned into an irony by the use of a litotes, is followed first by exclamation, then by interrogation, and finally by doubt, all of which combine to give the passage the character of a funeral oration :

Courez, courez, chasseurs un peu trop tard vaillants,  
 Détournez de vos noms un éternel reproche.  
 Vos efforts sont trop lents, déjà le coup approche;  
 Que n'en ai-je oublié les funestes moments!  
 Pourquoi n'ont pas péri ces tristes monuments?  
 Faut-il qu'à nos neveux j'en raconte l'histoire?  
 Enfin, de ces forêts l'ornement et la gloire.  
 Le plus beau des mortels, l'amour de tous les yeux,  
 Par le vouloir du sort ensanglante ces lieux.<sup>166</sup>

Then, as if to associate the whole of nature with her mourning, she addresses the elements :

Prêtez-moi des soupirs, O Vents qui sur vos ailes  
 Portâtes à Vénus de si tristes nouvelles.<sup>167</sup>

In the violence of despair, the goddess calls her lover :

Tu me quittes cruel;<sup>168</sup>

164. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.365, Adonis, ll. 393-395.

165. Collinet, J-P., Op.Cit., p.71.

166. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.366, Adonis, ll 506-514.

167. Ibid., p.367, ll. 543-544.

168. Ibid., p.367, Adonis, l. 565

regrets her own immortality which prevents her from joining him among the dead :

Destins, si vous vouliez le voir si tôt périr  
Fallait-il m'obliger à ne jamais mourir?<sup>169</sup>

bemoans her own fate :

Malheureuse Vénus, que te servent ces larmes?<sup>170</sup>

solemnly conjures the demons of darkness :

Noires divinités du ténébreux empire...<sup>171</sup>

appeals to inanimate nature :

Déserts rendez-le moi!<sup>172</sup>

and finally bids eternal farewell to Adonis :

Adieu donc, ô belle âme!<sup>173</sup>

A poet who could paint so touching and pathetic a scene was surely close to the poet of the Fables. L'Eunuque was an attempt at dramatic poetry and Adonis an experiment in the heroic genre. A blending of these two : the comic and the serious, produces the prototypes of the Contes which, like L'Eunuque, are comedies,<sup>174</sup> and of the Fables which, like Adonis, celebrate heroes whose father is Æsop.

Je chante les héros dont Esope est le père.<sup>175</sup>

In fact the Contes and Fables owe much of their richness and variety to this dual origin.

It is easy to see from this point how far La Fontaine has progressed from L'Eunuque. If that timid comedy is still far from the bewildering love intrigues of the Contes and the searching wisdom of the Fables, Adonis, by its subtle analysis of emotional conflict, its involvement with the grave issues of existence and death, and its humanization of animals, is a pointer to the significant progress which the poet has made in his professional and intellectual evolution. As Wadsworth puts it, the poem's

grace of movement, its sustained resonance and rich evocative power, mark an advance, both in feeling, and in expression, over the technique of L'Eunuque.<sup>176</sup>

169. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.367, Adonis, ll. 573-574.

170. Ibid., p.367, l.575.

171. Ibid, p.367, l.583.

172. Ibid. p. 367, l.597.

173. Ibid. p.367, l.599.

174. Ibid. pp.104-105, Fables, V, 1.

175. Ibid. p.104.

176. Wadsworth, P.A., Op.Cit., p.48.



Thus the aspiring poet has now acquired the art of story-telling and rhetorical style. He is at this stage more familiar with the poetic metres and better able to manipulate his literary devices to achieve flexibility of thought and style and sonorous effect. It is to this ornate style developed in Adonis that he will return in Le Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc, Le Poème du Quinquina, Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée.

There is no doubt, therefore, that La Fontaine's debt to Latin literature and to a lesser extent Greek literature is immense. The extent of the influence exerted on the formation of his literary thought by Latin literature in particular can be appreciated in the light of the tribute which Fénelon paid to him on the occasion of his death in 1695. Fénelon attributes the poet's delicacy of style, discernment, tendency to banter, portrayal of the social mœurs and types, and his poetic harmony to the cumulative influences of Anacreon, Horace, Terence and Virgil among others with whom he compares him

La Fontaine vit tout entier, et il vivra éternellement dans ses immortels écrits....Lisez-le, et dites si Anacréon a su badiner avec plus de grâce, si Horace a paré la philosophie et la morale d'ornements poétiques plus variés et plus attrayants, si Térence a peint les mœurs des hommes avec plus de naturel et de vérité, 177 si Virgile enfin a été plus touchant et plus harmonieux!

At the age of 26, about the same time that La Fontaine was working on the poem of Adonis, he married Marie Héricart. Although their union was none of the happiest, it contributed significantly towards the poet's professional success. With a substantial dowry of 30,000 livres brought to the matrimonial home by his wife and his own inheritance from his mother, the marriage provided, at least for the first six years of their union, a fairly comfortable existence thus leaving the poet ample time and leisure to concentrate on his literary pursuits. Union with Marie Héricart also opened the way for new and important contacts. She was a relation of Jean Racine and this lends credence to the belief that she helped to forge and strengthen the friendship between her husband and the playwright. This friendship was, as we shall see later, to prove of inestimable value to our poet, particularly in his interpre-

---

177. Fénelon, François de Salignac de La Mothe, Œuvres complètes, Paris, (Didot Frères), 1843, t.II, p.654.

tation of ancient Greek literature and culture, for Racine was one of the outstanding hellenists of the epoch. At the same time, working through her aunt's husband, Jacques Jannart, Marie Héricart helped La Fontaine to secure the patronage of Fouquet.<sup>178</sup> This patronage was to become an important milestone on the poet's road to literary and intellectual maturity.

When Charles de La Fontaine died in 1658, La Fontaine succeeded to his function as "Maître des Eaux et Forêts". This was a definite advantage for a man with poetic inclinations such as he was, for the exercise of the function afforded him a greater chance of intimate contact with nature and rural life. His experiences as forest warden could not fail to increase his knowledge of plants and animals, a knowledge which he was to exploit most skilfully and profitably in his Fables. Many of the stories narrated in the fables are situated in the region around Paris, Château-Thierry and Rheims, a region of farmlands, gardens, vineyards, gentle hills, meandering streams and small, well-tended forests.

Pendant vingt ans ses tournées à travers les bois qui environnaient alors sa ville natale l'ont mêlé à la vie des "pauvres bûcherons" et lui ont permis d'observer les arbres et les bêtes dans la diversité des heures et des saisons.<sup>179</sup>

Thus, when the poet speaks of rabbits, poultry, foxes, dogs and lambs, he is mainly drawing inspiration from his stock of experiences as a forest guard. He conversed with the common peasants, observed the woodcutters and shepherds at work and had the occasion to meet them and to familiarize himself with their life and problems. As a forest officer, he was closely associated with other provincial civil servants: attorneys, notaries, municipal officials. Through his colleagues of the Forest Tribunal, the provosts and masters of the granaries he could inform himself of the details of the cases tried within the neighbourhood, of the local scandals and gossips, conflict of interests and personalities, women's bickerings and petty jealousies, all of which were to be represented later in the Contes and Fables. Reminiscences of his experiences as a forest officer, for example, are noticeable in the fable of Le Jardinier et son seigneur. The delicate description of the farmer's garden

---

178. Jacques Jannart was a Paris-based lawyer who served as Fouquet's deputy in the "Parlement"

179. Clarac, P., *Littérature française*, t.II, p.187.

and the activities of the hunting party recalls the poet's memories of his role as "Capitaine des chasses".<sup>180</sup> The episode of La Mort et le Bûcheron was borrowed from Æsop, but the detailed description of the country scene and the condition of the woodcutter was built up from La Fontaine's accurate knowledge of the French peasant's hard lot in the seventeenth century.<sup>181</sup> Here then was the "comédie à cent actes divers"<sup>182</sup> playing itself out at all levels of the social hierarchy before the poet. Thus, without knowing it, he was already becoming a socio-psychologist and moral philosopher. But a more significant and better co-ordinated enlargement of his intellectual horizon still needed the powerful and reformatory impact of the social and political atmosphere of Vaux to materialize. The door to this influential milieu was opened with La Fontaine's presentation of his poem of Adonis to the Finance Minister, Fouquet, in 1658.

---

180. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.97, Fables, IV, 4.

181. Ibid., pp.79-80, I, 15 and 16.

182. Ibid, p.104, V, "Dédicace à M. le comte de Brienne".

#### 4. Enlargement of the Social Horizon (1658 - 1661)

The presentation of Adonis to the "Surintendant général du Parlement", Nicolas Fouquet, was one of the overtures by which La Fontaine won his way to the favour of the influential Finance Minister. The latter offered him an annual pension in return for which he became the official poet of the court of Vaux and one of the Minister's "protégés". The patronage of Fouquet accelerated the rate of the poet's social and intellectual evolution. It placed him within easy reach of a number of forces or factors which need to be analysed for their tremendous impact on La Fontaine's overall development. These closely related factors will be discussed in this section under three broad headings: the influence of Vaux, the impact of contemporary Paris, and the beneficent friends.

The poetic contract afforded La Fontaine an easy life amidst the splendour of Vaux and opened up new and important contacts with the flower of French nobility. Fouquet's generosity and keen interest in arts and letters attracted to his luxurious court literary men, such as Molière, Pellisson, Perrault and Saint-Evremond; master builders and professional artists like Le Vau, Le Brun and Le Nôtre, employed on the building and decoration of the Minister's famous palace, "Vaux-le-Vicomte". Then there were such aristocratic and noble personalities as the Bouillons and the Condés, the duc de La Rochefoucauld, the comte de Brienne, the Hervarts, Mmes. de Sévigné and de La Fayette, all of whom were powerful and influential figures.

In an age when wealth and influence controlled the destinies of men, it was no little advantage to be protected by a rich and powerful personality. One can therefore appreciate what Fouquet's patronage meant for La Fontaine. Apart from the material security which it offered, the patronage gave our poet a wonderful opportunity of cultivating the acquaintance and friendship of those important personages who helped to advance his career. As Gohin remarks, it was at Vaux that La Fontaine's artistic tastes were conditioned under the influence of the famous artists in Fouquet's service.

C'est surtout à Vaux que ses goûts artistiques purent se développer. Là, il vit à l'œuvre les plus grands artistes, Le Vau, Le Brun, Le Nôtre, et autour d'eux une foule d'architectes, de dessinateurs, de peintres, de sculpteurs, de graveurs... Puget, Michel Anguier, Nicolas Legendre, Jacques Houzeau, Baudrain, Pérelle, Marot, Silvestre. Avec quelle curiosité passionnée il dut suivre leurs travaux, et s'entretenir avec eux!<sup>183</sup>

Association with these prominent artists not only heightened La Fontaine's prestige but also increased his self-confidence considerably. The importance of these contacts can be appreciated in the light of their impact on the poet's later life and career. The Bouillons, for example, would later on not only intervene to save him from legal entanglements, but provide him with an alternative security when Fouquet fell from power, by recommending him to the dowager duchess of Orleans. The works and ideas of La Rochefoucauld would inspire some of the fables;<sup>184</sup> while the Hervarts would provide him with a home for the last few years of his life.

The effort to fulfil the conditions of the poetic contract was a useful apprenticeship in poetic liberty and in the manipulation of various literary devices, for the terms of the contract were flexible enough to permit the poet to try his hand at several literary genres. The result was a sort of proliferation of poetic forms such as madrigals, ballades, sonnets, rondeaux and epistles, all of which feature in the "pension poétique". The compositions making up the latter fall into two broad divisions: the genres with fixed forms such as ballade, rondeau and sonnet, which could be traced back through Voiture to Marot, and which are adorned with all the elegance and grace of the "vieux langage",<sup>185</sup> the irregular forms comprising madrigal, ode and stances which were also inspired by Voiture, but composed in a more varied metre.<sup>186</sup> This broad division was probably the origin of the two tendencies between which the poet hesitated as he prepared the Contes, before deciding finally to adopt two parallel forms, namely, the "vers irrégulier" and the "vieux langage". More will be said about these two forms in our discussion of the development of the theory of the Contes. Of the genres

---

183. Gohin, F., Op.Cit., p. 6

184. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 75, 78, 155, Fables, I, I and II; X, 14.

185. Ibid., pp. 455-460.

186. Ibid., pp. 461-463.

with fixed form, the only one worth mentioning is the ballade which replaced the sonnet and absorbed the rondeau that had gone out of fashion. In the group making up the second pattern, the body of Odes stands out clearly from the miscellaneous collection of occasional pieces. Broadly speaking, therefore, the "pension poétique" could be said to consist of the Odes and Ballades.

The number of pieces in each genre is fairly balanced. To the four ballades of the first three terms<sup>187</sup> and the one on Le Pont de Château-Thierry can be added Le Siège des Augustins, composed immediately after the episode of the Augustinians on August 23, 1658. This ballade preceded the "pension poétique" by a few months, but its support of the "Parlement" in which Fouquet was a Minister could justify its inclusion in the contract.<sup>188</sup> On the side of Odes, the four pieces: La Paix des Pyrénées, A Madame la surintendante sur le voyage de Toulouse, A Madame sur la naissance de son dernier fils and Pour Madame à l'occasion de son mariage, have also been complemented by Vous qui menez les Gripons, which is a poem on the private history of Vaux.<sup>189</sup>

The themes of the "pension poétique" are varied. They are based partly on Fouquet's domestic affairs and partly on contemporary events. But it must be remembered that the social distance between the poet and his patron was too great to permit the development of a high degree of intimacy, in spite of Fouquet's tenderness and La Fontaine's affection for him. The Minister was so preoccupied with State matters that he was often not accessible to the poet who had to be content in most cases with addressing himself to Madame la surintendante instead.<sup>190</sup> He admired the air of suddenness which characterized Fouquet's actions,<sup>191</sup> but deplored his excessive preoccupation with public affairs, and invited him to set aside some moments to enjoy himself in solitude and tranquillity.<sup>192</sup>

---

187. Ibid., pp. 459, 460, 463; The ballades include "A Mme (la surintendante)" "A. M. Fouquet", "Sur la paix des Pyrénées et le mariage du roi", and "Ballade à M. Fouquet pour le pont de Château-Thierry".

188. Ibid., p. 455.

189. Ibid., pp. 461, 465, 466, 468.

190. Ibid., p. 462: "Epître à M. le Surintendant".

191. Ibid., p. 464: "Epithalama".

192. Ibid., pp. 461-462: "A M. le Surintendant", ll. 53-54..

But a full appreciation of the place of the "pension poétique" in the literary and intellectual evolution of La Fontaine cannot be possible without an examination of the most ambitious composition of this period, namely, Le Songe de Vaux. This work of which Les Amours de Mars et de Vénus is a fragment, is a hybrid piece of composition in which the poet attempts to describe the beauties of Vaux-le-Vicomte as he imagined it would be when completed. After composing several fragments of it, he abandoned the work when Fouquet fell into disgrace. But its significance in the literary development of our poet is considerable. It served as a transition from the heroic (Adonis) to the more familiar genres. In it too, all the elements previously united in Adonis split into divergent patterns, forming miniature stances, ballades, odes and madrigaux. Each fragment seems autonomous, yet no part can be treated without reference to the whole. The Stances d'Hortésie (part of the second fragment) are particularly interesting for the richness of their ideas. The insistence on a measure of retreat into oneself, on the need to alternate the glamour and charms of worldly glory with the joys of inward peace, was the origin of La Fontaine's later reflections on the favourite theme of solitude.<sup>193</sup> This idea was to be taken up again after Fouquet's fall in the Elégie aux Nymphes de Vaux,<sup>194</sup> then elaborated in Le Songe d'un habitant du Mogol<sup>195</sup> and later in the Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César, et de Monsieur le Prince<sup>196</sup> before being fully developed as one of the cornerstones of La Fontaine's moral philosophy in Le Juge arbitre, l'Hospitalier et le Solitaire.<sup>197</sup> It can thus be seen that the poet's contact with Vaux, while being essentially social, was not entirely lacking in intellectual inspiration. As Pierre Clarac puts it,

Vaux marque une étape décisive sinon dans la carrière poétique de La Fontaine, du moins dans sa connaissance des hommes et de lui-même. Avant d'être admis dans cette société, la plus brillante du temps, il n'avait aucune expérience du monde et pouvait se croire incapable d'y faire

193. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 393-394 : Le Songe de Vaux, II.

194. Ibid., p. 469, ll. 19-44.

195. Ibid, p.158, Fables, XI, 4, ll. 22-38.

196. Ibid., pp. 520-525.

197. Ibid., pp. 173-174, Fables, XII, 24.

bonne figure. L'ami des Muses, "Qui préférerait à la pompe des villes" leurs "antres cois"; leurs "chants simples et doux", le "bon garçon" de la Table ronde, le "rêveur" auquel Tallemant prête de si étranges bévues, découvre en lui, aux environs de la quarantaine, des ressources de séduction qu'il ne soupçonnait pas. Il comprend que pour plaire il n'a qu'à rester dans son naturel. 198

However, in spite of this favourable evaluation of the influence of Vaux on La Fontaine's development, some critics, notably Lafenestre and Sainte-Beuve, maintain that the experience of Vaux, if it had continued, could not have provided the poet with sufficient intellectual stimulation. They argue that Fouquet's fall, though tragic, was a fortunate incident in the history of La Fontaine's overall development, for, according to them, if the Minister had remained in power, the poet would probably not have left the easy life of Vaux in search of the higher inspirations which he badly needed to discover his full potentialities.

La chute de Fouquet, qui troubla si violemment sa quiétude, ne fut pas, en définitive, pour le poète, un événement fâcheux. Qui sait combien de temps encore sa timidité ou sa nonchalance l'eussent laissé attaché à des besognes de commande, longues et obscures, sans qu'il se résolût à affronter la publicité? Sans doute, avec ses nouvelles habitudes prise de bien-être et de repos, de galanteries et de distractions mondaines, il était, moins que jamais, homme à chercher l'indépendance dans un effort personnel. 199

There is, no doubt, an element of truth in this observation. In fact most of the pieces constituting the "pension poétique" are, with the exception of Le Songe de Vaux, occasional verses, easy and topical. Although they are rich in classical allusions, and combine flashes of wit with naturalness, they offered a limited range of inspiration to an artist of La Fontaine's potentials. It was not until the fall of Fouquet that the need for survival stimulated our poet's competitive spirit. Perhaps if he had not left the illusory atmosphere of Vaux, he might have become just a literary man but not a genius. In addition, La Fontaine's connections with Vaux, particularly his continued fidelity to Fouquet after the latter's disgrace, were not altogether without some disastrous effects on

---

198. Clarac, P., *La Fontaine par lui-même*, p. 65.

199. Lafenestre, G., *La Fontaine*, Paris, (Hachette), 1922, p. 63; Cf. Sainte-Beuve, *Causeries du lundi*, 3ème édition, Paris (Garnier), t. VII, pp. 522-523.



the future life and career of the poet. His attachment to the fallen enemy of the King and the Prime Minister, Colbert, incurred for him the often unexpressed but positive hostility of these two people. This hostility which became manifest in La Fontaine's arrest on the dubious charge of usurping the title of nobility, was to be aggravated when the poet sought election to the French Academy, and to continue with more or less severity throughout his life. Posterity has since condemned in the strongest possible terms the injustice of this hatred reserved for a poet whose only crime was to have followed his own conscience. The judgement of Chamfort in this regard deserves mention here, particularly for its pathetic and forthright tone and its human touch. He writes :

C'est une singularité bien frappante de voir un écrivain tel que lui (La Fontaine), né sous un roi dont les bienfaits allaient étonner les savans du Nord, vivre négligé, mourir pauvre, et près d'aller, dans sa caducité, chercher loin de sa patrie les secours nécessaires à la simple existence : c'est qu'il porta toute sa vie la peine de son attachement à Fouquet, ennemi du grand Colbert.<sup>200</sup>

Given this situation, it is no longer difficult to understand why the poet attacked Colbert with all the force, skill and irony in his bantering style in the first collection of fables.<sup>201</sup>

However, in spite of the illusory nature of the glory of Vaux, in spite of the unfortunate stigma which the association with Fouquet left on La Fontaine's relationship with Louis XIV and Colbert, there is no denying the fact that contact with Vaux had also a favourable impact on the formation of the poet's mind and art. It enlarged his social horizon, greatly enriched his experience of life and afforded him the opportunity to rehearse his literary devices. But he still needed the stimulation, the personal challenge from the hard world outside the aristocratic and glamorous circle of Vaux to discover his genius. It was in the open, competitive milieu of seventeenth-century Paris that he finally made his mark.

Paris of that epoch, as of today, was an intellectual and cultural centre, affording young men and women eager to learn a wonderful

200. Chamfort, N., Op.Cit, t.I, pp.259-260.

201. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.110, 110-111, 112, Fables, V, 21; VI, 1; VI, 6; VI, 7.

new horizon. To it came many of the outstanding artists, literary men and travelling scholars of the day, including Leibniz, Bernier, Locke and others, and from it too, the glory of French culture radiated throughout Europe. Parisian society was refined and possessed enormous possibilities for the aesthetic enjoyment of life. This contrasted sharply with the provincial and rural environment of Château-Thierry. In his provincial home town, La Fontaine's artistic vision and resources though quite considerable, were limited. But as he came to spend more and more time in the city of Paris, within the artistically decorated surroundings of Luxembourg and Versailles, his appreciation for the fine arts deepened. Consequently, he also improved his art of communicating in poetry the sensations aroused in him by colours and forms. His description of the statues and grottos and Cupid's palace in Psyché, for example, owes something to his reminiscences of Versailles.<sup>202</sup>

The power of visualization, developed at this time, was to help later in creating much of the palpable realism of the Contes and Fables. Like a painter or a sculptor who has a living model before him, he saw his characters in action and sketched their gestures in quick strokes, giving them the clear outlines of figures in a vignette or of marionettes on a miniature stage.<sup>203</sup>

Apart from its artistic influences, the Paris of the seventeenth century was also rich in social and aesthetic ideas, such as the flourishing of "préciosité". As a social phenomenon, "préciosité" was not restricted to France alone; it was widespread throughout Europe; it manifested itself in various forms and under different names in several parts of the continent. Thus there was Euphuism in England, Marinism or concettism in Italy and Gongorism in Spain. It was particularly the Italian version that seduced the French élite of the seventeenth century and ushered in a considerable measure of artificiality in both feeling and expression. Although La Fontaine successfully resisted the negative influences of the movement, he absorbed its tone or spirit of gallantry and refinement, as one can infer from some of his love poetry, particularly the Elégies pour Clymène.<sup>204</sup>

---

202. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.403-428.

203. Ibid., pp.119, 136-37, Fables, VII, 4, ll. 1-2; VIII, 22, ll. 1-5.

204. Ibid., pp. 478-481.

On the whole, the social conditions exercised a profound influence on the writers. Although the majority of them were of middle-class origin, owing their fame and social success to royal patronage, the literature they produced was essentially aristocratic. The great playwrights, poets and prose writers of the epoch were in the position of artists catering for the tastes and pleasure of an aristocracy of which they were not a part. This select, leisured and critical public cherished noble birth, good breeding and delicacy of manners. Thus we see in the exquisite letters of Mme. de Sévigné, for example, a society assuming its modern complexion, with women becoming the arbiters of taste and fashion and their salons the centre of social and intellectual life. The intellectual situation was essentially social but the dissemination of ideas was not the prerogative of any particular class of people, for discussions were cherished by all classes. Naturally, ideas readily found their way into the salons, taverns and coffee houses. The entire temper of life acquired the suave, decorous and dignified tone of refinement which was mirrored in the literature of the epoch. The literary masterpieces were remarkable for their vitality, force and worldliness. They portrayed the spirit of the world, its greatness and splendour, its intensity, the human drama that animates it and the ordered beauty towards which it tends. That was the taste of the seventeenth-century Parisian society, a society in which the best in Greek and Roman antiquity was recaptured, refined and cherished, in which the sombre spirituality of the Middle Ages yielded place to worldliness and refinement of culture, and in which the questioning spirit of the Renaissance gave way to something like a general acceptance of a fixed and autocratic social order which politics, religion and philosophy seem to have taken for granted. It is in the light of this situation that the eloquence, clarity of thought, graceful simplicity and ease of movement which distinguish La Fontaine's style can be appreciated, for the poet deliberately set out to satisfy the taste of his epoch in his literary productions.<sup>205</sup> His works tend to be elegant without pretension, expressive without undue emphasis, simple without vulgarity, and subtle without affectation. The same situation explains their tendency to support the established authority, as we shall see in our discussion of the Fables, to be philosophical, political and essentially worldly, to

---

205. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.178 : Contes, I, (Préface).

give the impression of order and harmony. But beneath this polished surface, this semblance of splendid order and general acceptance were some contrary tendencies which were faint but unmistakable. For example, running clandestinely but parallel to the orthodox ideas was the undercurrent of libertinism. Some writers with libertine inclinations succeeded in pushing their licentious writings secretly to a considerable number of readers. These writers were neither philosophers nor moralists as such, but their desire for independence led them to adopt attitudes which had moral implications. Against the doctrine of a fixed autocratic order, they affirmed the existence of a virtue not founded on conventional observances but on obedience to legitimate natural impulses. Confronted with the social domination of the nobles and the intellectual domination of the clergy, their attitude was one of scorn and revolt rather than of acceptance. In bitterness and cynicism, they let loose their dissatisfaction in a clandestine proliferation of licentious literature, ranging from the merely sensual and obscene to the most blasphemous. Here again, this aspect of seventeenth-century Parisian life had a profound impact on the development of La Fontaine's literary thought. One cannot, for example, help seeing in the licentious verses of such libertine poets as Théophile de Viau, Jean Dehénault and others the remote ancestors of our poet's Contes. We shall return to this later on. In the same way, the naturalness of his poetic style and his abandonment of Malherbe's artificial poetry for a more natural lyricism were, in a way, a reaction against the artificialities and affectations of conventional poetry and of "préciosité". The pattern of development followed by La Fontaine's mind reflects the attitude of the contemporary Parisian society.

Parisian coffee houses and taverns provided literary men and intellectuals with suitable meeting grounds for exchange of ideas. This made it possible for our poet to be in constant touch not only with current events but with his literary associates such as Molière, Boileau, Racine, Chapelle and others. These friends would sometimes exchange ideas and discuss literature. Association with these literary friends provided La Fontaine with encouragement and stimulation. They aspired to introduce into their works "le beau, le naturel et le vrai" but each of them followed his own guidelines to the same goal. Among the several taverns and cabarets often frequented by La Fontaine and his associates

were the famous "Croix de Lorraine" and the "Mouton blanc", both noted for their predominantly literary customers. It was in the second tavern named above, for example, that Racine made the first draft of his play, Les Plaideurs, in the company of Furetière, Boileau and probably La Fontaine, all of whom were conversant with the modes and manners of the law-courts. Another centre of literary and intellectual influence in the city was the "Café" named "Pomme de pin", situated then in the rue de la Licorne near Notre-Dame de Paris. This coffee house was an active centre of libertinism, where gentlemen of the aristocracy such as the marquis de Liancourt, free-thinkers such as Cyrano and others met to let loose their eloquence in intellectual acrobatics. They discussed subjects ranging from minor local scandals to literature, politics and the great philosophical controversy between Descartes and Gassendi. Such were the discussions to which our poet no doubt listened with keen interest and which he would endeavour to recast in his own way in the Contes and Fables. Most of the cabarets had their special clients. There was, for example, the "Cabaret du Bel Air" in the Faubourg Saint-Germain where the King's musicians met. Lulli, the Florentine violinist, who would later sabotage La Fontaine's opera, Daphné, was a regular client of this cabaret, and so were well-known intellectuals like Jacques le Pailleur and Damien Mitton. Mathematicians, scientists and philosophers also frequented there. Etienne Pascal and his son Blaise used to come there to participate in the discussions on physics, mathematics and astronomy. La Fontaine met and certainly listened or took part in the discussions of many of these people. There is no doubt that these contacts and experiences broadened his mental outlook thus preparing him for the writing of the Fables.

Besides the mutual and direct exchange of ideas between the poet and his literary colleagues, the latter's professional successes were, in a way, powerful inspirations to him, for the constant demand which their friendship made on his intelligence offered him considerable intellectual stimulation. This comradeship, this facility for easy contact and mutual exchange of ideas were characteristic aspects of contemporary Parisian society, a society that was refined and meticulous in matters of taste and style. It was the character, the social values of this polite society,

in which authority, reason, propriety and genius were respected, that made it possible for La Fontaine to place his admirable gift of storytelling at the service of moral wisdom. Had the poet been born in the Middle Ages, he would perhaps have been something like a mendicant friar or a hermit or a monk, decorating the margins of his manuscripts with the pictures of birds and beasts. In the nineteenth century he would probably have been a figure drifting from one coffee house to the other, pouring out his soul in random lyrics and perhaps dying prematurely. But living in the Parisian society of the seventeenth century, he was preserved and encouraged through an admirable system of protection and patronage in high places, and enabled to develop into one of the most remarkable literary artists of all time. His talents, though natural to him, would perhaps not have acquired their charming purity, delicacy and universality if he had been born and bred in a less refined, less cultured society. As Taine has pertinently noted, La Fontaine's genius was the product of his race, time and milieu :

Le génie n'est rien qu'une puissance développée, et nulle puissance ne peut se développer tout entière, sinon dans le pays où elle se rencontre naturellement et chez tous, où l'éducation la nourrit, où l'exemple la fortifie, où le caractère la soutient, où le public la provoque.... Plus un poète est parfait, plus il est national. Plus il pénètre dans son art, plus il a pénétré dans le génie de son siècle et de sa race. Il a fallu la finesse, la sobriété, la gaieté, la malice gauloise, l'élégance, l'art et l'éducation du dix-septième siècle pour produire un La Fontaine.<sup>206</sup>

Taine may have stated his point with an air of finalism that smacks of exaggeration. But the truth remains that La Fontaine's association with the cultured personalities of seventeenth-century Paris such as the Bouillons, the Sévignés, the Sablières, the Condés and the Hervarts, to mention just a few, was no less significant in his intellectual development than his reading of Terence, Ovid, Horace, Virgil, Homer, Plato and Boccaccio. It took the elegance, the art, the splendid flowering of the French culture of that epoch as well as the frankness, malice and ironic wit native to the French, to form his genius. These national character traits will become more manifest as his personality unfolds in his literary works. He enjoyed the rare and inestimable gift of combining in his work the best of what had gone before with the immense

---

206. Taine, H., Op.Cit., p.344.

advantages of living in contemporary Paris.

Apart from the purely cultural and intellectual facilities provided by the milieu of Paris, La Fontaine had yet another important source of inspiration, stimulation and encouragement. Besides Fouquet and the purely literary associates, the poet also enjoyed the patronage of a number of influential figures who provided him with not only basic material needs, such as food, money and shelter, but created for him opportunities for intellectual stimulation. Among these friends were such well-known personalities as François de Maucroix, La Rochefoucauld, Saint-Evremond, the Bouillons, the dowager duchess of Orleans, Mme. . . de La Sablière whom we shall discuss separately in view of her special relationship with the poet, the Condés and the Hervarts, who were to offer him help and comfort in his old age. It was thanks to the generosity and magnanimity of these friends and admirers that La Fontaine was able to keep afloat when Fouquet sank. Walckenaer puts it thus :

L'amitié lui épargna même jusq'aux soins et aux  
soucis de sa propre existence. Il laissa doucement  
couler ses jours, et s'abandonna sans contrainte à ses  
goûts et à son genre.<sup>207</sup>

That the poet numbered so many distinguished figures of the epoch among his friends is not surprising. As we have seen in our analysis of his natural disposition, he had something particularly engaging in his simple, uninhibited, good-natured character. He would fain be at peace with everyone; he was forbearing and lenient towards people's foibles, liberal in construing their motives and as trustful in their affection for him as he was assured of his own for them. He was not the type to sit by, while his real friends were being disparaged or victimized. When, for example, most of the courtiers whom Fouquet had enriched abandoned him, La Fontaine remained faithful to his fallen patron. Even though at that time it was obviously risky to identify oneself with someone considered to be an enemy of Colbert, of the King and of the State, the poet stood manfully by Fouquet, and through his Elégie aux Nymphes de Vaux and his Ode au roi, helped to allay the storm of indignation raised on all sides against the Minister. In the Ode au roi, in particular, he dares to address the King in dignified and compelling verses,

---

207. Walckenaer, A.C., Op.Cit., pp. 1-2.

admonishing him to use his tremendous powers to crush his foreign enemies and to show mercy to his subjects.<sup>208</sup> Clearly, La Fontaine had the qualities of a man to be loved, a man pleasant to meet and pleasant to remember. This was the secret of his personal magnetism and partly of his professional success.

The most intimate of his friends, though not necessarily the most generous with material help, was certainly his old school mate, François de Maucroix. The two men shared a common taste for pleasure and a keen sense of literary values. Surviving correspondence between them, particularly the series, Billets à Maucroix, reveals to what extent the poet counted on his friend's encouragement and understanding. One example of this is the covering letter which he sent to Maucroix along with the manuscript of the fable, La Mouche et la Fourmi. It reads :

Il faut que tu aies oublié quelque chose dans la copie, car ce qui est au crayon ne s'y rapporte pas. Du reste j'ai corrigé cela, et je t'envoie une autre copie. J'aime mieux que tu me recueilles le tout. J'ai un conte à te faire....<sup>209</sup>

Then he adds in a postscript :

En voici encore, et je n'y trouve plus rien à changer. Il ne me semble pas que je doive me rendre à tes scrupules; ma veuve est également sincère dans ses deux états.<sup>210</sup>

The tone of this letter suggests that many of the tales and fables were submitted to Maucroix for reading and comments before they were published and there is no doubt that most of them were revised in accordance with his suggestions.

Le bon et plaisant chanoine de Maucroix est, sans aucun doute, l'ami qui a influé le plus sur la mentalité du fabuliste. Ils se visitent souvent, se comprennent fort bien, s'aiment d'un amour tendre et délicat, Maucroix est l'ami de toute une vie.<sup>211</sup>

Nowhere else is Maucroix' influence on the development of La Fontaine's mind more evident than in our poet's love elegies. Although the poet

208. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.470 : "Ode au roi", ll. 49-54.

209. Ibid., p.41 : "Billet à Maucroix"

210. Ibid., p.41.

211. Nayrac, J., Op.Cit., p.179.



drew inspiration for some of his elegies from Voiture, it is equally true that the development of his elegiac sensitivity was very closely related to his friendship and life-long association with Maucroix. The striking similarities between the elegies of Maucroix and those of La Fontaine suggest that both authors drew inspiration from a common source. Indeed both were avid readers of Voiture. But even then, their personal adaptations of their common model are so identical both in verse structure and turn of mind that one cannot doubt the fact that the two friends influenced each other too. A brief comparison of their elegies will help to illustrate this point. Maucroix's elegies are seven in number, but we shall limit our comparison to two of them, since nearly all of them are similar both in subject matter and in style. The one which appears to be the oldest is addressed to a certain Olympe, and was published in 1660, the same year that La Fontaine published his ballade on the peace of the Pyrenees.<sup>212</sup> The said Olympe was presumably Maucroix's first love. Before he knew her, he had lived free from emotional disturbances of amorous nature. But his meeting with Olympe results in an upsurge of emotion and agitation. His mental unrest, following his involvement with the charming Olympe, is such that he even contemplates abandoning her, but cannot muster sufficient courage and will-power to do so. Thus he laments :

J'ai fait pour mon repos des projets superflus,  
 Et j'ai dit mille fois : Je ne la verrai plus!  
 Mais que les vrais amants gardent mal ces paroles,  
 Et que tous ces serments sont des serments frivoles!  
 Je n'avais pas juré de vivre librement,  
 Que je brûlais déjà de rompre mon serment.  
 La raison avait beau combattre cette envie,  
 Je regardais assez le repos de ma vie,  
 Mais tu me possédais avec tant de pouvoir,  
 Qu'enfin je concluais qu'il fallait te revoir.<sup>213</sup>

This apparent blasphemy against love, traditionally characteristic of the elegiac genre, is repeated with comparable delicacy and feeling by La Fontaine in his Elégie troisième. But he handles it in a lighter, a more common-place manner than Maucroix.<sup>214</sup> The second elegy com-

212. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.460.

213. Maucroix, F.de, Œuvres diverses, Paris, édit. Louis Paris, 1854, t.I, pp.3-4 : "Elégie à Olympe"., ll. 39-49.

214. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.480.

posed by the latter is addressed to another of his sweethearts named Philis. The piece combines an indictment of love as "un funeste naufrage" with the contemplation of the risk of a new exposure to "l'orage" :

Ce n'est donc pas assez, des maux que j'ai soufferts :  
Tu veux, cruel Amour, que je rentre en tes fers,  
Et qu'à peine essuyé d'un funeste naufrage,  
J'expose encor ma vie au pouvoir de l'orage! 215

Here again, the similarity between these lines and those of La Fontaine's first and second elegies is so striking as to suggest the influence of one on the other. We find the same ideas, images and sometimes the very words used by Maucroix reappearing in our poet's work. Like that of Maucroix, La Fontaine's own elegies combine disenchantment with proposals for a new embarkation "sur la mer amoureuse". But these ideas are developed not in one elegy but separately at the beginning of the first and second elegies. The first two lines of Maucroix's poem, which our poet develops in a quatrain, form the disenchantment with amorous adventures or the indictment of love in his first elegy :

Amour, que t'ai-je fait? dis-moi quel est mon crime :  
D'où vient que je te sers tous les jours de victime?  
Qui t'oblige à m'offrir encor de nouveaux fers?  
N'es-tu point satisfait des maux que j'ai soufferts? 216

And the third elegy expands the last two lines of Maucroix's verse into proposals for fresh love adventures :

Me voici rembarqué sur la mer amoureuse,  
Moi pour qui tant de fois elle fut malheureuse,  
Qui ne suis pas encore du naufrage essuyé  
Quitte à peine d'un vœu nouvellement payé. 217

As disciples of Voiture, both Maucroix and La Fontaine have parallels in each other, apart from their mutual affection, literary co-operation and life-long friendship. Thus Olympe, Philis, Cloris and Diane retain in Maucroix's mind and works the same attachment which Iris, Doris, Clarice, Amarille and other beauties hold in those of La Fontaine. It is in the elegies that the two writers' feelings come closest to each other. Allowing for a slight difference in environment, upbringing, ultimate choice of profession and temperament, their approach to erotic poetry is virtually the same. But Maucroix being less inconstant in love and of a different profession in life, does not have the same graceful retinue of female figures around him as does La Fontaine. The for-

---

215. Maucroix, F.de., Op.Cit., p.198.  
216. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.478, ll.1-4.  
217. Ibid., p.479, ll. 1-4.

mer evokes his youthful amorous adventures briefly and discreetly; the latter celebrates his with all the wit and humour of a "bon conteur".

The next in the list of friends whose influences helped to stimulate La Fontaine's literary and intellectual growth is Racine. It was particularly through his assistance that our poet was able to find his way through the tangled maze of ancient Greek literature. Louis Racine, the son of the famous playwright himself, has recorded how La Fontaine succeeded in improving his knowledge of Greek antiquity through discussions with Racine :

Il (La Fontaine) cherchait à connaître les anciens par la conversation, et mettait à profit celle de mon père, qui lui faisait lire quelquefois des morceaux d'Homère dans la traduction latine. Il n'était pas nécessaire de lui en faire sentir les beautés; il les saïssait : tout ce qui était beau le frappait.<sup>218</sup>

The same relationship existed between our poet and Boileau, although his friendship with the latter does not seem to have been as intimate and constant as his association with Racine, particularly in their later years. Nevertheless, the association between La Fontaine and Boileau was quite fruitful to both from the literary point of view. Clarac, in an article on La Fontaine et Port-Royal, quotes fragments of a seventeenth-century manuscript, recording a discussion on Homer between the two friends.<sup>219</sup> What La Fontaine admired most and endeavoured to imitate from the literary techniques of Boileau and Racine was their fidelity to nature and their eloquent wisdom which enabled them to say only what should be said, in the right way, and at the right moment.

Among the less glamorous but lively salons in which our poet was always warmly received was that of Mme. de La Fayette, a lady of intelligence and taste, and the author of La Princesse de Clèves. Her salon was frequented by intellectuals, literary men and distinguished aristocrats. One of the stars of this salon was Mme. de Sévigné

218. Racine, Louis, *Mémoires sur la vie de Jean Racine*, t.V, p.156; Cf. Racine, J., *Œuvres*, édit. Mesnard, t.I. p.334.

219. Clarac, P., "La Fontaine et Port-Royal", article published in Revue d'Histoire de la philosophie, Paris, 1943, p.148.

who read and suggested amendments to La Fontaine's first poem to Fouquet, and whose daughter was to inspire the fable, Le Lion amoureux.<sup>220</sup> It was in this salon too, that the poet became more intimate with the duc de La Rochefoucauld who was a good friend of Mme. de La Fayette. There is not the slightest doubt that the wisdom and mature, even if cynical, reflections of this disillusioned, old "frondeur" appealed to the poet. This fact is borne out by the fables, L'Homme et son image<sup>221</sup> and Discours à M. le duc de La Rochefoucauld,<sup>222</sup> both of which were inspired by La Rochefoucauld's work, Réflexions et Maximes.

Another influential member of this circle was Saint-Evremond. Although the latter spent most of his life in exile in Holland and England, he was La Fontaine's good friend long before he went into banishment. Their paths crossed first at Vaux when Saint-Evremond was among Fouquet's frequent guests. From his exile he maintained steady contact with our poet through regular correspondence and exchange of ideas.<sup>223</sup> In fact the bond of friendship between the two men was such that later in life, Saint-Evremond made a determined but abortive effort to bring his friend over to England. Their literary meeting point is in Montaigne.

De Montaigne et de Charron à Saint-Evremond et La Fontaine et à Ninon....il n'y a que la main...C'est ainsi que, dans la série des temps, quelques esprits font la chaîne.<sup>224</sup>

Both writers think alike on a wide range of matters. The prose work entitled Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de M. le Prince, which La Fontaine published in 1684, was partly inspired by two of Saint-Evremond's works, namely, the Eloge de Monsieur le Prince (1652-1653) and La Comparaison de César et Alexandre. It was from Saint-Evremond, as we shall see later, that our poet learnt his first lesson on practical epicureanism and on the philosophy of Gassendi. Like Saint-Evremond, La Fontaine counsels indifference to the Christian ideal of

220. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.96, Fables, IV, 1.

221. Ibid., p.78, Fables, I, 11.

222. Ibid., p. 155, Fables, X, 14.

223. Saint-Evremond, Œuvres choisies, Paris, (Gidel), 1866, pp.243-248; Cf. La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., pp.49-51.

224. Sainte-Beuve, Op.Cit., t.IV, p.190.

sacrifice or self-mortification.<sup>225</sup> Man, insists Saint-Evremond, should get out of himself, try to forget his misery and use his pleasures to palliate the pain of living. Epicurean by temperament, he identifies the pursuit of pleasure as one of the cardinal virtues of life.<sup>226</sup> Both men share in common the "honnêtes-gens" attitude of being discreet in their pronouncements, modest in their aspirations, but sceptical, ironic and almost genuinely indifferent to those problems of life which are most likely to disturb one's inner freedom and peace of mind, be it honours, marriage or parenthood. Finally, both are united in their love of the simple pleasures of life : solitude, reading, love, the beauty of nature and music. From the purely intellectual aspect of their relationship, Saint-Evremond was a constant source of inspiration and encouragement to La Fontaine. In a letter to the former, dated 18 December, 1687, the poet acknowledges him along with Marot and Voiture as three of his most respected authors who are worthy of emulation.

L'éloge qui vient de vous  
 Est glorieux et bien doux :  
 Tout le monde vous propose  
 Pour modèle aux bons auteurs ;  
 Vos beaux ouvrages sont cause  
 Que j'ai su plaire aux neuf Sœurs :  
 Cause en partie, et non toute,  
 Car vous voulez bien sans doute  
 Que j'y joigne les écrits  
 D'aucuns de nos beaux esprits.  
 J'ai profité dans Voiture ;  
 Et Marot par sa lecture  
 M'a fort aidé, j'en conviens.  
 Je ne sais qui fut son maître :  
 Que ce soit qui ce peut être,<sup>227</sup>  
 Vous êtes tous trois les miens.

What La Fontaine admired most in Saint-Evremond was his original and independent mind, delicacy of style and taste, subtle wit, coupled with philosophical and scientific curiosity. Is it any wonder then that our poet's literary career was distinguished by these same traits and qualities?

---

225. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.172, Fables, XII, 20.

226. Saint-Evremond, Op.Cit., pp. 243-248.

227. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.49.

On the more social level, it was in the duc and the duchesse de Bouillon that La Fontaine found further encouragement and support when he most needed them. The duchess, in particular, was a young lady of great beauty, wit and wealth, with a remarkable taste for all sorts of pleasure and amusement. Our poet had a great deal of admiration for her, and celebrates her charms under the poetic names of "Olympe", "Uranie" and "Aminte". He dedicated Psyché to her, and it was she who commissioned La Fontaine to write the Poème du Quinquina. Her salon in Paris was a haven for the poet, other literary artists and pleasure-loving aristocrats. Nowhere else perhaps, could the Contes have had a more favourable welcome than in this circle of easy manners and worldly pleasures. Certainly, the encouragement from this quarter played a great part in stimulating La Fontaine's composition of the tales, for he wrote to satisfy their taste.

About the year 1663, the poet who, since the fall of Fouquet, had been secretly watched by Colbert's agents, was being prosecuted for usurping the title of "Ecuyer". His father had freely used this title before him without any unfortunate consequences. But since 1661 any unrecognized assumption of nobility was severely penalized, especially as title holders were exempt from certain forms of taxation. Whether the charge against La Fontaine was genuine or trumped up made no difference to Colbert and his henchmen. All that mattered was that it afforded the vindictive Prime Minister a good chance of punishing a supporter of his mortal enemy, Fouquet. The poet, realizing that he would be ruined, wrote a pathetic epistle to the duc and duchesse de Bouillon, requesting them in the name of their friendship to intervene on his behalf. He writes :

Digne héritier d'un peuple de vainqueurs,  
 Ecoutez-moi; qu'un moment de contrainte  
 Tienne votre âme attentive à ma plainte :  
 Sur mon malheur daignez vous arrêter; 228  
 En ce temps-ci, c'est beaucoup d'écouter.

The early intervention of the duc and duchesse de Bouillon led to the cancellation of the charge, thus saving not only La Fontaine's person but his evolving career as well. At the same time, these beneficent

patrons, or the duchess, to be precise, introduced the poet to her friends and distinguished associates in Paris. This was yet another excellent opportunity for La Fontaine to climb a step higher on the ladder of progress, for that same year he became a gentleman-servant to Marguerite de Lorraine, the dowager duchess of Orleans (1664).

The dowager duchess of Orleans was the widow of Louis XIII's brother and thus a member of the Royal family. Her good offices obtained for La Fontaine the official conferment of the disputed title of "écuyer" in July, 1664. The pious, rather gloomy palace of Luxembourg where the dowager duchess lived afforded little distraction or amusement to our pleasure-loving "bonhomme". Marguerite de Lorraine was for most of the period a sick woman, and the post of gentleman-servant, while conferring social status, paid only a small stipend. On the purely professional side, however, the association with Luxembourg was a most rewarding experience for La Fontaine. It gave him much leisure to devote himself to intensive literary activity. As would be expected, the eight years spent here were among the most fruitful periods of his career. Many projects fermented simultaneously in his mind, culminating in the creation of the new literary genres of Contes and Fables. The period saw the publication in quick succession of the Nouvelles en vers, containing the first two trial tales of Joconde and Le Cocu battu et content (Dec. 1664), the Contes et Nouvelles en vers (Jan. 1665), the second volume of tales (Jan., 1666), the first collection of Fables (March, 1668), Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon (1669), the Recueil de poésies chrétiennes et diverses (Jan, 1671) and finally, the Fables nouvelles et autres poésies (March, 1671). The composition and successful publication of this enormous volume of work could not fail to attract and retain the attention of the literary circles of the epoch. Certainly the activity enriched his experience, while increasing his confidence in himself and his ultimate success. It can thus be said that the patronage of the dowager duchess of Orleans was one of those very fortunate developments in the history of La Fontaine's evolution as a literary man.

This long list of friends and patrons should not be seen as a sign of parasitism or indolence on the part of the poet as some critics,

such as Lamartine, have tended to do.<sup>229</sup> No author, not even the most popular playwrights, could hope to survive at that time by the mere sale of his work. Patronage was the legitimate goal of every writer or artist. This patronage, as Georges Couton puts it, took various forms, ranging

de l'octroi....de vieux pourpoints du protecteur à l'honnête domesticité comportant logement, accès à la table, entretien d'un cheval, voire d'un carosse, à l'attribution de pensions, de sinécures sur des bénéfices ecclésiastiques, par exemple, à la nomination à une abbaye, un évêché, un simple prieuré. 230

Pensions and other grants were dispensed by the Royal Treasury, but since La Fontaine was virtually cut off from this source of income by the King's antagonism, he had to look for other means of support, if his literary and intellectual aspirations were to be fulfilled. The kindness and generosity of his friends, including the Condés and the Contis whom we shall discuss later on, not only encouraged our poet to forge ahead but afforded him some consolation in the face of what Chamfort has pathetically described as "l'oubli de la cour".

Leur société, leur amitié, les bienfaits des princes de Conti et de Vendôme, et dans la suite ceux de l'auguste élève de Fénelon, récompensèrent le mérite de La Fontaine et le consolèrent de l'oubli de la cour, s'il y pensa.<sup>231</sup>

The diversity of his protectors and benefactors is in fact a proof of greater independence than leaning on one single source of support. Naturally, his works reflect this diversity, for many of them were intended to appeal to various audiences or paymasters. Thus his works divide out into three main streams as they are grouped in several modern editions, namely,

Poèmes et poésies diverses,

Contes et Nouvelles,

Fables.

These productions, made possible by the congenial atmosphere of the Palace of Luxembourg, firmly established La Fontaine's literary reputation, for in the process of accomplishing this task, he created what was virtually a new literary genre.

---

229. See Lamartine's comment and Paul Valéry's reactions on page 30.

230. Couton, G, *La vieillesse de Corneille*, Paris, 1949, p.358.

231. Chamfort, N., *Op.Cit*, t.I, p.259.



CHAPTER III  
THE CREATION OF A LITERARY GENRE  
(1661 - 1668)

1. Evolution of the Theory of Contes : Clymène

After the literary apprenticeship with L'Eunuque, Adonis and the "pension poétique", La Fontaine was now set for the ambitious project of carving out for himself a literary domain which would be his own speciality. But before creating this new literary genre, the poet had first of all to prepare his public for the shock. He had to establish the theory or the guiding principles of the new genre, explain his techniques and illustrate them, if only to justify his claim to having actually created a new pattern out of the old. The establishment of this theory was not the result of a sudden inspiration nor was it carried out in a single literary work. The poet's literary doctrine evolved progressively with the development of his thought and works, culminating in the preface to the fables of 1668. The evolution began with the demonstration of the important concept of originality in imitation. This was carried out in the quasi-dramatic composition, Clymène.

The latter is a difficult work to classify. Some editors of La Fontaine, Lafenestre, for example, group it with the poet's dramatic works.<sup>1</sup> For Georges Couton, however, the piece is a conte,<sup>2</sup> while Pierre Clarac sees it as just another poem.<sup>3</sup> But if the dialogue form of Clymène, and its sub-title "comédie", suggest that it is a dramatic work, its foreword justifies its being grouped with the tales. A section of the foreword reads

Il semble d'abord au lecteur que la comédie que j'ajoute ici n'est pas en son lieu, mais s'il la veut lire jusqu'à la fin, il y trouvera un récit, non tout à fait tel que ceux de mes contes, et aussi qui ne s'en éloigne pas tout à fait. Il n'y a aucune distribution de scène, la chose n'étant pas faite pour être représentée.<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. Lafenestre, G., Les Grand Ecrivains de la France, Paris, 1891, t.VII, pp.141-183. Cf. Edmund Pilon et Fernand Dauphin, La Fontaine Théâtre, Paris, Garnier, 1929, pp.103-130.
  2. Couton, G., La Fontaine Contes et Nouvelles en vers, Paris, Garnier, 1961, pp. 228-255.
  3. Clarac, P., La Fontaine Œuvres diverses, Paris, Pléiade, 1958, pp. 20-46.
  4. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.249, Clymène, (Avertissement).

The work is effectively introduced by its opening lines as if it were a purely narrative piece<sup>5</sup> and Acante's final episode lends some weight to this view.<sup>6</sup> But this final piece, though it serves as the climax of the story, is only a small portion of the whole, possessing neither the elements of a story nor the liberty of tone which characterize the Contes. Its placement at the end of the work is a clever and deliberate artifice which assembles all the elements scattered in the preceding fragments, coordinates and organizes them into a unifying synthesis which completely eliminates the opposition between dramatic and narrative genres. The epic element too, is drastically reduced to just the "merveilleux" which now serves as a poetic ornament permitting a familiar correspondence between men and easy or indulgent gods. Viewed in this way, Clymène can be said to be just a poem. But it is a poem designed for a more serious purpose than the mere expression of a love episode. Before going on to examine what this purpose is, let us consider the second controversial aspect of this piece of work, namely, the date of its composition, for this must be established before the work can take its rightful place and assume its true importance in the development of La Fontaine's literary ideas.

The temptation to assign Clymène to the period of the "pension poétique" is quite strong, in view of the resemblance between it and some fragments of Le Songe de Vaux, and the allusions it makes to Vaux. For example, the lines :

Adieu donc, o Beautés! je garde mon emploi  
Pour les surintendants sans plus, et pour le roi.<sup>7</sup>

tend to suggest that Fouquet was still in power when the work was composed. But a careful study of the poem reveals that it belongs to a much later period, probably between 1664 and 1671, when La Fontaine was engaged in intensive literary activity while in the service of the dowager duchess of Orleans. The poet, for example, regrets the change in tastes and the consequent absence of the old type of epic poetry.<sup>8</sup>

5. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.249, ll. 1-15.

6. Ibid., pp. 256-257, ll. 641 - 728.

7. Ibid., p.249, ll. 9-10

8. Ibid. p. 255, ll. 565 -573.

Such a regret would be ridiculously out of place in a work composed during the period of the "pension poétique" when the heroic genre was still popular. It is also significant that the literary ideas discussed in this work, such as compliance with the tastes of the time, the theories of unity in diversity and originality in imitation, bear a closer similarity to those in the prefaces to the first volume of tales and the first collection of fables than to the ideas in the foreword of Le Songe de Vaux. Thus all indications tend to point to the period just before the Contes and the Fables of 1668 as the probable date of the composition of Clymène.

Situated at this point in time, the work becomes something more than just a romantic poem, and assumes its full significance in the literary evolution of La Fontaine, for it then becomes a demonstration shot, that is a demonstration or a trial of the suitability of some literary ideas, patterns and techniques in anticipation of the use the poet would make of them in the Contes and the Fables. This is in line with his usual practice of rehearsing his literary devices and instruments before embarking upon a major composition.

The poet conceived some important ideas relative to his handling of the early tales and fables, and the main purpose of Clymène was to try out those ideas and techniques. These ideas centre around the importance of inspiration in poetry,<sup>9</sup> the need for intelligent imitation and the belief that ancient poetry is superior to contemporary verse. This is precisely what the Muses mean when they doubt whether they can still rival the poetic excellence of such ancient writers as Horace and other famous poets of antiquity :

C'est bien dit, si cela pouvait s'exécuter :  
 Mais avons-nous l'esprit qu'autrefois à cet homme  
 Nous savions inspirer sur le déclin de Rome?<sup>10</sup>  
 Tout est trop fort déchu dans le sacré vallon.

The suggestion that ancient poetry has greater beauty and excellence than contemporary verse implies the acceptance of the fact that whosoever is aspiring to excel in this profession should imitate the poets of antiquity and contemporary authors who have imitated those poets. Thus the first

---

9. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.249, Clymène, ll. 1 - 5.

10. Ibid. p.253, ll. 420 - 423.

importance of Clymène is that it is a confirmation of La Fontaine's choice to tie his career with antiquity.

Lyric poetry, as demonstrated by Clio, Calliope, Polymnie and Erato, represents four traditions or styles: that of Marot, discreetly archaic,<sup>11</sup> of Malherbe, lofty and erudite,<sup>12</sup> of Horace, more varied but less sustained,<sup>13</sup> and of Voiture, elegant and humorous.<sup>14</sup> But in the manner La Fontaine demonstrates these patterns, they no longer represent distinct and clearly defined genres. According to the role he assigns to each of the Muses, Clio, the Muse of history, is to revive the archaic poetic forms of Marot;<sup>15</sup> Calliope, the Muse of eloquence, is to rediscover the oratorical grandiloquence of the Malherbian odes;<sup>16</sup> it belongs to Polymnie, the watch-dog of lyricism, to recover the varieties of the Horatian tone;<sup>17</sup> while Erato, lively and amiable, is to resuscitate the elegant and light touches of Voiture.<sup>18</sup>

Si ma prière n'est aux Muses importune,  
Devant moi tour à tour chantez cette beauté;  
Mais sur de nouveaux tons, car je suis dégoûté.  
Que chacune pourtant suive son caractère.<sup>19</sup>

Thus there is in this arrangement neither plagiarism nor unintelligent repetition, since originals cannot imitate one another. In this sense, Clymène is an illustration of an important literary theory, a theory which La Fontaine is to synthesize later in the Épître à Huet, namely the theory of imitation.

What the poet is trying to emphasize here, especially by means of the repeated versions of the same stylistic pattern and subject matter, is the fact that originality is possible within imitation, since the former consists, at least in the seventeenth-century sense, not in the subject matter, but in the manner of handling it. The contemporary French public were familiar with this principle, but it was normal for authors to justify their techniques in order to convince their audience that they were

---

11. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.252, Clymène, ll. 284-296.

12. Ibid., p.253, ll.332-335; 348-350.

13. Ibid. p.253, ll. 379-382.

14. Ibid. pp.252-253; ll. 336-337; 351-357.

15. Ibid. p.252, l.316.

16. Ibid. p.253, ll.366-368.

17. Ibid. p.253, ll.416-419.

18. Ibid. p.254, ll. 495-498.

19. Ibid., p.249, ll. 25-28.

neither mere plagiarists nor rebels against the established tradition based on intelligent adaptation. As a first step towards the audacious venture of creating new genres out of his models, therefore, La Fontaine thought it in consonance with professional ethics to explain and illustrate his technique of imitation so that the public would understand his handling of Ariosto, Boccaccio, Phaedrus, Æsop, Pilpai and other models used in the Contes and the Fables. Implicitly, he is here defending his right to treat the same themes and adopt the same plots as his models, provided that he does not descend to sheepish imitation. It is this principle that forms the basis of his invention and the keynote of the Epître à Huet<sup>20</sup>, to which we shall return later, and its successful evolution marks an important stage in the development of the poet's literary philosophy. It is intended to illustrate how elements of the most varied genres can be artistically united into one homogeneous entity, thus obliterating the barriers between them. In this sense, Clymène is also a brilliant demonstration of the æsthetics of unity in diversity, in opposition to the traditional practice, based upon the rigid separation of the genres, which seventeenth-century literary theorists defended strongly. Finally, the work is a dramatic revelation of La Fontaine's bias towards eclecticism. It represents the personal and audacious hypotheses of a confident author who is at this stage not only sure and in full possession of his means and techniques, but is about to deploy them in new inventions.

Before the principles demonstrated in Clymène were put into practice, first in the composition of the Contes, then in that of the Fables, they were developed further and expanded to include other important literary theories in a series of forewords and prefaces, prologues and epilogues. Besides the general "Avertissement", explaining the author's approach to the problem of versification, each of the prefaces accompanying the first two volumes of tales is an elaboration of the ideas enunciated in Clymène. Together the prefaces of 1665 and 1666 constitute a coherent treatise on the art of story-telling as well as a history of the evolution of La Fontaine's theory of Contes.

The first problem that confronted the poet was that of determining the pattern of verse to be used. This problem was further complicated

---

20. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.493, "Epître à Huet", ll. 21 - 32.

by the fact that the terms conte and nouvelle, though complementary to each other, differed as literary patterns in the eyes of seventeenth-century critics. Literally, a conte was a tale with emphasis on its essentially imaginary character, as opposed to a nouvelle or novelette which might have some basis of reality. The two types of tale correspond more or less to two different orientations or models available to La Fontaine from Italian literature. The conte is represented in Boccaccio's collection of tales and is not easily adaptable to poetic manipulation without considerably changing the original sense of the tale. The nouvelle on the other hand is the type of story associated with Ariosto. It is characterized by an air of romantic gallantry, and lends itself more easily to free imitation, amplification and natural style.

Between these two forms, the poet paused for reflection. If he chose the conte, it would imply remaining as close as possible to his model, with the obvious risk of overlooking the taste of his time. And if he opted for the nouvelle, he had to be prepared to attain in poetic diction the level of wit and elegance reached by his Italian model. But even if this issue were to be resolved, the vital question of verse pattern would still remain to be answered. Which pattern was likely to appeal most to the reading public, a tale composed in modern verse of mixed metres, described by the poet as the "vers irréguliers", or in verse of regular metres, embellished with archaisms, and labelled as "le vieux langage"? The first pattern has the merit of being nearer to prose and therefore more natural and easier to manipulate than the regular-line verse. In return, the latter exhibits greater elegance, charm and delicacy than the former. In the face of this dilemma, the poet did the only thing that any intelligent man would have done. He opted to submit the matter to public arbitration to determine their taste.

L'auteur a voulu éprouver lequel caractère est le plus propre pour rimer des contes. Il a cru que les vers irréguliers ayant un air qui tient beaucoup à la prose, cette manière pourrait sembler la plus naturelle, et par conséquent la meilleure. D'autre part aussi, le vieux langage, pour des choses de cette nature, a des grâces que celui de notre siècle n'a pas....L'auteur a donc tenté ces deux voies sans être encore certain laquelle est la bonne. C'est au lecteur à le déterminer là-dessus...<sup>21</sup>

---

21. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.177 (Avertissement).

Accordingly, he published in 1664 a sample of each of the two patterns. A nouvelle, imitated from Ariosto was composed in the "vers irréguliers" as Joconde<sup>22</sup> and a conte adapted from Boccaccio was published in the "vieux langage" as Le Cocu battu et content.<sup>23</sup> The trial-shots hit their target; both patterns were welcome to the reading public whose favourable response encouraged the poet to forge ahead. Rather than tie himself to one pattern, he wisely adopted the two forms concurrently.

Having resolved the issue of the verse pattern in the foreword, La Fontaine moves on to the task of defending the work itself from the triple charges of licentiousness, improbability and cruelty to the fair sex, anticipated from critics, and to correlate his argument to the whole question of imitation and originality in art. The discussion of these questions forms the subject of the two prefaces, and the clever way in which the poet extricates himself from this delicate problem makes an interesting study for the insight it gives into the development of his literary thought.

The first preface (1665) answers the anticipated objection to the licentiousness of the tales. Here one notices that the poet is obsessed with the success of the sample tales published the year before, for he opens his defence by summoning this success in evidence and by explaining his intention to exploit the favourable climate created by it.

J'avais résolu de ne consentir à l'impression de ces contes qu'après que j'y pourrais joindre ceux de Boccace qui sont le plus à mon goût; mais quelques personnes m'ont conseillé de donner dès à présent ce qui me reste de ces bagatelles, afin de ne pas laisser refroidir la curiosité de les voir qui est encore en son premier feu.<sup>24</sup>

In publishing more tales, he explains, he is not guided by the biased criticism of the literary cabal, intent on riding to fame on the back of other authors; he is guided by the tastes of the epoch.

Quoique j'aie autant de besoin de ces artifices que pas un autre, je ne saurais me résoudre à les employer: seulement je m'accommoderai s'il m'est possible, au goût de mon siècle, instruit que je suis par<sup>25</sup> ma propre expérience qu'il n'y a rien de plus nécessaire.

---

22. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.179, Contes, I, i.

23. Ibid. pp. 185-187, Contes, I, iii.

24. Ibid., p.178, (Préface).

25. Ibid. p.178.

To this end, the charges of immorality, improbability and cruelty to the members of the female sex must be answered. Playing upon the distinction between the ethical and the æsthetic notions of moral liberty, and gliding imperceptibly from the first to the second notion, the poet distinguishes two types of liberty open to the literary artist and examines them one after the other. Insisting on the essential and inseparable relationship between the contents of a literary work and the genre to which it belongs, he argues that it is in the nature of the genre which he is cultivating, in this case the Contes et nouvelles, to be licentious, and quotes the authority of Horace, the dictates of common sense, the examples of Ariosto and the ancients in support of his theory.

Quant à la première, je dis hardiment que la nature du conte le voulait ainsi; étant une loi indispensable, selon Horace, ou plutôt selon la raison et le sens commun, de se conformer aux choses dont on écrit. Or, qu'il ne m'ait été permis d'écrire de celles-ci, comme tant d'autres l'ont fait, et avec succès, je ne crois pas qu'on le mette en doute; et l'on ne me saurait condamner que l'on ne condamne aussi l'Arioste<sup>26</sup> devant moi, et les anciens devant l'Arioste.

It will be recalled that Horace in his De Arte poetica and in the first book of his Satires, mentioned earlier, insists that the author should not only select a genre and subject matter appropriate to his talents and temperament, but should also adapt himself to the character of his genre and subject matter, if professional success is to be ensured.<sup>27</sup> But if the nature of Contes is to be always licentious, why choose precisely that genre? How can the idea of "bienséance" be reconciled with a genre whose sole merit seems to consist in the most licentious liberties? These questions are partly answered by La Fontaine's reference to the authority of Horace. The genre suits his temperament and tastes. Thus in choosing to develop it, he has merely followed the valid prescriptions of his Latin master. But to justify the tales, it does not suffice to argue that their nature makes them so. Their intrinsic value in relation to the public for whom they are destined must be established. To this end, the poet, this time, finds inspiration in Cicero from whom he extracts a subtle definition of decency or "la bienséance" in a work of art:

---

26. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 178.

27. Horace, F., Op.Cit., pp. 204, 104.



Car, afin que l'on ne s'y trompe pas, en matière de vers et de prose, l'extrême pudeur et la bienséance sont deux choses bien différentes. Cicéron fait consister la dernière à dire ce qu'il est à propos qu'on die eu égard au lieu, au temps, et aux personnes qu'on entretient. Ce principe une fois posé, ce n'est pas une faute de jugement que d'entretenir les gens d'aujourd'hui de contes un peu libres. Je ne pêche pas non plus en cela contre la morale. S'il y a quelque chose dans nos écrits qui puisse faire impression sur les âmes, ce n'est nullement la gaieté de ces contes; elle passe légèrement.<sup>28</sup>

The famous work of Cicero to which our poet refers above is the masterpiece entitled De l'Orateur. In this work, which La Fontaine certainly read from cover to cover, the Latin author and orator states :

La chose capitale pour l'orateur, c'est de faire croire à son auditoire qu'on est précisément l'homme que l'on voudrait être.... Puis il faut que l'auditoire éprouve, en fait de passions, celles-là mêmes, qu'entend lui communiquer l'orateur : mais l'orateur y parviendra-t-il, s'il ne sait de combien de manières, et par quels ressorts, et au moyen de quel langage les cœurs humains peuvent être remués et dirigés en tous sens.... ? Ce n'est pas en rougissant, c'est en ne faisant pas ce qui prête à rougir que nous échapperons au reproche d'effronterie.<sup>29</sup>

Following this argument, what is indecent is not the sincere and candid presentation of the genre according to its nature and the tastes of the age, but robbing it of its charms in the name of false modesty. From the ethical or moral point of view too, this artistic robbery is more immoral than the harmless liberty of the tales.

But is this argument not a deliberate attempt to confuse decency with opportunism? Does this apparent collusion with public taste suffice to exonerate the poet from moral complicity? To exculpate himself from this blame, La Fontaine cleverly exploits the contemporary public criticism of the novel as an immoral and seductive genre, thus linking his own argument to the eternal debate on the moral influences of the novel and the theatre. In this way, attention is diverted from the licentiousness of the Contes to that of the novel and some dramatic works. It is the novel, the poet now argues, and not the conte, that could be dangerous to public morals :

---

28. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.178

29. Cicéron, Marcus Tullius, de l'Orateur, I, Texte établi et traduit par Edmund Courbaud, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1922, pp.34-35, 45.

Je craindrais plutôt une douce mélancolie, où les romans les plus chastes et les plus modestes sont très capables de nous plonger, et qui est une grande préparation pour l'amour.<sup>30</sup>

This argument is later developed in the prologue to Les Oies du Frère Phillipe. If women were permitted to read novels such as L'Astrée, why not the Contes?

Ne peut-il pas (le beau sexe) sans qu'il le dise,  
Rire sous cape de ces tours,  
Quelque aventure qu'il y trouve?  
S'ils sont faux, ce sont vains discours,  
S'ils sont vrais, il les désapprouve.<sup>31</sup>

According to La Fontaine, the tales are no more than amusing pastimes aimed at no particular individual or group :

Qui ne voit que ceci est jeu et par conséquent,  
ne peut porter coup?<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, the charge of cruelty to the fair sex does not hold. The tales are pleasantries whose intrinsic merit consists in the delightful manner in which they are told.

This nonchalant, self-deprecatory but ironic tone reveals the influence of Montaigne. In the foreword to his Essais, Montaigne nonchalantly declares that his book is written in good faith; that he has no ambitions for glory or public favour, since his strength is not capable of such a design; that all he is out to do is to dedicate the work to the private commodity of his kinsfolk and friends, so that when he dies, the latter may therein recover some traits of his condition thereby preserving their knowledge of him.

Si c'eust esté pour rechercher la faveur du monde,  
je me feusse paré de beautez empruntées : je veulx  
qu'on m'y veoye en ma façon simple, naturelle et  
ordinaire, sans estude et artifice; car c'est moy que  
je peins.<sup>33</sup>

It was the spirit of this foreword that La Fontaine tried to recapture in the preface of the Contes of 1665. He writes :

Il me suffit de ne pas vouloir qu'on impose en ma  
faveur à qui que ce soit, et de suivre un chemin  
contraire à celui de certaines gens, qui ne s'acquièrent  
des amis que pour s'acquérir des suffrages par leur

30. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.178.

31. Ibid., p.224, Contes, III, i, (Prologue)

32. Ibid., p.178.

33. Montaigne, M. de, Op.Cit., p.9.

moyen....Il n'appartient qu'aux ouvrages vraiment solides, et d'une souveraine beauté, d'être bien reçus de tous les esprits et dans tous les siècles, sans avoir d'autre passeport que le seul mérite dont ils sont pleins. Comme les miens sont fort éloignés d'un si haut degré de perfection, la prudence veut que je les garde en mon cabinet, à moins que de bien prendre mon temps pour les en tirer.<sup>34</sup>

Like Montaigne, La Fontaine identifies himself with his literary creation, particularly in the prefaces of the volumes of contes published in 1665 and 1666. In an effort to answer the moral objections by some critics, he wonders how he himself, who has served women in various ways and understood their psychology, could suddenly wish to scandalize them. Implicitly, he denies, like his Renaissance mentor, that his contes have any serious moral implication or pretensions. His only aim is ostensibly to amuse the reader with well-told, straightforward stories. We shall return to this point later and assess the poet's sincerity or the truth of this assertion by examining the actual contents of the tales. What La Fontaine imbibed from Montaigne's technique is this air of nonchalance, spontaneity and apparent irresponsibility which combines with the poet's own personal verve and sagacity to give the contes the quality of being somewhat frivolous, yet natural, real and captivating.

Accordingly, La Fontaine argues that it is the style of the tales, more than the probability or the moral implication of the episodes recorded in them, that counts.

Ce n'est ni le vrai, ni le vraisemblable qui font la beauté et la grâce de ces choses-ci; c'est seulement la manière de les conter.<sup>35</sup>

From this point the poet finally arrives at a formulation of the aesthetic and ethical theory of contes :

Contons, mais contons bien; c'est le point principal;  
C'est tout; à cela près, censeurs, je vous conseille  
De dormir, comme moi, sur l'une et l'autre oreille.  
Censurez, tant qu'il vous plaira,  
Méchants vers et phrases méchantes:  
Mais pour bon tours laissez-les là,

---

34. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.178.

35. Ibid. p.178.

Ce sont choses indifférentes;  
 Je n'y vois rien de périlleux....<sup>36</sup>  
 Beau sexe, vous pouvez le lire en sûreté.

It is easy to see from the above the distance the poet has covered from L'Eunuque. He has now, more clearly than ever before, established a distinction between morality and good literature, thus affirming once and for all the independence of the latter with regard to moral considerations.

In the second preface, published a year later (1666), La Fontaine, now made more confident by the overwhelming success of the first volume of tales, pronounces authoritatively on the validity of his theory and methods, particularly with regard to the twin doctrines of poetic licence and originality in imitation. The ideas demonstrated earlier on in Clymène are now to receive a final confirmation of their validity. Accordingly, the great literary debate passes from the defence of moral liberty to that of poetic licence. As in the earlier preface, the poet again cites the nature of his genre to justify the poetic negligences which would be unpardonable in other genres, but which are inseparable from the nature of Contes. It would be as easy for him to satisfy the literary critics by confining himself to artificial literary conventions, as it would have been for him to gratify the wishes of the moral purists by deleting or disguising unreasonably certain vital details of his tale. But just as he refuses to rob the tale of its charms in the name of false modesty, he will not now, by too much insistence upon artificialities, subordinate the essential to the accessory or sacrifice content to form. Being too scrupulous over little faults, such as occasional negligence of rhyme, enjambment, breaks and other minor details, would certainly spoil the beauty of the tale by interrupting its smooth flow.

Le trop grand soin de les éviter jetterait un faiseur de contes en de long détours, en des récits aussi froids que beau, en des contraintes fort inutiles, et lui ferait négliger le plaisir du cœur pour travailler à la satisfaction de l'oreille.<sup>37</sup>

The character of La Fontaine's particular genre afforded him the pretext he needed to free himself from the rigid principles of the Malherbian school of thought and to replace them with a more flexible

---

↑ 37. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.192-193, Contes, II, (Préface).

36 Ibid., p. 224, Contes, III, 1, (Prologue)

form, in keeping with the great Horatian principle that a poet should adapt himself to the character of the genre he is cultivating.<sup>38</sup> Our poet alludes to this dramatic change of literary masters and principles in certain lines of his Epître à Huet. Here, he confesses that it was Horace who at last opened his eyes to the artificialities of the style of a certain author, whom he formerly adopted as a model, but who "pensa me gêter", and whose "traits ont perdu quiconque l'a suivi."<sup>39</sup> In the first preface, he quotes Cicero to establish that it would be immoral to rob the tales of their charms in the name of modesty. This time, it is in Quintilian that he finds inspiration, proving by a similar argument, that in the genre of Contes the author would lose sight of his main objective, if he were unduly obsessed with the perfection of form. Simplicity and a measure of negligence are therefore permissible in the light genres such as the Contes. Thus, for the classical doctrine of "régularité", La Fontaine has now substituted "l'art d'agrèer", which makes strict regularity of form subservient to content, subordinates the outward form of a literary piece to the effect the work produces on the reader :

Quand celui qui a rimé ces nouvelles y aurait apporté tout le soin et l'exactitude qu'on lui demande, outre que ce soin s'y remarquerait d'autant plus qu'il est moins nécessaire, et que cela contrevient aux préceptes de Quintilien, encore l'auteur n'aurait-il pas satisfait au principal point, qui est d'attacher le lecteur, de le réjouir, d'attirer malgré lui son attention, de lui plaire enfin; car, comme l'on sait, le secret de plaire ne consiste pas toujours en l'adjustement, ni même en la régularité; il faut du piquant et de l'agréable si l'on veut toucher.<sup>40</sup>

From the principle of poetic licence, or the freedom to use any method to get to the heart of the reader, the poet claims the right to modify, abridge or amplify his model to suit the tastes of his own time and his particular situation. Accordingly,

Il retranche, il amplifie, il change les incidents et les circonstances, quelquefois le principal événement et la suite; enfin, ce n'est plus la même chose, c'est proprement une nouvelle nouvelle, et celui qui l'a inventée aurait bien de la peine à reconnaître son propre ouvrage.<sup>41</sup>

---

38. Horace, Op.Cit., p.204

39. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.493, "Epître à Huet", ll.46-55.

40. Ibid. p.178.

41. Ibid. p.178.

The liberties taken with his models are explained as measures to ensure flexibility and effective communication. But in doing so, the poet has used a lot of tact and moderation, maintaining a delicate equilibrium between the two extremes of either being a mere copyist or unreasonably mutilating his model.

Je confesse qu'il faut garder en cela des bornes, et que les plus étroites sont les meilleures: aussi faut-il m'avouer que trop de scrupule gênerait tout.<sup>42</sup>

Without over-estimating here, more than in the previous preface the importance of his literary theories, La Fontaine retraces the distance covered since his first foreword to the Nouvelles en vers (1664), and proudly defines the modest but original place which he has carved out for himself in the literary world.

Car notre auteur ne prétend pas que la gloire lui en soit due, ni qu'il ait mérité non plus de grands applaudissements du public pour avoir rimé quelques contes. Il s'est véritablement engagé dans une carrière toute nouvelle, et l'a fournie le mieux qu'il a pu, prenant tantôt un chemin, tantôt l'autre, et marchant toujours plus assurément quand il a suivi la manière de nos vieux poètes, "quorum in hac re imitari neglegentiam exoptat potius quam istorum diligentiam."<sup>43</sup>

The reference in this quotation to the prologue of Terence's Andrien is significant. It not only indicates one of the poet's sources of inspiration here, but also underlines the continuity of thought between the general foreword of the Contes (1664) in which La Fontaine hesitated between the choice of the "vers irréguliers" and the "vieux langage", and this second preface. In the end, he has opted for neither in particular, but has learned from experience that if the first, which relies more on imitation, involves, thanks to the excellence of the models, less risk of misleading the imitator, the second offers a greater latitude for free inventions. A careful study of the first two volumes of tales reveals that the poet usually opens the series with tales brilliantly narrated in the first pattern, and concludes with a piece elegantly embellished

42. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.178,

43. Ibid. pp.192-193. For the latin quotation, see the prologue to Terence's Andrien. Literally translated the quotation means "whose negligences in this matter he (La Fontaine) wishes to imitate."

in the second. Between these two he intersperses other tales and short novelettes. The arrangement remains more or less the same in the later volumes, with the irregular verse tales forming the main bulk, while the tales in "le vieux langage", composed in regular metres and discreetly tinted with archaisms, are reserved as the show-piece of the best in the poet's originality and poetic imagination.

With the prefaces of 1665 and 1666, establishing the aesthetic and ethical theory of contes, and stressing the importance of poetic liberty, subordination of form to content and originality in imitation, La Fontaine virtually concludes the formulation of the theory of his genre begun in Clymène. The brilliant manner in which he presents his points, the over-all merit of his finished product, shown in the extent of his research into the works of the relevant models, in the weight of his argument and the logic of his reasoning, bear out the fact of his intellectual growth, a fact recognized by no less a person than one of the most highly respected literary "doctes" of the epoch, namely, Gombauld. The latter formed with Mainard and Chapelain the great triumvirate which presided over French poetry from 1645 onwards. They represented the tradition of grand poetry whose gradual disappearance from the literary scene they deeply deplored. Mainard died in 1646, Gombauld in 1666, but not before the second volume of Contes were published. As soon as the tales were out, La Fontaine sent a copy to Gombauld. As the last of the literary watch-dogs, Gombauld demonstrated the broadness of his tastes and the soundness of his judgement in the comments he made on La Fontaine's preface. In a letter to our poet, dated 12 February 1666, he commends La Fontaine's erudition and regrets the poet's suggestion that those tales would be the last of the series.

Votre préface s'y sent bien de votre érudition et de l'usage que vous avez du monde, et rien ne m'y a déplu que ce que vous semblez y protester, au commencement, que les historiettes enjouées dont ce volume est formé seront les dernières qu'on verra de vous.<sup>44</sup>

Gombauld obviously admired our poet's intellectual effort and must have noted the forward-looking character of the prefaces as embodied in the literary theories which they expound. It now remains for us to see

---

44. Quoted in Clarac, P., La Fontaine, Paris, (Hatier), 1959, pp. 59-60

how these principles are put into practice in the adaptation of models chosen from French and Italian sources. In the next *section*, we shall examine his treatment of these models and how this reveals the place of the Contes in the literary and intellectual development of La Fontaine.



## 2. The Early Volumes of Contes.

Following the huge success of the trial tales : Joconde and Le Cocu battu et content, La Fontaine had them reprinted exactly a month later (Jan. 1665) together with eight new tales. These, including one other tale, added probably by some later editor of the poet, constitute what we know today as the "Première partie" of the Contes. A year later (Jan. 1666) thirteen more tales were published. Modern editors of the Contes have combined these thirteen tales with three others, published in a separate collection in 1667, to form our current "Deuxième partie". With the publication of the third part of the tales in 1671 and the Nouveaux Contes in 1674, not only was the series completed but the development of the genre attained its highest peak. Most of the later tales continue the trend inaugurated in the earlier volumes.

Although La Fontaine had access to Greek, Latin and French sources, the inspiration for the bulk of the tales was drawn from Italian models. The poet's debt to Italian literature with regard to the Contes is acknowledged in some lines of the famous Epître à Huet in which he lists his favourite Italian authors.

Je Chéris l'Arioste et j'estime la Tasse;  
Plein de Machiavel, entêté de Boccace,  
J'en parle si souvent qu'on en est étourdi;      45  
J'en lis qui sont du Nord, et qui sont du Midi.

The most influential of these as far as the poet's development of the Contes is concerned are Ariosto and Boccaccio. But he seems to have betaken himself first to the works of Ariosto, given the fact that his earliest tale, Joconde, was imitated from this author. The most popular of Ariosto's works is the lengthy epic entitled Orlando Furioso. This was one of the sources that nurtured French Renaissance and classical literature, enriching it with materials suitable for almost all the known genres. What was it, one may ask, that drew so many writers to Ariosto, thus heightening his influence in France throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? The secret of his appeal lay in the wide variety of his themes and his inventive skill. As one of his admirers puts it,

---

45. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.493 : Epître à Huet.

His actors range from archangels to horses, his scene from Cathay to the Hebrides. In every stanza there is something new: battles in all their detail, strange lands with their laws, customs, history, and geography, storm and sunshine, mountains, islands, rivers, monsters, anecdotes, conversations; there seems no end to it. He tells us what his people ate, he describes the architecture of their palaces; when you tire of one adventure he plunges you into another with something so ludicrous or questionable in its exordium that you feel you must read just one more. 46

An author with such a wide range of interests could scarcely have failed to win the admiration of a poet like La Fontaine whose literary motto was "diversity".

Diversité c'est ma devise....  
 Je suis chose légère, et vole à tout sujet 47  
 Je vais de fleur en fleur et d'objet en objet.

One can therefore understand why the poet readily found inspiration for his maiden Conte in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso.

In the Italian model, the handsome young hero, Jocondo, is summoned to the palace of Astolf, King of Lombardy. On his way to the palace, he suddenly remembers his wife's parting present and returns unexpectedly to find her making love to another man. He restrains his anger and continues his journey to the royal palace, very worried, depressed and embittered. He is about to give way to utter despair when by chance he surprises the queen herself beneath a lusty dwarf. Taking consolation from what he sees, he discloses the incident to the King. Both men set out on a tour of seduction to avenge themselves on the fair sex; many and various are their conquests. To crown it all, they share the love of an innkeeper's daughter who contrives to take on a third lover in the same bed. When Jocondo and his companion discover what has happened, they take consolation from this unique demonstration of feminine infidelity, reconcile themselves to the fact that all women are alike, and return home to tolerate their own wives. 48

---

46. Lewis, C.S., *The Allegory of Love*, Oxford, (Clarendon), 1936, pp. 301-333.

47. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.274, Contes, IV, xi: "Pâté d'Anguille"; Cf. *ibid.*, pp.490-491, "Discours à Mme de la Sablière" (1684) ll. 69-70.

48. Arioste, L, *Roland Furieux*, Traduction nouvelle et en prose par M. V.Philippon de la Madelaine, Paris, (Morizot), 1864, p.326, Chant XXVIII.

La Fontaine's fidelity to the model stops with following this bare plot. For the rest, he modifies the original episode beyond recognition, adding or suppressing details as he thinks fit and consonant with the tastes of his public. In the original version, for example, the parting gift which Jocondo's wife gives her husband is a collar to which a crucifix, decorated with the relics of the saints, is attached.<sup>49</sup> This sort of gift would have been something of an anachronism in the eyes of the audience of the seventeenth-century fashionable salons, permeated by the spirit of "préciosité". It was within these salons that our poet expected to find the greater proportion of his readers. So in place of a collar with a crucifix, he substitutes a beautiful bracelet.<sup>50</sup> The choice of this item is not surprising. Bracelets were popular love tokens in the seventeenth century in much the same way as our engagement or wedding rings of today. In his annotation of line 1343 of Molière's Dépit amoureux, published in 1656, Despois comments:

Ces bracelets étaient des gages que les hommes recevaient des femmes, et que sans doute ils portaient secrètement. "Les amants, dit Furetière tiennent à grande faveur d'avoir des bracelets de cheveux de leur maîtresse."<sup>51</sup>

La Fontaine also establishes the contrast, familiar in French classical literature, between court and countryside. This opposition is implied in the hint that Jocondo lives in the country, "loin du commerce et du monde"<sup>52</sup> and in the farewell speech of his wife :

As-tu bien l'âme assez cruelle  
Pour préférer à ma constante amour  
Les faveurs de la cour?....  
Ne quitte point les hôtes de tes bois,  
Ces fertiles vallons, ces ombrages si cois....<sup>53</sup>

Although Ariosto mentions the hero's country home, his allusion to it serves merely to distinguish between two geographical locations. In La Fontaine's tale, this distinction assumes a philosophical significance, symbolizing on one hand the peace and comfort of solitude derived from

49. Arioste, L. . Op. Cit., p. 328

50. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 179, Contes, I, i, l. 77.

51. Molière, Œuvres, (édit. E. Despois), Paris, (Hachette), 1873, t. I, p. 489 : Dépit amoureux, Acte IV, scène 3, l. 1343.

52. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 179, Contes, I, i, ll. 37-38.

53. Ibid., p. 179, ll. 52-56; Cf. ll. 57 - 64.

modest living, in which "Le repos règne jour et nuit."<sup>54</sup> and the elusive glamour and turbulence of ostentatious life and court honours

Qu'on conserve avec inquiétude,  
Pour les perdre avec désespoir.<sup>55</sup>

on the other. This reflection already anticipates the note of warning which the poet will sound later in the Fables, particularly in Le Berger et le Roi.<sup>56</sup> When the seemingly unexpected happens, and the hero surprises his own wife sleeping together with a slave, several thoughts pass through his mind. Conflicting emotions, ranging from the feeling of disappointment and humiliation to anger, take hold of him. He thinks of destroying the illicit lovers as they lie together in his bed; this action would avenge his honour. But he musters sufficient self-control to restrain the impulse, and continues his trip to the palace, taking the incident rather philosophically. Jocondo's attitude here is pertinent for the insight it gives into La Fontaine's approach to the whole question of the relationship between the sexes, as compared to that of his Italian model. In Orlando Furioso, for example, Ariosto begins the story of Jocondo with an apology to the fair sex thus suggesting that the episode he is about to narrate is a strange one likely to fill members of this sex with shame. In a tone of irony he suggests that female readers should skip over the chapter, if possible, to avoid being scandalized :

Femmes charmantes, et vous qui savez les aimer,  
gardez-vous d'écouter cette histoire: elle n'a d'autre  
objet que d'appeler sur un sexe aimable le blâme, la  
honte et le mépris. Bien que les discours de telles  
gens ne puissent vous atteindre, et bien qu'on sache que  
le vulgaire se plaît à parler de ce qu'il connaît à peine,  
je vous prie, jeunes dames, de laisser ce chant de côté,  
et la suite de mon récit n'en sera pas moins claire.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to Ariosto, La Fontaine views the episode philosophically. He finds nothing strange or extraordinary in the infidelity of Jocondo's wife. If inexperienced people believe the woman to be too much in love with her husband to succumb to temptation, he, La Fontaine, "Moi qui sais ce que c'est que l'esprit d'une femme",<sup>58</sup> would be a

54. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.179, l.60.

55. *Ibid.* p.179, ll. 56-57.

56. *Ibid.*, p.152, Fables, X, i, ll.25-30.

57. Arioste, L., *Op.Cit.*, p.326.

58. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.179, Contes, I, i, l.86.

fool to subscribe to such a belief. For our poet, to fail is human; and he quickly commends the hero's restraint and self-control in the face of this commonplace, though trying provocation.

....Mon avis est qu'il fit bien.  
Le moins de bruit que l'on peut faire  
    En telle affaire  
Est le plus sûr de la moitié. 59

Molière, who shares an affinity of thought with La Fontaine on a variety of subjects, re-echoes this idea in one of his comedies, Amphitryon, staged in Paris for the first time on 13 January, 1668, four years after the publication of Joconde. He writes :

Sur telles affaires, toujours, 60  
Le meilleur est de ne rien dire.

It can thus be seen that Jocondo's self-control before the provocative situation, which in Ariosto's tale is motivated by weakness arising from his fear of losing his beautiful young wife whom he loves so dearly, 61 that is, which is motivated by a lower passion, is, in La Fontaine's work, prompted by the need to avoid scandal or by the sense of honour, which is a higher passion and a more intellectual concept.

In the Italian model, it is Jocondo who proposes to the King the tour of seduction across the country in order to avenge themselves on their wives :

Ma foi, répond Joconde, il faut, sans nous soucier  
de ces infidèles, éprouver la vertu des autres : faisons  
aux maris ce qu'on nous a fait à nous mêmes....Par-  
tons pour conquérir les dépouilles opimes de mille  
maris. 62

In the seventeenth-century French context, it would have sounded rather impudent and audacious for a subject, no matter how highly placed, to court such a degree of familiarity with His Majesty the King. It is more fashionable that the latter should be master over his own private affair. Accordingly, in Joconde, La Fontaine makes the proposal to tour the countryside come from the King rather than from Jocondo :

Vengeons-nous-en, courons le pays;  
Cherchons partout notre fortune. 63

---

59. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.179, Contes, I, i, ll. 100-103.

60. Molière, Amphitryon, Paris, 1668, Acte III, scène x, ll.1942-1943.

61. Arioste, L., Op.Cit., p.328.

62. Ibid., p.331.

63. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.181, Contes, I, i, ll.246-247.

The elaborate preparation for their departure and the character of their mission are deliberately emphasized to create the impression of reality. We are made to appreciate the fact that their trip is a "hunting expedition", and the poet conveys this idea by the use of such appropriate terms as "voie" which, in the given situation, suggests more the image of a hunting track than that of a public highway. Ariosto does not mention this detail; he simply states that the two men travelled across France.<sup>64</sup> A less imaginative artist would probably have been satisfied with that much, or at best, added something, like this :

"Leur bagage étant fait,  
Nos galants se mettent en route".

La Fontaine probably thought of such a construction, but then, the verse would be less expressive of the nature of the trip and the most important item of the "bagage". So the poet opted for the following picturesque lines :

Leur bagage étant prêt, et le livre surtout,  
Nos galants se mettent en voie.<sup>65</sup>

The phrase, "et le livre surtout", is most significant here because of the light it throws into the understanding of the stronger stress which La Fontaine lays upon his model's main idea, namely, that all women are alike in matters of love and conjugal fidelity. As if bent on verifying and establishing beyond doubt the veracity of this assertion, the two adventurers are provided in the poet's tale with "un livre blanc"<sup>66</sup> an element which is entirely absent in Ariosto's tale. The ease and speed with which the amorous travellers fill this notebook with the names of easy female victims of all classes and all walks of life, each listed according to her rank, are deliberately emphasized by our poet to prove the truth of the assertion.<sup>67</sup> The provision of the "livre blanc" whose contents speak for themselves, is a more reliable evidence and, consequently, presents a more concrete and effective form of argument than Ariosto's method, based upon an indirect reporting of the successes of the two friends in their career of seduction.

64. Arioste, L., Op.Cit., p.331.

65. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.181, Contes, I, i, ll. 272-73.

66. Ibid., 1.257.

67. Ibid., 1.490.

It is not clearly known how La Fontaine came by this innovation. An often suggested source of inspiration is Molière's Don Juan ou le festin de Pierre. Although the idea of cataloguing the list of amorous conquests does not feature in the final draft of this comedy as we have it today, it did in its original scenario prepared by Gueullette. The script had an episode in which Don Juan tries to go back on his promise to marry a girl whom he has seduced with promises of marriage. The hero suggests his disenchantment with the girl by shifting from the idea of marriage to the undertaking to have her name included in the list of hundreds of other female aspirants :

Tenez, lui dis-je, voilà la liste de toutes  
celles qui sont dans le même cas que vous,  
et je vais y ajouter votre nom.<sup>68</sup>

But what makes it difficult to accept this work as our poet's source of inspiration is the fact that Joconde was first published in December, 1664, while Molière's play did not appear until February 15, 1665, suggesting that it may in fact have been La Fontaine's tale that influenced the text of the scenario instead of the other way round, unless of course, the scenario was written much earlier than 1665, and our poet had access to it. But there is nothing to suggest that he did. In Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles, a beautiful young nun keeps a secret diary containing the list of her admirers.<sup>69</sup> It is more probable that La Fontaine got the idea of the "livre blanc" from this episode, given the fact of his familiarity with the above-named collection. His ability to use this episode in Joconde is yet another example of his adaptability and inventive skill. How this fact contrasts with his modest but somewhat ironical suggestion that he does no more than translate his model!

Je le rends comme on me le donne.<sup>70</sup>

Ariosto's tale mentions the decision of the two adventures to share simultaneously the favours of the innkeeper's daughter as the climax of their experiences and for reasons of variety.<sup>71</sup> But the Italian

68. Molière, Œuvres complètes, (édit. Despois et Mesnard), Paris, (Hachette), 1880, t. V, p. 27.

69. Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles, XV.

70. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 181. Contes, I, i, l. 294.

71. Arioste, L., Op. Cit., p. 333.

model gives no suggestive details; it says little either about how the ground is prepared for the sport or which of the two men takes the first turn. In La Fontaine's Joconde, this episode is enlivened with additional details, including the hint that the heroes draw lots to determine who should have the girl first.<sup>72</sup> More important still, the episode is used by our poet to drive home two of his cherished ideas about women's attitude to love. Firstly, feminine infidelity has nothing to do with sophistication or social rank, since the innkeeper's daughter, a country lass, supposed to be a virgin,

Qui ne connaisse encor ni le mal ni le bien<sup>73</sup>

could be so loose. Secondly, no woman is ever satisfied with one man. All lovers are possessed by some sort of genie, making the taste for variety in love as keen in women as in men :

A présent on dirait que quelque astre malin  
Prend plaisir aux bons tours des maris et des femmes.<sup>74</sup>

These ideas are fairly close to the ones Ariosto is out to illustrate in his tale. But the main difference between his work and that of La Fontaine is in the manner<sup>in which</sup> the ideas are presented. Thus from the point of view of art and effective presentation of ideas, Joconde marks a literary and intellectual growth and a great improvement on the Italian model. Most seventeenth-century French readers tended to be touchy about forthright description of love scenes. In deference to their taste, our poet makes an effort to cover some of the obscene details recorded by Ariosto, by replacing them with suggestive remarks and innuendoes. Thus, emphasis is shifted from Ariosto's episode of three men in a bed with one girl to that of Jocondo's silly belief in the girl's virginity.

Je la tiens pucelle sans faute,  
Et si pucelle qu'il n'est rien  
De plus puceau que cette belle :<sup>75</sup>  
Sa poupée en sait autant qu'elle.

It will be recalled that Tallemant des Réaux (1619-1690), one of La Fontaine's literary associates and comrades of the "Round Table", had earlier expressed a similar idea in his Historiettes (1657-1659). He writes :

72. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.182, Contes, I, i, ll. 347 - 355.

73. Ibid., p.182, l. 333.

74. Ibid. p.183, ll. 498-499.

75. Ibid., p.182, ll. 335-338



Quand on luy produisit la Fanuche, qu'on luy  
 faisait passer pour pucelle, il trouva le chemin  
 assez frayé et il se mit à siffler. "Que veut  
 dire cela?" luy dit-elle. "C'est, répondit-il,  
 "que j'appelle ceux qui ont passé par icy.  
 "Picquez, picquez, dist-elle, "vous les attrapperez."<sup>76</sup>

It is only natural that our poet, wishing to express the ridicule in Joconde's belief, would recall the episode in his friend's collection of libertine stories and racy anecdotes about contemporary morals. This shift of emphasis makes La Fontaine's treatment of the scene comparatively less indecent than that of his model. There is no doubt that he makes this modification with an eye on the tastes of his public, the public of the fashionable and sophisticated salons by whom the idea of virginity would be received with mixed feelings. This clever manipulation of a delicate situation to his own advantage reveals the poet's mental alertness or presence of mind, whose significance as one of the sure indexes<sup>es</sup> of his mental growth could not escape the attention of one of the learned journals of the epoch, namely, the Journal des Savants. Commenting on the improvement which La Fontaine makes on his model, the journal writes :

La Fontaine n'a pas seulement usé de la liberté qu'ont prise les traducteurs de s'éloigner quelquefois du tour et des manières qui se trouvent dans les livres qu'ils traduisent, mais il a même changé beaucoup des principales circonstances des événements qu'il rapporte.<sup>77</sup>

Like Joconde, our poet's next intellectually significant tale, La Fiancée du roi de Garbe, is adapted from Italian literature, this time from Boccaccio's The Decameron. Access to this work was made possible for La Fontaine by the existence in French prose of some old translations of it. Among these were : Laurens du Premierfait's translation, first published in Paris in 1485, and reprinted in 1521, 1534 and 1537. It is not likely that our poet used this version of Boccaccio's work, for the translation was anything but readable. A more probable source is the version produced by Antoine le Maçon, which was dedicated to Marguerite de Navarre, and published in 1545. The erudite abbé de

---

76. Tallemant des Réaux, Gédéon, *Historiettes*, (édit. Antoine Adam) Paris, (Pléiade), 1960, t.I, p.7.

77. *Journal des Savants*, Paris, janvier 1665, p.39.

Longuerue described this work as a literary masterpiece.<sup>78</sup> The original version narrates how the heroine, Alatiel, affianced to the King of Garbo, makes love to eight men before finally arriving at her betrothed's court where she gets happily married.<sup>79</sup> As usual, La Fontaine retains this outline, but takes greater liberty with Boccaccio than he did with Ariosto. The reader is warned early in the tale not to expect any slavish fidelity to the model :

Je me suis écarté de mon original.<sup>80</sup>

Nevertheless, he conserves certain elements of the original which he considers essential to the plot and which meet his artistic and intellectual requirements. For example, he retains the vital detail of the fact that the heroine passes through eight hands before reaching the ninth to whom she is betrothed, and that after her adventures her man receives her in good faith as if nothing has happened.<sup>81</sup> He also recaptures and greatly improves on his model's admirable wit and impertinence, as we shall see later in this chapter. The resemblance between the two versions of the tale ends there. The rest of La Fiancée du roi de Garbe is a product of La Fontaine's adaptive skill and poetic imagination, a product so different from the original as to constitute a new genre, that is, a conte, in the poet's sense of the term.

The Italian model is weak in characterization. The personages are portrayed by Boccaccio as if they were mere automata, powered by one central force, namely, sensual passion. They lack the slightest element of honour and humanity. Even the heroine herself is not sufficiently endowed with a well-delineated personality, for the only image that the reader is given of her is that of an ill-starred beauty, turned by circumstances into a sex machine. Rejecting this image, La Fontaine endows Alatiel with a new and more interesting personality, which not only commands respect, but arouses sympathy for her and the other characters. He traces the traumatic experiences through which the poor girl, victim of her own beauty, has to undergo, her emotional conflicts, her initial stubborn resistance to the forces of seduction which threaten her highly treasured chastity. We are skilfully guided to see and appre-

78. Longuerue, (l'abbé de), Longueruana, Paris, 1754, p.32.

79. Boccace, G., Le Decameron, (Nouvellement traduit d'Italien en François par Maistre Antoine le Maçon), Paris, 1545, pp.43-50.

80. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.213, Contes, II, xiv, l.9.

81. Boccace, G., Op.Cit. p.43, Cf. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.213, ll. 14 - 21.

ciate the circumstances leading to her final capitulation : she is young and beautiful, sympathetic and refined; she is a girl who has been taught by her high birth to appreciate merit, kindness and generosity in herself and in other people. Could such a creature resist for long the concentrated pressure from men of substance and power to whom she is indebted for her very life? Relentlessly conspiring against her moral resistance too, are the physical surroundings and the elements : the beautifully wooded park, the secluded grotto and the fine spring weather, all fortuitously favourable and well-blended to dispose her to amorous sport.

Son amant et le lieu l'assuraient du secret:

C'était une puissante amorce;  
Elle résistait à regret.

Le printemps par malheur était alors en sa force:

Jeunes cœurs sont bien empêchés  
A tenir leurs désirs cachés,  
Etant pris par tant de manières.

Combien en voyons-nous se laisser pas à pas

Ravir jusqu'aux faveurs dernières,  
Qui dans l'abord ne croyaient pas  
Pouvoir accorder les premières!

Amour, sans qu'on y pense, amène ces instants:

Mainte fille a perdu ses gants,  
Et femme au partir s'est trouvée,  
Qui ne sait la plupart du temps  
Comme la chose est arrivée.<sup>82</sup>

In defence of the heroine still, the poet sketches the struggle raging in her mind amidst conflicting demands. She argues with herself as she mentally reviews the facts of her relationship with her benefactor vis-a-vis the determination to preserve her chastity, and wonders whether the preservation of the former is not worth the sacrifice of the latter :

Les services d'Hispal en ce même moment

Lui reviennent devant la vue:

Ses jours sauvés des flots, son honneur d'un géant.

Que lui demandait son amant?

Un bien dont elle était à sa valeur tenue:<sup>83</sup>

This argument reduces Alatiel's power of resistance by half.<sup>84</sup> But although her defence is crumbling, she manages to keep up the fight, declining, in spite of herself, Hispal's invitation to enter the grotto with him:

82. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.213, Contes, II, xiv, ll. 232-247.

83. Ibid. ll.251-255.

84. Ibid., ll.248 - 250.

Près de l'autre venus, notre amant proposa  
 D'entrer dedans. La belle s'excusa, 85  
 Mais malgré soi, déjà presque vaincue.

At this juncture, the elements intervene in their full force, shattering all that remains of the heroine's defence, for a sudden storm sets in:

Une pluie acheva l'affaire.  
 Il fallut se mettre à l'abri:  
 Je laisse à penser où. Le reste du mystère  
 Au fond de l'autre est demeuré. 86

Given these trying circumstances, argues La Fontaine,

Il ne faut pas pour cela qu'on l'accuse....  
 Je sais plus d'une belle,  
 A qui ce fait est arrivé 87  
 Sans en avoir moitié d'autant d'excuses qu'elle.

In Boccaccio's tale, Alatiel is presented throughout as a dumb victim of a series of violations. In our poet's version this element of violence and brutality is greatly minimized. In place of the cowardly devices, ranging from drugging the heroine to brutal rape, recorded by Boccaccio,<sup>88</sup> La Fontaine makes the girl submit willingly to amorous demands. But in each case, she is richly furnished with arguments and legitimate excuses to justify her submission. Sometimes it is out of pity and the desire to save the life of an admirer who threatens to starve himself to death, if she turns down his request. After all, she argues, is it not more honourable and more human to preserve life than chastity?

Laisser mourir un homme, et pouvoir l'empêcher,  
 C'est avoir l'âme un peu trop dure.  
 Par pitié donc, elle condescendit  
 Aux volontés du capitaine....<sup>89</sup>

Sometimes she acts to save her own neck, which is only natural:

Si par pitié d'autrui la belle se força,  
 Que ne point essayer par pitié de soi-même 90  
 Elle se force donc, et prend en gré le tout.

On another occasion she is taken unawares while fast asleep under the influence of wine taken during a party the previous evening (ll. 491-495). When she falls next, it is as an act of vengeance on her deceiver (ll. 522-528). Then again, she is in succession compelled by charity (ll. 588-606), by the prospects of seeing her home again (ll. 672-681) and

85. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.215, ll. 248 - 250.

86. Ibid. ll. 261-264.

87. Ibid. ll.265-268.

88. Boccace, G., Op.Cit. pp.43-50.

89. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.216, ll. 344-347.

90. Ibid. ll.390-392.

by the obligation to honour the last wishes of a dead guardian (ll. 712-722). Back home at last, she fabricates stories to deceive her father, gets married to her betrothed and lives happily ever afterwards. The main interest of these series of excuses or arguments provided for the heroine lies not in their moral justification, since nearly all of them can be proved to be weak, but in the logical way La Fontaine uses them to produce a continuous, well-told story in verse, and in the revelation they make of our poet's ideas about chastity. We shall examine these ideas later in this chapter.

Part of La Fontaine's literary technique, which contrasts sharply with Boccaccio's method of indirect reporting, is to intervene personally in the course of the story either to correct some impression, as in the following passage :

"Pourquoi me dira-t-on, nous ramener toujours  
 Cette cassette? est-ce une circonstance  
 Qui soit de si grande importance?"  
 Oui, selon mon avis; on va voir si j'ai tort.  
 Je ne prends point ici l'essor,  
 Ni n'affecte de railleries.  
 Si j'avais mis nos gens à bord  
 Sans argent et sans pierreries,  
 Seraient-ils pas demeurés court?  
 On ne vit ni d'air, ni d'amour.<sup>91</sup>

or to insinuate motives, as in these two lines :

Que ce fût ou non son dessein,  
 Pour se servir d'Hispal il fallait tout promettre.<sup>92</sup>

It is a credit to the poet's artistic growth that these interventions are made without interrupting the smooth flow of the story. The feeling of his presence in the narrative gives the tales an air of reality and authenticity which is lacking in the original model. This transformation of Boccaccio's prose narrative into a beautiful piece of poetry, richly documented, artistically embellished and compressed, yet possessing all the elements of a well-told story, justifies our poet's claim to have evolved a new genre. After reading Joconde and La Fiancée du roi de Garbe, and comparing them with the Italian models, one is no longer left in any doubt that La Fontaine has become "un conteur par excellence". The success of the Contes has proved the validity of the literary theories which he expounded in the forewords and prefaces.

---

91. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.214, ll.179-188. Cf. Ibid., p.217, l.467.

92. Ibid., p. 215, ll. 308 - 309.

The reconstruction of Alatiel's formerly detestable image into one that commands respect and sympathy, irrespective of her weaknesses, suggests La Fontaine's more realistic attitude, as against Boccaccio's unrealistic tendency to condemn the heroine. This realism is significant. It prepares the ground for the statement of our poet's position on the question of chastity in both men and women. If, as we shall shortly see, he believes that chastity is an illusion or contrary to nature, then he has to demonstrate this belief in his tales, hence the reluctance to condemn Alatiel and the deliberate effort to justify her amorous weaknesses.

In La Fontaine's hands, therefore, the Italian tales become more philosophical, with more fully developed characters, and forming a coherent and essential part of the poet's literary philosophy. This is proved by the close affinity between the themes and plots of the Contes and those of the poet's earlier and even later works. A brief analysis of this relationship helps to give some insight into the essential unity of La Fontaine's thought. The farewell which Jocondo's wife bids him at the moment of their separation,<sup>93</sup> for example, recalls that of Venus to Adonis,<sup>94</sup> and at the same time anticipates the supplication of the prudent pigeon to his mate in the Fables.<sup>95</sup> In a way, the Contes form a necessary transition from Adonis to the Fables. Adonis portrays a queen forced away by her obligations from the one she loves; in Joconde the roles are reversed; it is now the husband who leaves his beloved young wife for the call of state duty. Heroism thus resolves into an elegy. It remains for the them to be transposed to the world of animals and to embellish it with details borrowed from the lamentations of Dido in the fourth Book of Virgil's Æneid<sup>96</sup> to arrive at the fable of Les Deux Pigeons(IX, 2) The fable is thus linked up with the epic poem, but the passage from Ovid to Virgil is only possible through the intermediary of Ariosto. The theme of absence in Joconde is related to that of retreat, already treated in lyric style in Les Stances d'Hortésie.<sup>97</sup>

---

93. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.179, I, i, ll. 51-68.

94. Ibid., p.365, Adonis, ll. 178-198.

95. Ibid., p.140, Fables, IX, 2, ll. 5-17.

96. Virgil, Æneid, IV, ll.309-311; Cf.Ovid, Metamorphosis, X, ll.11-12.

97. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.393, Le Songe de Vaux, II : "Les Stances d'Hortésie".

This is linked up with the opposition between restless ambition and prudent moderation, stretching from L'Eunuque through Adonis to Joconde, and reaching its climax in the fables of L'Homme qui court après La Fortune et l'Homme qui l'attend dans son lit and Le Berger et la mer.<sup>98</sup> The different themes grouped together in one Conte are often what the poet later develops into short, witty fables. The most striking illustration of this technique is seen in the subtle relationship between the fables, L'Homme qui court après la Fortune, et l'Homme qui l'attend dans son lit and Les deux Pigeons (VII, 12; IX, 2), both of which have the tale of Joconde as their common ancestor or their meeting point. The hero of the tale, Jocondo himself, has to choose between the glamour of court life in the Royal Palace of Lombardy on the one hand and the attention of a loving wife, the peace of a modest country home on the other. In his choice, he commits the folly of abandoning the latter for the former in pursuit of chimerical fortune. In the Fables, the same folly is committed by the man who runs after fortune (VII, 12) and the imprudent pigeon (IX, 2). The example of Joconde is just one of the vast stock of cases, of themes and plots, hatched in the Contes and developed later in the Fables. But it serves to show what use La Fontaine makes of the pieces of Italian tales which he adapts, and how the Contes which hasty critics consider as mere sensual escapades, not only possess an intellectual character, but occupy a central rather than a marginal position in his literary creation. It is only when this fact is recognized that the essential unity and continuity of La Fontaine's intellectual development as well as the important truths hidden in the Contes can be better appreciated.

The poet covers some universal and vital truths beneath the appearances of licentiousness and frivolity. This device is imitated from his Renaissance master, Rabelais. In the prologue to the first Book of Gargantua, Rabelais compares his work to the Silenis or little old boxes, such as those seen in the shops of apothecaries. These boxes are painted on the outside with wanton toyish figures like harpies, satyrs, bridled geese, horned hares, saddled ducks, flying goats, thriller harts and other similar images which excite laughter and ridicule. But when the boxes are opened, they are found to contain

---

98. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.123, 96, Fables, VII, 12, ll.22-32; IV, 2, ll. 21-31.

les fines drogues, comme baulme, ambre, gris, amomon, musc, zivette, pierreries, et autres choses précieuses.<sup>99</sup>

Rabelais' technique of explaining his aims and methods to the reader, his concern that the latter should distinguish between the moral truth which his works hide beneath an appearance of frivolity, and his acceptance of responsibility for the true meaning of what he writes, are all imbibed by La Fontaine. The latter's prefaces to the first and second volumes of Contes are equally concerned with defining the aesthetics of the genre, his own intentions and the general truths contained in the tales.<sup>100</sup> The episode with which our poet illustrates his argument on the indiscretion of a whole group of nuns in L'Abbesse is drawn from Rabelais' narrative about the sheep of Panurge in his Pantagruel<sup>101</sup>

Maître François en conte un plaisant cas.  
Ami lecteur, ne te déplaira pas  
Si, sursoyant ma principale histoire,<sup>102</sup>  
Je te remets cette chose en mémoire.

Besides Rabelais and Montaigne, La Fontaine also combined his Italian sources with inspiration drawn from other French works, notably Les Cent Nouvelle<sup>s</sup> nouvelles, the tales of Marguerite of Navarre and Bonaventure des Périers. He borrowed nine tales from Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles. Of these the most interesting on account of its apt illustration of the war of intrigues between the sexes is Le Mari Confesseur<sup>103</sup>. The original version, the seventy-eighth tale of the collection, narrates how a beautiful housewife distributes her favours in succession to a squire, a knight and a priest in return for some gifts. When her husband, posing as a priest, discovers her perfidy and cupidity, she tries to save her face by pretending to have seen through her husband's trick all along and to have deliberately confessed to infidelity merely to mortify his jealousy and suspicion.<sup>104</sup> In adapting this episode, La Fontaine ignores his model's emphasis on the woman's greed for material gifts, and concentrates his effort on proving that the type of ruse used by the suspicious husband to penetrate his wife's private life could be a two-edged sword. Thus, when the guilty

---

99. Rabelais, F., Œuvres, (édit. Louis Moland), Paris, (date of publication not shown), t.I, p.3.

100. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.179, Contes, I, (Préface).

101! Rabelais, F., Op.Cit., t.II, pp.48-50: (Livre IV, chapt.viii).

102. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p258-59, Contes, IV, ii, ll.21-24, Cf. ibid. ll.25-41.

103. Ibid., p.187, Contes, I, iv.

104. Jourda, Pierre, Conteurs français du XVIIe siècle, Paris, (Pléiade), 1965, pp.164-167.



wife, applying her admirable presence of mind, turns the weapon against the designer himself, the latter is forced to cry out :

Béni soit Dieu! dit alors le bon homme;  
Je suis un sot de l'avoir si mal pris.<sup>105</sup>

The idea that in sexual relationships the intriguer can often be caught in his own trap is given further emphasis in the second part of the Contes. But this time, the intellectual inspiration is drawn from Marguerite de Navarre. La Fontaine's indebtedness to her work for the development of his skill as a "conteur" is expressed in the opening lines of La Servante justifiée :

Boccacce n'est le seul qui me fournit:  
Je vais parfois en une autre boutique.  
Il est bien vrai que ce divin esprit  
Plus que pas un me donne de pratique:  
Mais, comme il faut manger de plus d'un pain,  
Je puise encore en un vieux magasin;  
Vieux, des plus vieux, où Nouvelles nouvelles...<sup>106</sup>

Although Marguerite de Navarre is not mentioned here by name, the particular tale in which this acknowledgement appears is clearly defined in its sub-title as "Nouvelle tirée des contes de la Reine de Navarre". In her collection of tales entitled the Heptaméron, Marguerite de Navarre narrates as the eighth tale an episode about an unfaithful husband named Bornet who plans to seduce his wife's maid. His wife, on discovering the plan, contrives to exchange places with the maid. Unknowingly, the intriguing husband not only enjoys the favours of the supposed maid, but invites his friend to share in the sport, only to discover, to his own confusion and dismay, that he has prostituted his own wife.<sup>107</sup> Converted into the tale, Les Quiproquo, the episode is used by La Fontaine to stress the fact that resort to ruses and intrigues of this nature can act as a boomerang. More often than not, it makes the intriguer a victim of his own machinations.

L'époux vit bien qu'il fallait être sage.<sup>108</sup>

---

105. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.187, Contes, I, iv, ll. 44-45.

106. Ibid., pp.203-204, Contes, II, vi, ll. 1-7.

107. Marguerite d'Angoulême, L'Heptaméron, Des Nouvelles de très-haute et très-illustre princesse Marguerite d'Angoulême, Royné de Navarre, Nouvelle édition, publiée d'après le texte des Manuscrits avec des notes et une notice par P.L.Jacob, Paris, (Adolphe Delahays), 1876, p. 50.

108. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.295, Contes, V, viii, 1.176.

The last but not the least of the early French story-tellers, to whom our poet was indebted for inspiration in the Contes, is Bonaventure des Périers. The latter's work entitled Nouvelles Récréations et joyeux devis inspired three of La Fontaine's tales : Le Faiseur d'Oreilles (II, i), Le Gascon puni (II, xiii) and Les Lunettes (IV, xii). The last-named tale, in particular, provides the poet with one of the hard-hitting satires directed against members of the clergy and nuns in the fourth part of the Contes. In the original version, a sensual young man, disguised as a nun, penetrates the convent where he amuses himself with the love-starved nuns. Suspecting something unusual about the whole place, the mother superior subjects the nuns to a physical examination, during which each of them presents herself in the nude before the superior. The wolf among the fold, fore-warned, ties his genitals to his lap with a rope in order to escape detection. But at the sight of so many nude beauties parading before him, he has a powerful erection which splits the rope and releases his sexual organ. The latter, on account of the force with which it breaks loose, hits the spectacles of the mother superior as she bends low to examine the youth.<sup>109</sup>

What interests La Fontaine in this model is the fact that nature follows its course. The beauty of the female body is designed by nature to attract the male. It would have been unnatural or abnormal, if the youth failed to react in the face of so much physical beauty, displayed by naked women, for, as the poet himself puts it, not even saints and angels could have been insensitive to such an attraction :

..... Amenez-moi des saints;  
 Amenez-moi, si vous voulez, des anges;  
 Je les tiendrai créatures étranges  
 Si vingt nonnains, telles qu'on les vit alors,  
 Ne font trouver à leur esprit un corps.<sup>110</sup>

For La Fontaine, the resisting of legitimate natural impulses or attempting to suppress them is the height of hypocrisy. The effort made in this direction is as futile as it is vain, for nature is so powerful that it must ultimately triumph over man-made obstacles to the natural fulfilment of its laws, particularly with regard to sexual desires. This is

---

109. Des Périers, Jean Bonaventure, Nouvelles Récréations et joyeux devis, (édition Louis Lacour), Paris, 1874, t.I, p.8.

110. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.276-77, Contes, IV, xii, ll. 89-93.

true of both sexes, contrary to the seventeenth-century ideas of platonic love or "amour courtois". It is particularly in these tales that the poet cleverly brings out the contrast that is inherent in the concept of womanhood held in his epoch. It was believed by a large section of the public that women are essentially pure, lofty and platonically inclined in their relationship with men. The Contes tend to prove that this concept of womanhood is a mistaken one, and that women, though they succeed better than most men in hiding their true feelings, are generally as lustful as men. The force of the sexual impulse in women, particularly when a deliberate attempt is made to suppress the urge, is further demonstrated in Mazet de Lamporechio, adapted from Boccaccio. Here, a village rustic, pretending to be <sup>deaf and</sup> dumb, secures himself the post of gardener in a convent of nuns. He is quickly seduced by the latter who compete among themselves for the right to have him first as a bedfellow, thus proving that

Le voile n'est le rempart le plus sûr  
Contre l'amour, ni le moins accessible. 111

Although the Contes present the appearance of a useless collection of frivolous tales, they are bound together by a clear-cut philosophy which runs through all the tales, namely, that the sexual acts of the characters should not surprise anyone. The urge to love is a legitimate natural impulse which should not be stifled, for the more one tries to suppress this urge the more intense the desire to obey nature grows. Desire is the child of constraint :

Tentation, fille d'Oisiveté,  
Ne manque pas d'agir de son côté;  
Puis le Désir, enfant de la Contrainte. 112

When Richard, the hero of Le Calendrier des Vieillards, by following the calendar of the feast days of the Church, restricts the satisfaction of the sexual desires of his wife to just four brief periods in a year, he forces the young woman to succumb to the sexual potency of a handsome young pirate named Pagamin. When the latter gives her the option of remaining with him in the ship or returning to her legitimate husband, she denounces the artificial impotence of the latter and chooses to remain with the pirate, in spite of the riches which her husband places

111. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.222-23, Contes, II, xvi, 11.1-2.

112. Ibid., 11. 22-24.

at her disposal. To the pirate's proposal she replies :

J'ai pris mari qui pour toute chanson  
 N'a jamais eu que ses jours de férie;  
 Mais Pagamin, sitôt qu'il m'eut ravie,  
 Me sut donner bien une autre leçon.  
 J'ai plus appris des choses de la vie  
 Depuis deux jours qu'en quatre ans avec vous.  
 Laissez-moi donc, Monsieur mon cher époux;  
 Sur mon retour n'insistez davantage.  
 Calendriers ne sont point en usage<sup>113</sup>  
 Chez Pagamin, je vous en avertis.

In this sense, the Contes of La Fontaine are an objective appraisal of the facts of nature and a plea that its legitimate impulses should be obeyed, provided that moderation is observed. Of these impulses the strongest and the most dominant, particularly in youth, is the urge to love. That is, the desire to have a sexual relation with a person of the opposite sex. No matter what is done to divert this urge from its normal course, nature will in the end have its way in one form or the other. It is no wonder, therefore, that the poet insists in the preface of the tales of 1665, that by telling the stories in the way he does, he has done no injustice whatsoever to any sex. He is simply being rational and natural, true to himself and to the facts of life. Thus parents giving their daughters in marriage have something to learn from the Contes in the same way that prospective husbands and wives have. They should all realize that physical compatibility deserves as much consideration as the dowry and other matters. At this stage, it is easy to see that the story-teller, who earlier on denied moral involvement in the Contes, and avowed that his sole aim is to amuse the reader with well-told stories, was merely hiding his true objective under studied nonchalance. At last, the Contes have shown themselves capable of stimulating both pleasure and serious thought.

We therefore dare to state that in spite of the licentious character of the Contes, they are, on the whole, forward-looking and thought-provoking. They reveal La Fontaine's mental attitude towards women in general. His approach to love and his obvious adoration of the fair sex in their physical reality are opposed to the idealistic concept of self-

---

113. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.208-210, Contes, II, viii, ll. 214-223.

abnegation. For the poet, the true end of love is its physical consummation, not a situation in which the lover gazes ecstatically upon his "untouchable" mistress as though she were supernatural. To this end, the heroes and heroines of the Contes are creatures of flesh and blood rather than symbols of some higher, abstract quality of the spirit. The poet rarely condemns the physical union of people who are in love, for he believes that copulation is a pleasurable activity, sanctioned by nature. Yet the actual descriptions of love scenes are, on the whole, stylized and remarkably astringent, for La Fontaine is first and foremost a magnificent story-teller, who realizes that the most important ingredients of a good story are a lively and eloquent style, an interesting plot and characters who can be instantly visualized in the mind of the reader.

The merit of the Contes lies in the judicious combination of this artistic appeal with the stimulation of thought. As we have already noted, the tales illustrate in a humorous and delicate manner the ceaseless conflict of the sexes in which the main weapons on either side are deceit, intrigue and subterfuge. It can be seen from this that the poet's attitude in the Contes is based upon three main propositions which he set out to demonstrate in an agreeable manner: sexual relationships are based on conflict; this conflict manifests itself in the form of intrigues and counter-plots; such plots and ruses are double-edged and can often turn into boomerangs. Native cunning, maintains La Fontaine, sometimes triumphs, but where it fails, the parties concerned should bury the hatchet and endeavour to accept the inevitable.

S'accommoder à tout est chose nécessaire;  
 Ce qu'on ne voudrait pas, souvent il le faut faire;  
 Quand il plait au destin que l'on en vienne là,  
 Augmenter sa souffrance est une erreur extrême. 114

The idea first mooted in Joconde, to the effect that the less noise one makes about certain inevitable situations in life the better, is once more recalled here. But it is in La Coupe enchantée<sup>115</sup> and particularly in Pâté d'anguille that the poet turns it into an ethical principle:

Bien sot de faire un bruit si grand  
 Pour une chose si commune!<sup>116</sup>

114. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.216, Contes, II, xiv, ll. 386-389.

115. Ibid. p.230, III, iv, ll. 1-2.

116. Ibid., p.258, IV, ii, ll. 33-34.

At the same time that the spirit of the Contes suggests prudent submission to the inevitable, it leads the reader to see, particularly in the case of La Fiancée du roi de Garbe, how an embarrassingly seductive beauty could become not only a victim of her own charms but, like Helen of Troy, the cause of wars and the ruin of nations.

Ce changement de favoris  
Devint à l'infante une peine;  
Elle eut regret d'être l'Hélène  
D'un si grand nombre de Paris. 117

Commenting on the artistic, literary and intellectual merits of the Contes, Pierre Bayle writes :

Avec la permission de ceux qui mettent l'antiquité  
si au-dessus de notre siècle, nous dirons ici  
franchement, qu'en ce genre de composition, ni  
les Grecs, ni les Romains, n'ont rien produit qui  
soit de la force des Contes de M. de La Fontaine,  
et je ne sais comment nous ferions pour modérer  
les transports et les extases de MM. les humanistes,  
s'ils avaient à commenter un ancien auteur, qui eût  
déployé autant de finesse d'esprit, autant de beautés  
naturelles, autant de charmes vifs et piquants, que  
l'on en trouve dans ce livre-ci. 118

The significance of Bayle's observation can be appreciated in the light of the reflections of that noted critic and story-teller, Paul-Philippe Gudin. The latter describes the writing of tales as "une manière de faire avec vérité l'histoire du mensonge". He adds :

Cette entreprise est peut-être plus étendue que  
vous ne le croyez : elle exige de l'érudition, du goût,  
de l'imagination; qualités dont la réunion est aussi  
rare qu'elle est précieuse. 119

This opinion of a respected "conteur" and critic gives an idea of La Fontaine's literary and intellectual personality now that he has become "un conteur par excellence". His Contes were unique in their time and indeed, at all times. Nothing quite like them had been seen prior to their publication, and nothing in the genre of tales has ever succeeded in approaching their enchanting combination of wit, eroticism, lyricism and charm. One has only to read Ariosto, Boccaccio or the other

117. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.218, Contes, II, xiv, ll.613-616.

118. Bayle, P., République des Lettres, Paris, avril, 1685,  
t.III, p.435.

119. Gudin, Paul-Philippe, Contes, précédés de recherches sur  
l'origine des contes, Paris, (Dabin), 1804, p.1.

sources used by the poet, to be struck by the difference. The accomplishment of this task is a sure evidence of his intellectual growth.

With the brilliant formulation of the theory of Contes, the spectacular success of the tales themselves, and the increasing debate which they stimulated in literary circles, La Fontaine has now become a literary theorist of fame, an analyst of delicate human emotions and, above all, a controversial author, engaging the attention of the literary world. The skill and stylistic devices, developed thus far, will now be deployed in the most ambitious venture yet of all his career, namely the Fables.

### 3. The Conception of the Verse Fable.

At the same time that La Fontaine's literary theories were gradually evolving, he was also acquiring a lot of ideas on almost every aspect of national life, social, political, religious, philosophical, indeed on any aspect of life that could possibly be a subject of poetic meditation. There was naturally a desire to communicate these ideas to his readers. But the main problem here was that what would best convey the ideas, that is, prose, was not necessarily the most artistic genre for a literary artist such as La Fontaine. He probably considered the genre of prose essay, interspersed with verse, which he had already tried out in Le Songe de Vaux. Both Montaigne and Rabelais had earlier shown prose essay as the normal medium of expressing encyclopaedic thought, for its qualities of clarity and succinctness make it very suitable. But then, philosophical prose would be more informative than rich in artistic effect. What La Fontaine wanted was a genre which would place the advantages of his poetic skill at the service of ideas. The more artistically ideas are expressed the more effective they are likely to be. Thus ideas and art would enrich and fertilize each other. It was to this end that the poet contemplated the creation of the verse fable.

The latter was conceived as a genre which would at the same time be witty, lively, poetic as well as informative. The 17th-century French public delighted in instructive, pithy anecdotes as much as they admired the sermons of Bossuet or the Maxims of La Rochefoucauld. In fact, around 1644, there were several French translations of the apologues of the Oriental fabulist, Pilpai, the most popular of which was the edition or collection entitled Le Livre des lumières ou la conduite des rois, published in 1644. Between 1610 and 1644, Audin, Boissart and Nevelet also published adaptations of Æsop's fables, while Ménage and other writers composed fables in Latin verse. But no seventeenth-century poet had yet composed any fables in French verse in quite the same way as La Fontaine was shortly to do.

Having thus sensed "le goût du siècle", the poet carefully surveyed the situation and made a number of deductions. Firstly, his future as a literary man lay in the development of an unappropriated



genre which would be more respectable, that is, less controversial than the Contes, but which he could cultivate as his own speciality with the experience and skill acquired from working on the tales. Secondly, no contemporary poet had yet composed any fables in French verse. The fable, although used by moralists and philosophers as a medium for illustrating ideas, had never been considered as a literary genre either in classical antiquity or in seventeenth-century France. It was merely regarded as a rhetorical device, similar to a proverb or an allegory. Thus the contemplated verse fable would be a virgin field for any aspiring poet with the appropriate skill to cultivate it. Finally, the nature of the genre suited the poet's temperament and skill at telling simple, short stories in verse. These considerations and many others led La Fontaine to try his hand at versifying in French the fables adapted from Æsop, Phædrus and Pilpai, little realizing how quickly this venture would immortalize his genius.

As in the case of the Contes, the influences that contributed to the formation and development of his thinking on the contemplated genre are revealed in the preface to the first collection of fables. This preface places the Fables under the patronage of four eminent figures of antiquity, corresponding to the main sources from which the poet drew inspiration :

A peine les fables qu'on attribue à Esope virent le jour, que Socrate trouva à propos de les habiller des livrées des muses... Du temps d'Esope, la fable était contée simplement, la moralité séparée, et toujours en suite. Phèdre est venu, qui n'est pas assujetti à cet ordre : il embellit la narration, et transporte quelquefois la moralité de la fin au commencement. Quand il serait nécessaire de lui trouver place, je ne manque à ce précepte que pour en observer un qui n'est pas moins important. C'est Horace qui nous le donne.<sup>120</sup>

It is discernible from this quotation that the credit for most of the themes and plots of the fables goes to Æsop; the idea of versifying the apologues belongs to Socrates; the poetic art is imitated from Horace;

---

120. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 66-68, Fables, (Préface de 1668).

while the technique of manipulating and humanizing the characters and moral of the fables is borrowed from Phaedrus.

Opinions differ widely as to how many of La Fontaine's fables are inspired by Phaedrus. The most recent estimate by Pierre Bornecque puts the number at fifty out of a total of about two hundred and forty fables.<sup>121</sup> But the influence of Phaedrus on the formation of the poet's thinking on fables is too considerable to be measured in terms of the number of fables directly imitated from him. The Latin fabulist influenced La Fontaine in more ways than merely supplying him with bare plots and themes. La Fontaine could not have, for instance, failed to take note of his model's elegance and purity of style, his precision and his ironical wit.

Les meilleurs critiques s'accordèrent à dire que Phèdre, par son élégance, sa pureté, sa précision, avait atteint la perfection en ce genre.<sup>122</sup>

Our poet read a student's edition of Les Fables de Phèdre, edited by the Jansenist priest, Le Maître de Sacy, who systematically suppresses the licentious details in the original version, while adding French prose translations.<sup>123</sup> La Fontaine's comparison of his own fables with the Latin models suggests that he may have also read the original text.

On ne trouvera pas ici l'élégance ni l'extrême brèveté qui rendent Phèdre recommandable; ce sont qualités au-dessus de ma portée.... On reconnaîtra dans cet auteur le vrai caractère et le vrai génie de Térence.<sup>124</sup>

He adopts his model's practice of exposing his literary ideas, intentions and techniques in various prefaces, prologues and epilogues, and his earliest handling of the genre does not seem to have gone beyond the pattern set in his model. As Clarac puts it, he approaches Phaedrus timidly :

Ces premières fables, pleines de grâce et d'enjouement, sont pour la plupart timides encores. L'apprenti fabuliste demeure le disciple.... de Phèdre. Il égaie ses apologues

121. Bornecque, P., Op. Cit., p. 71.

122. Brottier, Gabriel, Les Fables de Phèdre, Paris, 1783, p. 13.

123. Sacy, (Le Maître de), Les Fables de Phèdre, Paris (Neuve Durand) 1647, (re-edited 1661).

124. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 66-68, Fables, (Préface de 1668)

avec la plus fine délicatesse, mais c'est à peine  
s'il ose sortir du cadre où ils s'enfermaient.<sup>125</sup>

He picks up the best of Phaedrus' fables and embellishes them according to his own taste, while taking care not to change the theme or the basic outline of the story. One notes in particular the description of the mule with its tinkling bell,<sup>126</sup> the hypocritical compliments of the fox to the crow,<sup>127</sup> the timidity of the frogs,<sup>128</sup> and the pathetic lamentations of the lamb before the ravenous wolf.<sup>129</sup>

But if La Fontaine finds in Phaedrus' work a selected list of pithy anecdotes on which to rehearse his technique, it is in Æsop that he discovers the richest mine of fables. He seems to have relied mainly on Nevelet's Mythologia Æsopica, a collection of ancient fables consisting mostly of Æsop's apologues, a few fables from Abstemius and other Greek fabulists. This collection afforded him quite a substantial stock of themes and plots, rich in pranks and amusing situations. As a moralist, Æsop is a practical man with a lot of common sense and traditional wisdom. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this crafty, legendary slave, whose precepts are said to have inspired kings and philosophers, holds an irresistible attraction for La Fontaine. But his borrowing from Æsop is not as systematic as in the case of Phaedrus. He appears to have picked his models at random, seizing an interesting anecdote here and a moral reflection there. Thus one cannot say for sure how many other sources he may have combined with Æsop. It is possible that they include works by Abstemius, Avianus, Alciati, Babrios, Corrozet, Cousin, Guérout, Hegemon, Marot and Régner. But his main sources of inspiration remain Æsop and Phaedrus. Æsopic sources account for 166 out of La Fontaine's total collection of fables.<sup>130</sup>

In both of these sources the emphasis is laid on the moral of the fable, the story serving merely to illustrate a lesson. With La Fontaine, however, the dual aspects receive equal stress. The apologue must amuse as well as teach.

125. Clarac, P., *Littérature française* (collection dirigée par Claude Pichois), Paris, 1969, t.II, p.198.

126. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.76, Fables, I, 4; Cf. Phaedrus, Fables, II, 7.

127. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.75, Fables, I, 2; Phaedrus, I, 13.

128. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.91, III, 4; Phaedrus, I, 2

129. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.78, I, 10; Phaedrus, I, 1.

130. Bornecque, P., *Op.Cit.*, p.71.

Une morale nuë apporte de l'ennui;  
 Le conte fait passer le précepte avec lui.  
 En ces sortes de feinte il faut instruire et plaire.<sup>131</sup>

To this end, the poet applies the technique of story-telling developed in the Contes and turns the terse, aesopic apologues into amplified and delightful narratives. A look at the way he handles the fable of Les Grenouilles qui demandent un roi, for example, reveals this shift of emphasis from the fable as just a moral allegory to the fable as a well-told story, illustrating an idea. Conscious of the fact that the interest of a good story lies in the naturalness and realism with which the local colour, the characters and their emotional reactions are sketched, the poet enlarges upon Æsop's brief allusion to the initial timidity of the frogs. In the authoritative translation of the original Greek fables, produced by Emile Chambry, Æsop merely makes a passing remark about the panic among the frogs :

Tout d'abord les grenouilles effrayées par le bruit se  
 plongèrent dans les profondeurs du marais; puis, comme  
 le bois ne bougeait pas, elles remontèrent et en vinrent  
 à un tel mépris pour le roi qu'elles sautaient sur son  
 dos et s'y accroupissaient.<sup>132</sup>

Applying his artistic skill to this casual reference to the timidity of the frogs, La Fontaine carefully analyses the emotional involvement of these creatures, explaining first of all why the splash produced by the fall of the wood terrifies them. The frogs are by nature

Gent fort sotté et fort peureuse.<sup>133</sup>

Attention is drawn to the confusion resulting from the panic by portraying the disorderly manner in which the frogs run into each other, scattering themselves in different parts of the swamp :

....sous les eaux,  
 Dans les joncs, dans les roseaux,  
 Dans les trous du marécage.<sup>134</sup>

This vivid representation of utter disarray contrasts with the model's flat expression :

se plongèrent dans les profondeurs du marais.<sup>135</sup>

131. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.110, Fables, VI, 1.

132. Esope, Fables, Texte établi et traduit par Emile Chambry, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1927, p. 32 : "Les Grenouilles qui demandent un Roi".

133. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.91, Fables, III, 4, 1.8.

134. Ibid., ll. 9-11.

135. Esope, Op.Cit., p.32.

The reader is made to follow the reaction of the frogs, the movement of their feelings from initial suspicion and fear to confidence and audacity. The boldest of the lot is naturally the first to venture by degrees to approach the strange object; he is followed shortly, and at a reasonable distance, by the rest. Finding at last that there is no danger, they leap upon the wood and begin to take undue liberties with it, even though it is supposed to be their king.

Elle approcha, mais en tremblant;  
 Une autre la suivit, une autre en fit autant:  
 Il en vint une fourmilière;  
 Et leur troupe à la fin se rendit familière  
 Jusqu'à sauter sur l'épaule du roi.<sup>136</sup>

This subtle analysis of the emotional situation, the beautiful poetry in which the episode is expressed, coupled with the judicious use of suggestive vocabulary, such as "gent marécageuse" (l.7), "soliveau de qui la gravité fait peur" (ll. 14-15), "fourmilière" (l.20) and "gobe" (l.28) make the whole scene seem natural and true, thus stimulating interest and pleasure in the story. Such is the character of La Fontaine's newly conceived verse fable.

From the study of AEsop and Phaedrus the poet draws three important lessons, namely, that a fable should be as terse as possible; that it should have a moral lesson; and that it can be suitable and quite effectively treated in verse. These basic ideas form the nucleus of his thinking on the genre within which there is much scope for variations. But as he reflects on these ideas, they become more and more subtle in their inter-relationship, resulting finally in the prologue of the twin fables: Le Pâtre et le Lion and Le Lion et le Chasseur. In this prologue La Fontaine pays tribute to his models for their terseness and conciseness:

Tous ont fui l'ornement et le trop d'étendue  
 On ne voit point chez eux de parole perdue.<sup>137</sup>

At the same time, he notes that Phaedrus is criticized for extreme succinctness. This is already an indication of his intention to exceed the narrow limits set by his models. Accordingly, the idea of conciseness is modified to mean that a fable should leave something to the reader's

136. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.91-2, Fables, III, 4, ll.18-22.

137. Ibid. p.110, Fables, VI, 1.

imagination. The fabulist should use simple suggestions and innuendoes to stimulate the imagination :

Loin d'épuiser une matière  
On n'en doit prendre que la fleur.<sup>138</sup>

But for a fable to be effectively treated in verse, it must be adorned with poetic ornaments. All poetry relies for maximum effect on a measure of artistic embellishment by way of imagery and sense impressions. The sketchy apologues of Æsop and Phædrus could hardly present anything new to the reader if they were not poetically adorned. Now, this embellishment implies an amplification of the model, a process which is opposed to the original succinctness.

Therefore, rejecting the two extremes of arid succinctness and elaborate embellishment, La Fontaine steers the middle course, opting for a sort of supple and lyric poetry, composed mainly in flexible or free verse. The result turns out to be exactly what he wants, a kind of poetry which is not too richly adorned but which is elaborate enough to offer artistic pleasure as well as communicate effectively.

Vous voulez qu'on évite un soin trop curieux  
Et des vains ornements l'effort ambitieux.  
Je le veux comme vous; cet effort ne peut plaire.  
Un auteur gâte tout quand il veut trop bien faire.  
Non qu'il faille bannir certains traits délicats:  
Vous les aimez, ces traits, et je ne les hais pas..<sup>139</sup>

The formulation of this important principle marks the climax of the evolution of the poet's theory of verse fable. As in the Contes, he has now found his way, and will stick firmly to it for the rest of his career, allowing, of course, for minor deviations to permit personal reflections.

Drawing further inspiration from Plato, he also arrives at a definite statement on the moral of the fable. The genre should have a moral, since it is in its nature to have one.

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.<sup>140</sup>

138. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.117, Fables, VI, (Epilogue)

139. Ibid., p.104, V, 1.

140. Ibid., pp. 66-68.

And children should be introduced early in life to the moral lessons, in keeping with the recommendations of Plato.

Il souhaite que les enfants sucent ces Fables avec le lait, il recommande 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?<sup>141</sup>

But while upholding the moral as an inseparable part of a good fable, he is not prepared to sacrifice artistic beauty to moral considerations. The moral of a fable can, therefore, be shifted, changed or suppressed entirely, depending on its artistic adequacy and the possibility of integrating it into the fable as a whole. Thus the over-riding objective is artistic perfection.

Jamais....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....C'est ce que j'ai fait à l'égard de quelques moralités, du succès desquelles je n'ai pas bien espéré.<sup>142</sup>

With a clear vision of his objective and the possession of the means to achieve it, is it any wonder that he ultimately succeeded!

The publication of the fables of 1668 virtually marks the end of La Fontaine's formative years as a poet, while intensifying his evolution as an intellectual. He has spent nearly forty years of his life in a diligent search for a pattern and style that would suit his temperament and the tastes of his age. With the popular reception accorded to the first collection of fables, this long search for literary identity can be said to have met with success.

One of the outstanding testimonies of this huge success is, perhaps, the famous Eloge de Chamfort, which celebrates the eternal freshness of La Fontaine's new creation.

Le style de La Fontaine est peut-être ce que l'histoire littéraire de tous les siècles offre de plus étonnant. C'est à lui seul qu'il était réservé de faire admirer dans la brièveté d'un apologue, l'accord des nuances les plus tranchantes, et l'harmonie des couleurs les plus opposées.

---

141. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 66-68,

142. Ibid., pp. 66-68.

Souvent, une seule fable réunit la naïveté de Marot, le badinage et l'esprit de Voiture, des traits de la plus haute poésie, et plusieurs de ces vers que la force du sens grave à jamais dans la mémoire. Nul auteur n'a mieux possédé cette souplesse de l'âme et de l'imagination qui suit tous les mouvements de son sujet. Le plus familier des écrivains devient tout à coup, et naturellement, le traducteur de Virgile et de Lucrèce; et les objets de la vie commune sont relevés chez lui, par ces tours nobles et cet heureux choix d'expressions, qui les rendent dignes du poème épique.<sup>143</sup>

This tribute recognizes the poet's pioneering role in the genre of fables, a role modestly claimed by him in the preface of 1668. He writes :

Je me suis flatté de l'espérance que si je ne courais dans cette carrière avec succès, on me donnerait au moins la gloire de l'avoir ouverte.<sup>144</sup>

On the whole, the success of the first collection of fables established La Fontaine's reputation, while providing him with a sure springboard for further plunge. He is yet to produce more delightful, more personal and more philosophical fables, but his poetic language and skill will undergo no further transformation of major significance. Minor variations, if any, will be within the tested and established pattern. Having successfully evolved a suitable literary pattern, he will now use this pattern as a vehicle of a more effective communication of thought. He will infuse more and more ideas into it thus making his poetry as intellectual as it is artistic. That is, he will transform the traditional apologue into intellectual poetry in much the same way as he converted the tales of Ariosto and Boccaccio into instruments of poetic meditation on the relation between the sexes. But this transformation is by no means a sudden operation. Like the poet's literary theories, the process of change from the traditional apologue to intellectual poetry evolved from the nature of the former. In order, therefore, to appreciate better the character of the new invention, it is necessary to examine briefly the nature of the traditional apologue.

The latter is usually associated with the half-mythical, half-historical character, Æsop, who is celebrated as an excellent composer

---

143. Chamfort, N., Œuvres, Paris, 1792, t.I, p.43. Cf. also La Harpe, "Eloge de La Fontaine" in Recueil de l'Académie de Marseille, Marseille, 1774, pp. 21-24.

144. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 66-68.



of short animal anecdotes. Whether there was a real person called Æsop is not clearly known. The whole question of his identity and historical authenticity is still a controversial one. Some people have wondered whether any such man ever existed at all. Handford, one of the most recent English translators of the fables, attributed to Æsop, writes in the introduction :

We possess very little certain information about him, and it has even been held that no such person ever lived, and that the name represents nothing more than an imaginary inventor of the fable, for the Greeks liked to ascribe each kind of composition to a real or fictitious "finder out".<sup>145</sup>

On the other hand, in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Æsop is described as a Phrygian slave and a contemporary of Solon, who lived on the island of Samos in the early part of the sixth century B.C. He is supposed to have been later made free and to have then visited the court of King Croesus of Lydia. On gaining the confidence of the king, he was sent on several missions on behalf of the monarch. During one of these missions, this time to Delphi, Æsop was brutally murdered by the Delphians who accused him of theft and blasphemy against the gods.<sup>146</sup> Greek and Oriental apologues had, however, existed long before the period during which Æsop is supposed to have lived. The ancients, in close contact with wild and domestic animals, tended to invent stories describing imaginary adventures of these animals, and to make the latter act and speak like human beings. Such stories were designed to teach a lesson. This method of imparting instruction was so effective that it caught men's fancy, resulting in people of various lands building up a body of apologues which were either adapted, invented or modelled on some of those which had been in existence for centuries. It was not until about the 5th century B.C. that these pieces of anecdote were associated with the semi-legendary fabulist, Æsop, due probably to accidents of transmission. From then onwards all apologues have tended to be ascribed to him. Thus, as far as we can see, traditional apologues are part of the oral folklore and, although there may have been a real person by the name of Æsop, it is highly improbable that he ever wrote any book of fables as some people tend to suggest.

---

145. Handford, S.A., *Fables of Æsop*, London, (Penguin), 1974, p.xiv.

146. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, London and Chicago, 1968, vol. I, pp. 220-221.

The traditional apologue presents a pessimistic and gloomy vision of the world and leaves the reader with an element of cynicism and an awareness of evil and privation among men. The main idea is couched in a brief, witty, prose anecdote, usually concluded with a moral of some sort, and generally capable of being used as a peg on which to hang a piece of advice. The latter is often based on observation of people's behaviour, and it reflects the ideas of ordinary men and women about the conduct of life. In other words, it was neither popular literature nor had it anything to do with intellectualism or with the high ideals of virtue and the pursuit of perfection, inculcated by the great ethical and social philosophers over the ages, and featured in La Fontaine's best developed verse fables. Indeed, all that the traditional apologue passes on is the kind of practical wisdom which the rural and oppressed peasants of any country and epoch, including those of ancient Greece, need to survive in a human society, which can be compared to a jungle in which only the wise and cunning animal can hope to survive. The ancient Greek peasants were poor, exploited and subjected to a hard life upon a soil that was equally poor. They were constantly victimized by their overlords. Naturally, the hardship and misery which were their lot, made them thrifty, suspicious, apprehensive of the rich and the powerful, and pessimistic about the human condition in general. To them, therefore, the sagacious, witty apologues came as a manual of cynical wisdom, exhorting them not to expect any good or kindness from their exploiters,<sup>147</sup> and to understand that, in a world ruled by egoism and bereft of goodness, one should regard everyone else as a probable enemy, and make no concessions to the wicked. One should, whenever possible, exploit the exploiter himself.<sup>148</sup> If you are weak, you must be prepared to use cunning and flattery; if you are strong, you can afford to be brutal; kindness and good faith do not often pay any dividend; every trick is fair in a community where everybody cheats and bullies.<sup>149</sup> One must therefore be shrewd and constantly on one's guard, double-tongued and ready to compromise when necessary.<sup>150</sup> Such are the

---

147. Esope, Op. Cit., p.119, Fable 270.

148. Ibid., pp. 61-62, Fable 137.

149. Ibid., p. 82, Fable 188.

150. Ibid., p.64, Fable 143.

character and substance of the aesopic apologues or the traditional fable.

The first known written collection of these apologues was the one compiled by Demetrius in 300 B.C., i.e. three hundred years after Æsop is supposed to have lived. The Latin literature of the first century B.C. contains some fables. Horace (65 - 8 B.C.), for example, records the episodes of The fox and the herdsman.<sup>151</sup> The City mouse and the country mouse<sup>152</sup> and The calf and the frogs.<sup>153</sup> But Horace is not a fabulist. The earliest Latin fabulist who deliberately set out to versify the circulating apologues was the freedman of the Emperor Augustus, Phædrus (15 B.C. - 50 A.D.). His collection includes many Greek fables as well as apologues invented by the author himself and based on contemporary social and political situations. In the second century A.D. Babrius, a hellenized Roman, versified 146 fables selected from the existing pool of stories. Using Babrius as his source, another Roman, Avianus, composed 42 fables in Latin verse. From the 5th century A.D., prose paraphrases of the fables of Phædrus and Avianus began to appear. It was from such prose versions that the later generations of readers, who could not have access to the originals, came to know about the written fables. In the Middle Ages, collections of apologues, such as the fables of Marie de France and the anecdotes of Le Roman de Renard appeared in France, but it was not until the Renaissance that the use of the fable for moral and polemical purposes was intensified, as Rabelais, Montaigne, Bonaventure des Périers, Marot and others began to make increasing use of the medium. The humanist, Faerner (1520? - 1562), acting on the order of Jean-Ange de Médicis, composed 100 fables in Latin verse. Another humanist, Abstemius or Bevilacqua, librarian to the duke of Urbino, composed 200 fables in the same language but in prose form. The whole of these two hundred fables figure in Nevelet's collection. Then in 1547, Haudent translated 366 aesopic apologues into French verse under the long title : Trois cent soixante et six apologues d'Esopé, très excellent philosophe, premièrement traduits en latin par plusieurs illustres auteurs, Laurens Valle, Erasme et autres, et nouvellement de latin en rythme française, par M. Guillaume Haudent. This was followed three years later by Guillaume

---

151. Horace, Epistlès, I, 7, ll. 29-33.

152. Ibid., Satires, II, 6, ll. 79-117.

153. Ibid., II, 3, ll. 314-320.

Guérault's Le Premier Livre des Emblèmes, published in Lyons in 1550. The next collection of aesopic apologues in French verse appeared in 1578 when Gilles Corrozet published his Les Fables d'Esopé, mises en rithme française avec la vie du dit Esopé. (Rouen). All these collections, though they contain a certain amount of original material, are based mainly on traditional stories drawn from classical Greek and Oriental sources. Their flow was more or less uninterrupted and culminates in the seventeenth century with the masterpiece of La Fontaine. It can be seen from this brief survey that the poet had a rich stock of models at his disposal when he was working on the Fables.

Although he transforms the literary character of the traditional apologue through the evolution of the verse fable, he does not alter its basic spirit in some of his fables. He does not, for example, change his model's vision of human nature. This is partly because of the unchanging character of the basic human traits and partly because he visualizes a clear parallel between the social condition of the ancient Athenians and that of the seventeenth-century French peasants. Accordingly, he makes no significant shift from the basic attitude of his models in his treatment of those fables dealing with social inequality, exploitation and corruption among men. He is temperamentally in sympathy with the weak and the under-privileged. This is seen particularly in the episodes of Le Chêne et le Roseau (I, 22 : Esopé, p. 64, fable 143) and Le Lion et le Moucheron (II, 9; Esopé, p. 82, fable 188). The first fable must have been one of our poet's favourite pieces, for it illustrates in a most vivid manner his contempt for the great man who, intoxicated with power, splendour and vanity, thinks himself beyond the reach of harm. By a strange turn of fortune, which characterizes La Fontaine's ironical humour, it is the great and stubborn oak that succumbs by crashing to the ground, while the feeble and compromising reed bends without breaking.<sup>154</sup>

This fidelity to his sources is understandable, given the fact that such subjects as man's essential imperfection, suffering and death, the reality of good and evil are matters on which the generality of men have thought alike through the ages. In other words human nature was

---

154. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 82, Fables, I, 22, ll. 24-32.

neither less corrupt nor suffering and death less painful in the seventeenth century than in the days when Æsop is supposed to have lived. If anything the situation was rather more glaringly perceptible in La Fontaine's epoch, as moralists and literary critics began to revive and evaluate the ideas of Montaigne about human nature. It will be recalled that the Renaissance essayist pushed the criticism of man to the point of humiliation. He sees all the physical, moral, social and political peculiarities of man as "un paysage inépuisable", places man at the margin of the cosmos and discovers in him no more than a helpless appendage of nature, full of error and corruption, pride and vanity which make him vicious, an enemy of himself and his fellow man.<sup>155</sup> The same pattern of thought is maintained by the "avant-garde" intellectuals of the seventeenth century, notably Théophile de Viau. The latter's elegies go beyond the conventional banality of mundane gallantry to present a sombre picture of the tragic realities of the human condition.

Une nécessité que le ciel établit  
Deshonore les uns, les autres enoblit.<sup>156</sup>

De Viau's pessimistic ideas were avidly consumed by the later generations of writers, as can be inferred from the fact that his poetic works went through ninety-three editions between 1620 and 1715, and left their marks in varying degrees on the works of Mme. Deshoulières,<sup>157</sup> Jean Dehénault,<sup>158</sup> Molière,<sup>159</sup> Pascal,<sup>160</sup> Boileau,<sup>161</sup> Racine<sup>162</sup> and La Bruyère,<sup>163</sup> all of which portray man as irrational, enslaved by the passions, motivated by egoism and basically unhappy.

155. Montaigne, M., *Op.Cit.*, pp. 315 - 321, 426 - 467., . . .

156. Théophile de Viau, *Œuvres poétiques*, (édition Streicher), Paris, 1951, t.I, p.90, ll.23-24.

157. Deshoulières, A. (Mme.), *Poésies*, (édition nouvelle), Amsterdam, 1964, p.33.

158. Dehénault, J., *Œuvres*, (édition Lachèvre), Paris, 1922, p.xii.

159. Molière, 'Le Misanthrope', (édition Ronald Wilson), London, (Harrap), 1973, Act I, sc.i.

160. Pascal, B., *Pensées*, Paris, (Garnier), 1964, pp. 101-102.

161. Boileau, D., *Op.Cit.*; pp. 41 - 48, (Satire, VIII).

162. Racine, Jean, *Britannicus*, Act IV, sc.2.

163. La Bruyère, Jean de, *Les Caractères ou les Mœurs de ce siècle*, Paris, (Garnier), 1962, p.180.

This image of human nature is essentially the same as the one painted in Æsop's apologues, and there is no doubt that its reaffirmation in the seventeenth century influenced La Fontaine's vision of man and his fidelity to Æsop in this regard. For it would be strange for him to deviate from what was, and what continues today to be considered as the universally accepted truth about human nature. What he retains or modifies in his traditional models is determined by his awareness of the fact that certain basic truths are eternal and cannot be altered in deference to any age, custom or usage. Thus our poet's ideas on the corrupt and vicious nature of man, on the need to be constantly on one's guard and on the brevity of human life are traditional and basically the same as those of his model. He agrees with Æsop and with his own contemporaries that man is ruled by vanity, selfishness and envy :

Tantôt je peins en un récit  
La sottise vanité jointe avecque l'envie,  
Deux pivots sur qui roule aujourd'hui notre vie. 164

Hence the weak will always be the wretched victims of the strong and the vicious, unless they resort to cunning and flattery. This idea is amply illustrated in several fables, particularly in the episodes of La Génisse, La Chèvre et le Brebis, en société avec le Lion (I, 6) and Le Loup et l'Agneau (I, 10). These two fables bring out clearly the weakness of reason and justice vis-a-vis misused egoism. In the first episode the lion is the image of force and domination whose ego countenances neither contradiction nor resistance. The goat, the sheep and the heifer imprudently enter into an association with him in the hope of mutually sharing the spoils of their hunting expedition. When they come to share the meat of a stag caught in the goat's trap, the lion dividing it into four parts, takes the first share "en qualité de sire":

Elle doit être à moi, dit-il, et la raison,  
C'est que je m'appelle lion :  
A cela l'on n'a rien à dire. 165

The second and third shares belong also to him by reason of his being the most powerful, and any member of the group who dares tamper with the last share will be the first to be strangled immediately :

164. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.105, Fables, V, 1, ll. 18-20.

165. Ibid., p.76, I, 6, ll. 10-13.

La seconde par droit me doit échoir encor:  
 Ce droit, vous le savez, c'est le droit du plus fort.  
 Comme le plus vaillant, je prétends la troisième.  
 Si quelqu'une de vous touche à la quatrième,  
 Je l'étranglerai tout d'abord.<sup>166</sup>

It is in the second episode that La Fontaine summarizes in a single line of verse the law of the jungle as it operates among men:

La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure.<sup>167</sup>

Man is weak, vacillating and a slave to selfishness and inordinate ambition.

Tout bourgeois veut bâtir comme les grands seigneurs,  
 Tout petit prince a des ambassadeurs  
 Tout marquis veut avoir des pages.<sup>168</sup>

Like his model, La Fontaine believes that kindness and good faith do not often get the reward they deserve.

Ce qu'on donne au méchant, toujours on le regrette.  
 Pour tirer d'eux ce qu'on leur prête,  
 Il faut que l'on en vienne aux coups;  
 Il faut plaider, il faut combattre.  
 Laissez-leur prendre un pied chez vous,  
 Ils en auront bientôt pris quatre.<sup>169</sup>

that whenever possible, one should enjoy the "double plaisir de tromper le trompeur"<sup>170</sup>; one should be eternally vigilant over the snares of the enemy:

Nous pouvons conclure de là  
 Qu'il faut faire aux méchants guerre continuelle.  
 La paix est fort bonne de soi;  
 J'en conviens; mais de quoi sert-elle  
 Avec des ennemis sans foi?<sup>171</sup>

Finally, La Fontaine follows his model in laying the blame for many of man's ills squarely on the shoulders of man, on man's irrational actions, his short-comings and neglect, his malice and cruelty, all of which combine to make him a wolf to his fellow man.

At this stage death too is an obsession for the poet, as it is in his sources. The source of this obsession can be found not only in the weakness of human nature and man's attachment to life, but also in

166. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.76, ll. 14-18.

167. *Ibid.*, p.78, *Fables*, I, 10, l.1.

168. *Ibid.*, p.75, I, 3, ll. 12-14; Cf. *ibid.*, p.96, IV, 2, ll. 26-31.

169. *Ibid.*, p.84, I, 3, ll. 15-20; p.93, III, 9, ll. 10-17.

170. *Ibid.*, p.87, II, 15, l.32.

171. *Ibid.*, p.94, III, 13, ll. 24-28.

seventeenth-century attitude to death. Ignorance and superstition portrayed death in a most frightful manner. The Christian teaching, in an effort to combat paganism and draw people to God, played on their fear of death. It depicted the latter as the most terrible moment which would terminate life and all earthly joys and deliver its victim to the rigorous judgement of the most implacable judge whose decree would be irrevocable. Theologians, such as Pierre Nicole, emphasized death as the time during which both soul and body, confounded by the reality of eternity and of God's presence, would accuse each other before the Almighty God for having caused their mutual perdition. Men must therefore fear death and the danger of eternal punishment in hell.<sup>173</sup> Certain meditations of Pascal on the necessity for a wager<sup>174</sup> and many of Bossuet's funeral orations<sup>175</sup> reflect the general lack of psychical stability which characterized the epoch. All these attitudes, though they may have been prompted by the best of intentions, the principal of which was to ensure the salvation of souls, had not shifted from the psychological fear of death which grip the characters in the traditional apologue, and no one expects La Fontaine's attitude to be any different from that of his age. Thus at this stage the poet not only fears death as the moment of stock-taking but sees it as a monstrous imperfection in human nature, as an evil which must be dreaded as much as possible rather than precipitated, no matter the situation in which one may be. The influence of Seneca now combines with that of the Christian writers to exert an impact on La Fontaine's attitude to death.

Qu'on me rende impotent,  
Cul-de-jatte, goutteux, manchot, pourvu qu'en somme,  
Je vive, c'est assez, je suis plus que content.<sup>176</sup>

From this brief survey of La Fontaine's fidelity to the traditional apologue emerge two important facts, namely, that the poet is a continuator of Æsop, and that in the process of his ambitious transformation of the æsopic anecdotes into intellectual poetry, a transformation which we shall discuss in the next chapter, he does not overlook or sacrifice

172. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.111, VI, 5, ll. 41-42.

173. Nicole, P., *Essais*, Paris, 1678, t.IV, pp. 53-54.

174. Pascal, B., *Op.Cit.*, pp. 124-125.

175. Bossuet, B., *Œuvres*, Tours, 1961, p. 1077.

176. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.80, *Fables*, I, 15, ll. 12-14.



the basic home truths on the altar of erudition. It is not these basic truths which everyone knows, or these areas of thought about human nature, in which the poet makes little or no appreciable alteration in the sense and spirit of the traditional apologue, that interest us here. We have drawn attention to them, all the same, merely as a starting point, as the basis of La Fontaine's intellectual plunge; and to show his unflinching faith and strict adherence to whatever he knows or believes to be the truth. With this base established, we shall now attempt an analysis of those aspects of man the discussion of which provides the poet with a chance to show his intellectual growth by improving significantly upon the intellectual content of his traditional model.

#### 4. From Traditional Apologue to Intellectual Poetry.

As La Fontaine steadily perfected his poetic art, and became more mature, he had a tendency to thrust his intellectual preoccupations into his verse. This is only to be expected. From antiquity, poets had known that their art consisted in singing in measured tones the profound thoughts of a people. If the poet was a seer, it was because he fathomed the deep meaning of these thoughts and could shape them into golden words and harmonious expression so that they would imprint themselves in the soul of man and upon the spirit of a race. Poetry thus became a social phenomenon in which the poet was restricted by a set of rules, the most important of which was the maintenance of the harmony of structure and content. There had to be a proper balance between these components. Any attempt to enhance one at the expense of the other would lead to professional failure. In this way, poetry became not only a work of art but a medium for conveying ideas. Lucretius and Horace had used this medium with great success because they realized the affinity between poetry and philosophy. To maintain the traditional equilibrium, that is, to build a balanced structure, therefore, La Fontaine had to be both poetic and intellectual. But, like every builder, he needed raw materials and a basis upon which to build. *Æsop's* apologues provided him with this infrastructure.

We have already noted, in our discussion of the evolution of the verse fable, how the poet successfully transformed the literary form of the apologue from dry prose to beautiful, condensed poetry. It is important to note that just as this operation is motivated by the taste of his epoch, that is, by the seventeenth-century taste for beautiful poetry, so is the extent to which he develops the content of his traditional model determined by contemporary limitations on the subject of poetry. What interested seventeenth-century thinkers and readers was the study of man. The questions that constantly haunted their minds were: what is man? How does he differ from the gods on the one hand and from the rest of nature on the other? What is the divine element in man? A different set of answers to such questions, or a shift of emphasis in the old answers, changes the style and subject matter of poetry and the poet's conception of his function. To be a poet in the classical French sense, therefore, was to be an intellectual, or a student of human

nature or a "moraliste". As the English word, "moralist", does not mean exactly the same thing as the French word, it is perhaps necessary to point out that the term was used in the seventeenth-century French sense to describe a writer whose interest was centred on the study of man, that is, on man's relationship with society and the universe, his passions, emotions, behaviour and perception of the world around him. One can understand, therefore, why the study of man is the central theme of the Fables and the focus of La Fontaine's intellectualism. The newly evolved verse fable, as developed and enlarged by him, is adequate for his purpose, for it preserves his poetry, while satisfying the need for the communication of ideas.

Mûri, en pleine possession de lui-même, La Fontaine est venu à la fable parce qu'après s'être essayé en divers sens, par la logique de son évolution et en étroite liaison avec les circonstances, il a compris que par elle . . . ., il pouvait le mieux exprimer, ou du moins suggérer, ce qui lui tenait le plus au cœur.<sup>177</sup>

Thus he infuses into his fables a body of ideas on those complex problems upon which seventeenth-century French intellectuals exercised their minds : political and social questions, the paradox of human nature, metaphysical speculations, the problems of happiness and suffering here on earth. This new use of the fable changes the character and scope of the traditional apologue, transforming it into an intellectual organ. Our objective in this Section is to attempt an assessment of La Fontaine's intellectual growth in terms of the extent to which he succeeds in this transformation.

One of the clearest indications of the poet's shift from apologue to intellectual poetry is seen in the subtle manner in which he turns the aesopic anecdotes into political instruments. Poetry, as we have already noted, is a social activity, since poets versify the thoughts and actions of society. An appreciation of this relationship between a certain form of poetry and a given social or political situation is a necessary prerequisite to the understanding of the formation of La Fontaine's political attitude. It is to be noted that the poet was never a political analyst in the same way that he was a literary theorist. We do not therefore need to look for any political volumes he may have read or

---

177. Jasinski, R. La Fontaine et le premier recueil des fables, Paris, (Nizet), 1966, t.I, p.87.

the particular parties to which he owed allegiance, for there are scarcely any that are worth mentioning. He was not a politician as such but a literary man, a poet. But poetry being a social phenomenon, the poet could hardly help being involved in the social and political aspirations of his age, thus making his verse appreciably political. It is therefore in the seventeenth century social and political situations that one must look for the factors that conditioned La Fontaine's political thinking, bearing always in mind that what he chose or overlooked in his model depended on its relevance to these situations.

France of the poet's epoch was under an absolute monarch, Louis XIV, whose words were law and whose patronage was virtually indispensable to anyone anxious to succeed in his chosen career. Ministers of State were subject to the King and could be disciplined, removed from office, imprisoned for life or even executed at his pleasure, as was the case with Fouquet. The activities of the King and his ministers, as well as the major social, political and economic events of the kingdom found expression in the verses of the poets and the works of other literary artists. But there was a limit to what writers could express in their works. A strict censorship of the information media was maintained by the authorities. Given this situation, literary men fell back on clandestine writing. They used innuendoes rather than forthright expressions, and clothed their thoughts in various forms of allegory, ranging from proverb to apologue. This was the situation in which the newly evolved verse fable proved of inestimable value to La Fontaine. Under the guise of translating or versifying Æsop's apologues, he plunged into political poetry, airing his views on the most sensitive issues of the day.

The most relevant of such issues, at least as far as the poet was concerned, was the Fouquet affair. We already know La Fontaine's connections with the fallen Finance Minister. Naturally, one of the earliest demonstrations of the poet's political use of the fable was his adaptation of the medium to the circumstances surrounding the ministry and fall of Fouquet. In one of Æsop's apologues entitled L'Ane, le Renard et le Lion, the ass and the fox enter into a hunting alliance. When suddenly a lion appears in their path, the fox realizes the danger that

threatens them, and going up to the lion, he undertakes to hand over the ass to him in exchange for a guarantee of security. On receiving the lion's promise to let him go, he leads the ass into a trap. But the lion, when he sees that the ass cannot possibly escape, seizes the fox first, and then goes after the ass at his leisure. This anecdote is used by Æsop to demonstrate that those who plot against their friends often find to their surprise that they destroy themselves into the bargain.<sup>178</sup>

Taking up this episode, La Fontaine transforms it into a completely new fable, Le Renard et l'Ecureuil. He retains one of the original characters of Æsop, namely, the fox, but substitutes the squirrel for the ass, while two other seemingly unrelated characters, the storm and the hunter, are invented to share between them the role originally played by the lion. Our poet dares not mention the lion in this particular fable, given the highly explosive situation at the very time he was composing it, for this would have made his intention too glaringly obvious to the authorities. Louis XIV was popularly and affectionately referred to by his admirers as "Le Lion", as well as the better-known "Le Roi Soleil". Obviously, it would have been unsafe to use any of these tags in so straightforward a situation as the poet intended to portray in this fable. So he drops the name "lion" from it. But this prudent measure in no way affects his major objective, for, when it is recalled that the fox and the squirrel were the respective emblems of the Prime Minister, Colbert, and the Finance Minister, Fouquet, it will still be easily seen how the original apologue has, in the hands of La Fontaine, assumed a political symbolism, representing the rivalry between the two ministers. It will be recalled that it was Colbert who, like his political emblem, the fox, betrayed Fouquet before the King, and who organized the minister's downfall, only to fall out of favour with the King later in his own career, after Fouquet had been securely locked up in the strong fortress of Pignerol. Although this particular fable is listed under "Appendix" in some modern editions of La Fontaine,<sup>179</sup> it is shown in the Manuscrits Conrart as the first of the poet's ten earliest fables, composed between 1661 and 1663, when the

---

178. Esop, Op.Cit., pp.119-120, fable 270.

179. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.174.

Fouquet affair was being probed.<sup>180</sup> Obviously, its publication was withheld until later in La Fontaine's career, and we know the reason. Throughout the period of Fouquet's confinement and trial, Colbert not only exiled the former's defence counsel, Jannart, but also maintained a rigorous censorship of the information media to ensure that his fallen rival lacked the facilities and support which he needed for his defence. Outspoken sympathizers were imprisoned in the Bastille. As René Jasinski puts it,

La Bastille regorgeait d'imprimeurs convaincus, ou soupçonnés d'avoir travaillé pour Mme. Fouquet. On surveillait les ouvriers à Paris, les libraires à Lyon, à Rome, à Caen. Quant aux faiseurs de gazettes à la main, on les envoyait aux galères. C'était plus simple que de les faire juger par les jeunes conseillers du Parlement, toujours disposés à créer des ennuis au pouvoir.<sup>181</sup>

Despite this threat, La Fontaine succeeded in adding his manuscript fables to the volume of clandestine literature, produced during this period, in support of the extravagant but ill-used Minister. When protests against Colbert's corruption, hypocrisy and tyranny flooded the royal court, and the King's suspicion of him increased, our poet's clandestine fables, particularly those forming part of Books V and VI of the modern editions of the Fables, grew increasingly militant in condemnation of Colbert's tyranny, corruption and maladministration. He found in three other aesopic apologues: Borée et le Soleil, Le Loup et l'Ane and La Magicienne,<sup>182</sup> a means of condemning, respectively, authoritarianism (VI, 3), controlled economy (VI, 4) and charlatanism which duped both King and princes (VI, 19). Under cover of translating Æsop's Le Renard et le Singe élu roi and Le Bouvier et le Lion,<sup>183</sup> sarcasms are heaped not only on Colbert's position as Prime Minister (VI, 6), but on his cowardly and despicable character as a man (VI, 1). His artificial nobility is satirized in Le Mulet se vantant de sa généalogie (VI, 7), adapted from Æsop's La Mule<sup>184</sup>, while his eventual

---

180. Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, (Ms. 5420, XI, 1<sup>er</sup> partie).

181. Jasinski, R., Op. Cit., I, p. 101.

182. Esope, Op. Cit., pp. 34, 100-101, 43, fables 73, 228, 91.

183. Ibid., pp. 20, 35, fables 38, 74.

184. Ibid., p. 58, fable 128.

downfall is predicted in L'Ane vêtu de la peau du Lion (V, 21), the latter being, again, a clever transformation of two closely related apologues narrated by Æsop, namely, L'Ane revêtu de la peau du Lion et le Renard and L'Ane qui passait pour être un Lion.<sup>185</sup> Æsop uses these apologues to describe people who, by putting on airs, manage to pass for what they are not, only to be exposed later on. La Fontaine has the intuition and presence of mind to apply the twin anecdotes to the circumstances of his own epoch, finding in Colbert's futile effort to masquerade as a man of honour, a situation as ridiculous as that of an ass passing for a lion. Just as no counterfeit of any good quality or virtue can withstand the test of time, so are Colbert's hidden vices bound to lead ultimately to his disgrace and downfall.

Force gens font du bruit en France,  
Par qui cet apologue est rendu familier.  
Un équipage cavalier  
Fait les trois quarts de leur vaillance.<sup>186</sup>

Thus, through the ingenious medium of the fable, La Fontaine airs his views on the most delicate political issues of the day without compromising his personal liberty. After all, is he not just a translator of Æsop? And can anyone be prosecuted for versifying traditional fairy tales?

But running parallel to these activities are his deep political beliefs. The latter are the logical issues of his conception of human nature at this stage. Man, as we have seen, is weak, coarse, more wicked and vicious than the beasts, and, therefore, incapable of good without some controlling influence or authority, which can repress vice and anarchy. Only the law of the jungle, chaos and misery could result from man acting on his own natural instincts. Following this belief, La Fontaine's political views at this time are quite often in support of authority, irrespective of his taking sides with Fouquet. His overall attitude is rather nationalistic. An example of his support of authority is seen in the use he makes of yet another æsopic apologue, L'Estomac et les Pieds. In this anecdote, the stomach and the feet are arguing with each other about their relative strength. The feet keep on saying

185. Esop, Op.Cit., pp. 118, 123, fables 267 and 279.

186. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.110, Fables, V, 21, ll. 11 - 14.

that they must be much stronger and more important than the stomach, since they actually carry it about. "That's all very well, my friends!" replies the stomach, "but if I stop supplying you with nourishment, you won't be able to carry me." This episode is intended by Æsop to apply to the ancient Greek army:

Il en va ainsi dans les armées : le nombre, le plus  
souvent, n'est rien, si les chefs n'excellent pas dans  
le conseil.<sup>187</sup>

La Fontaine modifies both the form and the content of the apologue, and applies it to the common people of France, who were grumbling against what they regarded as the extravagant and idle luxury of the King and his nobles vis-a-vis the peasants' burden of forced labour, heavy taxation, harsh economic laws and grinding poverty.

Il faudroit, disoient-ils, sans nous qu'il vécût d'air.

Nous suons, nous peinons comme bêtes de somme;  
Et pour qui? pour lui seul; nous n'en profitons pas;  
Notre soin n'aboutit qu'à fournir ses repas.  
Chommons, c'est un métier qu'il veut nous faire apprendre.<sup>188</sup>

The poet shows the reader how the rebellion of the bodily organs against the stomach turns into a boomerang, for, as each of the rebel members pines away and can hold out no longer, they find that they cannot dispense with the stomach.<sup>189</sup> Transposed into the contemporary political situation, the fable becomes a plea to Frenchmen not to revolt against their monarch, for idle and useless as the latter seemed, he was fulfilling an important role in the body-politic.

Ceci peut s'appliquer à la grandeur royale.  
Elle reçoit et donne, et la chose est égale.  
Tout travaille pour elle, et réciproquement  
Tout tire d'elle l'aliment.<sup>190</sup>

La Fontaine is here defending the monarchy and the French colonialist propaganda, based on propping up France with wealth drained from her vast colonial empire. On several occasions, the King's policy of conquests came under secret but severe criticism. The monarch was accused of neglecting the well-being of the people and squandering the national wealth on costly wars. Gui Patin, Dean of the Faculty of

187. Esopé, Op.Cit., p.70, fable 159.

188. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.90, Fables, III, 2, ll. 9-13.

189. Ibid., ll. 17-23.

190. Ibid, ll. 24-27,



Medicine of the University of Paris and Professor at the Royal College, gives an idea of the situation in one of his letters :

On dit que le roi se plaint qu'il a affaire d'argent. Enfin, on ne parle que d'argent, nous sommes au siècle d'argent, ... La paix est faite, le roi est marié, mais les impôts ne diminuent point. Nous aurions besoin de quelque homme de bien qui parlât au roi et qui lui fit entendre l'état présent de ses affaires et les calamités publiques de son pauvre royaume dont personne ne lui parle.<sup>191</sup>

But our poet, apostle of peace and non-violence, does not subscribe to anything that would lead to insurrection or violent revolution. He condemns the revolt of Les Grenouilles qui demandent un roi, warning his countrymen through this medium, to adjust themselves to the existing government for fear of jumping from the frying pan to the fire.

De celui-ci contentez-vous,  
De peur d'en rencontrer un pire.<sup>192</sup>

In the same spirit, he stigmatizes the corrupt practices of the revenue collectors, who often cheated the Royal Treasury by misappropriating the greater proportion of the funds they collected. Whenever caught, insists our poet, they should be made to disgorge their ill-gotten wealth :

Vous êtes maigre entrée, il faut maigre sortir.<sup>193</sup>

The function of the King is to "distribuer en cent lieux ses grâces souveraines".<sup>194</sup> The word "grâce", as used here, suggests that the royal favours were gratuitous. No one had an absolute right to them and the monarch was accountable to nobody for the way and manner he distributed them. The nobles, domesticated at Court, thronged the Palace of Versailles, and expected from the King alone the favours in cash and kind which they badly needed to survive. In return, they provided the King with military service. This situation influenced La Fontaine's idea of social politics. First, the social institutions and classes are as closely dependent upon each other as the organs of a living body. Each is important in its own role and none can survive without the others. Secondly, society is a jungle, whose inhabi-

---

191. Gui Patin, *Lettres*, Paris, 1661, t.III, pp.379-385.

192. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.91, III, 4, ll. 36-37.

193. *Ibid.*, p.95, III, 17, l.18.

194. *Ibid.*, p.90, III, 2, l.31.

tants are engaged in a ferocious struggle for survival, hence the inevitable existence of the "mangeurs" and the "mangés".<sup>195</sup>

The poet's monarchical tendencies are the products partly of the times and partly of his social background. As a middle-class intellectual from a small provincial town, in an age when the provincial feudal lords and administrators could hardly be relied upon to be fair and just, he seems to have preferred the King's central administration to provincial feudalism. This is not to say that he is ignorant of the evils of royal despotism, but he sees the latter as the lesser of two evils. His attitude is, above all, one of reconciliation and mutual cooperation. Thus the episode of La Chauve-souris et les deux belettes could be regarded as the synthesis of his political thought at this stage :

Le sage crie selon les gens:  
Vive le Roi! Vive la Ligue!<sup>196</sup>

If La Fontaine tends to prefer constituted monarchy as the central authority, it is because he demands of whoever would occupy that position certain qualities of character which would make the monarch a father of his people. The poet cannot conceive the idea of the sovereignty of the people; at this stage of his evolution the term holds no attractions for him as it does for Rousseau, for example, a century later. But the merit and main interest of his political ideas lie in the way they beautifully fit into the seventeenth-century social and political pattern. Apologues have now become sharp instruments of political polemics, turning our poet from a mere fabulist, in the traditional sense of the word, into a vigilant prophet of social harmony and national unity. With the expression of the idea that every creature has an assigned and important role in the general order of things, he has now introduced the germ of the great metaphysical postulate of pre-established harmony in nature which he is to develop ten years later in the second collection of fables.

But it is not only in the political domain that La Fontaine converts the apologue into an intellectual organ. His attitude to egoism also marks an intellectual advance from traditional thought. *Æsop* in nearly

195. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.90, III, 2.

196. Ibid., p.84, II, 5, ll.33-34.

all the fables attributed to him, takes a negative view of egoism. Among the writers of the seventeenth century who handled this subject was Blaise Pascal. The latter crystallizes briefly, but with a deeper perceptiveness than the legendary Æsop, the phenomenon of egoism and its ambivalence. The ego, he writes, wants to be great and perfect, but sees itself small and imperfect. It therefore craves for love and esteem and even prefers esteem based on falsehood to truth that diminishes it. The pursuit of reputation, glory and immortal fame is a mark of baseness in human nature.<sup>197</sup> But later on, Pascal is forced to concede that this baseness, which manifests itself in man's effort to satisfy his ego, is also a sign of man's excellence and greatness as a privileged creature.

La plus grande bassesse de l'homme est la  
recherche de la gloire, mais c'est cela même qui  
est la plus grande marque de son excellence; car  
quelque possession qu'il ait sur la terre, quelque  
santé et commodité essentielle qu'il ait, il n'est  
pas satisfait, s'il n'est dans l'estime des hommes.<sup>198</sup>

Behind this striving of the ego, continues Pascal, is an effort or a determination to secure power over others. But each ego, making itself the centre of everything, becomes the tyrant of all others. In this sense, egoism is for Pascal one of those negative passions that diminish the greatness of man more than it increases it.

La Fontaine's approach to this dominant human passion, however, offers evidence of positive thinking. Drawing inspiration from the Maximes of La Rochefoucauld, he begins by accepting as his base the fact that man is incapable of a disinterested action or love of good for its own sake.

Et cette erreur extrême  
Est un mal que chacun se plaît d'entretenir.  
Notre âme, c'est cet homme amoureux de lui-même;  
Tant de miroirs, ce sont les sottises d'autrui,  
Miroirs, de nos défauts les peintres légitimes;  
Et quant au canal, c'est celui  
Que chacun sait, le livre des Maximes.<sup>199</sup>

---

197. Pascal, B., Op.Cit., pp. 375 - 76.

198. Ibid., p. 510.

199. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.75, Fables, I, 2, ll. 22-28.

In the work mentioned in the last line of this quotation, and published in 1665, La Rochefoucauld insists on the predominance of egoism in all human conduct or behaviour. This passion is the origin of all actions and reveals itself in the desire to possess and dominate whatever it fancies. The so-called love of others or charity is no more than a disguised form of egoism.

Il est difficile de définir l'amour. Ce qu'on peut dire est que dans l'âme c'est une sympathie. Et dans le corps ce n'est qu'une envie cachée et délicate de posséder ce que l'on aime après beaucoup de mystère.<sup>200</sup>

With the acceptance of self-love as the law of nature, as a pre-moral motive, La Fontaine goes on to formulate and substantiate an ethics that would be compatible with this fact, that is, to fill the moral gap created by the acceptance of egoism as a fact of life. To this end, the poet enlarges his philosophy to include egoism within morality itself. True morality should not deny, condemn or destroy self-love completely, but build upon it by making it the basis of love of others. Thus the little rat who rescues a trapped lion (II, 11 and 12), the brave "general" who dies fighting for his people (IV, 6), and the dolphin who plunges into the roaring sea to rescue his drowning companions (IV, 7), all are acting on self-interest, whether we are aware of it or not. This is possible because of the natural checks and balances inherent in the interplay of individual egoisms, for a society based entirely upon self-love can hardly survive. Reason and self-interest thus oblige everyone to pursue the general happiness as the means of procuring his own. Egoism becomes the ethics of enlightened self-interest, a necessary virtue and one of the principal instruments of happiness.

Il faut autant qu'on peut, obliger tout le monde,  
On a souvent besoin d'un plus petit que soi.<sup>201</sup>

La Fontaine's ethics here is based upon his belief in the unity of nature and the uniformity of its laws, for when an individual is guided by self-interest, he is unconsciously led by nature to promote an end which

---

200. La Rochefoucauld, (le duc de), *Maximes et Réflexions*, Paris, (Garnier), 1967, No. 68. (*Nouvelles Réflexions*, No. 61).

201. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p. 85, *Fables*, II, 11 and 12, ll. 1-2.

did not form part of his original intention. This end is a natural process through which the conflicts of egoism flow into a natural, social harmony of mutual service. Man seeks to increase his power of action which is to increase the essence of his own being. He is disturbed when others hate what he likes, or like what he hates. He tends to over-estimate himself and to under-estimate those he dislikes. Consequently, the individual tries to avoid the dislike of others by doing what they will look upon with approval and desisting from what they will hate to see or hear. This impulse is related to ambition, praise and blame. Man is everywhere a sensitive being, susceptible to pleasure and praise, afraid of pain and blame. He is surrounded by other sensitive beings like himself, who also seek pleasure and abhor pain. They contribute to the welfare of their fellows only for the sake of the pleasure they derive from it, and they refuse to contribute to it as soon as it hurts them, or as soon as they realize that no reward of some kind can be gained from it. Hence the *dolphin* in our fable throws the monkey back into the sea, when he discovers that he is rendering a service not to a fellow human-being, capable of gratitude, but to an animal.<sup>202</sup> Thus, non-virtuous, selfish impulses are, according to this ethics, the origin of virtue. What our poet is making here is an effort to be realistic, to recognize human nature for what it is, and to determine how ethical behaviour can ensure itself a legitimate status in a secular view of nature. For him, therefore, as opposed to his traditional model, *Æsop*, enlightened "amour-propre" could correct all the exterior faults of the society and form a well-regulated community of men and women.

Les injustices des pervers  
 Servent souvent d'excuse aux nôtres  
 Telle est la loi de l'univers :  
 Si tu veux qu'on t'épargne, épargne aussi les autres.<sup>203</sup>

What La Fontaine seems to have overlooked, however, is the fact that self-love and the passions it breeds often lead to unsocial, harmful or vicious acts. In evaluating the soundness of his ethics, therefore, one must distinguish between "amour de soi" (love of self) and "amour-propre" (selfishness or excessive craving for self-esteem).

202. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.99, *Fables*, IV, 7, ll. 43-44.

203. *Ibid.*, p.115, VI, 15, ll. 1 - 4.

The former is natural and legitimate; the latter is vicious and corrupt. If the poet intends the first, his judgement could be valid; if the second, it is difficult to see how his ethics could stand. Selfishness is always a vice, no matter how much good results from it. The passions generated by "amour de soi" are gentle, but when they are blocked or resisted, they become irascible and imperceptibly turn into "amour-propre". The nature of the latter is to envy those who are in prosperity and better circumstances. This envy engenders apprehension, anger, vengeance and cruelty. Thus a feeling which was good and absolute becomes relative, preferential and hurtful to others. Moreover, it is arguable that altruism is an illusion. Man does everything for his own good, true enough, but there is a vast difference between seeking the good of another because of some remote advantage to oneself, and making the happiness of those, in whose well-being one takes pleasure, a part of one's own happiness. In the second case, good is desired for its own sake, not for any selfish advantage. Nevertheless, our poet's thinking has the merit of being positive and practical. If egoism is so deep-rooted in man's nature that it cannot be completely eliminated, why not exploit it as much as possible to the advantage of man? Why not harmonize our critical standards with the fact of the existence of egoism as the law of nature by incorporating it within morality? The novelty of La Fontaine's position vis-a-vis his traditional model lies in this positive approach to a negative tendency.

It is in his study of man's addiction to error that the poet most uses the aesopic apologues as instruments of intellectual meditation. AEsop himself is involved with this problem to a certain extent, but his treatment of it does not exceed the limit imposed by the scope of the traditional apologue. For example, in one of his fables, entitled L'Astronome, the Greek fabulist tells of a certain astrologer who, deeply absorbed in gazing at the stars, fails to see a deep ditch below him, and falls into it. Concluding the apologue, AEsop declares :

On pourrait appliquer cette fable aux hommes qui se vantent de faire des merveilles, et qui sont incapables de se conduire dans les circonstances ordinaires de la vie. 204

The background to this apologue is the practice of watching the stars, which dates back to the days of the ancient Assyrians and Chaldeans, the beauty of whose clear sky favoured astronomical observations. These ancients spent time and effort studying the movements or the periodic revolutions of the heavenly bodies. In time, a sort of analogy was established between the stars they observed and some terrestrial events, and the conclusion was eventually drawn that the stars were the Fates which presided over the birth of men and governed their future. As a follow-up of this conclusion, the astrologers claimed to possess the power of predicting moral events through the influence of the heavenly bodies. Moral event is understood here to mean an event which depends largely on man's free-will and action. This bogus claim implies that man's free-will and actions are influenced by the stars, and that the sky is a great book, in which God has written down the whole history of mankind, and from which man can read his own destiny. Many ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans succumbed to this idea.

In La Fontaine's epoch, this type of astrology was very much in vogue. In 1665, Comiers declared that the comets were the souls of great men. And Bélin postulated that the influence of the stars was exercised in the form of radiation which he sought to control by means of some magic powder.<sup>205</sup> Astrological speculations were popular at the Royal Court, particularly as from the reign of Catherine de Médicis. Indeed under Henri III and Henri IV, astral predictions were so much in vogue that nothing important was undertaken without first consulting the royal astrologers. This was done, for example, at the birth of the future Louis XIV; and on September 10, 1660, Gui Patin made the following critical comment in one of his letters :

On dit que le cardinal Mazarin est fort attristé de ce qu'on lui prédit pour son horoscope, qu'il n'a plus que cinq mois à vivre. La cour est pleine de charlatans.<sup>206</sup>

---

205. Bachelard, *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique*, Paris, 1947, p.89. Cf. also

Bélin, *Traité des Talismans*, Paris, 1671, p.26, and *Poudre de sympathie*, (3<sup>e</sup> édition), Paris, 1671, p.1.

206. Gui Patin, *Op. Cit.*, p.259.

The foregoing survey reflects the situation in which La Fontaine's sagacious and evolving mind found itself as well as gives an idea of the magnitude and impact of the sort of intellectual presumption which the poet challenged in his fables.

To launch his attack he needed a suitable occasion or a pretext. This was provided by an incident which occurred in the night of December 13, 1664. A very bright comet appeared in the sky and the sight of it caused a stir and much speculation among a people already too prone to astral predictions. Mme. de Sévigné, whose correspondence provides a sort of window on seventeenth-century French society, relates the impact of this incident on the community. In a letter to Pomponne she writes :

Il y a une comète qui paraît depuis quatre jours. Au commencement elle n'a été annoncée que par des femmes, on s'en est moqué; mais présentement tout le monde l'a vue. M. d'Artagnan veilla la nuit passée et la vit fort à son aise. M. de Neuré, grand astrologue, dit qu'elle est d'une grandeur considérable. J'ai vu M. de Foix, qui l'a vue avec trois ou quatre savants. Moi qui vous parle, je fais veiller cette nuit pour la voir aussi: elle paraît sur les trois heures; je vous en avertis, vous pouvez en avoir le plaisir ou le déplaisir.<sup>207</sup>

Further on in the same letter, she adds the following detail :

Tout le monde s'intéresse dans cette grande affaire. On ne parle d'autre chose; on raisonne, on tire des conséquences, on compte sur ses doigts; on s'attendrit, on espère, on craint, on peste, on souhaite, on hait, on admire, on est triste, on est accablé; enfin, mon pauvre Monsieur, c'est une chose extraordinaire que l'état où l'on est présentement; mais c'est une chose divine que la résignation et la fermeté de notre cher malheureux (Fouquet). Il sait tous les jours ce qui se passe, et tous les jours il faudrait faire des volumes à sa louange.<sup>208</sup>

The climax of superstition was thought by La Fontaine to have been reached when this purely natural occurrence was applied not only to a number of chance incidents that followed, such as the fainting of a

207. Sévigné, Mme. de, *Lettres*, Texte établi et annoté par Gérard Gailly, Paris, (Pléaïde), 1953-57, t.I., p.140.

208. *Ibid.*, p.141.



lawyer in the court and the discovery of another who falsified legal documents, but to the whole business of the final trial of Fouquet which was on at the time

Ces choses extraordinaires, au moment du jugement de M. Fouquet, sont fort à remarquer : la folie de Berryer, la comète, la déclaration de Lamothe sur la sellette. La famille de M. Fouquet paraît avoir bonne espérance.<sup>209</sup>

This seems to be the last straw that broke the camel's back. Our poet's patience was at an end and, as an intellectual, he showed his disgust with the whole situation by launching an all out attack against judicial astrology and popular superstition. For much of the intellectual inspiration which he needed here, he relied on St. Augustine's The City of God. In this famous work Saint Augustine spares no effort in his attack against judicial astrology and its superstitious implications. The vulgar, pagan astrologer, declares the author, speaks of Destiny as if it were different from Divine Providence, and attributes the eternal will of the latter to the influence of created stars. This is the height of superstition, sacrilege and paganism whose perpetrators should have no place in the society of God's children.

Sans aucun doute, c'est la Providence qui établit les royaumes humains. Celui qui en fait honneur au destin, parce qu'il appelle "destin" la volonté même ou la puissance de Dieu, peut garder son opinion, mais doit en modifier l'expression.... En effet, quand on entend parler du destin, l'usage courant de la langue vous oblige à ne penser à rien d'autre qu'à l'influence de la position des astres, à l'instant de la naissance ou de la conception. Or cette influence, certains veulent qu'elle soit indépendante de la volonté divine, tandis que d'autres affirment qu'elle y est assujettie. Ceux qui prétendent que, sans intervention de la volonté divine, les astres décident de nos actes, des biens dont nous jouissons, des maux que nous ayons à souffrir, il faut leur refuser toute audience.<sup>210</sup>

It will be recalled that La Fontaine read Saint Augustine's book from cover to cover when in 1665, he collaborated with Louis Giry in translating the work into French. We have seen in our discussion of our

---

209. Sévigné, Mme. de, Op. Cit., p.141.

210. Saint Augustine, Op. Cit., (Édit. Pierre de Labriolle), Paris, (Garnier), 1941, t.I, p.429, Livre V, chapt. I.

poet's contact with Virgil how he was led to discover the ideas of Saint Augustine on various subjects. It is only natural, therefore, that La Fontaine, confronted with a situation in which he needed to condemn popular superstition, should recall the ideas of the great saint.

He opens his attack by stating the fact of the situation as he sees it :

Le monde n'a jamais manqué de charlatans :  
 Cette science, de tout temps  
 Fut en professeurs très fertile. <sup>211</sup>

Converting the aesopic apologue, L'Astronome, into "L'Astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits", he uses it as a framework for attacking the pretentious claim to a sure knowledge of the future through astral influences. La Fontaine takes Æsop's conclusion as the starting point. The tendency to give mystical interpretations to purely natural events, such as the movement of the heavenly bodies, is not only futile but dangerous. The fate of the astrologer in the fable illustrates clearly the risk involved in such preoccupations.<sup>212</sup> The link between La Fontaine and his model ends with this statement of fact. The remaining forty-two lines of the fable are devoted to metaphysical arguments against intellectual presumption and man's addiction to error.

Men are slaves to their own illusions; their great fault is the tendency to despise the ordinary things of life in a vain effort to transcend their own nature. Some claim to possess the enigmatic books of life, but the more they read these imaginary books the less they understand what they read :

Parmi ce que de gens sur la terre nous sommes,  
 Il en est peu qui fort souvent  
 Ne se plaisent d'entendre dire  
 Qu'au livre de destin les mortels peuvent lire.<sup>213</sup>

But what is this supposed "Book of Destiny", celebrated by the sages of antiquity, and quoted by the self-styled philosophers of today, except sheer chance in one case and providence in the other?

211. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 115 - 116, Fables, VI, 19, ll. 1 - 3.

212. Ibid., p.86, II, 13, ll. 5 - 6.

213. Ibid., p.86, ll. 7-10.

Mais ce livre, qu'Homère et les siens ont chanté  
 Qu'est ce, que le hasard parmi l'antiquité,  
 Et parmi nous la Providence?  
 Or du hasard il n'est point de science :  
 S'il en était, on aurait tort  
 De l'appeler hasard, ni fortune, ni sort,  
 Toutes choses très incertaines.<sup>214</sup>

Thus, those who engage in this futile speculation merely waste their own time and effort, for they lack the necessary knowledge of what they are doing. And because they are working on something beyond their understanding, they end up with discovering nothing more than their own profound ignorance and frustration. The divine will and actions are no more within human understanding than the knowledge of the future :

Quant aux volontés souveraines  
 De Celui qui fait tout, et rien qu'avec dessein,  
 Qui les sait, que lui seul? Comment lire en son sein?  
 Aurait-il imprimé sur le front des étoiles  
 Ce que la nuit des temps enferme dans ses voiles?<sup>215</sup>

Having thus refuted speculative astrology and the accompanying superstition, La Fontaine reaffirms his faith in experimental truth as he sees it :

Le firmament se meut, les astres font leur cours,  
 Le Soleil nous luit tous les jours,  
 Tous les jours sa clarté succède à l'ombre noire,  
 Sans que nous en puissions autre chose inférer  
 Que la nécessité de luire et d'éclairer,  
 D'amener les saisons, de mûrir les semences,  
 De verser sur le corps certaines influences.  
 Du reste, en quoi répond au sort toujours divers  
 Ce train toujours égal dont marche l'univers?<sup>216</sup>

On this note, our poet casts anathema on the "charlatans", "fiseurs d'horoscope" and all their kind for their deceit, their vanity and presumption.

Charlatans, fiseurs d'horoscope,  
 Quittez les cours des princes de l'Europe;  
 Emmenez avec vous les souffleurs tout d'un temps:  
 Vous ne méritez pas plus de foi que ces gens.<sup>217</sup>

La Fontaine's intellectual growth is evident in the force and subtlety of this reasoning, and in the appropriateness of his illustrations

---

214. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 86, ll. 11 - 17.

215. Ibid., ll. 18-22.

216. Ibid., ll. 30-38

217. Ibid. ll. 39-42.

which bring out clearly the superstitious naivety and ridicule behind astral predictions. The penetrating force of his argument here has never failed to strike his critics among whom one can mention Clarac. He writes :

La passion avec laquelle l'argumentation est conduite, la souplesse du style qui s'élève par degrés jusqu'à une sorte d'émotion métaphysique, pour redescendre à la simplicité de la prose, cette variété et cette richesse font des trente ou trente-cinq vers qui viennent s'interposer ici, de façon imprévue, entre l'apologue et la moralité, l'un des rares fragments de vraie poésie philosophique qu'il y ait dans notre langue.<sup>218</sup>

One wonders whether our poet, judging from the emphatic tone of his argument, is not here fighting dogmatism with dogmatism, for he seems to make no allowance whatsoever for the other side of the coin. In a universe where all things are linked one to the other, where all things act and react, compose and decompose themselves, there may perhaps not be a single atom which does not play a more far-reaching role than man can imagine. It could be that each imperceptible molecule, placed in favourable circumstances, could produce prodigious effects far beyond all expectations. Perhaps, if we were in a position to follow the eternal chain that links all causes to their visible effects; if we could disentangle the ends of the imperceptible string which stirs the thoughts, will and passions of those men, who, from their actions, are described as great, we might discover that the secret levers with which nature moves the world consist of mere atoms in varying combinations, including astral combinations. One may never be sure; but this reflection does not affect the validity of La Fontaine's reasoning. If the course of the stars determines irrevocably the destiny of man, what then is the rationale behind political, social and economic aspirations? What is the use of free will, the pursuit of perfection and even religious faith?

What the poet sets out to destroy is superstition, prejudice and error, the narrow-minded fanaticism of private opinion that offers itself as the absolute truth. His challenge is backed by the knowledge of the fact that human reason, because of its fluctuating or unstable nature, is incapable of reaching the absolute truth. It should therefore not be used where it cannot be effective. Man is endowed with reason, not for the

---

218. Clarac, P., *Littérature française*, t. II, p. 199.

purpose of futile speculations or spinning out theories about things beyond human understanding, but for the sake of action within the bounds of experience. Theoretical reason is fanciful and chimerical, it runs widely astray whenever it leaves the firm ground of experience. Experience then is the remedy which La Fontaine offers to mankind against the dangerous fallacies of perverted, weak and unstable human reason.

The affirmation of faith in the truth or facts of experience leads the poet to the exploration of the relationship between experience, the senses and reason. Here again, he finds a spring-board for his intellectual plunge in Æsop's apologue. In Le Chameau qui a fienté dans une rivière, Æsop narrates the following brief episode: "Un chameau traversait une rivière au cours rapide. Ayant fienté, il vit aussitôt sa crotte emportée devant lui par la rapidité du courant. "Qu'est ce là? s'écria-t-il; ce qui était derrière moi, je le vois à présent passer devant moi." By way of a moral lesson concluding the apologue, the Greek fabulist adds:

Cette fable trouve son application dans un Etat où  
les derniers et les imbéciles dominant à la place des  
premiers et des gens sensés.<sup>219</sup>

In the hands of La Fontaine, this apologue becomes Le Chameau et les Bâtons flottants. Ignoring the moral given by his traditional model, he uses the fable as an illustration of the manner in which sense impressions or experience and reason are involved in the process of forming human judgement and beliefs, following the theory of knowledge formulated by Epicurus and transmitted through Lucretius to Gassendi and his disciples. We shall analyse in a greater detail the Epicurean, Lucretian and Gassendist theory of knowledge when we come to discuss its influence on La Fontaine's second collection of fables. But since the spirit of this particular fable suggests that the poet is following this theory even at this stage of his intellectual development, it is necessary, if only to explain what he means in the fable, to recall briefly Epicurus' idea of how human knowledge is acquired. According to him, experience comes through sense impressions, for all sensations leave traces which form images. The latter are indispensable to the exercise of thought, since it is through them that the understanding draws

---

219. Esopé, Op.Cit., pp. 64-65, fable 144.

intelligible knowledge. Sensation must be distinguished from fantasy, which is merely an imaginative memory and, as such, does not require the effective presence of concrete objects. When external objects strike our senses, an experience is registered and we acquire various ideas, say, of colour, heat, proximity or distance. But this process is such that the mind receives more or less impression according to the manner in which the objects affect the senses, i.e. according to their similarity or dissimilarity to what the experience already knows, their proximity or distance and their other qualities. It is this relativity that accounts for the diversity of opinions, formed on the same object, because each observer interprets the sense impression he receives from the external object according to his own vision, and has a tendency to make up for what he cannot perceive clearly by using his own imagination.

It is thus, argues La Fontaine, in this fable, that some of the men, who see a distant object floating on the sea, take it for a powerful warship. Then, as the object draws nearer and nearer to the observers, it becomes, in turn, and to various people, a fireship, a gondola, a package, and finally, mere sticks floating on the wave. This, says the poet, is because

Ce qui nous paraissait terrible et singulier  
S'apprivoise avec notre vue  
Quand ce vient à la continue....  
De loin, c'est quelque chose; et de près, ce n'est rien. 220

The question that arises then is this: Does La Fontaine think that a sure knowledge can be acquired through the senses? The poet answers 'yes', but with strong reservations. This answer is not elaborated until in the second collection of fables. Meanwhile, it is possible to deduce what his position is from the analogy he gives in the present fable. The senses, he suggests, always report faithfully all that they perceive clearly, not distant or obscure impressions, as in the case of this fable. This is so because the senses are natural faculties which act through the necessary stimuli. For example, an eye, fixed upon a fast-moving ship, reports that the bank appears to be moving in the opposite direction. This is exactly as it ought to be, for in the circumstances, the

eye receives the same impression as if the bank and the ship were moving in opposite directions. What the senses perceive clearly is always in conformity with the truth of a given situation, in cases where it concerns the ordinary behaviour and needs of life. With regard to food, for example, the senses help us to discern what we need. If they report that we are hungry, then we are hungry. In the same way, if the eye had clearly seen the floating sticks, mentioned in the fable, the observers' initial errors of identification would not have occurred. Viewed in this way, the senses do not deceive, and are, for La Fontaine, the gateway to knowledge. On the other hand, where the senses are incapable of perceiving a given object, such as a distant planet or a star, errors are bound to occur in any speculations on the size, position or influence of such a star, since the speculators would only be building upon their own imaginations rather than upon the evidence of the senses.

This is the main argument behind La Fontaine's scepticism vis-a-vis all human claims to absolute truth in matters outside the domain of real experience. What guarantee have the charlatans, astrologers and presumptuous philosophers against the falsity of the imagination which influences reason and judgement? The impression which the poet gives to the reader is not that of an arrogant sceptic, who delights in making a mockery of traditional beliefs, or who amuses himself at the spectacle of the weakness of human reason. It is rather that of a lucid moderate, who is afraid of falling into error by adopting absolute opinions. Thus, our poet's scepticism is that of an open and intellectually alert mind who, in an age when all parties were intent on imposing their trenchant doctrines on others, when everyone else was proclaiming at the top of his voice: "Je sais tout", seems to have murmured, like Montaigne, "Que sais-je?"<sup>221</sup>

This affinity of thought with Montaigne is hardly surprising. It will be recalled that the seventeenth-century struggle against intellectual presumption drew inspiration from Renaissance scepticism, particularly from that of Montaigne. The latter attacks man's self-arrogated superiority over the animals. He visualizes man as being essentially a

---

221. Montaigne, M., Op.Cit., pp. 426 - 430, 465 - 467.

bundle of errors and contradictions. Reason itself which distinguishes man from the rest of the animals is not worth the price set on it; its efficiency compares unfavourably with the perfection of animal instinct, for it is constantly at the mercy of the imagination and external circumstances. Finally, he challenges man's claim to a sure knowledge.<sup>222</sup> There is not the slightest doubt that La Fontaine drew inspiration from the writings of Montaigne, for he re-echoes the latter's ideas in the main body of his argument against hasty conclusions and intellectual vanity.

But the influence of Montaigne alone cannot account for the attitude of intellectual scepticism which La Fontaine has cultivated at this stage of his development, for significant as this influence may have been on seventeenth-century thought in general, it does not seem to have had a very direct impact on the poet. It is generally believed that La Fontaine is a faithful follower of Æsop, that is, a poet of traditional wisdom in the first collection of fables, and that he does not give serious attention to highly intellectual problems, such as the controversy over the theory of knowledge, until his contact with the circle of Mme. de La Sablière. Léon Petit, for example, attributes the poet's earliest contact with Epicurean/Gassendi's<sup>st</sup> ideas to the influence of Bernier in Mme. de La Sablière's salon.

La Fontaine, quant à lui, n'a pas connu personnellement Gassendi. Quand celui-ci mourut (1655), le poète avait trente-quatre ans. Trop provincial encore pour être mêlé à la vie de la capitale, cependant que Molière et Chapelle, par exemple, plus parisiens que lui, avaient profité des leçons du maître. En revanche, il est à présumer que c'est par le truchement de Bernier, dont il fut l'ami, que La Fontaine a été introduit à la doctrine philosophique de Gassendi.<sup>223</sup>

But from what we have seen in the course of this chapter, it is quite evident that as early as 1668, La Fontaine was already involved in some of the most complex intellectual problems of the age, for his fable of Le Chameau et les Bâtons flottants and his attitude of meta-physical doubt or scepticism are implicated in the controversy between

---

222. Montaigne, M., Op.Cit., pp. 315 - 321, 426 - 467.

223. Léon Petit, Op.Cit., p.193.



Descartes and Gassendi over the question of the extent to which human reason and intelligence can be relied upon to attain a sure knowledge. The position taken by the poet, as seen in the arguments he advances above, is obviously already Gassendist, that is, the epicurean theory of knowledge adopted by Gassendi. How then do we explain the fact that La Fontaine adopts this attitude even before coming in direct contact with the Gassendist milieu of Mme. de La Sablière's salon? Does mere temperament suffice to explain his intellectual scepticism? This is probable, but only to the extent that he is temperamentally drawn to kindred spirits whose influence had an impact on his thinking at this time. There is no doubt that his earliest ideas of epicureanism were derived from his reading of Lucretius who is a disciple of Epicurus. But again, the degree of influence here, though considerable, is not as strong as that of direct contact. An example of the later form of influence, that is, of direct and more powerful influence on the formation of La Fontaine's thinking and attitude at this stage is Saint-Evremond. The tight bond of friendship between the poet and Saint-Evremond has already been noted in our discussion of the beneficent friends (Cf. Chapter II, 4). Saint-Evremond was well-known for his epicureanism both in tastes and in mental attitude. In his Réflexions sur la morale d'Epicure, begun before his banishment but completed in exile and published in 1674, he takes up the defence of Epicurus against the latter's detractors. Everyone knows, he declares, that most men condemn Epicurus and reject his doctrine as dangerous. Consequently, a man is considered vicious from the moment he declares himself a disciple of Epicurus. The reason for this attitude is that the epicureans do not follow other people in believing sheepishly. Most people do not endeavour to inform themselves correctly, but blindly adhere to whatever is told them. Without instructing themselves in the nature of things, they judge those to be best that have the greatest crowd of admirers. Thus most men retain their errors because they are countenanced by those of other men. <sup>224</sup> The impact of this attitude on Saint-Evremond is seen in the words of Albert-Marie Schmidt. He writes

---

224. Saint-Evremond, *Œuvres en Prose*, (édit. R. Ternois), Paris (Didier), 1966, t. III, pp. 418-438

De ce commerce sans franchise avec des épicuriens, il retire cependant quelques principes formels: un incurable dégoût pour la témérité d'esprit, une superbe humilité devant l'inconnaissable, et peut-être encore, cette méthode hypercritique d'analyse morale, dont, à l'usage il crut reconnaître l'exactitude.<sup>225</sup>

In men's desire to know the truth and the future, they look up to the philosophers and the charlatans for the answer, not knowing that these impostors themselves are as ignorant as everyone else about these things. Plato, Aristotle, Zeno and Epicurus all contradict each other, argues Saint-Evremond, and it is one of life's misfortunes that certain truths should remain unknown. Philosophers who proclaim one view act in a manner contrary to their own opinions. Thus Epicurus taught that everything is matter, even soul, spirit and mind, and that everything becomes corrupt and perishes, yet he acted as if he expected immortality. Descartes, who talked about a substance which is purely spiritual and which thinks eternally, proved nothing, except that he had no proofs for his theory. In conclusion, Saint-Evremond recommends that since it is impossible to know the ultimate principles or causes, men should console themselves by seldom reflecting upon life's hidden problems and by endeavouring to escape from misery through the pursuit of pleasure.<sup>226</sup> It is easy to see from the above that Saint-Evremond is temperamentally Gassendist. His attraction to Gassendi's circle derives from the latter's interest in Epicurus of whom Saint-Evremond himself writes :

Lucrèce a été son adorateur; Sénèque, tout ennemi de sa secte qu'il était, a parlé de lui avec éloge. Si des villes l'ont eu en horreur, d'autres lui ont érigé des statues; et parmi les chrétiens, si les Pères l'ont décrié, M. Gassendi et M. Bernier le justifient.<sup>227</sup>

Although Gassendi adopts an eclectic attitude towards philosophy in general, the real basis of his doctrine is Epicurean. As Léon Petit puts it,

---

225. Schmidt, Albert-Marie, *Saint-Evremond ou l'humaniste impur*, Paris, (Cavalier), 1932, p. 35.

226. Saint-Evremond, *Œuvres mêlées*, (édit. Charles Giraud), Paris, 1865, t. I, pp. 58-59.

227. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

Si en effet, dans son éclectisme, ce dernier a prétendu construire son œuvre en cueillant la fleur de toutes les philosophies, c'est en fait Epicure qui reste son idole et son maître.<sup>228</sup>

Like Gassendi, Saint-Evremond is persuaded that the power of human reason to acquire absolute truth is severely limited as has been vindicated by the endless disagreements and self-contradictions among the philosophers. Amidst this reflection, as Saint-Evremond himself tells us, the idea occurred to him to consult Gassendi personally for instruction and guidance :

Au milieu de ces méditations, qui me désabusaient insensiblement, j'eus la curiosité de voir Gassendi, le plus célèbre des philosophes et le moins présomptueux. Après de longs entretiens, où il me fit voir tout ce que peut inspirer la raison, il se plaignit "que la nature eût donné tant d'étendue à la curiosité et des bornes si étroites à la connaissance, qu'il ne le disait point pour mortifier la présomption des autres, ou par une fausse humilité de soi-même qui sent tout à fait l'hypocrisie; que peut-être il n'ignorait pas ce que l'on pouvait penser sur beaucoup de choses, mais de bien connaître les moindres, qu'il n'osait s'en assurer".<sup>229</sup>

This meeting with Gassendi was momentous and certainly quite decisive in shaping directly Saint-Evremond's thinking on philosophical and metaphysical speculations and indirectly that of La Fontaine, for commenting on the impact of the interview on his subsequent life and attitude, Saint-Evremond declares :

Alors une science qui m'était déjà suspecte me parut trop vaine pour m'y assujettir plus longtemps; je rompis tout commerce avec elle, et commençais d'admirer comme il était possible à un homme sage de passer sa vie à des recherches inutiles.<sup>230</sup>

It is this Gassendist attitude to popular superstition, this intellectual humility in the face of the impenetrable mysteries of nature, that Saint-Evremond communicated to La Fontaine in the course of their association during the period between 1658 and 1661. The assimilation of the ideas

---

228. Léon Petit, *La Fontaine et Saint-Evremond ou La Tentation de l'Angleterre*, Toulouse, 1953, p.191.

229. Saint-Evremond, *Œuvres mêlées*, t.I, p.59.

230. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

of the gassendist circle was rendered easier by the fact that La Fontaine was already temperamentally disposed to welcome them. Thus he readily discovered in Saint-Evremond a kindred spirit and an early link with gassendism and epicureanism. The surviving fragments of the correspondence which passed between the two men reveal an affinity of thought and taste between them. Prior to Saint-Evremond's banishment in 1661, when the friends and associates of Fouquet were being persecuted by Colbert and his group, La Fontaine had been a close friend of Saint-Evremond since the days their paths crossed at Vaux, and throughout the period of exile, Saint-Evremond maintained a steady contact with the poet through a regular exchange of letters. The conclusion cannot, therefore, be avoided that, contrary to the general view, La Fontaine derived his first practical knowledge of epicureanism and gassendism before he ever came in contact with the circle of Mme. de La Sablière. The poet first discovered and admired in Saint-Evremond that intellectual doubt, born of prudence and humility of which Gassendi was the symbol. In one of his letters to Saint-Evremond, the poet recalls one area of his intellectual and temperamental affinity with Saint-Evremond. He writes :

Je ne suis pas moins ennemi que vous du faux  
air d'esprit que prend un libertin. Quiconque 231  
l'affectera, je lui donnerai la palme du ridicule.

What La Fontaine imbibed from his friend, in addition to their common epicurean taste for pleasure, is the "honnêtes-gens" attitude of being discreet in his pronouncements, modest in his aspirations, but sceptical, ironic and almost genuinely indifferent to the problems of life, particularly those problems which seem to transcend human understanding. Both men have in common their lucid doubt, founded upon the fact of the incapacity of human reason to attain the absolute truth. All absolute doctrines anger our poet, particularly when he recalls that the so-called absolute truth is no more than a personal opinion. In the face of man's evident limitations and intellectual weaknesses, why, he asks, should an individual or groups pronounce with an air of finality on abstract issues outside the domain of experience : divine will, astral influences on man's destiny, the nature of God, and all the rest of it?

---

231. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 375 - 383.

It can be seen from this attitude that La Fontaine's contribution to the intellectual debate is positive. It is a plea for people to be modest enough to suspend judgement in order that they may the more easily maintain their balance before the exigencies of nature. That is, if man is to avoid error, he must hold on to rational doubt until he sees an incontrovertible evidence of truth through methodical reasoning based on real experience. It is significant that the poet rarely, if ever, gives any categorical answers to paradoxical problems, such as the ones mentioned earlier on. He is content to leave them as they are, admitting humbly that

L'Avenir m'est chose inconnue,  
Et je n'en parle qu'à tâtons.<sup>232</sup>

Having abandoned the hope of ever penetrating the ultimate principles of nature through natural means, he neither resorts to superstition nor hides his natural human incapacity under the cloak of vain metaphysical speculations. It is no wonder, therefore, that he condemns in the strongest terms, the astrologers and charlatans, for their intellectual dishonesty, presumption and vain claims to possess the last word on matters that transcend human understanding

.... Pauvre bête,  
Tandis qu'à peine à tes pieds tu peux voir,  
Penses-tu lire au-dessus de ta tête?<sup>233</sup>

In the same uncomprising tone, he indicts, in the episode of the wolf masquerading as a surgeon, the medical quacks of his epoch, who claimed to cure diseases that they could not even diagnose.

C'est bien fait, dit le loup en soi-même, fort triste;  
Chacun à son métier doit toujours s'attacher.  
Tu veux faire ici l'arboriste,  
Et ne fus jamais que boucher.<sup>234</sup>

This reaction does not make our poet any less intellectual or forward-looking. It is without prejudice to the genuine scientific curiosity of honest researchers, who contribute positively to human knowledge. Such researchers work methodically, following the empirical laws of physics, chemistry, biology and other combinations, which enable them to discover the secrets of nature for the benefit of mankind. Their preoccupation contrasts therefore with the pretentious speculations of the impostors condemned by the poet.

---

232. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 55.

233. Ibid. p.86, Fables, II, 13, ll. 2-4.

234. Ibid., p.107, V, 8, ll. 33-36.

From all indications, La Fontaine has now plunged headlong into the intellectual pool of his epoch. It is possible, at this stage of his development, to form a mental picture of the evolving personality. The image he presents is that of an intellectual who judiciously looks before taking a mental leap, who considers all sides before committing himself. Having observed more diversity than uniformity in nature, he has come to understand that all comparisons are futile, given the relative character of all situations, all absolute generalizations over-simplifications. Moreover, his historical and personal perspective has taught him that the views of his epoch, his country and himself are by no means absolute truths, in view of their diversity and the constantly changing nature of all earthly things, a change which makes it impossible for something as constant as absolute truth to dwell in man. In this sense, his metaphysical doubt is not so much an arrogant inquest into reason and faith, as a statement of the moral fact that man is naturally addicted to error, and that the quest for absolute truth is unattainable. It is more intellectually honest, more prudent, and consequently, more virtuous to set oneself an attainable ideal than to aspire to transcend one's own nature. Ethically and intellectually, the former teaches man to learn of himself as he really is and to be humble. The latter leads to presumption, disillusionment, frustration and misery. For La Fontaine, therefore, the stage of metaphysical scepticism was the point in time, when he manifested his intellectual independence vis-a-vis the presumptuous philosophers, metaphysicians and theologians. Some of these were once his heroes and his teachers during his early, formative years. Now, he has discovered such flaws in them that he cannot but shake off their mental tutelage over him, and turn to the facts of experience for self-education. This is a sign of healthy, intellectual growth. The switch from traditional apologue to intellectual poetry has thus set our poet on the road to maturity.

CHAPTER IV

TOWARDS MATURITY (1668 - 1678)

1. La Fontaine Painter of the Passions and Poet of "Volupté": Psyché

By the time La Fontaine transformed the traditional apologue into intellectual poetry in the first collection of fables, he had attempted almost all the known literary genres. He had first of all tried dramatic poetry (L'Eunuque), then attempted the heroic genre (Adonis). At Vaux, he had also exercised his talents in historical writing with the descriptions of the private history of Vaux, mixed with romantic episodes. Next he, first as a "conteur", then as a "fabuliste", created the two new and closely related genres of "conte" and "fable". We have already noted how the transformation of the latter into an intellectual instrument set him on the road to maturity. But the real point of departure towards this goal is Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon. This hybrid piece, published in 1669, marks the culminating point of La Fontaine's professional formation, for it synthesizes all his previous literary experiences into one mixed and complex unit of work, made possible by the subtle fusion of prose and poetry.

The remote origin of the legend of Psyché is not clearly known. What is certain, as the poet himself tells us in the "Préface" is that his immediate source of inspiration was The Metamorphoses or the Golden Ass of Apuleius.

Apulée me fournissait la matière....<sup>1</sup>

The seventeenth century was rich with more or less faithful Renaissance translations of Apuleius' work. Among these were the renderings by Guillaume Michel (1517), Jean Maugin (1546), Georges de La Bouthière (1553) and Jean Louveau (1558). It is possible that La Fontaine consulted some of these works, but the version he is more likely to have used, judging from its popularity and up to date quality, is the one translated early in the seventeenth century by Jean de Montlyard (1612). The same legend was also adapted by Benserade into a Ballet, performed at the royal palace on the 16th of January, 1656.

---

1. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 404 - 405, Psyché, (Préface).

Apuleius' work recounts the episode of a princess who marries a prince of exquisite beauty. The latter only wears his true shape by night. During the day he is a monster in the form of a serpent. A curse is on his wife if she tries or seeks to know his face. She is led by curiosity to transgress his commands and he departs from her in sorrow. After many adventures she succeeds in regaining him.<sup>2</sup>

As is often the case with La Fontaine, he retains this framework, while modifying certain aspects of his model beyond recognition. First, the tone of the two versions is different. Whereas Apuleius writes like one who believes in the possibility of physical transformations, La Fontaine gives the impression of one who derides the extravagances of popular superstition. In the original story, it is Pan, who sits on the bank of the river, playing with the nymph Echo and grazing his flock, who dissuades the heroine from committing suicide.<sup>3</sup> In place of this rustic mythology, La Fontaine substitutes an adaptation of the episode from Tasso's Jerusalem delivered, in which Herminia meets an old hermit and two young shepherdesses.<sup>4</sup> One need only compare our poet's version of the story with the faithful French translation of the model by Paul Vallette to realize what an immense difference La Fontaine's excellent diction makes to the reader's enjoyment of the story. The conclusion too, is different in both versions. Although Apuleius maintains the humour of the story throughout, and succeeds in lifting the piece above the genre of farce, his ending of the narrative has nothing to compare with the solemn poetical conclusion which colours La Fontaine's exquisite myth of Psyché with a strange light. The model stops with merely mentioning that the daughter born of Cupid and Psyché is named "Volupté".<sup>5</sup> Our poet goes further to celebrate the qualities of "Volupté" as a lead to the exposition of his own recipe for happiness.<sup>6</sup>

2. Apulée, *Les Métamorphoses*, Texte établi par D.S. Robertson et traduit par Paul Vallette, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1940, t.II, pp. 32-93 (IV, 28 - VI, 24).

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

4. Tasso, Torquato, *La Gerusalemme liberata*, (édit. L. Caretti), Milan, 1971, pp. 195-232 : (Canto VII).

5. Apulée, *Op.Cit.*, p.93.

6. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p.453.



Thus, in his hands, the narrative assumes a more intellectual character as we shall see shortly. The liberty taken with his model is justified on the usual ground of contemporary taste.

Il serait long, et même inutile, d'examiner les endroits où j'ai quitté mon original, et pourquoi je l'ai quitté. Ce n'est pas à force de raisonnement qu'on fait entrer le plaisir dans l'âme de ceux qui lisent : leur sentiment me justifiera, quelque téméraire que j'aie été, ou me rendra condamnable, quelque raison qui me justifie. Pour bien faire, il faut considérer mon ouvrage sans relation à ce qu'a fait Apulée, et ce qu'a fait Apulée sans relation à mon livre, et là-dessus s'abandonner à son goût.<sup>7</sup>

The confident tone of this declaration contrasts with the timid "Avertissement" of L'Eunuque. This is not surprising, for confidence comes with success and intellectual growth.

Jean-Pierre Collinet in his scholarly work, Le Monde littéraire de La Fontaine, has not only shown the synthesizing role of Psyché in La Fontaine's literary works, but also made a penetrating and up to date study of the piece as a work of art. He outlines the qualities of simplicity, clarity and naturalness which distinguish its style, the deliberate regression from heroic gallantry to elegant gaiety, and demonstrates how La Fontaine succeeds in combining the comic with the pathetic without unduly disrupting the smooth flow of the narrative. In other words, he shows how the poet remains faithful to the "goût du siècle" which he set out to satisfy, for the above-mentioned literary qualities constituted part of contemporary taste.<sup>8</sup>

Mon principal but est toujours de plaire : pour en venir là, je considère le goût du siècle. Or, après plusieurs expériences, il m'a semblé que ce goût se porte au galant et à la plaisanterie....<sup>9</sup>

But the taste of the epoch was not restricted to the appreciation of good literary qualities. The century was equally, as we have seen from the preceding chapter, interested in ideas, in the analysis of the human passions as revealed in the leading characters of a given piece of work.

7. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 404-405.

8. Collinet, J-P., Op.Cit., pp. 229-284.

9. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 404-405.

Non que l'on méprise les passions; bien loin de cela, quand on ne les trouve pas dans un roman, dans un poème, dans une pièce de théâtre, on se plaint de leur absence.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the merit of an author's work was judged not only from the artistic beauty of his medium of expression but also from the quality of ideas expressed in that medium. Since Collinet has made a brilliant study of the first aspect in respect of Psyché, we shall direct the present investigation to the second, that is, to an examination of the use which La Fontaine makes of the work as a medium for intellectual meditation on the psychology of the passions in the fair sex and on the concept of happiness as implied in the idea of "Volupté".

The clearest evidence of the poet's intellectual growth, as seen in Psyché, is in his delicate analysis of the passions. Before going on to show this or to analyse the movement of his thought in the work, it is necessary to examine briefly the social and literary context which contributed to influence the tone and content of the narrative or which decided La Fontaine to devote a considerable portion of the story to the painting of the psychology of the passions, particularly in the female sex. He was neither a professional psychologist nor a successful playwright who is usually expected to be skilled in the art of portraying human emotions. He was just a poet. Given this situation, how can we account for the inspiration which enabled La Fontaine to analyse so admirably the movement of the passions in Psyché? In order to answer this question, it is important to realize that what the poet continues in this work is the same allegorical representation of the human condition with regard to suffering and pain which dates back to the Hebrew legend of Adam and Eve. In this legend the origin of evil and suffering is attributed to Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit and her getting Adam to do the same. In Greek mythology it is due to Pandora's opening of the forbidden box; and in the Latin narrative of Apuleius which inspired La Fontaine it is again the heroine's disobedience to a given command that plunges her into suffering and misery. All along what one sees is the same portrayal of unbridled curiosity and indiscretion and the impression is given in each case that these passions are more dominant in the female than in the male sex. How true this assumption is, is

---

10. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 404-405.

another matter. But there is no doubt that in La Fontaine's epoch it was believed to be so. Accordingly, works devoted to the portrayal of the passions in women were a common feature of the time. Many artists and writers found in the ancient myth of Psyché a suitable representation of the various human passions and did not hesitate to adapt it in different ways in order to exploit the popular taste. Thus Benserade composed his Le Ballet royal de Psyché ou la puissance de l'Amour which was performed in 1656. La Fontaine's half-prose-half-verse adaptation of the same myth in 1669 was followed by Corneille's Psyché, tragédie-ballet,<sup>11</sup> and Molière's work of the same title both of which were performed before the King in 1671.<sup>12</sup> Although these works appeared two years after La Fontaine's Psyché, they are cited here to show the trend in popular taste, a trend which played a major role in motivating the poet's painting of the movement of human emotions in the work. The theatrical works of contemporary artists were often devoted to the portrayal of various human passions: pride, envy, avarice, indiscretion, heroism and other traits of character. These works had a great deal of impact on La Fontaine's analysis of the passions in Psyché. For example, the lines in which he describes the dominance of "Amour" over all sensitive beings:

L'époux que les Destins gardent à votre fille  
 Est un monstre cruel qui déchire les cœurs,  
 Qui trouble maint Etat, détruit mainte famille,  
 Se nourrit de soupirs, se baigne dans les pleurs.  
 "A l'univers entier il déclare la guerre,  
 Courant de bout en bout un flambeau dans la main:  
 On le craint dans les cieux, on le craint sur la terre;  
 Le Styx n'a pu borner son pouvoir souverain....  
 Tout l'univers obéit à l'Amour."<sup>13</sup>

follows the pattern of thought adopted by Corneille in certain lines of Rodogune, published in 1644. Here Oronte reminds Rodogune of the omnipotence of love and advises her to use her beauty to exploit the advantages against the envious queen, Cleopatra. He declares:

---

11. Corneille, P., *Œuvres*, (édit. C.H. Marty-Laveaux), Paris, (Hachette), 1862, t.vii, pp. 279-370.

12. Molière, J., *Œuvres*, (édit. Régner), Paris, (Hachette), 1883, t.viii, pp. 247-384.

13. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 409, 411.

L'Amour fera lui seul tout ce qu'il vous faut faire.  
 Faites-vous un rempart des fils contre la mère;  
 Ménagez bien leur flamme, ils voudront tout pour vous;  
 Et ces astres naissants sont adorés de tous.  
 Quoi que puisse en ces lieux une reine cruelle,  
 Pouvant tout sur ses fils, vous y pouvez plus qu'elle. <sup>14</sup>

In the same way, Corneille's description of the implacable fury and jealousy of "La Reine de Syrie" who fears the possibility of her own beauty being overshadowed by that of Rodogune :

La Reine, qui surtout craint de vous voir régner,  
 Vous donne ces terreurs pour vous faire éloigner;  
 Et pour rompre un hymen qu'avec peine elle endure,  
 Elle en veut à vous-même imputer la rupture....  
 Mais pourrons-nous braver une reine en colère....? <sup>15</sup>

has a parallel in the circumstances of the furious and unrelenting jealousy and envy of "La Reine de Cythère" against the emergent and overpowering beauty of Psyché. Like Corneille, La Fontaine emphasizes the unforgiving nature of this sort of envy, particularly in the fair sex. Jealous women, he says, rarely forgive or pardon their rivals.

Rarement se pardonnent-elles l'avantage de la beauté. Et je dirai en passant que l'offense la plus irrémissible parmi ce sexe, c'est quand l'une d'elles en défait une autre en pleine assemblée; cela se venge ordinairement comme les assassinats et les trahisons. <sup>16</sup>

It is equally significant that in Corneille's work the victim's main weapon against her oppressor is the latter's own son who is charmed by the beauty of Rodogune, in the same way that Psyché's beauty attracts Cupid to save her from the evil machinations of Venus, Cupid's own mother. This striking similarity in the way the two authors express the same idea, portray the same passion in an identical context, use the same images and even the same vocabulary in places, is much more than a mere coincidence. It is possible that both authors were inspired by a common source, namely, Apuleius' Metamorphoses. But even then, this fact alone cannot account for the similarity in verse pattern and the use of identical images in both Corneille and La Fontaine, particularly as these images do not appear in the original source. For example, Corneille's allegorical representation of "Amour" as "flamme"

14. Corneille, P., Op. Cit., t. iv, p. 464, Rodogune, Acte III, scène 2, ll. 831 - 836.

15. Ibid., ll. 805 - 808, 823.

16. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 408.

(1.833) is imitated in La Fontaine's portrayal of the same "Amour" as going about with "un flambeau dans la main".<sup>17</sup> When the fact that Corneille's work, published in 1644, preceded that of La Fontaine which appeared in 1669, is added to these circumstances, one cannot avoid the conclusion that, although La Fontaine may have drawn the bulk of his inspiration from Apuleius' work, he also consulted that of Corneille, particularly with regard to the analogy existing between the conflict that opposes Psyché to the Queen of Cythera on the one hand and Rodogune and the Queen of Syria on the other.

The passion for love, the desire to know more about it among adolescent females and the idea that young girls usually know much more about love at an earlier age than their parents and elders are prepared to accept are portrayed by Molière in the dialogue between Mascarille and Lélie in the comedy entitled L'Etourdi, published in 1653. Reacting to Mascarille's reproaches to her for being too curious about sex, Lélie declares :

Tu ne me diras plus, toi qui toujours me cries.<sup>18</sup>

The same idea is expressed in a later comedy, L'Ecole des Femmes, performed in 1662. This time, it is the young Agnès who resents Arnolphe's tendency to scold her for being too eager for love. She cries out :

Pourquoi me criez-vous?<sup>19</sup>

La Fontaine adapts this idea in Psyché, particularly in the dialogue between the two daughters of the old shepherd who dissuades Psyché from committing suicide. As the younger daughter's curiosity about the whole question of love and sex increases, leading eventually to the revelation of the fact that she actually knows more about love than the elder sister believes, the latter tries to hush her up by reminding her that if she were heard discussing love and sex with such frankness and at such a tender age, she would certainly be scolded :

17. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.409.

18. Molière, J., Op.Cit., t.I, p.161, L'Etourdi, Acte II, scène 2, l. 839.

19. Ibid., t.III, p.261, L'Ecole des Femmes, Acte V, scène 5, l.1506.

Petite fille, reprit sa sœur, si l'on vous entend, vous serez criée...<sup>20</sup>

That the development of La Fontaine's skill in portraying human passions also drew inspiration from Molière's comedies is further suggested by the almost simultaneous appearance of La Fontaine's L'Ermite with Molière's L'Imposteur in 1667. Both works expose religious hypocrisy, abuse of office by the clergy and the latter's cupidity over worldly wealth. Certainly, it is the same mutual influence between these authors that is at work in La Fontaine's painting of the passions in the hybrid work of Psyché.

But it was not from Corneille and Molière alone that La Fontaine's skill at the analysis of human passions, such as we see in Psyché, was acquired. Racine, though a later writer than both Corneille and Molière, also exercised a measure of influence on La Fontaine in this direction. The feeling of great anguish and frustration, culminating in the desire for death, which grips Psyché after her folly and indiscretion, for example, has something of the style and mood of Racine in the tragedy of Andromaque, which he published in 1667, two years before La Fontaine's Psyché appeared. The agony, despair and frustration felt by Psyché are expressed in words which invite the darkness of death to come and engulf her :

Charitables filles d'enfer, aidez-moi à  
rompre les nœuds qui m'attachent; venez,<sup>21</sup>  
venez me représenter ce que j'ai perdu.

It is in a similar image that Racine portrays the anguish of Andromaque. The latter, feeling that she has nothing more to hope for in the world also cries out to death to come and end her miserable life. She laments :

Hé bien! filles d'enfers, vos mains sont-elles prêtes?<sup>22</sup>

Molière and Racine were La Fontaine's good friends and literary associates. He not only read many of their plays but also watched them on the stage. Thus he observed the portrayal of jealous men and women, the rich but disconcerted wives, the handsome, loving husbands

20. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 435.

21. Ibid., p. 428.

22. Racine, J., Op. Cit., t. II, p. 124, Andromaque, Acte V, scène 5, l. 1637.

betrayed by intriguing wives and vice versa, the spectacle of human endurance put to severe trial, the triumph of patience and perseverance over seemingly insurmountable obstacles, all dramatized with admirable naturalness and vividness. With such models of literary art, produced by these master-painters of human passions before his eyes, is it any wonder that he succeeds so admirably in analysing the various passions in Psyché? What he learnt from the models is that grace and beauty cannot be achieved in a work of art without an adequate representation of the dominant human passions or the infusion of useful ideas into it for the purpose of educating the public. Thus the excellence of La Fontaine's literary production in Psyché rests upon his harmonious combination of artistic skill with a rational expression of the human nature as he saw it. It is to this artistic balance that Vauvenargues later refers when he declares that La Fontaine's works should serve as models to other writers.

Il est bon d'opposer un tel exemple à ceux qui  
cherchent la grâce et le brillant hors de la  
raison et de la nature.<sup>23</sup>

Our poet admirably shows how the main characters in the story are torn between conflicting emotions and desires. The furious jealousy of the Queen of Cythera, who finds her temple deserted in favour of a mortal beauty, is exposed in lyric stanzas, to which a combination of the decasyllabic, the alexandri<sup>n</sup>e and the octosyllabic metres gives an added tinge of hatred and viciousness.

La fille d'un mortel en veut à ma puissance.  
Elle a juré de me chasser des lieux  
Où l'on me rend obéissance:  
Et qui sait si son insolence  
N'ira pas jusqu'au point de me vouloir ôter  
Le rang que dans les cieus je pense mériter?  
.....Prenez-y garde; il vous y faut songer:  
Rendez-la malheureuse; et que cette cadette,  
Malgré les siens, épouse un étranger  
Qui ne sache où trouver retraite,  
Qui soit laid, et qui la maltraite,  
La fasse consumer en regrets superflus,  
Tant que ni vous ni moi nous ne la craignons plus.<sup>24</sup>

What a picture of envy, anger and hatred is portrayed in these lines!  
And the poet, who does not seem to be surprised at this seemingly

23. Vauvenargues, Œuvres, (édit. D.L.Gilbert), Paris, 1857, p.233,  
"Réflexions critiques sur quelques poètes: La Fontaine".

24. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.408.

unprovoked outburst of evil passion, adds a malicious comment, as if with his tongue in his cheek :

Ces extrémités où s'emporta la déesse  
marquent merveilleusement bien le naturel  
et l'esprit des femmes.<sup>25</sup>

An equally penetrating portrayal of the emotions is the pathetic image of Psyché as a helpless victim of Venus' envious curse. The heroine, for all her manifest beauty, has no joy in her loveliness. All men gaze upon her, but never a king nor a prince nor even a lover from the common folk comes forward to propose marriage to her. Her elder sisters, whose beauty is but ordinary, have long since become happy royal brides, while she herself, who possesses

tous les appas que l'imagination peut se figurer,<sup>26</sup>  
et ceux où l'imagination même ne peut atteindre,

sits at home an unwedded maid, sick of body, broken hearted and bewailing her loneliness and solitude. The height of despair is approached when she, in the depth of her heart, harbours a loathing for her incomparable but ill-fated beauty. This feeling of inferiority, frustration and anguish is conveyed by La Fontaine in a brief soliloquy in which the heroine betrays her despair in self-condemnation

Va, Psyché, va te cacher au fond de quelque  
désert : les dieux ne t'ont pas faite pour être  
vue, puisqu'ils ne t'ont pas faite pour être aimée.<sup>27</sup>

At the moment of separation, as Psyché is being abandoned on the rocks, the pathetic element, as in Adonis, attains greater intensity. Here again, our poet, making use of the alexandrine metre, summons verse to the aid of feeble prose :

L'éloquence elle-même, impuissante à le dire,  
Confesse que ceci n'est point de son empire:  
C'est au silence seul d'exprimer les adieux<sup>28</sup>  
Des parents de la belle, au partir de ces lieux.

By a subtle manipulation of rhetorical figures such as personification, metaphor and allegory, the poet heightens the effect of the general grief, showing how even the natural elements participate in it.

25. La Fontaine, Op. Cit. p. 408.

26. Ibid. p. 408

27. Ibid. p. 409

28. Ibid. p. 410



Le Soleil, las de voir ce spectacle barbare,  
 Précipite sa course, et, passant sous les eaux,  
 Va porter la clarté chez des peuples nouveaux :  
 L'horreur de ces déserts s'accroît par son absence.  
 La Nuit vient sur un char conduit par le Silence;  
 Il amène avec lui la crainte en l'Univers.<sup>29</sup>

With Psyché's two sisters re-emerges the dominant passion behind all her misfortunes, namely, envy.

Ce méchant couple amenait avec lui  
 La curieuse et misérable Envie,  
 Pâle démon, que le bonheur d'autrui  
 Nourrit de fiel et de mélancolie.<sup>30</sup>

The intensity of this passion is increased by the clever way in which La Fontaine deliberately accentuates the advantages of the heroine's position over that of her sisters and the contrast between her ingenuous trust and their perfidy. Thus the envious sisters are made to exaggerate and feel more the distance between themselves and their younger sister, thereby exciting themselves to an uncontrollable passion, which quickly and almost imperceptibly passes from mere jealousy to bitter hatred and ill-will, measurable only in terms of the language in which the author expresses them :

Déjà l'envie s'était emparée du cœur de ces deux personnes. Comment! On les avait fait attendre que leur sœur fût éveillée! Était-elle d'un autre sang, avait-elle plus de mérite que ses aînées? Leur cadette être une déesse, et elles de chétives reines! La moindre chambre de ce palais valait dix royaumes comme ceux de leurs maris! Passe encore pour des richesses; mais de la divinité, c'était trop. Hé quoi! les mortelles n'étaient pas dignes de la servir! On voyait une douzaine de Nymphes à l'entour d'une toilette, à l'entour d'un brodequin! Mais quel brodequin! qui valait autant que tout ce qu'elles avaient coûté en habits depuis qu'elles étaient au monde. C'est ce qui roulait au cœur de ces femmes, ou pour mieux dire de ces furies: je ne devrais plus les appeler autrement.<sup>31</sup>

This delicate manipulation of rhetorical figures : exclamation, interrogation, hyperbole and antithesis, reveals an author, who is already competent in the use of literary instruments, versed in the psychology of

29. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.410.

30. Ibid., p. 420.

31. Ibid., p.418.

the passions, and who now seems to be demonstrating the confident claim of being a painter of the passions, made in the first collection of fables.<sup>32</sup>

Psyché's dilemma after her husband's solemn warning to her to beware of her two sisters, symbols of impending doom, leaves the heroine victim of a succession of emotional conflicts: suspicion, apprehension and frustration. She sees herself now as utterly undone, as a captive within the walls of a luxurious prison, and deprived of all human contact. She is not even to see her own sisters. This second mystery combines with the one surrounding the identity of her lover to make her a prey to anxiety; and bursting into tears, she consumes the whole day in agony and lamentation.

Voilà Psyché fort embarrassée, comme vous voyez. Deux curiosités à la fois! Y a-t-il femme qui y résistât? Elle épuisa sur ce dernier point tout ce qu'elle avait de lumières et de conjectures. "Cette visite m'étonne, disait-elle, en se promenant un peu loin des Nymphes. Ne serait-ce point mes parents? Hélas! mon mari est bien cruel d'envier à deux personnes qui n'en peuvent plus la satisfaction de me voir."<sup>33</sup>

Under the guise of commenting upon the heroine's mental speculation over the impending visit of her sisters, La Fontaine launches a fierce attack on the female sex, examines their psychological traits and pinpoints their dominant passions:

Vous êtes tombée justement dans les trois défauts qui ont le plus accoutumé de nuire aux personnes de votre sexe, la curiosité, la vanité et le trop d'esprit.<sup>34</sup>

At the critical moment, when Psyché, pushed by curiosity and the evil insinuations of her sisters, stumbles suddenly on the sleeping Cupid, she is completely bewildered and overwhelmed by violent and conflicting emotions, ranging from sheer curiosity to suspicion, resentment,

32. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.105, Fables, V, I, ll. 18-20.

33. Ibid. p. 417.

34. Ibid. p.418.

apprehension and resolution. She tosses to and fro upon a tide of troubles vast as the sea. Her resolve is made and her heart fixed, yet she strives to nerve her hands for the deed; her purpose fails her; she is shaken and distraught by a host of passions born of anguish, impatience, indecision, daring and terror, diffidence and anger, all striving for the mastery of her mind, thus turning her into a wretched bundle of emotions. Once again,

Voilà Psyché bien embarrassée. Comme on ne connaît l'importance d'une action que quand on est près de l'exécuter, elle envisagea la sienne dans ce moment-là avec ses suites les plus fâcheuses, et se trouva combattue de je ne sais combien de passions aussi contraires que violentes. L'apprehension, le dépit, la pitié, la colère, et le désespoir, la curiosité principalement, tout ce qui porte à commettre quelque forfait, et tout ce qui en détourne, s'empara du cœur de notre héroïne, et en fit la scène de cent agitations différentes.<sup>35</sup>

The suggestion by Apuleius that the heroine is acting under the influence of the Furies<sup>36</sup> is repudiated by La Fontaine. For him, Psyché is possessed by no other demon than her own sisters who are motivated by "La curieuse et misérable Envie".<sup>37</sup>

After the diversionary debate on the relative merits of tears and laughter, the tone of the narrative changes abruptly. The second part is effectively introduced by the opening phrase: "la criminelle Psyché",<sup>38</sup> for it gives a clue to the dominant passion tormenting the heroine in this second half of the story. All her emotional disturbance, be it humiliation, repentance or despair, dissolve now into one major obsession, namely, the feeling of guilt. We again see the contrast of Adonis repeat itself as the pleasures of love give way to mental agitation and the thought of death. By the law of passions, love must alternate with pain, following the rule of their mysterious alliance. Thus, torn between the desire to die and the natural attachment to life, the heroine lyrically laments her dilemma in a prose passage which recaptures all the expressive force of La Fontaine's best poetry:

35. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 421.

36. Apulée, Op. Cit., pp. 32- 93.

37. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 418.

38. Ibid., p. 428.

Sœur du Soleil....., que l'horreur du crime ne t'empêche pas de me regarder. Sois témoin du désespoir d'une malheureuse; et fais-moi la grâce de raconter à celui que j'ai offensé les circonstances de mon trépas, mais ne les raconte point aux personnes dont je tiens le jour. Tu vois dans ta course des misérables: dis-mois, y'en a-t-il un de qui l'infortune ne soit légère au prix de la mienne? Rochers élevés, qui serviez naguère de fondements à un palais dont j'étais maîtresse, qui aurait dit que la nature vous eût formés<sup>39</sup> pour me servir maintenant à un usage si différent?

At the end of this lamentation, she gazes again at the precipice; death appears to her in its most frightful form; she tries several times to take the fatal plunge; but each time she is held back by a mysterious feeling of weakness. She struggles to encourage this feeling by arguing with herself :

Quelles sont....mes destinées! J'ai quelque beauté, je suis jeune; il n'y a qu'un moment que je possédais le plus agréable de tous les dieux, et je vais mourir! Je me vais moi-même donner la mort! Faut-il que l'aurore ne se lève plus pour Psyché? Quoi! voilà les derniers instants qui me sont donnés par les Parques! Encore si ma nourrice me fermait les yeux! Si je n'étais point privée de la sépulture!<sup>40</sup>

This painful indecision, betrayed by the alternation of resolution and irresolution, presents a dismal picture of the human condition, the agony of a mortal torn between the urge to seek in self-immolation an escape from the trials of existence and the instinctive dread of death. In the face of the sweet attachment to life, strengthened by a definite injunction by her divine husband never to tamper with her own life, the heroine realizes the bitter truth that the height of despair is the inability to despair.

C'est bien le comble du désespoir que de n'oser se désespérer.<sup>41</sup>

Passion then becomes for her regret and self-condemnation :

Que nos plaisirs passés augmentent nos supplices!  
 Qu'il est dur d'éprouver, après tant de délices,  
 Les cruautés du Sort!  
 Fallait-il être heureuse avant qu'être coupable?  
 Et si<sup>de</sup> même haïr, Amour, tu fus capable,  
 Pourquoi m'aimer d'abord?<sup>42</sup>

39. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.428.

40. Ibid., p. 428.

41. Ibid., p. 432.

42. Ibid., p.434.

But from her trials, which are slow but precarious, she acquires wisdom and fortitude. Her stubborn resistance to the urge to take her own life and her ultimate triumph over this impulse are symbolic gestures, as can be inferred from the prominence which La Fontaine gives them in the story. They represent his own personal attitude to the thorny problem of suicide. This attitude is both moral and intellectual. One is always master of oneself in this regard, and can part with life at will. But then, thought the poet, apart from the personal implications of suicide, the act is repudiated by society as cowardly and un-social. It is defeatist in conception and contrary to nature. The world is like a blind alley full of evil, suffering and contradictions, true enough, but the more positive approach to the problem is to endeavour to make the most out of the situation, to have the will to adapt the absurdity of the human condition to the best possible advantage of man. Suicide is a negation of this ideal. Thus, he who tries to escape the realities of life through self-immolation, betrays a cowardly will, incapable of grappling with the problems of existence. Suicide is therefore seen by La Fontaine as a gross violation of the fundamental law of nature and of the community.

Vous êtes encore sujette à la loi commune. Or, cette loi veut deux choses : l'une, véritablement que nous mourions; l'autre, que nous tâchions de conserver notre vie le plus longtemps qu'il nous est possible. Nous naissons également pour l'un et pour l'autre; et l'on peut dire que l'homme a en même temps deux mouvements opposés : il court incessamment vers la mort; il la fuit aussi incessamment. De violer cet instinct, c'est ce qui n'est pas permis.<sup>43</sup>

There is something unnatural, something basically anti-social about suicide and the school of thought that approves of it. To resort to it is to hide in the tomb from the challenge of life. It is more heroic to endure, to live and fight back than to surrender to despair. It is here that La Fontaine's reading of Plato reveals its influence, for by adopting this attitude, the poet re-attaches his doctrine to the great Platonic tradition, maintained by Montaigne, and converted into an article of faith by Saint-Evremond.

---

43. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 432.

Plato condemns self-immolation or any form of hopeless surrender to death as the action of a diseased mind, and stresses the need for courage and lucidity in facing up to the problems of life.

Nous sommes, nous les humains, dans une espèce de garderie, et on n'a pas le droit de s'en libérer soi-même, ni de s'en évader.<sup>44</sup>

And Montaigne sees it as yet another evidence of a debased human nature. The opinion that disdains our life, he declares, is ridiculous in us, for after all, life is our being and our everything. It is a malady peculiar to man, which is seen in no other creature, to hate and annihilate himself.<sup>45</sup>

But it is Saint-Evremond who has a more direct influence on La Fontaine's attitude to this problem and to the next main point which we shall discuss in this chapter, namely, the ethics of "volupté". We have already discussed at length in the preceding chapter the development of the poet's epicurean tendencies through a temperamental attachment to Saint-Evremond, to La Rochefoucauld and to the worldly-living salon of the duchesse de Bouillon. This group had one thing in common apart from their temperamental addiction to pleasure, namely love of life for its own sake. They valued it even without wealth, honour and reputation. Saint-Evremond in particular condemns those who either by direct suicide or by rigorous self-mortification tamper with the precious life that nature has given them.

Je connois des gens qui troublent la joie de leurs plus beaux jours, par la méditation d'une mort concertée; et, comme s'ils n'étoient pas nés pour vivre au monde, ils ne songent qu'à la manière d'en sortir.... Pour vivre heureux, il faut faire peu de réflexions sur la vie; mais sortir souvent comme hors de soi, et, parmi les plaisirs que fournissent les choses étrangères, se dérober la connoissance de ses propres maux.<sup>46</sup>

As if to stress the above idea, he concludes by saying:

A l'âge où je suis une heure de vie bien ménagée, m'est plus considérable que l'intérêt d'une médiocre réputation.<sup>47</sup>

---

44.. Platon, Phédon, Texte établi et traduit par Léon Robin, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1934, p.8, Phédon, 61 et 62.

45. Montaigne, M., Op. Cit., p. 334.

46. Saint-Evremond, Marguetel de, Œuvres mêlées, (édit. Charles Giraud), Paris, 1865, t.I, p.31.

47. Ibid., p.171.

This is precisely the pattern of thought which La Fontaine re-echoes when he declares

Je regarde une chose plus essentielle : c'est la  
vie, dont huit jours valent mieux que huit  
siècles de gloire après la mort.<sup>48</sup>

By thus linking the emotional fear of death, which he shares in common with the aesopic characters in the fifteenth and sixteenth apologues of the first Book of fables, with the wider and more complex problem of suicide, La Fontaine has now given an intellectual dimension to his attitude. This is yet another example of a studied movement away from the traditional wisdom towards intellectual maturity. After showing the reader the dark side of things, that is, the manifestation of evil passions, he now presents the other side of the coin. Without any perceptible transition, the tone of the narrative changes from that of sorrow to one of happiness, following the universal law of nature from which the story draws its moral, namely, that no condition is ever permanent. Every dark cloud has its silver lining. Accordingly, Psyché recovers her natural bliss and gaiety as she is reunited with the one she loves. It is upon this flexibility in the handling of the passions, more than upon anything else, that the blending of styles and the originality of the work rest.

At this point, La Fontaine, by way of conclusion, gives the story a new and subtle twist. By cleverly baptizing the issue of the conjugal love between Cupid and Psyché with the symbolic name of "Volupté", the poet delicately moves on to the next important idea embodied in the myth of Psyché, namely, his own concept of pleasure and happiness as represented in the term, "volupté". To understand the background to the poet's use of this expression a brief excursion into its origin and evolution as an intellectual concept, is necessary.

"Volupté" comes from the Latin word "voluptas", meaning pleasure. As first used by Epicurus (341 - 270 B.C.), the term implied absence of mental agitation and physical pain. For the Athenian philosopher, peace of mind and bodily health are the highest forms of pleasure, and happiness consists in a succession of such pleasures.

---

48. Quoted in Léon Petit, *La Fontaine et Saint-Evremond ou La Tentation de l'Angleterre*, Toulouse, 1953, p.190.

Car nous recherchons le plaisir, seulement quand son absence nous cause une souffrance. Quand nous ne souffrons pas, nous n'avons plus que faire du plaisir. Et c'est pourquoi nous disons que le plaisir<sup>49</sup> est le commencement et la fin d'une vie bienheureuse.

But pleasure, insists Epicurus, does not mean debauchery; it means the absence of physical pain and mental anxiety.

Par conséquent, lorsque nous disons que le plaisir est le souverain bien, nous ne parlons pas des plaisirs des débauchés.... Nous parlons de l'absence de souffrance physique et de l'absence de trouble moral.<sup>50</sup>

By implication, neither pleasure nor happiness, in Epicurus' sense of the terms, is possible without the wisdom of discretion and the virtue of moderation.

Le principe de tout cela et en même temps le plus grand bien, c'est donc la prudence. Il faut l'estimer supérieure à la philosophie elle-même, puisqu'elle est la source de toutes les vertus, qui nous apprennent qu'on ne peut parvenir à la vie heureuse sans la prudence, l'honnêteté et la justice, et que prudence, honnêteté, justice ne peuvent s'obtenir sans le plaisir.<sup>51</sup>

It is therefore impossible, following this doctrine, to live a pleasant life without living wisely, justly and well, and it is equally impossible to live wisely and well and justly without living happily. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, a man does not live wisely, though he lives honestly and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life. This suggests that in real life man is faced with alternatives in which he has to choose between what is wise and good on one hand, and what is pleasant on the other. No pleasure is in itself evil, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail annoyances many times greater than the pleasures themselves. Since everyone desires what is best for himself, continues Epicurus, pleasure should be avoided when it is a source of greater pain, and pain chosen when a greater amount of pleasure results from it. But while recommending prudence and discretion in the use of pleasures, the philosopher condemns self-abnegation as unnatural.<sup>52</sup>

---

49. Cresson, André, *Epicure sa vie, son œuvre avec un exposé de sa philosophie*, Paris, (P.U.F.), 1947, p.70

50. Ibid., p.71.

51. Ibid., p.72.

52. Ibid., pp. 71 - 72.



La Fontaine's epoch witnessed the rehabilitation of Epicurus as a moral philosopher. The latter's works and maxims were freely quoted to justify various ways of life. The key-word of his system, "voluptas", was interpreted by one school of thought to mean profligacy and indiscriminate surrender to all sorts of pleasures. Rémond de Saint-Mard, for example, was not only vocal in defence of this view, but went further to reproach nature for endowing man with reason which restricts surrender to sensual libertinism.

Hélas! pourquoi la nature, en nous donnant les passions qui suffisaient pour nous rendre heureux, nous donne-t-elle une raison qui ne nous permet de l'être?<sup>53</sup>

Another school of thought considered 'voluptas' as a convenient excuse for immorality and loose living and, as such, believed that it should be condemned by all right thinking people. A representative of this group was Patru. He claimed that the doctrine of "volupté" is degrading and dangerous to Christianity:

C'est la raison qui fait l'homme. La volupté dégrade l'homme et anéantit le chrétien.<sup>54</sup>

Among the immoral components of "volupté", condemned by Patru, were such amusements as love outside marriage, sports, idle conversation, certain types of reading, the theatre and dancing. These forms of pleasure, he argued were not only immoral but contrary to true happiness.

Il est à coup sûr plus facile d'être heureux en se passant des plaisirs qu'en les possédant.<sup>55</sup>

Between these two schools of thought was yet a third group, the real epicureans, who interpreted "volupté" to mean freedom from mental anxiety and physical discomfort. This was the sense in which Saint-Evremond understood it when he wrote:

Le mot de volupté me rappelle d'Epicure; et je confesse que, de toutes les opinions des philosophes touchant le souverain bien, il n'y a point qui me paroisse si raisonnable que la sienne. Il seroit inutile d'apporter ici des raisons, cent fois dites par

53. Rémond de Saint-Mard, Nouveaux dialogues des dieux, ou Réflexions sur les passions, Cologne, (Pierre Marteau), 1713, p.99.

54. Baudot de Juilly, Dialogues entre MM. Patru et d'Ablancourt, Paris, 1701, t.I, p.43

55. Ibid., p. 163.

les épicuriens : que l'amour de la volupté et la fuite de la douleur, sont les premiers et les plus naturels mouvements, qu'on remarque aux hommes; que les richesses, la puissance, l'honneur, la vertu, peuvent contribuer à notre bonheur : mais que la jouissance du plaisir, la volupté, pour tout dire, est la véritable fin où toutes nos actions se rapportent.<sup>56</sup>

Following the same trend of thought, Descoutures declared :

Le plaisir donne une seconde vie à l'homme, il l'arrache à la mort, il bannit l'humeur sombre de la mélancolie, il contribue à sa santé, il ramène le calme dans son esprit, et contribue à le faire vivre. Mais comme dit excellemment Epicure, le plaisir doit être borné, il ne faut pas trop s'abandonner à ses transports.<sup>57</sup>

From this intellectual argument emerges one clear fact, namely, that although the desire for happiness is accepted by all sides as natural and legitimate, not all are agreed on what constitutes happiness or the best attitude to adopt towards it. This was precisely the context in which La Fontaine's ingenious conclusion to Psyché, that is, his famous Hymne à la Volupté, was situated. The theme of "volupté" had been the favourite of literary men since the time Epicurus first used the term. But La Fontaine's idea of celebrating it in musical verse came to him from Lucretius. The latter opens the first Book of his De la Nature des Choses with a touching tribute to Venus whom he describes as the human, the divine "Volupté" :

Douce mère d'Enée, aieule des Romains,  
O Vénus, volupté des dieux et des humains,  
Tu peuples, sous l'azur où glissent les étoiles,  
Les champs où croit l'épi, les flots, sentiers des voiles:  
C'est par toi qu'est conçu, par toi que tout vivant  
Naît et voit la clarté; le nuage et le vent  
S'enfuient à ton retour; la terre fait éclore,  
Merveilleuse ouvrière, une suave flore;  
Les plaines de la mer sourient, et le soleil  
Dans les cieus apaisés épand son flot vermeil.<sup>58</sup>

---

56. Saint-Evremond, Marguetel de, Op.Cit., p.171,, "Sur la morale d'Epicure!"

57. Descoutures, La Morale universelle, Paris, 1687, p.173.

58. Lucrece, C.T., De la Nature des Choses, Traduction complète en vers par Edouard Miélet, Paris, 1889, p.1, ll. 1 - 10.  
Cf. ibid., ll. 11-50.

But if the earliest theoretical notion of this epicurean idea seems to have come to our poet from his reading of Lucretius, the application of the idea to real life situations was brought home to him through his association with Saint-Evremond. From what is already known about his connections with Saint-Evremond and with the epicurean circle of the duchesse de Bouillon, it should not be difficult to fix the direction of his attitude. Indeed, it is not without reason that Psyché is dedicated to the duchesse de Bouillon. It was through her influence and that of Saint-Evremond that La Fontaine first came into contact with practical epicureanism. Saint-Evremond's epicurean credo is based on accepting fate with cheerfulness, scorning the vain splendour of the great, and seeking in verse, music, play, conversation, wine and love the pleasures which make life tolerable and death easy to bear. He declares :

Il s'agit en effet de cette volupté de pur aloi,  
qui naît essentiellement de la santé du corps  
et de la tranquillité de l'âme, donc ennemie de  
tout excès.<sup>59</sup>

This is the philosophy which La Fontaine adopts with slight modifications in his ethics of volupté. Léon Petit describes this affinity of taste and interest between La Fontaine and Saint-Evremond when he writes :

Par cette communauté de goûts et de pensée que  
la Fontaine et Saint-Evremond se sont mutuellement  
reconnus...les deux interlocuteurs ne pouvaient  
avouer plus catégoriquement qu'ils appartenaient en  
fait à une même famille d'esprits...Francs épicuriens  
l'un et l'autre, c'est d'abord et surtout par ce fonds  
commun qu'ils se ressemblent. Ni le premier, ni le  
second n'ont jamais douté que l'homme fût né pour  
être heureux, et que le bonheur sur cette terre restât  
pour lui son principal objet.<sup>60</sup>

La Fontaine accepts all the items of pleasure or aspects of amusement enumerated by Saint-Evremond, particularly those which identify "volupté" with peace of mind and the absence of physical discomfort, and he stresses reasonableness and discretion as the crucial factors in determining what sort of amusement should contribute most to induce "volupté".

59. Quoted in Léon Petit, *La Fontaine et Saint-Evremond ou La Tentation de l'Angleterre*, p.188.

60. *Ibid.*, p.187.

Thus, in the guise of celebrating the daughter of Cupid and Psyché, our poet proposes his own theory of "volupté". The criteria of physical health and mental tranquillity, discretion, reasonableness and moderation lead him to reject violent amusements and all forms of momentary pleasure from which years of pain and regret would result. He prefers simple pleasures such as those of reading, games, friendship, conversation and love which are accessible and relatively durable. He adores love, works of art, solitude and the beauty of nature, all of which he summarizes under the epicurean term of "volupté", and no poet ever has celebrated this concept with greater conviction than he does :

O douce Volupté, sans qui, dès notre enfance,  
 Le vivre et le mourir nous deviendraient égaux;  
 Aimant universel de tous les animaux,  
 Que tu sais attirer avecque violence!  
     Par toi tout se meut ici bas.  
 C'est pour toi, c'est pour tes appas,  
 Que nous courons après la peine :  
     Il n'est soldat, ni capitaine,  
 Ni ministre d'Etat, ni prince, ni sujet,  
     Qui ne t'ait pour unique objet.  
 Nous autres nourrissons, si pour fruit de nos veilles  
 Un bruit délicieux ne charmaient nos oreilles,  
 Si nous ne nous sentions chatouillés de ce son,  
     Ferions-nous un mot de chanson?  
 Ce qu'on appelle gloire en termes magnifiques,  
 Ce qui servait de prix dans les jeux olympiques,  
 N'est que toi proprement, divine Volupté.  
 Et le plaisir des sens n'est-il de rien compté?  
     Pourquoi sont faits les dons de Flore,  
     Le Soleil couchant et l'Aurore,  
     Pomone et ses mets délicats,  
     Bacchus, l'âme des bons repas,  
     Les forêts, les eaux, les prairies,  
     Mères des douces rêveries?  
 Pourquoi tant de beaux arts, qui tous sont tes enfants?  
 Mais pour quoi les Chloris aux appas triomphants,  
     Que pour maintenir ton commerce?  
 J'entends innocemment : sur son propre désir  
     Quelque rigueur que l'on exerce,  
     Encore y prend-on du plaisir.  
 Volupté, Volupté, qui fus jadis maîtresse  
     Du plus bel esprit de la Grèce,  
 Ne me dédaigne pas, viens-t'en loger chez moi;  
     Tu n'y seras pas sans emploi....<sup>61</sup>

---

61. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 453.

This passage is often quoted by La Fontaine's detractors to prove what a frivolous and sensual libertine he was. But to interpret it in this way is to misunderstand completely the poet's intellectual conception of happiness. He is persuaded by experience that man is incapable of fully realizing his own nature except through collaboration between reason and the passions, the latter generating the force of action and the former applying the necessary brake on any tendency towards excess. As soon as this balance is achieved, anything is permissible, since vice consists in profligacy. Following this conviction, the poet carefully chooses the comparatively more accessible, more innocent and more peaceful amusements of life as the essential elements of his "volupté" :

J'aime le jeu, l'amour, les livres, la musique,  
 La ville et la campagne, enfin tout; il n'est rien  
 Qui ne me soit souverain bien,  
 Jusqu'au sombre plaisir d'un cœur mélancolique. <sup>62</sup>

The affinity of taste between La Fontaine and his friend, Saint-Evremond, is evident from this quotation, for the ingredients of our poet's "volupté" are essentially the same as those enumerated by Saint-Evremond in his letter to La Fontaine, written from London in 1687. The passage of years did not alter the epicurean taste for which he was known back home in France. Thus, communicating his attitude to La Fontaine, he writes :

S'accommoder aux ordres du Destin;  
 Aux plus heureux ne porter point d'envie,  
 Du faux esprit que prend un libertin,  
 Avec le temps, connoître la folie;  
 Et dans les vers, jeu, musique, bon vin,  
 Passer en paix une innocente vie : <sup>63</sup>  
 C'est le moyen d'en reculer la fin.

La Fontaine's choice of amusements, like that of his friend, aims at the epicurean recipe for happiness, namely, moderation, prudence and peace of mind. This tranquillity of mind forms the central idea in the poet's theory of happiness, which is to preserve at all cost one's peace of mind by obeying the necessary demands of nature and ignoring the extravagant impulses, particularly those ones whose satisfaction is sure to disturb this mental tranquillity. In a brilliant effort to ex-

62. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.453.

63. Saint-Evremond, Marguetel de, Op.Cit., t.III, p.373.

plain the above concept, the poet makes an incursion into the psychology of desire and anxiety. It is the desire of every man to be happy, he admits, but experience shows that man's quest for perfect happiness is subject to severe limitations. He is frustrated at every turn, and his mind flies from one desire to another. Man desires something with great eagerness, only to treat that thing with indifference when obtained, to desire yet another thing. Thus, when Psyché's active desire for a loving husband is satisfied by her marriage with the god of love himself, her desire shifts from the pleasure of wedlock to that of establishing the identity of her mysterious husband. Desire can neither be checked nor eliminated altogether, for the latter would plunge man into a state of lethargy, more painful than desire itself. A more plausible alternative would be to substitute hope for actual satisfaction; this would neutralize active desire without eliminating it completely. In other words, the happiest state in which one can be in this world is that of active desire, coupled with a strong hope of finally realizing the desired objective.

Il est à propos pour l'un et pour l'autre de demeurer en l'état où nous nous trouvons. Premièrement, tenez-vous certaine que du moment que vous n'aurez plus rien à souhaiter, vous vous ennuierez. Et comment ne vous ennuierez-vous pas? Les dieux s'ennuient bien; ils sont contraints de se faire de temps en temps des sujets de désir et d'inquiétude, tant il est vrai que l'entière satisfaction et le dégoût se tiennent la main.<sup>64</sup>

But La Fontaine is not unaware of the precarious nature of such a state. Psyché's impatience after her imagination and curiosity have been stimulated by her perfidious sisters, proves that such a state cannot last long without proving painfully intolerable. A state of unfulfilled hopes is a state of mental agony, for uncertainty breeds anxiety, and the mind, fixed thus upon the future, can never enjoy the present. This explains the heroine's unhappiness. She has in her golden palace all the wealth and riches that the world can offer, including an array of nymphs to wait on her, the fairest baths, the daintiest meals; furniture of the most exquisite gold, all combining to sate the senses with the affluence of her surroundings, yet she is far from being happy. Mental agitation, caused by her anxiety, her curiosity over the nature and identity of her lover

---

64. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p. 415.

keeps her restless. The fear of the unknown surpasses by far the joys of her overflowing fortune, hence she says to her lover :

Je vous dirai franchement que tous vos palais, tous vos meubles, tous vos jardins, ne sauraient me récompenser d'un moment de votre présence, et vous voulez que j'en sois tout à fait privée: car je ne puis appeler présence un bien où les yeux n'ont aucune part.<sup>65</sup>

Perfect happiness presupposes a triple equilibrium between desire and hope, between hope and satisfaction, and between satisfaction and desire. Desire should outlive the possession of the desired object in order to secure it from indifference; satisfaction should be permanent thus setting a limit to further desires. Unfortunately, maintains La Fontaine, the inability of human nature to achieve this balance makes all claims to real happiness a sham. In consequence, therefore, he recommends the attitude already defined in the first collection of fables. That is,

"Qu'il se faut contenter de sa condition;  
Qu'aux conseils de la mer et de l'ambition  
Nous devons fermer les oreilles."<sup>66</sup>

Since supreme happiness is an unattainable objective, desire, taste and choice must be regulated by prudence and moderation. Thus, in the circumstances in which the heroine finds herself, and given the fact of the timely warning given her by her husband, the best thing she could have done would have been to adapt herself to her particular circumstances by closing her ears to all insinuations to the contrary.

Ainsi le meilleur pour vous est l'incertitude, et qu'après la possession vous ayez toujours de quoi désirer : c'est un secret dont on ne s'était pas encore avisé. Demeurons-en là, si vous m'en croyez.<sup>67</sup>

This view offers a classic example of epicurean prudence and moderation which characterizes La Fontaine's concept of "volupté". The above virtues consist in knowing how to live as happily as possible. This involves four things : knowing oneself, accepting the facts of one's nature, learning what to expect of oneself and an awareness of the conflicting nature of personal relationships. But the basic element upon which all the others depend is self-knowledge. Ethics and tastes must be firmly rooted in

65. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 415.

66. Ibid., p.96, Fables, IV, 2, ll. 26 - 28.

67. Ibid., p.415.

the facts of personal psychology, for without this one becomes out of touch with one's weaknesses, the limitations of one's resources, and expects either too much or too little from oneself and from nature. In either extreme, there is the danger of falling short of one's best possible moral effectiveness and feeling disappointed. On the other hand, when a man conditions his tastes and limits his expectations to what is simple and accessible, he minimizes the incidence of disappointment, frustration and mental agitation. It follows from the above that, for La Fontaine, the ability of the individual to enjoy a measure of happiness depends largely on the individual's temperament or mental disposition and the extent of his ambition. Thus, although Psyché has transgressed her husband's command and seen his face, she could yet have avoided an unfortunate accident but for her insatiable ambition to see, feel and take in everything that needs be known about her wonderful husband. She could have put away the oil lamp that caused the accident, but no. She wants to gaze, touch, kiss and find out more about Love, and she needs the ill-fated lamp to do all that.

Elle en avait trop affaire, et n'avait pas  
encore vu tout ce qu'il y avait à voir.<sup>68</sup>

Even after her swooning mind has exhausted itself, reflecting upon the ecstasy of such a bliss, our heroine continues her hysterical demonstration of joy, until her insatiable curiosity and inordinate ambition to attain supreme bliss turn this same happiness into bitterness.

Après ces réflexions, il lui prit envie de regarder  
de plus près celui qu'elle n'avait déjà que trop vu.  
Elle pencha quelque peu l'instrument fatal qui l'avait  
jusque-là servi si utilement. Il en tomba sur la  
cuisse de son époux une goutte d'huile enflammée.  
La douleur éveilla le dieu.<sup>69</sup>

The point which La Fontaine is trying to put across by emphasizing these minute details is quite clear: by regulating one's ambition, by subjecting the illusions of the imagination to critical judgement, based upon the realities of life, it is possible to carve out for oneself a measure of happiness that is cool, innocent and satisfying. Thus, Psyché would have been

68. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 422.

69. Ibid., p. 422.



Mille fois heureuse si elle eût suivi les conseils de son époux, et qu'elle eût compris l'avantage et le bien que c'est de ne pas atteindre à la suprême félicité! car, sitôt que l'on est là, il est force que l'on descende, la Fortune n'étant pas d'humeur à laisser reposer sa roue.<sup>70</sup>

Could the poet be recalling here the nostalgic memory of his former friend and benefactor, Nicolas Fouquet, whose inordinate ambition and ostentatious splendour, like that of our heroine, caused his downfall? Is it possible that La Fontaine had his own wife's jealous curiosity in mind?

Et le mari déclamait toujours contre les femmes trop curieuses....<sup>71</sup>

One cannot say for sure. Our poet's moral lessons are of universal application. Whomsoever the cap fits, let him wear it. What is more interesting is rather the fact that the heroine behaves in the way she does, thus illustrating the truth that no condition is permanent, no matter how stable it may seem. If the swift flight of time does not alter it, as in the case of Adonis, it wears itself out through lassitude and satiety. Such is the psychology of the passions which is demonstrated in Psyché.

"Volupté" would therefore be the conquest of the sort of wisdom that is ever vigilant against unbridled passion and the snares of the imagination which obscure reason and disturb the mind, thus alienating either to other people or to circumstances the little peace of mind to which one can lay claim. The happy man, envisaged by La Fontaine's ethics of "volupté", is, in this sense, a gambler with sufficient self-mastery to weigh lucidly the chances and risks of the game. He is an experienced staker who, undeceived by external appearances, chooses those games in which there is more to hope for than to fear. Finally, he is a connoisseur who is able to distinguish between sensual pleasure and real happiness. Whereas the former is an instant the latter is a state. Thus while life is punctuated with ecstatic moments of pleasure, such momentary delights can hardly constitute real happiness unless they are accompanied by mental tranquillity. It is thus far that human aspiration can go, for a state of perfect or absolute happiness is an illusion for mortal man.

---

70. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 416.

71. Ibid. p. 417.

Telle est la condition des mortels....Les dieux seuls sont exempts de mal, et vivent là-haut à leur aise, sans rien souffrir.<sup>72</sup>

Happiness, inasmuch as it is a perfect and sufficient good, excludes all evil and satisfies all desires. Since this ideal is not possible of realization in nature, those desiring to be relatively happy here should therefore have a relative concept of happiness by limiting their desires to those elements embodied in the idea of "volupté": friendship, reading, music, sports, love, conversation and the enjoyment of the beauty of nature. These amusements combine the triple merits of accessibility, durability and security with that of affording a measure of satisfaction. They should not be ignored for being commonplace or undistinguished, for

Un Tiens vaut, ce dit-on, mieux que deux Tu l'auras  
L'un est sûr, l'autre ne l'est pas.<sup>73</sup>

La Fontaine's private life presents a striking example of the ambiguous role which the doctrine of "volupté" played in the hedonistic morals of his epoch. While justifying the enjoyment of pleasures as natural and legitimate, his concept of "volupté" carefully limited it to reasonable and simple amusements thus eliminating the risk of subversive delight. Enemy of all violence and tyranny, the poet could resist any impulse, any passion, no matter how strong, if only he were convinced that surrendering to it implied a risk for the essence of his "volupté", namely, peace of mind. Thanks to this equilibrium between instinct and reason, this subjection of tastes and feelings to critical judgement, he succeeded more easily than many of his contemporaries in leading a comparatively quiet and peaceful life. His brand of "volupté" threatened neither social order nor morality. D'Olivet declares:

Jamais La Fontaine n'avait été impie par principes;  
mais il avait vécu dans une prodigieuse indolence  
sur la religion comme sur tout le reste.<sup>74</sup>

His attitude to conventional religion, which we shall discuss later, is rather pragmatist. He could be friends with both believers and atheists, depending upon which source is likely to induce genuine "volupté". Against the obscurity of religious dogma he pitches the clarity of the

72. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 425.

73. Ibid., p. 105, Fables, V, 3, ll. 24 - 25.

74. Pellisson, F.P., et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., t.II, pp. 303 -306.

moral laws of nature, for his self-surrender to the latter has nothing tyrannical or dogmatic about it. For him, therefore, the essence of volupté is adaptation to nature, to her simplicity and her harmony. Man belongs in nature, even though he sometimes finds it belittling to admit the fact. In his reckless attempts to improve upon her by artificialities, he has lost her track and hardly recognizes her in himself. La Fontaine's ethics of volupté therefore urges man to follow nature. She is a sweet guide, though no more sweet than she is prudent and just. We cannot fail if we follow her, and the more simply we follow her the better for our inner peace. "Volupté", for our poet is, contrary to what some critics believe, not an unbroken succession of drinking parties and revelries, not sexual orgy; although he had his fair share of legitimate pleasures, he was, as confirmed by d'Olivet, never a profligate, for this would be contrary to the ethics of "volupté". The latter is therefore sober reasoning, retreating occasionally into the delights of solitude, searching out the ground of every choice of amusement and avoiding or banishing those beliefs and usages through which the greatest tumult is likely to take possession of one's peace of mind. In other words, "volupté" is self-mastery and self-enjoyment :

La véritable grandeur....est de régner sur soi-même,  
et le véritable plaisir, de jouir de soi. Cela se trouve  
en la solitude, et ne se trouve guère autre part.<sup>75</sup>

The principle of "personal convenience first" is the focus around which La Fontaine seeks to construct a theory of morality which would explain empirically his attitude to social obligations. When, however, this system is subjected to a rigorous scrutiny, it is found to have some flaws, for an ethics which makes "self-convenience" the centre of all actions, is nothing short of egoism. Following La Fontaine's adoption of this tendency, is it any wonder that he succeeded as a poet but failed as a husband, a father and a civil servant? Viewed in this light, "volupté" becomes a logical outcome of the poet's acceptance of egoism as the law of nature. At the same time, this concept of volupté has its positive and more interesting side. It is an art of using pleasures with discretion and delicacy. As an undisturbed enjoyment of the simple plea-

---

75. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 433.

asures of life, derived from reading, music, sports, love and solitude, it excludes the abnegation of pleasures as prescribed by Patru.<sup>76</sup> It is based on the conviction that one can be at one and the same time an epicurean and a good and respectable citizen. If the later idea is accepted, that is, if the action of nature, directed by Providence, is seen in the desire for these simple joys of life, then morality is reconciled with the ethics of "volupté". As a reasoned choice of pleasures, as a refinement in taste, whose distinguishing characteristic is one's attitude to, rather than the quantity of pleasure, "volupté" is beyond the reach of the vulgar or the intellectually uncultured person, for pleasure, being essentially subjective, depends more on the mental disposition than on the accumulation of amusements. This disposition includes mental liberty which protects one from falling a prey to popular prejudices; it includes imaginative insight and critical judgement. Finally, it includes the possession of the sort of temperament that is both serious and congenial. By admitting pleasures which satisfy nature without conflicting with reason, it reconciles pleasure with virtue, for only a soul in harmony with itself can be wholly good. As an intellectual concept, "volupté" is founded upon an unflinching confidence in the bounty of nature and in her readiness to furnish man with those pleasures needed to make living worth while, hence the poet's enthusiastic call for the reign of "volupté", that is volupté in the way he defines it in the preceding pages.

Viens donc; et de ce bien, ô douce Volupté,  
Veux-tu savoir au vrai la mesure certaine?  
Il m'en faut tout au moins un siècle bien compté;  
Car trente ans, ce n'est pas la peine.<sup>77</sup>

The idea of "volupté", so dear to La Fontaine, inspired in him one of the finest pieces of poetry to which the narrative of Psyché owes much of its popularity.

Situated mid-way between the serious and the comic, Psyché is essentially a myth, whose very unreality renders it inoffensive. Its importance in the literary evolution of La Fontaine lies in its synthesizing role and its place as the culminating point of the poet's artistic

76. Baudot de Juilly, Op.Cit., p.163.

77. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.453.

formation. Reminiscences of his earliest known work, L'Eunuque, are noticeable in the debate between Ariste and Gélaste on the relative merits of a tragedy and a comedy.<sup>78</sup> Terence, already present in the foreword to the Nouvelles en vers, then in the preface to the second volume of tales, is not only cited in the preface to the Fables (1668), but given a definite place here in Psyché, as a master or a model of the art of exciting laughter in a fashionable audience.

Vous savez combien nous avons ri en lisant Térence,  
et combien je ris en voyant les Italiens : je laisse  
à la porte ma raison et mon argent, et je ris après  
tout mon soûl.<sup>79</sup>

Adonis, too, is recalled in Psyché. Although the latter is composed mainly in prose, it relates wonderful exploits, such as the love between men and gods, the alternation of joy and sorrow, which are among the distinguishing features of the heroic poem of Adonis. But more than any other of La Fontaine's work discussed so far, Psyché is a continuation in a modified form of the early Contes and Fables. The Preface describes it as "une fable contée en prose". Indeed the poet simultaneously refers to it as a conte and a fable. He speaks of

Un conte comme celui-ci, qui est plein de  
merveilleux, à la vérité....<sup>80</sup>

then he alludes to

le plaisir que doit donner cette fable à ceux qui  
la lisent....<sup>81</sup>

These references underline the dual affiliation of Psyché to both the Contes and the Fables, an affiliation which enables the poet to defend the work on the basis of the same "art d'agrèer" defined in the second volume of tales in 1666 and in the preface to the first collection of fables in 1668. The two genres of Conte and Fable therefore meet and reconcile themselves in Psyché. But while the conte gains in innocence the fable loses something of its moral utility to the quest for amusement and intellectualism.

As a conte, Psyché marks an intellectual growth by being an improvement on the situation in La Fiancée du roi de Garbe. The stubborn conjugal fidelity of Psyché contrasts with Alaciel's extravagant

78 La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 423 - 426.

79. Ibid., p. 424.

80. Ibid., pp. 404 - 405.

81. Ibid., pp. 404 - 405.

distribution of her favours. But if Psyché is a further development of the Contes, it is even more so with regard to the first collection of fables. This can be seen from the central position which it occupies in the hierarchy of La Fontaine's published works. The symmetrical position of La Fiancée du roi de Garbe at the end of Part II of the tales (at least in the 1666 edition) and the positioning of the fable of La jeune veuve (VI, 21) at the end of the first collection of fables suggest a parallelism between the two characters of the conte and the fable and the heroine of Psyché. The latter is situated mid-way between Alaciel of the conte and the young widow of the fable. But she surpasses both of them by her admirable perseverance in love and conjugal fidelity. Her earlier counterparts are simple mortals whose weaknesses amuse our poet, while her triumph merits her elevation to the status of a goddess. When the naivety of Alaciel and the young widow is matched against Psyché's ingenuity and critical judgement, the reader perceives a definite change in the mental attitude of the poet, a well-marked improvement over the morals of both the conte and the fable. Thus, while celebrating the omnipotence of love, Psyché, like the fable that it is, imparts a more mature, more dignified moral lesson. It teaches the aesthetics of true love, a love that is ready to go to any length to preserve its fidelity. Certainly, La Fontaine's moral thinking on love has assumed an intellectual character, compared with the sensual libertinism of the Contes. Thus with Psyché, he extends and elaborates the traditional scope of the term fable, in continuation of what we saw in the last chapter. From a simple, dry, wholly moral anecdote, a fable becomes a deliberately amplified and ingenuously told story, destined to stimulate pleasure as well as impart a lesson. At the same time, love ceases to be mere physical pleasure or a sexual conflict in which the main weapons on either side are deceit, intrigue and infidelity, and becomes a test of endurance and faith in the object of love.

In this sense, Psyché represents an ideal synthesis of La Fontaine's imaginary universe. It is a work of transition to full maturity, complex in structure and deliberately ambiguous in tone. But it owes its most subtle charm to the incursion which the poet makes into the

ethics of volupté, and to his penetrating analysis of the passions in the female mind. He portrays the inner psychology of the latter with an amusing sympathy for its inconsistencies, its excesses, weaknesses, cruelties and human tenderness, and in doing so perfects the art of blending the comic with the pathetic, the frivolous with the serious, without being incongruous. The work also reflects an intellectual advance from its twin composition, Adonis. In the latter, for example, Venus, though a goddess, could neither escape the fatality of love nor save mortal Adonis from a violent death.

Malheureuse Vénus....

Vante-toi maintenant du pouvoir de tes charmes:

Ils n'ont pu du trépas exempter tes amours;

Tu vois qu'ils n'ont pu même en prolonger les jours. 82

But Psyché, a mere mortal, descends to the dead from where Venus herself is excluded by reason of her immortality. Psyché is received among the gods of the dead and returns triumphant, thus securing a favour which Venus could not obtain for her beloved Adonis. Viewed from this angle, Psyché is a projection of La Fontaine's humanist faith in the future of the human spirit. It is a mythical representation of the destiny of the soul, nourished by Platonic idealism. Whereas Adonis symbolises youthful exuberance and immaturity, with its passions, its ungovernable outbursts of emotion and impulses, Psyché represents a march towards maturity with the accompanying mental cogitation and crisis of conscience. The ultimate victory of the heroine's perseverance and fidelity over despair and death anticipates the situation in the Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc in which Christian heroism will triumph over human weakness and the power of evil. This particular poem is, as we shall see in the next chapter, one of those surprising contrasts in La Fontaine's literary and intellectual evolution, for it represents a sudden switch from the erotic sensibility of the love elegies to stoic idealism, symbolized in Saint-Malc's heroism.

2. Interlude of Stoic Idealism - Le Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc

Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon is the first of the series of love episodes published in succession after the first collection of fables. It is followed by the almost simultaneous publication in January and March, 1671, respectively, of Clymène and the Elégies pour Clymène. The latter appeared as part of the heterogeneous collection entitled Fables nouvelles et autres poésies and it treats in sombre accents the same "Amour" that was celebrated in a gay and pleasant mood in Clymène. This succession of erotic pieces was suddenly interrupted by the publication in 1673 of the Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc, an edifying poem of about five hundred and fifty lines, based on the Christian theme of chastity.

This unexpected switch from erotic to religious poetry is so striking as to require an explanation. Many of La Fontaine's critics, such as Sainte-Beuve, have wondered at the poet's sudden change of taste. The later critic declares :

On se demande ce qui a pu l'amener à rimer cette  
historiette sacrée d'après Saint-Jérôme et tout en  
l'honneur de la virginité. La Fontaine, n'était pas  
chaste....<sup>83</sup>

The change is even more surprising when it is recalled that the poem was followed shortly after by the publication in 1674 of the most licentious tales that La Fontaine ever dared to write, namely, Part III of the Contes. How then can one account for the appearance of the poem of Saint-Malc at this point in time? Can the twist in mental attitude be explained away by the poet's quality of "Papillon de Parnasse"? Certainly not, for our poet's flight pattern could have been until now predicted with a fair degree of accuracy. He usually flies "de fleur en fleur", not "de fleur en aubépine". This suggests that there must have been some more personal, more pragmatic or strategic reason for his action. In our attempt to determine the major influences behind his thoughts and actions we usually turn to the circumstances of his milieu, including the philosophy of life adopted by his closest associates at any given time. But the circle which he was frequenting at the time he composed the poem of Saint-Malc, namely, that of Mme. de La Sablière, was by no means one that can be described as religious, as we shall

---

83. Sainte-Beuve, C.A., Port-Royal, Paris, (Hachette), 1878, t.V, p.23.



see later. It was worldly, more intellectual than devout. Mme. de La Sablière herself did not take to devout life until around 1688. Thus her influence could not have been behind La Fontaine's choice of marital chastity as a literary theme. Another likely source of influence would be Port-Royal. Régnier thinks the poet was *persuaded* into writing the poem by his friends of Port-Royal.

C'est à l'instigation, à la requête des solitaires  
de Port-Royal que La Fontaine composa ce poème  
tiré d'une lettre de Saint-Jérôme, traduite par  
Arnauld d'Andilly.<sup>84</sup>

But, although La Fontaine was friendly with the solitaries of Port-Royal, and had in fact collaborated with them in editing and publishing the Recueil des poésies chrétiennes et diverses (1671), he was by no means obliged to surrender himself to their indoctrination. He had already demonstrated this fact by his attitude to the Oratory. Certainly, he borrowed the episode of the poem from his Jansenist friends, as we shall shortly see, but that does not mean that they were behind his change to religious poetry. The decision to undertake the latter was certainly made before the poet's search for a suitable theme. There is a world of difference between the actual decision to carry out a project and the search for the means of realizing or accomplishing it. Assuming that the overriding motive behind the composition of this poem was the request by Arnauld d'Andilly, as suggested by Régnier, La Fontaine was still quite free to decline it, and would certainly have done so, if the granting of the request did not conform to a project he already had in mind.

One is then left with one possibility of fixing the motive behind La Fontaine's decision to squeeze in an edifying poem between a line of erotic and licentious compositions. The clue to the riddle seems to lie more in the position and circumstances of the personage for whom the piece was intended, namely, Emmanuel-Théodose de La Tour, Cardinal de Bouillon and Grand Aumônier de France. The latter was the younger brother of the poet's earliest benefactor, the duc de Bouillon. As a high Church dignitary, in an age when State and Church authorities were virtually synonymous, his patronage would not be an

---

84. Régnier, A.D., Op.Cit., t.VI, p.274.

unprofitable one to secure. In fact, the cardinal was already quite well and charitably disposed towards La Fontaine, following the latter's attachment to the duc and the duchesse de Bouillon. It was only natural, therefore, that the poet should show his appreciation of this kind gesture as well as cement the friendship by dedicating a literary work to the cardinal. But it was not just any poem or any story that could be appropriate to the situation, for the prelate was noted for his "mœurs si pures...."<sup>85</sup> La Fontaine was searching for a theme that would conform to the dignity of his patron's clerical office, when a fortuitous chance brought in the request to compose a religious poem from a member of the Port-Royal Brotherhood. Naturally, he was quick to seize the opportunity. It was this awareness of what would normally appeal to the individual whose patronage he was eager to consolidate, rather than his own personal conviction of the virtue of chastity, that influenced his choice of theme and his consequent switch from erotic to edifying poetry at this time. In the epistle dedicating the piece to the cardinal, the poet clearly defines his intentions :

Tout ce qui porte le caractère de piété est auprès  
de vous d'une recommandation trop puissante....  
Je voudrais que cet idylle, outre la sainteté du sujet,  
ne vous parût entièrement dénué des beautés de la  
poésie.<sup>86</sup>

Clearly the emphasis is laid on the sanctity of the theme.

This theme, as has been mentioned earlier on, was taken from the writings of a Port-Royal friend of La Fontaine, Arnauld d'Andilly. In his Vies des saints Pères du désert (1647 - 1653), the Jansenist priest quotes a translated version of St. Jerome's letter, narrating the episode of Saint-Malc.

Jérôme en est témoin, ce grand saint dont la plume  
Des faits du Dieu vivant expliqua le volume.  
Il vit Malc, il apprit ces merveilles de lui;  
Et mes légers accords les chantent aujourd'hui.  
Qui voudra les savoir d'une bouche plus digne  
Lise chez d'Andilly cette aventure insigne.<sup>87</sup>

---

85. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 368, Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc (Dédicace).

86. Ibid., p. 368.

87. Ibid., p. 372, ll. 524-529.

The poem is composed on the pattern of Adonis. But in place of the pagan valour of the latter, the poet substitutes the christian heroism of the former, that is, sheer heroic valour is replaced with unconquerable piety.

The work owes its most beautiful and sublime verses to La Fontaine's skilful manipulation of poetic expression in favour of the Catholic orthodoxy. The cult of the "Blessed Virgin" as the protectress of the pure and the chaste at heart, a cult very much cherished by Port-Royal, is present throughout the poem. The poet opens the piece with a solemn invocation to the Queen of Virgins for the necessary inspiration in the obviously difficult task of writing an edifying poetry which, as we all know, is outside his speciality.

Reine des esprits purs, protectrice puissante,  
 Qui des dons de tons fils rends l'âme jouissante,  
 Et de qui la faveur se fait à tous sentir,  
 Procurant l'innocence, ou bien le repentir,  
 Mère des bienheureux, Vierge enfin, je t'implore.  
 Fais que dans mes chansons aujourd'hui je t'honore;  
 Bannis-en ces vains traîts, criminelles douceurs  
 Que j'allais mendier jadis chez les neuf Soeurs.  
 Dans ce nouveau travail mon but est de te plaire.<sup>88</sup>

It is significant that, not by accident, at the most critical moment, when Saint-Malc and his companion in suffering are hotly pursued by their enemies, the former find refuge in a cave guarded not by a lion but by a lioness.

.....En ses détours obscurs  
 Régnait une lionne, hôtesse de ses murs.<sup>89</sup>

This is an allegorical reference to the doctrine, deeply entrenched in the Catholic dogma, in which the Blessed Virgin Mary is regarded as "Our Lady of refuge and perpetual succour", that is, as the ready refuge of God's children in their flight from the devil. Jean Delumeau, in his Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire, records that seventeenth-century Catholic parishes kept special registers in which miracles attributed to the Blessed Virgin, "Notre-Dame de refuge et de secours perpétuel", were recorded.

88. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.368, Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc, ll. 1 - 9.

89. Ibid., p. 372, ll. 438 - 439.

On conserve aussi à Sainte-Anne-d'Auray des registres du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle sur lesquels sont consignés les miracles attribués à la Vierge vénérée ici depuis la découverte d'une statue en 1625. D'où la possibilité de connaître grâce à eux les catégories de miracles et leur fréquence ainsi que le niveau culturel, le classement social, l'origine géographique des miraculés, et donc le rayonnement du sanctuaire.<sup>90</sup>

Religion serves in this poem as a poetic symbol, enabling christian orthodoxy and poetry to combine most admirably and at the highest level. Nothing brings out more vividly, for example, Saint-Malc's saintliness and heroism than the clever juxtaposition of the metaphor "serpent" and the phrase "Christ le vainqueur". This device conveys poetically and in a more sublime manner the quality of the saint as a stubborn fighter in Christ's victorious army against the devil.

Là, Malc priait, jeûnait, soupirait à toute heure,  
Pleurait, non ses péchés, mais ceux qu'en notre cœur  
A versés le serpent dont Christ est le vainqueur.<sup>91</sup>

Referring to the water of his baptism, Saint-Malc is made to pass hyperbolically from the natural to the supernatural order when he says :

Conserver avec soin le trésor précieux  
Que nous tenons d'une eau dont la source est aux Cieux...<sup>92</sup>

Comparisons of this nature are traditionally associated with epic poetry and they are frequent in Adonis and in the present poem. But in the latter, their purpose is slightly changed; they no longer serve to exalt sheer brute force and epic valour but to present a realistic and sombre vision of the human condition. Thus the image of the solitary turtle-dove, depicted in Adonis :

Telle sur un ormeau se plaint la tourterelle,  
Quand l'adroit giboyeur a, d'une main cruelle,  
Fait mourir à ses yeux l'objet de ses amours.<sup>93</sup>

is modified into the figure of a dove which conveys the idea of weakness and panic at the beginning of the poem of Saint-Malc.

Telle fuit la colombe, oubliant ses amours,  
A l'aspect du milan qui menace ses jours.<sup>94</sup>

90. Delumeau, J, Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire, Paris, (P.U.F.), 1971, p.216.

91. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.368, ll. 14 - 16.

92. Ibid., p. 368, ll. 19-20.

93. Ibid., p.367, Adonis, ll. 547 - 549.

94. Ibid., p.369, Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc, ll. 75 - 76.

One of the most interesting passages in the poem is the hero's mental prayer as he reflects upon his past folly and present predicament. This prayer is successfully introduced by a quatrain which summarizes in an admirable manner the doctrinal basis of the Christian religion.

Pour Malc, il méditait sur la triple origine  
De l'homme florissant, déchu, puis rétabli.  
Du premier des mortels la faute est en oubli;  
Le Ciel pour Lucifer garde toujours sa haine.<sup>95</sup>

This is a poetic reference to the Christian dogma of man's original innocence, fall and redemption. The dogma was vividly represented in La Fontaine's epoch not only in the teaching of the Port-Royal seminary which he attended, but in Blaise Pascal's doctrine of the dualism of man. According to Pascal, human nature and its contradictions can only be explained by a transcendental reference to the mystery of the Fall and the miracle of Sanctifying Grace procured by the redemption.

J'ai créé l'homme saint, innocent; parfait, je l'ai rempli de lumière et d'intelligence; je lui ai communiqué ma gloire et mes merveilles.... Il a voulu se rendre centre de lui-même et indépendant de mon secours. Il s'est soustrait de ma domination; et, s'égalant à moi par le désir de trouver sa félicité en lui-même, je l'ai abandonné à lui.... en sorte qu'aujourd'hui l'homme est devenu semblable aux bêtes.... Dieu a voulu racheter les hommes, et ouvrir le salut à ceux qui le chercheraient... L'homme, par la grâce, est rendu comme semblable à Dieu, et participe de sa divinité.... Avec Jésus-Christ, l'homme est exempt de vice et de misère. En lui est toute notre vertu et toute notre félicité.<sup>96</sup>

The main body of the prayer itself is not only apprehensive in tone but critical and apologetic of human nature, thus revealing La Fontaine's Jansenist sympathy:

"Dieu tout bon, disait Malc, si ton Fils par sa peine  
M'a sauvé de l'enfer, m'a remis dans mes droits,  
Garde-moi de les perdre une seconde fois;  
Fais qu'un jour mes travaux par leur fin se couronnent.  
Je suis dans les périls, mille maux m'environnent,  
L'esclavage, la crainte, un maître menaçant;  
Et ce n'est pas encor le mal le plus pressant.  
Tu m'as donné pour aide au fort de la tourmente  
Une compagne sainte, il est vrai, mais charmante.  
Son exemple est puissant, ses yeux le sont aussi:  
De conduire les miens, Seigneur, prends le souci".<sup>97</sup>

95. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.370, ll. 194-197.

96. Pascal, B., Op.Cit., pp. 176-215.

97. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.370, ll. 198-208.

It is interesting to see in this particular poem how our poet's seminary experiences and subsequent contact with religious influences are now bearing fruit. And one cannot but admire the delicate way in which he has turned these experiences into subjects of poetic meditation. It is these experiences and his contact with Port-Royal that explain his affinity of thought with Pascal in several sections of the poem of Saint-Malc. Both men were intellectually united not only by their common exposure to Jansenist influences but by their common meeting point in Montaigne. In the poem of Saint-Malc, therefore, the two aspects of La Fontaine's development, namely, the artistic and the intellectual, are blended together into a productive force serving the needs of doctrinal theology. Few people would have believed that the poet's epicurean mind, an unfit material for the Oratory, was capable of composing so edifying and ardent a prayer as the one quoted above.

But the importance of the poem of Saint-Malc does not lie only in the revelation it makes of La Fontaine's deep knowledge of Catholic theology. Equally significant, if not more so, is the place of the poem in the evolution of the poet's thought, following the rhythm upon which the essential unity and continuity of this thought are based. The pattern of this rhythm consists in the regular breaking up of the materials or themes accumulated in each preceding long poem into small fables. That is, each collection of his fables is usually preceded by a long poem in which all the elements or ideas touched in the fables are synthesized. This is particularly so with the relationship between Adonis and the first collection of fables, and between the Poème du Quinquina and the third collection. Following this pattern, Le Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc is a sort of springboard to the second collection of fables. Just as the fauna of Adonis, capable of teaching the lesson of bravery and heroism to human beings, is a prelude to the animal comedy in the fables of 1668, the poem of Saint-Malc is focused on the stoic ideas around which the poet is to exercise his moral reflections in the fables of 1678. The idea of a world redeemed by a good and forgiving God, which permeates the poem, for example, is already a prelude to the providentialist view of the universe, which La Fontaine defends in the second collection of fables. The simile of the dove, already quoted, is followed by another image :

Telle l'ombre d'un loup dans les verts pâturages  
Ecarte les troupeaux attentifs aux herbages....<sup>98</sup>

This similitude anticipates the episode of the flock started by the shadow of the wolf in the nineteenth fable of the ninth Book of fables :

Un loup parut, tout le troupeau s'enfuit:  
Ce n'était pas un loup, ce n'en était que l'ombre.<sup>99</sup>

It is in the poem of Saint-Malc that the poet for the first time places men and animals side by side in the dock for what is virtually a criminal trial in which men are found guilty and the animals vindicated.

Que vous êtes heureux, peuple doux! disait-elle,  
Vous passez sans péché cette course mortelle:  
On loue en vous voyant celui qui vous a faits;  
Et nous, de qui les cours sont enclins aux forfaits,  
Laissons languir sa gloire, et d'un faible suffrage  
Ne daignons relever son nom ni son ouvrage.  
Chères brebis, paisez, cueillez l'herbe et les fleurs:  
Pour vous l'aube nourrit la terre de ses pleurs;  
Vivez de leurs présents : inspirez-nous l'envie  
D'éviter les repas qui vous coûtent la vie.  
Misérables humains, semences de tyrans,  
En quoi différez-vous des monstres dévorants?<sup>100</sup>

This kind of comparison was a popular feature of seventeenth-century poetry. Both Boileau and La Bruyère used it with much effect and so did Mme. Deshoulières.<sup>101</sup> But the source closely followed by La Fontaine is certainly Boileau. He puts across in a more delicate and gentle manner a sentiment which Boileau expresses rudely as a bitter invective against man in the following passage, published towards the later part of 1668 :

De tous les animaux qui s'élèvent dans l'air  
Qui marchent sur la terre, ou nagent dans la mer,  
De Paris au Pérou, du Japon jusqu'à Rome,  
Le plus sot animal, à mon avis, c'est homme.  
Quoi? dira-t-on d'abord, un ver, une fourmi,  
Un insecte rampant qui ne vit qu'à demi,  
Un taureau qui rumine, une chèvre qui broute,  
Ont l'esprit mieux tourné que n'a l'homme?  
Oui, sans doute.<sup>102</sup>

98. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 369, ll. 77 - 78.

99. Ibid., p. 147, Fables, IX, 19, ll. 26-27.

100. Ibid., p. 369, ll. 181 - 192.

101. Deshoulières, A., (Mme.), Op. Cit., (édition de 1694), p. 96.

102. Boileau, D. Op. Cit., p. 41, Satire, VIII.

The sombre reflection on the relative disposition of men and animals, made in the poem of Saint-Malc, is a prelude to the fables of Le Loup et les Bergers (X, 5) and Les Compagnons d'Ulysse (XII, 1). The theme of solitude, so dear to La Fontaine, and one of the pillars upon which his ethics of "volupté" is built, is not only emphasized in the poem, but is given the character of a cardinal Christian virtue in the admonitions which the wise old man gives to Saint-Malc :

Fuyez, fuyez, mon fils, le monde et ses amorces:  
 Il est plein de dangers qui surpassent vos forces,  
 Fuyez l'or; mais fuyez encor d'autres appas.  
 On ne sort qu'en fuyant vainqueur de ces combats.  
 La paix que nous goûtons a-t-elle moins de charmes?  
 Quoi! vous hasarderiez le fruit de tant de larmes,  
 Et celui de ce sang qu'un Dieu versa pour vous!<sup>103</sup>

These lines re-echo the credo of the solitaries of Port-Royal and represent the point where the poem of Saint-Malc anticipates the last and the greatest of the fables, namely, Le Juge arbitre, l'Hospitalier et le Solitaire (XII, 24), which was also of Jansenist inspiration.

In addition to its anticipation of the second collection of fables, the poem of Saint-Malc also rehearses certain important ideas embodied in Psyché. The scene in which the hero meditates upon the exemplary spirit of mutual co-operation among the ants, for example, recalls the magic assistance which Psyché received from the world of ants.<sup>104</sup> But the manner in which the episode is developed in the poem of Saint-Malc :

L'une poussait un faix, l'autre prêtait son dos...<sup>105</sup>

makes it a fitting prelude to the ingenious animal solidarity demonstrated in the fable of Les deux Râts, le Renard et l'Œuf.<sup>106</sup> It will be recalled that Virgil, one of La Fontaine's Latin masters, had painted a similar scene in lines 402-407 of the fourth Book of Æneid. Later on, Joachim du Bellay, too, was to evoke the same image in his Discours au Roy, composed in support of mutual co-operation and understanding throughout the realm.

---

103. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.368, ll. 45-51.

104. Ibid., pp. 446 - 447.

105. Ibid., p. 371, ll. 354-357.

106. Ibid., p.147, Fables, IX, "Discours à Mme. de la Sablière".



Vous voyriez par les champs, pour piller le monceau  
 Du bled nouveau battu, marcher ce noir troupeau  
 Par un sentier estroict : les uns vont et retournent,  
 Les autres hastent ceux qui paresseux sejourment,  
 Ceux-ci traistent les grains trop pesans et trop gros,  
 Ceux-là les vont poussant de l'espaule et du dos.<sup>107</sup>

We have no clear proof that La Fontaine read much of du Bellay, but the similarity in verse pattern and even in the actual words used by both poets, such as "pousser", "dos", "légions" and "troupeau", suggest some contact with the Discours au Roy. At the moment of the decisive trial, when the hero is tempted to commit suicide, his companion, by the firmness of her character and her encouraging exhortations, dissuades him from taking the defeatist plunge. This is a further development of the humanist attitude initiated in La Mort et Le Bûcheron (I, 16) and maintained in Psyché. The encouragement given to Saint-Malc recalls the advice which the old hermit gave to Psyché at the hour of her greatest despair.<sup>108</sup> But the exhortation not to kill herself, which the hermit span out to Psyché in diffused prose, is, in the poem of Saint-Malc, condensed into energetic and compelling alexandrian lines which transcend human philosophy to assume the character of a divine inspiration :

Ne craignez plus, vivez; l'Eternel vous l'ordonne.  
 Estimez-vous si peu cet être qu'il vous donne?  
 Votre corps est à lui; ses mains l'ont façonné:  
 Le droit d'en disposer ne vous est point donné.  
 Quelle imprudence à vous de finir votre course  
 Par le seul des péchés qui n'a point de ressource!  
 Toute faute s'expie; on peut pleurer encor;  
 Mais on ne peut plus rien s'étant donné la mort.<sup>109</sup>

This argument against suicide is now reinforced by reminiscences of La Fontaine's reading of Saint Augustine's La Cité de Dieu, the work which he helped Louis Giry to translate into French in 1665. It will be recalled that in this work Saint Augustine regards suicide as the most unpardonable of crimes, for unlike other crimes, suicide does not leave the criminal any room for repentance. It is therefore a sign of moral weakness and of inability to live up to the trials of life.

---

107. Joachim du Bellay, Œuvres, (édit. C.H. Marty-Laveaux), Paris, 1857, t.II, pp. 493 - 494.

108. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.432.

109. Ibid., p.371, ll. 316 - 323.

Et ce n'est pas sans raison que, dans les saints Livres canoniques, nulle part il n'est prescrit ni permis au nom de Dieu de se donner la mort, soit pour gagner la vie éternelle, soit pour prévenir ou conjurer quelque mal. Que cela nous soit interdit; c'est ce que nous fait comprendre le "Tu ne tueras point" de la Loi.... "tu ne tueras point", c'est-à-dire tu ne tueras ni un autre ni toi-même.... Et même, consulter la raison, on ne peut même appeler grandeur d'âme cette impuissance à supporter de dures épreuves ou les péchés d'autrui, qui achemine au suicide.<sup>110</sup>

Commenting on La Fontaine's clever adaptation of Saint Augustine's ideas on suicide to the circumstances of the poem of Saint-Malc, Colonel Godchot declares :

Le poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc.... sert à montrer comment La Fontaine savait tirer, étudier, se pénétrer des auteurs qu'il avait fréquentés, et combien sa mémoire admirable savait aller chercher ses arguments même dans la prose angélique de Saint-Augustin.<sup>111</sup>

By way of Christian reciprocity, the hero in his turn, encourages his companion in suffering to follow his plans aimed at liberating themselves from the bondage of the wicked. His admonition to the heroine is couched in a sound and convincing argument to which our poet's solemn verses give an added tinge of a moral necessity :

Mais enfin jetez l'œil sur l'état où nous sommes.  
 Vous êtes exposée aux malices des hommes;  
 Je n'ai plus de mes bois les saintes voluptés.  
 Ne reviendront-ils point ces biens que j'ai quittés?  
 Ah! si vous jouissiez de leur douceur exquise!  
 La fuite, direz-vous, ne nous est pas permise.  
 De notre liberté l'Arabe est possesseur.  
 Et quel droit a sur nous un cruel ravisseur?  
 Brisons ses fers; fuyons sans avoir de scrupule.<sup>112</sup>

The intellectual distance from Adonis to the poem of Saint-Malc can be measured in terms of the shift in La Fontaine's concept of human possibilities, aided by will-power and faith in the ability to succeed. We have noted how the poet advanced from the deploration of the fragile beauty of the human body or the brevity of mortal life (Adonis) to the mythical representation of the destiny of the human soul (Psyché).

110. Saint Augustin, La Cité de Dieu, Texte latin et traduction française par Pierre de Labriolle, Paris, (Garnier), 1941, t.I, pp. 69 - 75).

(Livre I, chapitres xx - xxii).

111. Godchot, Colonel, La Fontaine et Saint Augustin, Paris (Albin Michel), 1919, p. 133.

112. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 371, ll. 408 - 416.

Following the same progression in thought, the condemnation of self-immolation, initiated in the first collection of fables, and re-emphasized in Psyché, is given a symbolic representation and a divine justification in the poem of Saint-Malc. Here too, the tragedy of pagan heroism conquered by death (Adonis) gives way to the triumph of Christian heroism over the power of evil. Thus, as the poet approaches full maturity, his thinking becomes more positive, more confident and more forward-looking. The practice of chastity, though so much at variance with human nature in its observance, is nevertheless, an ideal which human reason approves. Its difficulty neither destroys its attractiveness nor has its idealism ever ceased to appeal to virtuous minds. In its exquisite refinements, it is essentially Christian and revealed, but in the sublime appreciation of its beauty not all cults and cultures are agreed, hence La Fontaine sees its observance by the hero and the heroine in the circumstances they find themselves, a singular act of heroism and a rare virtue.

Je chante d'un héros la vertu solitaire.... 113

114

This "vertu solitaire" contrasts sharply with the "criminelles douceurs" the indecencies in which the Contes are couched. In this sense, the poem of Saint-Malc gives the poet's literary and intellectual development a tilt towards stoic idealism. But is he there to stay? It would certainly be surprising if he does, for an eclectic such as La Fontaine, who declares himself "volage en vers comme en amour"<sup>115</sup> cannot be expected to remain for long tied to one tendency. Moreover, his temperament is basically opposed to the stand he takes in this poem. As we saw in his handling of the Contes, his approach to love and to women in their physical reality is opposed to the idealistic concept of self-abnegation or the suppression of legitimate natural impulses. For him, the true end of love is its physical consummation, hence he sees as natural or commonplace the physical union of people of the opposite sex who are prompted by love. The scorning of love or the suppression of its impulses is an unnatural act which can lead to dangerous consequences. He later places a final emphasis on this idea when, drawing further in-

---

113. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 368, l.10.

114. Ibid., p. 368, l. 7.

115. Ibid., p.490.

spiration from Theocritus' twenty-third idyll entitled L'Amant malheureux, he demonstrates in Daphnis et Alcimadure (1685) how quick nature is to punish those who resist or suppress her impulses to love.

In the original work, it is a loving young girl who pines away for an insensitive and hard-hearted lad. In Daphnis et Alcimadure La Fontaine reverses the situation for obvious reasons. He is here addressing himself to a lady not a man. It is only natural therefore that the victim of "Amour's" anger and vengeance should be a woman, since the moral lesson of the fable is intended particularly for a woman in this case. The aspect of the model which our poet retains and stresses is Theocritus' insistence on the implacable vengeance of love upon those who ignore his promptings. The insensitive heart, declares Theocritus,

ne savait pas quel dieu c'est que l'Amour, quel  
est l'arc qu'il tient dans ses mains, de quelles  
flèches amères il frappe les cœurs indifférents!<sup>116</sup>

Theocritus ends his idyll with an invitation to all loving and tender hearts to rejoice over the well-deserved fate of the scorner of love and to learn a lesson from the incident :

O vous qui aimez, réjouissez-vous, l'insensible  
n'est plus; et vous que l'on aime, ne soyez point  
cruels : L'Amour punit les ingrats.<sup>117</sup>

La Fontaine concludes Daphnis et Alcimadure on this same note. This poem is dedicated to Mme. de La Mésangère, the daughter of our poet's benefactress, Mme. de La Sablière. Mme. de La Mésangère suddenly became a widow at a very tender age when her husband, M. de La Mésangère died between 1684 and 1685. The young widow's blooming beauty attracted many new suitors whom she rejected because of her deep love for her dead husband and her respect for his memory. Mme. de La Sablière, not wishing to see her daughter unattached at so tender an age, eagerly desired her to remarry and, no doubt, communicated her desire to La Fontaine. The latter therefore composed the above poem as an admonition to the beautiful young widow, advising her not to imitate the attitude of Alcimadure who remained insensitive to the prompting of love and thereby paid dearly for fighting against legitimate natural impulses. Mme. de la Mésangère should therefore not choke

---

116. Théocrite, *Idylles de Théocrite*, traduites en français par J. B. Gail, Nouvelle édition, Paris, 1796, t.II, p.91, (Idylle xxiii).

117. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

up her beauty and youthful charm which La Fontaine here compares to beautiful roses, by surrounding them with the thorn of self-abnegation :

Gardez d'environner ces roses  
De trop d'épines, si jamais  
L'Amour vous dit les mêmes choses :  
Il les dit mieux que je ne fais,  
Aussi sait-il punir ceux qui ferment l'oreille  
A ses conseils....<sup>118</sup>

The young Mme. de La Mésangère was to remarry the Comte de Nocé five years later (1690), and in 1694, this poem was joined to the last book of Fables. It can thus be seen that although La Fontaine pays lip service to the Catholic orthodoxy on chastity, he remains temperamentally the same sensual "bonhomme" whom we met in the Contes. Viewed in this light, the poet's idealistic pose in the poem of Saint-Malc must be taken for what it really is, namely, a strenuous effort on the part of La Fontaine to dance to the tune, that is, to comply with the taste of the prelate to whom the poem is dedicated and whose patronage our poet eagerly desired to secure. The superficiality of La Fontaine's seemingly edifying attitude in this poem is revealed by the fact that in 1674, barely a year after the publication of the Poem of Saint-Malc, he released the most licentious of his Contes so far, devoted almost entirely to a devastating attack on the clergy and the church dignitaries in general. This could hardly be otherwise, judging from the epicurean and essentially naturalist orientated milieu in which the poet now finds himself as from 1672, namely, the circle of Mme. de La Sablière.

### 3. The Circle of Mme. de La Sablière.

La Fontaine's position as gentleman-servant at the palace of Luxembourg was suddenly lost by the death in 1672 of the dowager duchess of Orleans whom he was serving. This event cut off his principal means of subsistence. But by a strange turn of fortune, which often keeps men of destiny from ever despairing, he found favour with Mme. de La Sablière. This gracious lady turned out to be the chief instrument of his intellectual advancement, the God-sent refuge in which he was to attain mental maturity.

Mme. de La Sablière was a lady of great distinction, versed in literature, mathematics, astronomy, the arts and physical sciences. According to d'Olivet,

Non seulement elle entendait parfaitement la langue du siècle d'Auguste, et savait par cœur les plus beaux vers d'Horace et de Virgile, mais elle n'était étrangère à aucune des connaissances humaines cultivées de son temps.<sup>119</sup>

Apart from the blessing of a good formal education under able masters, she had the advantage of having a brilliant uncle, Antoine Menjot, who helped to build up her interest in anatomy and philosophy, for the latter was both a well-known physician and a philosopher.

Son oncle, Antoine Menjot, contribua plus que tout autre à développer sa vive intelligence. Il s'efforça de mettre à sa portée les spéculations philosophiques de son temps....De savants professeurs lui enseignèrent les lettres grecques et latines, les sciences mathématiques, et développèrent en elle cet amour du beau, qui fit si longtemps le charme de sa vie.<sup>120</sup>

It was in her that La Fontaine discovered the one woman who thoroughly understood his temperament, sincerely admired and appreciated his poetic potentialities, and loved him with a motherly tenderness. He lived in her house for twenty years (1672 - 1692).

Mme. de La Sablière kept an open house for scientists, philosophers and literary men at her "Hôtel particulier" in the "rue Neuve-des-Petits Champs" which was then situated in what is now the new part of the Parish of Saint-Roch. In this august circle and sympathetic milieu, La Fontaine came in direct contact with kindred spirits into

---

119. Pellisson et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., p.280.

120. Menjot d'Elbenne, Madame de La Sablière ses pensées chrétiennes et ses lettres à l'abbé de Rancé, Paris, (Plon), 1923, p.15.

whose way of thinking he had been initiated by his association with Saint-Evremond, as well as met many of his friends of Vaux: Charles Perrault, the famous author of fairy-tales, Paul Barillon who was the French Ambassador to England but who was often in Paris, Louis de Brancas, M. de Rochefort, M. de Foix, l'abbé de Chaulieu, François d'Usson seigneur de Bonrepaux, who had been a good friend of Fouquet and of the Bouillons; then there were such other important personalities as Lauzun, Ninon, Menjot and the brilliant Marquis de La Fare with whom the lady of the house was in love. Among those living in her house with La Fontaine as special guests were the young geometrician, Sauveur, who later became a distinguished mathematician, and François Bernier, travelling scholar, scientist and philosopher, who was to play an important role in shaping La Fontaine's philosophical thinking during this period.

Life was gay and care-free among this group of like-minded men who held "la douce volupté" as "la valeur suprême de la vie" and whose more or less discreet impiety was considered by the authorities as relatively less dangerous to the Church and State than the religious disputations of the Jansenists and other dissenters. Bernier and Ninon insisted that reason should control but never stifle legitimate human passions.

Le cercle de la rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs était résolument fermé au stoïcisme chrétien qui régnait à cette époque. Bernier et Ninon étaient d'accord pour enseigner que la douce volupté est la valeur suprême de la vie, pour réduire la morale à une sagesse souriante. La raison ne doit pas, pensaient-ils, étouffer les passions, elle a pour rôle de les ordonner, et de les utiliser en vue du plus grand et plus durable bonheur.<sup>121</sup>

The supper parties held here were extremely brilliant, and discussions ranged from metaphysics and the new cartesianism to literature and politics, all subjects being treated with ironical facility. As the evening progressed and wine circulated, the conversation became more intimate; affairs of the heart and various degrees of love were discussed, intermingled with gossip, scandalous stories, songs, often improvised to suit the occasion by such guests as the abbé de Chaulieu and Chapelle,

---

121. Adam, A., Histoire de la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Paris, 1954, t.iv, p.18.

both of whom excelled in this accomplishment. The genial and voluptuous atmosphere which prevailed during these supper parties has been skilfully portrayed by Louis Roche. He comments :

Il (La Fontaine) regarde les jolies femmes dans ce décor brillant de lumières, pendant que les rires gazouillent comme des oiseaux ou que les mélodies dansent dans la salle. On fait de la musique : pour lui, quelle joie! Après les causeries enjouées ou fines, voilà que s'entr'ouvre le monde des rêves, douceur et volupté. Les phrases rythmées sont comme des rondes, où les yeux brillants, les épaules nues des femmes rieuses dansent devant lui. Ou plus lentement elles passent, la main dans la main, chuchotant des mots qui sont des caresses : et les vieux souvenirs d'amour, les folles espérances agitent son cœur. Vers des pays lointains où tout est tendresse, sourire et lumière, il se laisse emporter sur les ailes de la musique, - et son âme errante s'envole.<sup>122</sup>

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that La Fontaine discovered a kindred affinity with this circle and surrendered himself entirely to its influences. Given the character of his new milieu, is it any wonder that the faint glimmer of stoic idealism which appeared in the wake of the poem of Saint-Malc quickly faded away, leaving in Part III of the Contes, published in 1674, barely two years after his initiation into the circle, one of the least disguised representations of literary libertinism in seventeenth-century France? How far these influences permeated his life can also be seen in the light of the conclusion to Le Songe d'un habitant du Mogol<sup>123</sup> and other similar episodes in the second collection of fables.

The twenty good years, spent in Mme. de La Sablière's house, in regular contact with the distinguished members of her salon, gave La Fontaine an opportunity to see and hear the great scholars and worldly men who surrounded Mme. de La Sablière, at first hand. This was for him a great source of intellectual stimulation. Commenting on the impact of such an experience on the intellectual and social development of the poet, Clarac declares :

122. Roche, Louis, Op.Cit., p.245.

123. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.158, Fables, XI, 4, ll. 39-40.



Au contact des philosophes et des savants qui fréquentent le salon de Mme. de La Sablière, des curiosités nouvelles s'éveillent dans son esprit.<sup>124</sup>

This was particularly true of La Fontaine's association with Bernier

Le célèbre orientaliste....enseigna à son ami l'histoire naturelle et l'anatomie, mit à sa portée les spéculations de Descartes et les doctrines philosophiques les plus ardues....<sup>125</sup>

Bernier had travelled much in the Eastern lands, and was at one time the personal physician to the Emperor Aurangzeb of Hindustan. He possessed a good deal of common sense, and, though anti-cartesian in so far as he considered Descartes' conclusions too affirmative, he did not altogether approve of the easy acceptance of the doctrine of Epicurus which was so fashionable with some moralists. He compiled an abridgement of Gassendi's philosophy in eight volumes for his hostess, for the distinguishing characteristic of the latter's salon was its interest in Gassendism. This great Gassendist stimulated our poet's interest not only in the doctrine of his master but in the oriental myths. The latter gave La Fontaine a better understanding of the fables of Pilpai, some of which feature in the second and third collections of fables. One example of this is the fable entitled L'Elephant et le Singe de Jupiter. The oriental colouring of this fable is seen in the respectable role which the fabulist assigns to the monkey. This animal, according to Tavernier, is highly regarded among the people of the oriental lands as a creature endowed with some reason and fashioned to be a friend of man. Following this belief, they reserve for monkeys a sort of respect approaching religious veneration:

On les regarde non seulement comme des petits hommes dotés de raison, qui s'abstiennent de parler pour s'exempter du travail, mais encore comme des divinités auxquelles on rend un culte religieux. On leur consacre des temples, on leur élève des statues, et il y a des fêtes instituées en leur honneur....On leur offre des prières et des sacrifices et ce serait un crime capital de les tuer....On construit pour eux des hôpitaux à Amadabat.<sup>126</sup>

---

124. Clarac, P., *Littérature française*, Collection dirigée par Claude Pichois, Paris, 1969, t.II, p.190.

125. Menjot d'Elbenne, *Op.Cit.*, p.105.

126. Tavernier, *Voyages*, Paris, 1676, t.II, p.44.

La Fontaine also had other sources of information. The period between 1670 and 1678 witnessed a substantial proliferation of books about Oriental lands. In 1670-71, Bernier published his Histoire de la dernière révolution des Etats du grand Mogol; Evénements particuliers...dans les Etats du grand Mogol. This was followed by La Suite des Mémoires...sur l'Empire du grand Mogol (1671). The same year, 1671, saw the appearance of Chardin's Couronnement de Soliman III, and le Père Gabriel de Chinon's Relations nouvelles du Levant. These were followed in 1673 by Daulier-Deslandes' Les Beautés de la Perse, and in 1676 by the two-volume, quarto-sized edition of Voyages, published by the celebrated traveller and orientalist, Tavernier, who made six voyages to the East. But Bernier's major contribution to La Fontaine's intellectual growth is his doctrine of animal intelligence, based upon Gassendi's anti-Cartesian philosophy. Gassendi believes in the existence of varying degrees of intelligence in both men and animals. This idea, as brilliantly explained by Bernier, fascinated our poet, who readily adopted it in his Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, which we shall discuss later. Night after night, La Fontaine listened attentively to the discussions and fascinating stories of oriental lands and animals, narrated by his friend.

On sait l'attrait qu'avaient pour La Fontaine les livres entretiens. Bien des curiosités nouvelles s'éveillèrent alors à la surface de son esprit. Aussi ne s'étonnera-t-on pas de trouver aux fables du second recueil une couleur gassendiste et orientale, d'y rencontrer d'amusantes silhouettes de bassas, de vizirs, de bramins et tant d'allusions aux astres, aux dangers des grandes traversées, aux affaires publiques, à la diplomatie.<sup>127</sup>

The episode of Les Souris et le Chat-huant (XI, 9), for example was narrated to Bernier in La Fontaine's presence: A hollow tree in the forest of Fontainebleau, used as a nest by an owl, had been found to contain scores of mice, still alive but with their legs broken so that they could not escape, together with a small store of ears of wheat to keep them alive and fatten them up for gradual consumption. Our poet was to quote this episode in support of his argument against Descartes that the lower animals have a measure of intelligence,<sup>128</sup>

127. Clarac, P., *La Fontaine par lui-même*, Paris, (Seuil), 1967, p. 76.

128. *La Fontaine*, Op. Cit., p. 161, Fables, XI, 9.

and Bernier also recorded it in his Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi.<sup>129</sup> In the same way, the anecdote of the Polish boubaks, which La Fontaine quotes in his Discours (ll. 116 - 135) was, according to Walckenaer, told to the poet by yet another man supposed to have been one of Mme. de La Sablière's special guests, namely, Jean Sobieski;

C'est ainsi qu'il a versifié dans le premier apologue du dixième livre, ce que Jean Sobieski, depuis roi de Pologne, lui avoit raconté chez Mme. de La Sablière des castors de son pays.<sup>130</sup>

Walckenaer's observation suggests that La Fontaine also met Jean Sobieski in Mme. de La Sablière's house.<sup>131</sup> But it is not clearly known whether or not Sobieski returned to France for a second time after his first visit. If not, it is difficult to imagine how our poet could have met him, for both Louis Roche and Menjot d'Elbenne, who have made an exhaustive study of La Fontaine's relationship with Mme. de La Sablière, affirm that Sobieski was in France between 1646 and 1647, when Mme. de La Sablière was only seven years old and when La Fontaine himself was still twenty-six.<sup>132</sup> Nobody claims to have seen Sobieski again in France between 1669 and 1685 when Mme. de La Sablière's salon flourished, and nothing in the works we have consulted suggests that he actually returned to live in her house. In fact, he himself is quoted by Roche as having declared in 1678 :

J'étais bien jeune quand je vivais en France....<sup>133</sup>

But what still casts some doubt on this account about Sobieski are certain lines which La Fontaine himself incorporates into the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière :

Mais voici beaucoup plus. Ecoutez ce récit,  
Que je tiens d'un roi plein de gloire.

129. Bernier, F., Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi, Lyon, 1678, t. vii, p. 674.

130. Walckenaer, A.C., Op.Cit., p.154. In Walckenaer's 1848 edition of La Fontaine's Fables, the "Discours à Mme. de La Sablière" is placed as the first fable of the tenth book.

131. Ibid., p. 123.

132. Roche, Louis, Op.Cit., p.54, note 2. Cf. Menjot d'Elbenne, Op.Cit., p.70, note I.

133. Roche, Louis, Op.Cit. p.54, note 2.

Le défenseur du Nord vous sera mon garant :  
 Je vais citer un prince aimé de la Victoire.  
 Son nom seul est un mur à l'Empire ottoman :  
 C'est le roi polonais. Jamais un roi ne ment.... 134

These lines suggest that the fabulist heard the story of the Polish fox and boubaks directly from Jean Sobieski. If the assertion that La Fontaine did not meet the Polish King is accepted, to whom then is the poet referring in these lines? There is no suggestion that the fabulist ever visited Poland during his life time. A probable solution to the problem seems to be the suggestion made by Georges Couton. In his edition of La Fontaine's Fables he speculates that the fabulist may have heard the story of the Polish boubaks from l'abbé Chaulieu. The latter was, according to Couton, a member of the delegation, headed by the marquis de Béthune, which Louis XIV sent to Jean Sobieski to pay him tribute on the occasion of his accession to the Polish throne in 1674. Considering Chaulieu's close connections with Mme. de La Sablière's salon, it sounds probable that he may have brought this story from Poland and narrated it in our poet's hearing.<sup>135</sup> But La Fontaine himself does not say so. There seems to be no way of knowing what actually happened. In any case, if we have to choose between the speculations of the critics and the actual texts of the author himself, we are inclined to rely more on the latter than on the former; that is, to believe that somehow La Fontaine was personally acquainted with Jean Sobieski, though not necessarily in Mme. de La Sablière's salon. By the year 1647 when Sobieski is supposed to have left France, our poet was already a young man of 26 years, quite familiar with Paris, and able to mix up with various categories of people, particularly in the company of his friends of the Round Table. It is possible that he may have met the future King of Poland about this time and probably heard him narrate this episode by way of illustration to some point raised in the course of a discussion in a coffee house or a cabaret.

---

134. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.147, Fables, IX, "Discours à Mme. de La Sablière", ll. 116 - 121.

135. Couton, Georges, *La Fontaine Fables choisies mises en vers*, Paris, (Garnier), 1962, p.513.

Antoine Menjot, "ce singulier médecin, philosophe, théologien, huguenot, somme toute homme de coeur et d'esprit"<sup>136</sup> had also a considerable intellectual influence on La Fontaine at this time. As a Gassendist, Menjot ridiculed, to the great enjoyment of our poet, the theories of Descartes on the subject of animal-machine, which he describes as mere intellectual acrobatics.

Je les considère comme un simple jeu d'esprit,  
et je les mets au rang des choses ingénieuses  
qui sont bien trouvées si elles ne sont pas véritables. 137

La Fontaine adopts the same disparaging tone in his discussion of this doctrine in the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, where he expresses some surprise that Descartes, this mortal who would have been regarded as a god among the pagans, should describe animals as mere automata. (ll. 54-55).

This period was certainly one of great intellectual activity for our poet, thus ensuring for the second collection of fables a wider horizon and fresh sources of inspiration. La Fontaine was now as happy as ever. If these days in Mme. de La Sablière's salon were no longer the magic days of Vaux, when the world looked so full of promise and faces seemed lit by a mysterious radiance, there was now a compensating poise and a keener insight into the realities of life. It can thus be seen that the significance of Mme. de La Sablière's patronage was enormous for the poet's development. First, it guaranteed a steady supply of his needs thereby enabling him to devote more time to intellectual pursuits. Secondly, it broadened his intellectual horizon through contact with the flower of French nobility and learned aristocracy. He now found himself discussing not only literature but philosophy, science and medicine, as we shall see in his treatment of the "quinquina". In this milieu, highly intellectual and diversified, La Fontaine's already awakened genius received the greatest stimulation as well as attained its maturity. The poet has thus come a long way from being the village poet of Château-Thierry whom we met many years ago, and whose main preoccupation

---

136. Menjot d'Elbenne, Op.Cit., p.5.

137. Menjot, Antoine (Dr.-Med.), Lettre à M. Puerari sur les opinions de M. Descartes; Opuscules posthumes de M. Menjot, conseiller et médecin ordinaire du roi à Paris, Amsterdam, 1697, Part I, pp. 115, 118.

appeared to be the cultivation of the Muse just for its own sake. Now poetry serves him more as a vehicle for the communication of ideas than as an amusement. The plainest phrases, the homeliest illustrations, the most everyday topics, are now used to insinuate some useful and eternal truth.

As a mark of his indebtedness to Mme. de La Sablière, La Fontaine does not fail to attach her name to the immortality of his own fame. In the poem, dedicated to M. de Harlay at her instigation, the poet indicates his gratitude to this beneficent hostess and his intention to immortalize her memory.

Iris m'en a l'ordre prescrit....  
 Cette Iris, Harlay, c'est la dame  
 A qui j'ai deux temples bâtis,  
 L'un dans mon cœur, l'autre en mon livre. 138

Accordingly, in the most solemn event in his life, on the occasion of his election to the French Academy, he read an address, in which he surveyed his own life and career, and paid a warm tribute to Mme. de La Sablière, thus associating her with the climax of his own success.<sup>139</sup> Many critics of La Fontaine, notably Saint-Marc Girardin, see in this homage not only Mme. de La Sablière's surest passport to immortality but the most incontrovertible testimony of the lady's reputation as a woman of character and learning, contrary to the opinion held by some of her envious detractors.

Ce qui montre l'ascendant que Mme. de La Sablière avait dans le monde, c'est qu'en 1684, La Fontaine, le jour de sa réception à l'Académie, n'hésita pas à lire le discours en vers qu'il lui avait adressé. Un pareil hommage ne se rend que lorsqu'on est sûr d'avance de l'assentiment du public.<sup>140</sup>

And Menjot d'Elbenne, who has written a biography of Mme. de La Sablière, concludes that

---

138. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.492, "A M. de Harlay". M. de Harlay was the generous "Procureur général du Parlement" who looked after La Fontaine's only son.

139. Ibid. pp. 490 - 491, Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, (1684), ll. 36 - 43.

140. Saint-Marc, Girardin, La Fontaine et les fabulistes, (Nouvelle édition), Paris, (Michel Levy), 1867, t.I, p.306.

Sa maternelle affection pour La Fontaine est le vrai titre de Mme. de La Sablière au souvenir reconnaissant de la postérité.<sup>141</sup>

These testimonies prove the great importance which not only La Fontaine himself but the entire seventeenth-century French society attached to the influence of Mme. de La Sablière on the physical well-being and intellectual development of the poet.

The idea of attaching the name of his most beloved patron to the immortality of his work is probably imitated from his Latin models. Horace, Seneca, Virgil and Ovid, all express the desire of achieving eternal renown in their literary creations. In one of his odes, entitled Exegi monumentum, Horace writes :

J'achève un monument plus que l'airain durable,  
La grande pyramide a moins de majesté,  
A l'onde dévorante il est impénétrable,  
Les vents ne pourront rien sur sa solidité,<sup>142</sup>  
Elle résistera sous les siècles sans nombre.

Ovid concludes the fifteenth Book of his Metamorphoses in the same tone.<sup>143</sup> In the twenty-first epistle of Seneca's Lettres à Lucilius, the same work which La Fontaine translated in collaboration with his cousin, Pintrel, the Latin author promises immortality to Lucilius. As a prelude to this promise, Seneca quotes several models who had written before him, including Epicurus, whose work immortalizes the name of the tyrannical minister, Idoménée:

Je me réfère à Epicure. Ecrivant à Idoménée pour le ramener d'une vie tout en dehors à une gloire solide et durable, il disait à ce ministre d'un tyran, qui maniait de grandes affaires :  
"Si tu es sensible à la gloire, mes lettres te feront mieux connaître que ces grandeurs dont tu es avide et qu'on honore en toi".<sup>144</sup>

Then he cites the examples of Cicero who secures eternal renown in his writings for Atticus,<sup>145</sup> and of Virgil who also promises immortality to two of his dear, brave friends in his verses :

141. Menjot d'Elbenne, Op. Cit., p.84.

142. Horace, F.Q., Les Odes d'Horace, Texte établi et traduit en vers par Edouard Bourette, Paris, (Quantin), 1895, p.189 (Odes, III, xxx).

143. Ovide, Métamorphoses, XV, ll. 871-879.

144. Sénèque, L.A., Op.Cit., t.I, p.111, (Lettre xxi).

145. Ibid., p. 111.

C'est ainsi que notre Virgile a promis une gloire  
éternelle à ses deux héros :

"Couple heureux! Si mes vers sont des ans respectés,  
Vos noms ne mourront point par ma muse chantés.  
Je les ferai durer tant que la destinée  
Rendra Rome soumise aux descendants d'Enée. 146

In conclusion, Seneca makes the same promise of eternal fame to  
Lucilius :

Eh bien! ce qu'Epicure a pu promettre à  
son ami, je te le promets, Lucilius : auprès  
de la postérité je ne serai pas sans crédit, 147  
et je pourrai faire durer ton nom avec le mien.

Drawing inspiration from these sources, La Fontaine, an avid reader  
of Horace, Virgil, Seneca and Ovid, adapts the spirit of the Latin  
texts to the circumstances of his relationship with Mme. de La  
Sablière. There is a strong reason to suggest that the earliest idea  
of the immortality of a good literary work came to our poet through  
his reading of Virgil in particular. As early as 1658, the difficult  
period of his literary apprenticeship, when he had little or no confi-  
dence in himself, and before he had even collaborated in translating  
Seneca's work, he was already familiar with the idea of literary im-  
mortality, for in the dedicatory letter, presenting a copy of his  
Adonis to Fouquet, he expresses the hope that this work would be im-  
mortalized by being associated with the famous name of Fouquet.

Vois de bon œil cet œuvre, et consens pour ma gloire  
Qu'avec toi l'on le place au temple de mémoire.  
Par toi je me promets un éternel renom: 148  
Mes vers ne mourront point assistés de ton nom.

The humble tone of this petition presents an interesting contrast with  
the confident assurance now being given to Mme. de La Sablière. In  
the intervening period between 1658 and 1685, our poet's works have  
become so renowned and their immortality so assured that they no  
longer require a third-party guarantee of their posterity. On the con-  
trary, they have now become other people's passport to immortality.  
This contrasting situation is one of the surest proofs of La Fontaine's  
intellectual growth, self-confidence and maturity.

---

146. Sénèque, L.A. Op.Cit., t.I, p.111. - 113.

147. Ibid., p.111.

148. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.361, Adonis (Dédicace).



The particular importance which the poet attaches to the influence of Mme. de La Sablière on his own survival and intellectual development is also evident from the fact that he devotes a whole fable of one hundred and thirty-four lines in the last book of Fables to this woman. The episode of Le Corbeau, la Gazelle, la Tortue et le Rat (XII, 15) is virtually an allegorical dramatization of Mme. de La Sablière's domestic life and her adventure with the marquis de La Fare. Although this particular fable, clearly dedicated to her, appears in the twelfth book of fables, it was, in fact, composed much earlier than 1693, that is, between 1679 and 1684, for it was published for the first time in the Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine which appeared in 1685. It can thus be seen that the date of its publication coincides with the period of the love crisis between Mme. de La Sablière and le marquis de La Fare. It has therefore been thought proper to treat this fable as part of La Fontaine's experiences in the house of this benevolent lady. In the fable, "la Gazelle" would represent Mme. de La Sablière herself, the centre of the "douce société", which symbolizes the circle around her, particularly those people living amicably in her house (ll. 54-57). The "Chien" that trails the scent of the "Gazelle" would be le marquis de La Fare, in love with the lady of the house (ll. 63-65). He also represents the hunter seen at the background of the story. In the same allegorical manner, the "Corbeau" refers to some private informant to Mme. de La Sablière, who reports to her on La Fare's flirting tendencies and his acts of infidelity towards "la Gazelle" (ll. 78 - 87). The "Rat" is used to personify a friend or an admirer who persuades the ill-used lady in spite of herself to sever relations with the unfaithful lover (ll. 101 - 102). As for the "Tortue", slow, apologetic of his short legs (ll. 98 - 100), and capable only of advice and suggestions (ll. 70 - 77, 127), this is a fitting representation of La Fontaine himself who was constantly plagued about this time by his recurrent rheumatism. The crowning episode of this ingenious reflection upon a company among whom our poet has spent the better part of twenty years is his assurance to Mme. de La Sablière of preserving her good name and exemplary conduct in the whole affair as long as his literary works endure.

Je vous gardais un temple dans mes vers:  
 Il n'eut fini qu'avecque l'univers,  
 Déjà ma main en fondait la durée  
 Sur ce bel art qu'ont les Dieux inventé,  
 Et sur le nom de la divinité  
 Que dans ce temple on aurait adorée.  
 Sur le portail j'aurais ces mots écrits: 149  
 PALAIS SACRE DE LA DEESSE IRIS....

This thus fulfils the promise which the fabulist made about Mme. de La Sablière in the Epître à M. de Harlay (1685).

Mme. de La Sablière's intellectual circle compelled him to re-educate himself, to supplant the romantic tendencies he had cultivated at Vaux with increased interest in philosophy and the natural sciences. This was the challenge of the new circle, and, in responding to this challenge, the poet was obliged to reconsider the elements of knowledge in the light of the relationship between art and thought. By the time he had been through this process of re-education, which took the better part of twenty years, he was already an adept, a model in the technique of combining clarity of thought with artistic beauty. In this sense, his association with Mme. de La Sablière was, in a way, a form of self-realization. Before he came under her influence, he had been actively productive mainly in the sphere of the imaginative faculties and in the criticism of literary forms and regulations. By the time he had spent the first six years in her salon, and embarked upon writing the second collection of fables, his poetic skill was not only perfected but he himself had become more alive to the central truth of the social destination of all art and all knowledge. He had previously had a coherent set of opinions and ideas which he expressed in poetic medium, as has already been noted. Now, these ideas have come in contact with other ideas and opinions expressed in another medium, and were to become modified, but not significantly distorted. Thus, many of La Fontaine's ideas in the later collections of fables are mainly, as Antoine Adam has rightly pointed out, those of Mme. de La Sablière's circle.

---

149. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 169, Fables, XII, 15, ll. 1 - 8.

Il est assez vain de chercher dans tel ou tel ouvrage contemporain l'origine de ces idées. La philosophie de La Fontaine....est celle de la société qu'il fréquente, celle des amis de Mme. de La Sablière, celle de Bernier, de Menjot, de La Fare.<sup>150</sup>

The degree of mental stimulation which the poet received in this challenging and intellectually diversified circle is measurable only in terms of the breadth and richness of the fables of 1678 and 1693, which firmly and indisputably established his intellectual maturity.

---

150. Adam, A., Op. Cit., p.60.

CHAPTER V

INTELLECTUAL MATURITY (1678 - 1684)

1. The Second Collection of Fables

The La Fontaine that we are dealing with at this stage is no longer the simple, timid composer of occasional odes, sonnets, madrigals and epistles for their own sake. We are now confronting an intellectual, a social psychologist and moral philosopher who is an adept in analysing various aspects of human nature. The second collection of fables, published in 1678 - 79, was, consequently, to become not only a model of artistic excellence, but a synthesis of universal wisdom, deserving the personal recognition of Louis XIV. The new work is, in the words of Pierre Clarac, "d'un air et d'un tour bien différent." The critic is quoting the poet himself, who used this expression in his "Préface". But Clarac repeats the poet in an attempt to explain the reason for this difference in "air" and in "tour" between the first and the second collection of fables. He attributes it to the maturity of La Fontaine under the influence of the circle of Mme. de La Sablière:

Chez Marguerite de La Sablière l'horizon de sa pensée s'est élargi... Les fables d'il y a dix ans semblent légères auprès de ces méditations, lourdes d'expérience, d'un accent tout personnel, et dont la gaieté ne dissimule qu'au lecteur distrait l'amertume ou la mélancolie.<sup>1</sup>

This maturity has overcome the emotional outbursts of youth and the timidity of the non-expert, which coloured the earlier works, and has established in the mind of the poet a hierarchy of values, based on a clear awareness of limitations, as reflected in the new fables. The latter thus came as a climax of his literary career, for the sum total of his talents met in this particular work. As Sainte-Beuve aptly puts it,

C'est dans le second Recueil, dans celui de 1678, que La Fontaine paraît avoir atteint à toute la plénitude et la variété de son génie sous la forme à la fois la plus animée, la plus légère et la plus sévère.<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. Clarac, P., *Littérature française*, Collection dirigée par Claude Pichois, Paris, 1969, t.II, p.198.
2. Sainte-Beuve, *Les Grands Ecrivains français XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, (Garnier), 1927, t.I, p.196.

Having defined his techniques and the poetics of the genre in the earlier prefaces, prologues and epilogues, the poet now needed no more than a brief "Avertissement" to draw attention to the major changes in "l'air" and "le tour", made in the new work.

J'ai jugé à propos de donner à la plupart de celles-ci un air et un tour un peu différent de celui que j'ai donné aux premières, tant à cause de la différence des sujets, que pour remplir de plus de variété mon ouvrage.<sup>3</sup>

The key words in this foreword are "différence" and "variété", both of which suggest the vast extent of the new universe covered by the fables of 1678.

The first index of progress from the previous to the present collection of fables is the difference between the new and the old fables in the average number of lines devoted to each theme. Whereas in the earlier fables the average length of 124 fables is 30 lines, this average rises to 40 lines for each of 87 fables of the present collection, many of which are no longer fables as such but serious philosophical discourses. As Clarac observes, these fables are now mature reflections on various aspects of life :

Ainsi bien des fables de notre recueil ne sont-elles plus de fables : "Les deux Pigeons" est une élégie; "Tircis et Amarante", une pastorale; "Le mal marié", une satire contre les femmes d'un emportement rabelaisien; "La Fille", un conte narquois et attendri; "Le Berger et le Roi", un conte édifiant; "Les Souhaits", un conte de fées; "Le Lion", un essai politique; "La Souris et le Chat-huant", une observation de naturaliste; "Le Songe d'un habitant du Mogol", une méditation poétique; "Le Paysan du Danube", un tableau d'histoire.<sup>4</sup>

Fables of this nature are very difficult to compose because of their dimensions, the presence of foreign elements and the demand they make on the intellect. That La Fontaine successfully exploited the possibilities of the genre to the fullest in this manner without unduly altering its basic nature, is a sure sign of the maturity of his genius. Indeed, René Kohn thinks that at this stage the poet has become "un sage à l'éloquence diverse".

---

3. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p. 117, *Fables*, VII - XI, (Avertissement).

4. Clarac, P., *La Fontaine*, Paris, (Hatier), 1959, p. 120.

La Fontaine n'est plus seulement écrivain, auteur de contes ou fabuliste; il est conteur, au sens oriental du mot: un sage à l'éloquence diverse, qui tient sous le charme de mille récits successifs un auditoire captivé.<sup>5</sup>

The new fables are also more lavishly enriched, both artistically and intellectually, than the previous ones. For this greater enrichment, La Fontaine acknowledges his indebtedness mainly to the Oriental fabulist, Pilpai.

Seulement je dirai par reconnaissance que j'en dois la plus grande partie à Pilpay, sage Indien.... Quelques autres m'ont fourni des sujets assez heureux.<sup>6</sup>

The poet is referring here to the volume of fables entitled Le Livre des lumières, ou La Conduite des roys, composed by the Indian sage, Pilpai, and translated into French in 1644 by David Sahid d'Ispahan. But this acknowledgement contains an element of exaggeration. In fact only 16 out of the 87 fables of this collection were inspired by Pilpai; forty-three were borrowed from Æsop, Phædrus and their imitators, five from the French story-tellers of the Renaissance, and four from the works of Poussines.<sup>7</sup>

However, the dominant tone of the new work is one of universality; the least detail now leads the poet to intellectual digressions; he has acquired a new gravity, a greater air of independence and meditative ease. His indebtedness to Oriental sources should be viewed in the light of these new dimensions rather than from the actual number of fables borrowed from Pilpai. Thus, following the pattern of Oriental stories, morality is now subordinated to penetrating psychological observations on the human condition. With a greater sense of independence, born of professional confidence, La Fontaine's judgement became more subjective and diversified, thus enabling him to reflect upon the burning social, political and philosophical questions of the day. Usually an adept at sensing the overall pulse of his milieu, he intensified his effort to inject his findings in a more personal manner into his poetry, and to reaffirm, modify or entirely repudiate, in the light of new contacts and experiences, the ideas he

---

5. Kohn, R., *Le Goût de La Fontaine*, Paris, 1962, p. 185.

6. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p. 117.

7. Bornecque, P., *Op. Cit.*, p. 71.

held in his earlier works. Everything is now encompassed by limits, but these limits are by no means restrictive. They are merely more realistic, subjected to deeper thought and expressed more philosophically or in a more compelling manner. We shall, in this chapter, attempt to examine the manifestation of these traits of maturity in the second collection of fables, with an eye on the influences which combined with the impact of Mme. de La Sablière's salon to bring about this maturity.

With regard to his political thinking, the source of inspiration has shifted. The heat has cooled off the Fouquet affair. New situations have developed, giving rise to fresh intellectual stimulation and the evolution of new ideas and attitudes in the poet. Basically, he is still monarchist, at least from the evidence of his work, but his monarchical thinking at this time is sustained by a different force, namely, the national emergency. The tense military and diplomatic situation in Europe of 1677 - 1680 demanded fidelity and support for the French monarchy from every loyal French citizen. The Franco-Dutch war was raging at a great cost in men and material to France. In 1678, just as La Fontaine was busy with the second collection of fables, a dynastic alliance was about to be concluded between the King of England, Charles II, and the House of Orange, for in October of the same year, the Prince of Orange, who was the soul of the struggle against France, married the niece to the King of England and heiress apparent to the British throne. The entire French diplomacy at this time was therefore directed towards preventing England from joining the enemies of France. As a member of the intellectual élite, La Fontaine did not remain indifferent to the national challenge. Accordingly, the political and diplomatic situation inspired him with a fable. In Le Pouvoir des Fables, dedicated to his good friend, the French Ambassador in London, M. de Barillon d'Amoncourt, the poet appealed to the diplomat, charging him to forestall the effort to isolate France :

Empêchez qu'on ne nous mette  
Toute l'Europe sur les bras.<sup>8</sup>

---

8. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.128, Fables, VIII, 4, ll. 10 - 11.

This is the main theme of the fable; the rest of it is concerned with warning the French at home not to imitate the frivolity of the ancient Athenians and their care-free attitude in public affairs, but to take stock of the gravity of the danger hovering over the nation.<sup>9</sup> In the fable of Le Lion, "Sultan Léopard" represents King Charles II of England; the generous lion, a reliable friend but formidable enemy, symbolizes Louis XIV; while the initial weaknesses of the lion alludes to the troubles of the "Fronde" during the minority of Louis XIV.<sup>10</sup>

The framework of this fable was adapted from Æsop, but the political argument which the poet infused into it was built up from inspiration drawn from a collection of stories entitled Recueil de quelques pièces nouvelles et galantes, published in Cologne in 1667 and reprinted in 1677. The second part of this volume contains an allegory in which the shrewd and vigilant Prime Minister (the Fox), advises his royal master (the Lion) on how best to reconquer the latter's authority usurped by men :

Il faut chasser de l'étendue des terres, où vous voudrez établir votre domination, tous ceux qui peuvent prétendre à la qualité de rois ou disputer de rang et de naissance avec vous; ou plutôt il faudra tâcher à les prendre, après quoi vous en égorgerez la plupart, et vous en réserverez quelques-uns que vous tiendrez dans votre sérail; ceux-ci serviront seulement pour être tirés l'un après l'autre et monter sur le trône si le destin ne vous donne point de lignée....<sup>11</sup>

In adapting this episode, La Fontaine carefully left out the sections of it which had little or no bearing with the circumstances or the ideas he wished to communicate, namely, that it would not be in the best interest of England to oppose French preponderance. Participation in a European coalition against France would therefore be an error of judgement on the part of England because the latter's own long term interests demanded that she remain an ally of Louis XIV, even at the cost of some temporary sacrifice :

Proposez-vous d'avoir le Lion pour ami,  
Si vous voulez le laisser craître.<sup>12</sup>

9. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 128, Fables, VIII, 4, ll. 34 - 70.

10. Ibid., pp. 156-157, XI, 1, ll. 1 - 51.

11. Calvet, Pierre, Recueil de quelques pièces nouvelles et galantes, Cologne, 1667, 2ème partie, pp. 128 - 154.

12. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.157, XI, 1, ll. 52 - 53.



The poet's political concern here and his support for the national symbol are understandable. His attitude is in line with what any true nationalist would expect of a mature intellectual who has learnt to put the nation before private interests. In such a delicate situation, when the French nation was fighting her war of survival, the monarchy needed all the help, support and co-operation it could muster from all loyal subjects, irrespective of the personal faults of the figure who was on the throne. Thus La Fontaine not only kept his position on the side of authority but, drawing inspiration from the writings of Hippocrates, he went further to question the wisdom of the maxim that the voice of the people is the voice of God :

Le peuple est juge récusable.  
En quel sens est donc véritable  
Ce que j'ai lu en certain lieu,  
Que sa voix est la voix de Dieu?<sup>13</sup>

Hippocrates, the philosopher-physician, believed to be "le Père de la Médecine", recorded his crucial meeting with the Greek sage, Democritus, who was equally regarded as "le corps de la sagesse". The latter was pronounced mad by the Senate of the people who sent a frantic call to Hippocrates to come and cure him :

Le plus grand péril menace en ce moment notre  
cité, Hippocrate, en menaçant un de nos citoyens,  
en qui, pour le présent et pour l'avenir, la ville  
voyait une gloire perpétuelle.... Tant il est devenu  
malade par la grande sagesse qu'il possède....  
qu'il y a crainte non petite que, si Démocrite perd  
la raison, la ville des Abdéritains ne soit véritable-  
ment abandonnée. En effet, oublieux de tout et  
d'abord de lui-même, il demeure éveillé de nuit  
comme de jour, riant de chaque chose grande et  
petite, et pensant que la vie entière n'est rien....  
Il dit que l'air est plein de simulacres; il écoute  
les voix des oiseaux, et maintes fois se levant de  
nuit, seul il a l'air de chanter doucement des chants;  
d'autres fois, il raconte qu'il voyage dans l'espace  
infini, et qu'il y a d'innombrables Démocrites sem-  
blables à lui... Viens donc promptement nous sauver...<sup>14</sup>

---

13. La Fontaine, p.138, Op. Cit., p.138, Fables, VIII, 26, ll. 46-49.

14. Hippocrate, Œuvres complètes, Traduction de Littré parue pour la première fois chez Baillièrre et Fils de 1839 à 1861, Paris, t. iv, pp. 297 - 298. (4 vols.).

Although Democritus merely laughed at the people's belief, and insisted that he was quite normal, popular opinion could not be changed. It turned out from his discussions and subsequent correspondence with his would-be doctor that the people were wrong and Democritus right, thus proving the falsity of mob judgement.

.....Car il viole les lois de la verité....

Car les hommes n'aperçoivent pas le droit  
chemin de la vertu, chemin libre, uni, où l'on  
ne choppe pas, et pourtant où nul ne veut s'engager;  
au lieu de cela, ils se jettent dans la voie rude et  
tortueuse, marchant péniblement, glissant, trébuchant,  
la plupart même tombant, haletant comme s'ils  
étaient poursuivis, disputant, en avant, en arrière....<sup>15</sup>

Several French translations of this episode existed in France in the seventeenth century. Of special relevance are the translations by the physician, Bompert, entitled Conférences d'Hippocrate et de Démocrite, traduites du grec en français avec un commentaire, published in 1632, and another version by Chartier which appeared in 1638. It is this latter that La Fontaine is most likely to have consulted, for apart from being the latest available at the time, it has the merit of being more faithful to the original Greek text than the version published by Bompert. It is equally certain that he is familiar with the theories of Democritus himself, for certain lines of his fable, Démocrite et les Abdéritains, which allude to the infinity of the number of atoms, are a poetic attempt to summarize Democritus' atomic theory. We shall come back to this later. Although La Fontaine quotes from this source, his main interest in this fable is not the atomic theory of Democritus. The poet is more concerned with using this detail to build up his argument to the effect that the majority can often be wrong and the minority right. His aim here is mainly political, namely, to prove from the analogy of Democritus that government by the people would be a rabble government. France, in the opinion of the poet, could ill afford such a government, particularly at a time of national emergency. She should therefore stand firmly by her King. Following this stand, the role of the monarchy as the mainspring of national survival, which was demonstrated in the fables of 1668, is now re-emphasized in the episode of La Tête et la Queue du Serpent. The

---

15. Hippocrate, Op.Cit., pp. 308 - 309.

monarch as the Head of State has a directing role; his position is unassailable; and all should co-operate with him in the overall interest of the nation, for any deviation from this attitude would be a fatal error which was bound to spell disaster for the nation.

Malheureux les Etats tombés dans son erreur!<sup>16</sup>

Given this context, the fable of Le Rat qui s'est retiré du monde was an indictment of the action of the secular clergy, who in 1675, refused to contribute towards the war effort as Louis XIV was prosecuting the Franco-Dutch war.<sup>17</sup>

La Fontaine's political orientation at this stage must not be seen to mean a blind support for war or naked aggression. We have already noted that temperamentally, he was a man of peace. Indeed, the Ode pour la Paix was inspired by the peace of Nymegue. The poet celebrates this event in a tone which expresses the hope that after war and destruction, favourable conditions would now be created for permanent peace, for the arts and learning to flourish undisrupted, as was the case in England, with which he compares his own country :

....Peuple heureux! quand pourront les Français  
Se donner, comme vous, entiers à ces emplois....?  
O peuple trop heureux! quand la paix viendra-t-elle  
Nous rendre, comme vous, tout entiers aux beaux-arts?<sup>18</sup>

As a pacifist, a humanist and a mature intellectual, he is opposed to violent conquests and tyranny. Following this disposition, it would not be wrong to see in the fable of Le Paysan du Danube a discreet condemnation of the policy of conquest and destructive wars which were among the distinguishing features of the reign of Louis XIV. This particular fable is one of the immortal testimonies of La Fontaine's political sagacity, his unqualified condemnation of tyranny and social injustice. Nothing proves this more clearly than the mature and compelling manner in which he makes the peasant delegate of the Danube lands draw up a catalogue of the oppressed people's grievances against the Roman army of occupation.

---

16. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.126, Fables, VII, 17, l. 37.

17. Ibid., p. 119, VII, 3.

18. Ibid., p.126, VII, 18, ll. 54 - 55, 71 - 72.

Témoin nous que punit la romaine avarice:  
 Rome est, par nos forfaits, plus que par ses exploits,  
 L'instrument de notre supplice.  
 Craignez, Romains, craignez que le Ciel quelque jour  
 Ne transporte chez vous les pleurs et la misère;  
 Et mettant en nos mains, par un juste retour,  
 Les armes dont se sert sa vengeance sévère,  
 Il ne vous fasse en sa colère,  
 Nos esclaves à votre tour.  
 Et pourquoi sommes-nous les vôtres? Qu'on me die  
 En quoi vous valez mieux que cent peuples divers.  
 Quel droit vous a rendu maîtres de l'univers?  
 Pourquoi venir troubler une innocente vie?<sup>19</sup>

This vehement protest is followed up immediately with twenty-nine compelling lines in which the poet demonstrates his skill in oratory, his sound knowledge of human rights and his understanding of political polemics. In the guise of speaking for the inhabitants of the German lands, he attacks contemporary political victimization and social anomalies: the system whereby the rich and powerful govern the laws and the laws grind the poor, the inefficiency and scandalous slowness of the legal machinery, the merciless exploitation of the toiling peasants by their rich and inconsiderate overlords, the prevalence of indolence, avarice and all forms of corruption among the ruling classes and their scandalous influences on the masses of the people. In conclusion, the distinguished demagogue demonstrates his political courage and conviction by defying the authorities, who have the power of life and death in their hands, to crucify him for speaking out, if they wish.

....Ce discours, un peu fort,  
 Doit commencer à vous déplaire.  
 Je finis. Punissez de mort  
 Une plainte un peu trop sincère.<sup>20</sup>

Judging from the skill with which La Fontaine uses the episode of Le Paysan du Danube as a political weapon, it has become quite clear that the poet has now grown to be, in the words of A. C. Walckenaer, a practised orator

qui, avec l'éloquence d'un Démosthène, fait  
 tonner contre la tyrannie le paysan du Danube....<sup>21</sup>

The political ideas which La Fontaine puts across in this fable place him intellectually one hundred years ahead of his own century. It is

19. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.160, XI, 7, ll. 30 - 42.

20. Ibid., ll. 55 - 84.

21. Walckenaer, A.C., Op.Cit., p. 150.

now evident that, left to him<sup>self</sup> alone, he would, in all political matters, either of domestic or foreign policy, prefer a diplomatic approach to violent and brutal conquest. Diplomacy is understood by him here to mean that if the King must avoid military confrontation and rule in peace, he has to be fair to the inhabitants of the conquered lands. He must also try as much as possible to keep his potential enemies perpetually divided :

Tenez toujours divisés les méchants:  
La sûreté du reste de la terre  
Dépend de là. Semez entre eux la guerre,  
Ou vous n'aurez avec eux nulle paix.<sup>22</sup>

But the policy of divide and rule, while being an effective instrument of foreign policy, is self-defeating when used at home. Accordingly, the poet denounces in equally strong terms the petty rivalry and mutual destruction among the aristocrats domesticated at the royal court, and casts aspersions on their career of hypocrisy, deceit and rancour:

Messieurs les courtisans, cessez de vous détruire;  
Faites, si vous pouvez, votre cour sans vous nuire.  
Le mal se rend chez vous au quadruple du bien.  
Les daubeurs ont leur tour d'une ou d'autre manière:  
Vous êtes dans une carrière  
Où l'on ne se pardonne rien.<sup>23</sup>

It is now easy to infer from his opinion of the nobles why he continues to prefer the King's central rule to that of the feudal lords. The latter wallowed in vindictiveness and exploitation of the poor. Indeed the poet has now found, in an episode which we can trace back only to Æsop, namely, Le Bassa et le Marchand, a means of expressing overtly what he formerly suggested by innuendoes in the fables of 1668:

Ceci montre aux provinces  
Que, tout compté, mieux vaut, en bonne foi,  
S'abandonner à quelque puissant roi,  
Que s'appuyer de plusieurs petits princes.<sup>24</sup>

Our fabulist has thus become a political theorist and a cautious diplomat whose main objective is peace and "détente". At this stage he is neither just a poet nor the simple story-teller whom we met many years ago, struggling to find his feet on the slippery ground of literary

22. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.121, VII, 8, ll. 41 - 44.

23. Ibid., p.128, VIII, 3, ll. 35 - 40.

24. Ibid., p.135, VIII, 18, ll. 54 - 57.

adventure. He has succeeded in combining indisputable literary success with the merit of being a politically conscientious intellectual whose moral reflections, vigilance and maturity are manifest in the scintillating wit and erudition of his fables.

This stage of La Fontaine's development also witnesses a broadening of his thinking on egoism to embrace another important manifestation of this passion, namely, personal pride or self-esteem. But his demonstration of the latter is only a way of stressing his previous views on this subject. This time, it is in the episode of Le Lion, le Singe, et les deux Anes that he finds an interesting allegory with which to re-emphasize his earlier contention that egoism is the law of nature, a law from which no sensitive creature is exempt.

....Car c'est le père,  
 C'est l'auteur de tous les défauts  
 Que l'on remarque aux animaux  
 Vouloir que de tout point ce sentiment vous quitte,  
 Ce n'est pas chose si petite  
 Qu'on en vienne à bout en un jour:  
 C'est beaucoup de pouvoir modérer cet amour. 25

The idea of two asses, mutually flattering each other, which the poet uses as an illustration of self-esteem in this fable, suggests reminiscences of Clément Marot, one of La Fontaine's Renaissance models. The episode of "Deux vieulx asnes qui s'entregratent" and "s'entreflatent" is contained in one of Marot's satirical poems entitled L'Epître de Frippelippes, and composed in 1537 :

L'un est ung vieulx resveur Normand....,  
 L'autre ung Huet de sotte grâce....  
 Ce Huet et Sagon se jouent;  
 Par escript l'un l'autre se louent,  
 Et semblent, tant ilz s'entreflatent 26  
 Deux vieulx Asnes qui s'entregratent.

The literary atmosphere prior to the publication of the fables of 1678 was well suited to evoke reminiscences of Marot's satire, for in October, 1670, Molière published Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme. The third scene of the second act of this comedy is devoted to the illustration of the manifestation of egoism in people of varying walks of

25. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.158, XI, 5, ll. 10 - 16.

26. Marot, C., Œuvres satiriques, édition critique par C. A. Mayer, London, (Athlone Press), 1962, p. 97.

life. Thus in an argument between "Maître de Philosophie", "Maître de Musique", "Maître à Danser" and "Maître d'Armes", each personnage endeavours to blow his own trumpet in an effort to establish that his own profession is the best in the world. "Maître d'Armes" declares :

Et moi, je leur soutiens à tous deux que la science  
de tirer des armes est la plus belle et la plus  
nécessaire de toutes les sciences.

To this, the philosopher retorts :

Et que sera donc la philosophie? Je vous trouve  
tous trois bien impertinents de parler devant moi  
avec cette arrogance, et de donner impudemment  
le nom de science à des choses que l'on ne doit pas  
même honorer du nom d'art, et qui ne peuvent être  
comprises que sous le nom de métier misérable de  
gladiateur, de chanteur et de baladin!<sup>27</sup>

Two years later, in 1672, Les Femmes savantes presented an identical scene in which some of the characters take turns in exhibiting their ego.<sup>28</sup>

La Fontaine watched both comedies which were performed at the Palais-Royal on the 23rd of November, 1670, and the 11th of March, 1672. Indeed the following lines of his fable :

Toute profession s'estime dans son cœur,  
Traite les autres d'ignorantes,  
Les qualifie impertinentes....<sup>29</sup>

are a direct reference to the argument between the members of the various professions in Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme. Our poet not only repeats his friend's central idea in the comedy, but retains the very adjective, "impertinents", which he used. In the same way, the egoistic contest between Trissotin and his rival in Les Femmes savantes is recalled in these lines :

Deux Anes qui, prenant tour à tour l'encensoir,  
Se louoient tour à tour, comme c'est la manière....<sup>30</sup>

27. Molière, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, Acte II, scène 3.

28. Les Femmes savantes, Acte III, scène 2.

29. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.158, XI, 5, ll. 24 - 26.

30. Ibid., ll. 36 - 37.

About this time too, the Jansenist scholar and theologian, Pierre Nicole, published his Essais de Morale (1671) which treated the related passions of vanity, pride and egoism. He distinguishes between innocent and corrupt self-love, and denounces the latter as being exclusive, cruel and the father of Pride, a phrase which La Fontaine re-echoes in his fable when he describes corrupt amour-propre as "le père...de tous les défauts" (XI, 5, 1.10). Pride, declares Nicole, is the monster which all men harbour in their breasts. But every man hates the same feeling in another because it opposes and limits his own. The result of this inner conflict is bitter rivalries in which men endeavour to destroy each other.<sup>31</sup>

The discussion of egoism was carried a step further by Malebranche in his De la recherche de la vérité, published in 1675. His approach is strikingly modern. He subdivides egoism into love of greatness and love of pleasure, thus seeing the passion as a great stimulant to man in his aspiration after greatness and independence. Men, he argues, desire to have necessary being. They want, in a sense, to be like Gods, for it is only God who truly has being and who exists necessarily, since all that is dependent exists only by the will of him on whom it depends. Men therefore wish for the necessity of their being and for the power and independence that make them safe and esteemed by others.

L'amour-propre se peut diviser en deux espèces, scavoir en l'amour de la grandeur, et en l'amour du plaisir; ou bien en l'amour de son être et de la perfection de son être, et en l'amour de son bien-être ou de la félicité. Par l'amour de la grandeur nous affectons la puissance, l'élévation, l'indépendance, et que notre être subsiste par lui-même. Nous désirons en quelque manière d'avoir l'être nécessaire: nous voulons en un sens être comme des dieux. Car il n'y a que Dieu qui ait proprement l'être, et qui existe nécessairement, puisque tout ce qui est dépendant n'existe que par la volonté de celui dont il dépend. Les hommes donc souhaitant la nécessité de leur être, souhaitent aussi la puissance et l'indépendance qui les mettent à couvert de la puissance des autres.<sup>32</sup>

---

31. Nicole, P., Essais de morale, Paris, . . . (édition de 1713),

pp. 111 - 160.  
32. Malebranche, De la recherche de la vérité, Paris, 1675, p.401.



An eclectic like La Fontaine could not have been ignorant of the new trend of thought. He must have been aware of the new dimensions which these recent works added to the idea which La Rochefoucauld expressed briefly in his Maximes. Naturally, the new works provided the poet with the metaphysical and psychological substructure which he uses in enlarging and reinforcing the position he held on egoism in the fables of 1668. Thus in the fable of Le Lion, le Singe et les deux Anes, quoted earlier on, he endeavours to demonstrate that the contemplation of one's own weakness and imperfection yields only sorrow and an inferiority complex, and that it is in man's nature to aspire to remove these feelings either by diminishing the value of others or by giving as great a lustre as possible to his own. This aspiration is entirely in accordance with reason. The latter, after all, demands that a person should seek what leads to his true profit and perfection. And part of this is the craving for fame and the praise of others. As everyone is desirous to conserve the esteem of others, one person will readily destroy that of another, and, as the object of contention is what is commonly thought to be the highest good, a great desire arises on the part of everyone to keep down his fellows by every possible means. And whoever comes off conqueror boasts more because he has exalted himself than because he has injured another person. In this sense, self-esteem is a defensive weapon in the hands of man.

Par là, votre personne auguste  
N'admettra jamais rien en soi  
De ridicule ni d'injuste.<sup>33</sup>

In the last Book of fables, the poet would try to illustrate what usually follows when this legitimate human passion is abused or carried to excess. Until then, his approach to egoism remains positive and forward-looking.

Meanwhile, the metaphysical doubt or intellectual scepticism which he manifested in the first collection of fables ten years earlier, has now found a new source of inspiration too, for about this time (1674 - 1678), Bernier who was now La Fontaine's companion in Mme.

---

33. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.158, XI, 5, ll. 13 - 19.

de La Sablière's house, was actively involved in rehabilitating the philosophy of Pierre Gassendi. The eight-volume Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi, which he published between 1674 and 1678, is unsparing in its condemnation of intellectual presumption, judicial astrology and astral predictions, particularly the practice of the horoscope.

Le bonheur ou le malheur de la vie de chaque homme dépend de cent rencontres qui n'ont aucun rapport avec sa manière de naître.<sup>34</sup>

Besides, argues the philosopher, the so-called influence of the stars on human conduct and destiny, if it exists at all, should have general rather than particular effects, since stars shine upon every man.

Quelle que soit cette action des astres, elle est générale, et elle n'est capable de produire aucun effet particulier qu'en tant qu'elle se joint à l'action de quelque cause singulière.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, Gassendi maintains that the infinite distance separating the stars from man make the idea of any direct contact or influence improbable.

Comment ont-ils (les astrologues) donc pu voir et considérer ce que faisait Saturne lorsqu'il était audelà du Soleil, et qu'ainsi il était couvert du corps du Soleil? Comment se sont-ils aperçus que les rayons de sa vertu passent au travers de la masse du Soleil pour pouvoir parvenir à la Terre?<sup>36</sup>

In direct contact with Gassendism, La Fontaine's intellectual scepticism received fresh stimulation, for, drawing inspiration from the Gassendists, gathered around Mme. de La Sablière, he now reaffirmed his rejection of the theory of astral influences on human conduct and destiny. Each star, comet or any other heavenly body, he argues, is no more than "un corps sans connaissance", whose influence should be the same on all men. The poet here challenges the "charlatans et faiseurs d'Horoscope" to explain why one of two men, born under the same star, becomes a King and the other a shepherd. Does this disparity in fortune not prove that man's condition of being and destiny depend more on factors of time, milieu and circumstances than on the so-called influences of the stars, imagined

---

34. Bernier, F., Op.Cit., t.IV, p. 462.

35. Ibid., p.472.

36. Ibid., p.475.

by the superstitious charlatans? Could the immutable laws of nature be so slavishly tied to the movement of the stars?

Je ne crois point que la nature  
 Se soit lié les mains et nous les lie encor  
 Jusqu'au point de marquer dans les cieux notre sort:  
 Il dépend d'une conjoncture  
 De lieux, de personnes, de temps,  
 Non des conjonctions de tous ces charlatans.  
 Ce berger et ce roi sont sous même planète;  
 L'un d'eux porte le sceptre, et l'autre la houlette:  
 Jupiter le voulait ainsi.  
 Que'est-ce que Jupiter? un corps sans connaissance.  
 D'où vient donc que son influence  
 Agit différemment sur ces deux hommes-ci?<sup>37</sup>

Here, the inspiration drawn from Gassendi is re-inforced by reminiscences of the argument advanced by Saint Augustine in The City of God. The latter challenges the presumptuous metaphysicians and astrologers to show how a set of twins, born at the same time and under the same star, come to have different destinies :

Comment se fait-il qu'ils n'aient jamais pu expliquer pourquoi dans la vie de deux jumeaux, dans leurs actes, leur destinée, leur profession, leur métier, leurs honneurs, dans toutes les circonstances de la vie et dans leur mort même, on trouve presque toujours une telle diversité qu'à ce point de vue beaucoup d'étrangers ont plus de rapports avec eux qu'ils n'en ont eux-mêmes l'un avec l'autre, encore qu'un intervalle infime ait séparé leurs naissances, et que, lors de leur conception, ils aient été engendrés au même moment par un acte unique?<sup>38</sup>

It is hardly surprising that La Fontaine should quote Saint Augustine's example. The poet's intimate knowledge of the City of God, following his collaboration with Louis Giry in translating the work into French, has been discussed earlier in this study. It is possible that both he and Gassendi drew inspiration from Saint Augustine as a common source.

Parallel to Gassendi's reference to the impossibility of penetrating the astral universe by human eyes is La Fontaine's argument that the infinite distance between the stars and the earth renders claims to an intimate knowledge of their nature and influence suspect:

---

37. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p.134, VIII, 16, ll. 59-70.

38. Saint Augustine, *Op. Cit.*, t.I, p.431.

Puis comment pénétrer jusques à notre monde?  
 Comment percer des airs la campagne profonde?  
 Percer Mars, le Soleil, et des vides sans fin?  
 Un atome la peut détourner en chemin:  
 Où l'iront retrouver les faiseurs d'horoscope? <sup>39</sup>

Assuming, continues the poet, that the immensity of the distance separating the astral universe from our planet permitted direct contact, a more important and complex question would still need to be answered by those who claim to read human destiny from the stars. How does one establish any correspondence between the immeasurable speed of the stars and that of the human passions which are the real influences on man's actions? The great error involved in the irresponsible speculation of the charlatans is seen from the fact that they predict something that never actually happens and omit what really comes to pass. If their art were true, argues La Fontaine, they should at least have been able to foresee the general unrest and devastating wars that set the nation states of contemporary Europe at each other's throats.

L'état où nous voyons l'Europe  
 Mérite que du moins quelqu'un d'eux l'ait prévu:  
 Que ne l'a-t-il donc dît? Mais nul d'eux ne l'a su.  
 L'immense éloignement, le point, et sa vitesse,  
 Celle aussi de nos passions,  
 Permettent-ils à leur faiblesse  
 De suivre pas à pas toutes nos actions?  
 Notre sort en dépend: sa course entre-suivie  
 Ne va, non plus que nous, jamais d'un même pas.... <sup>40</sup>

Even when the speculators claim to have foreseen future events, their gloomy predictions do no more than plunge innocent men and women into tragic actions; they are precipitated into self-destructive actions which do nothing to alter the course of destiny. This point is amply demonstrated in the case of the two characters in L'Horoscope, both of whom meet their sudden death in the very precautions taken to ensure their safety:

On rencontre sa destinée  
 Souvent par des chemin qu'on prend pour l'éviter....  
 ....Et cette chère tête,  
 Pour qui l'art d'Esculape en vain fit ce qu'il put,  
 Dut sa perte à ces soins qu'on prit pour son salut.  
 Même précaution nuisit au poète Eschyle. <sup>41</sup>

39. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 134, VIII, 16, ll. 71-75. See also Bernier, Op. Cit., t. IV, p. 475.

40. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 134, VIII, 16, ll. 76 - 84.

41. Ibid., ll. 1 - 2, 41 - 44.

It follows from this that the so-called art of forestalling the irrevocable decree of destiny through astral predictions is dangerous and futile :

De ces exemples il résulte  
 Que cet art, s'il est vrai, fait tomber dans les maux  
 Que craint celui qui le consulte;  
 Mais je l'en justifie, et maintiens qu'il est faux....,  
 Ce Fils par trop chéri, ni le bonhomme Eschyle,  
 N'y font rien : tout aveugle et menteur qu'est cet art,  
 Il peut frapper au but une fois entre mille;  
 Ce sont des effets du hasard.<sup>42</sup>

Although La Fontaine picked up the framework of this story from Æsop's fables, and the intellectual argument from Saint Augustine and Pierre Gassendi, he embellishes it with materials drawn from the works of the famous historian, Herodotus. The latter narrates in the first Book of his Histoires the curious episode of King Crœsus, who is told in a dream that his beloved son, and heir to the throne of Lydia, named Atys, would be killed by an iron spear. Preoccupied with this warning, the King removes all the javelins, spears and other similar instruments from his son's neighbourhood, and takes all the necessary precautions to forestall the materialization of the omen. But in spite of these measures, his son is killed by a spear mistakenly thrown by the very guard of honour, Adrastus, who is protecting the prince.<sup>43</sup>

Our poet found in this Greek story an appropriate illustration of his contention that it is not only dangerous but presumptuous to try to escape the inevitable decree of destiny by resorting to the casting of horoscopes, to chiromancy and to other superstitious practices.

His final position with regard to these practices is clearly stated in Le Cochon, la Chèvre et le Mouton :

.....Quand le mal est certain,  
 La plainte ni la peur ne changent le destin;  
 Et le moins prévoyant est toujours le plus sage.<sup>44</sup>

42. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., VIII, 16, ll. 55 - 58, 89 - 92.

43. Hérodote, Histoires, (I, 34 - 35), Texte établi et traduit par PH. E. LEGRAND, Collection des Universités de France, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1932, pp. 51 - 56.

44. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.132, VIII, 12, ll. 30 - 32.

In conclusion, the poet laments that in spite of this fact, in spite of the truth that the course of human history is neither regular nor predictable with any degree of precision, the impostors and charlatans

.....veulent au compas  
Tracer le cours de notre vie!<sup>45</sup>

The above is an indictment of the hankering after fortune-tellers, conjurers and quacks. If these impostors were not patronized by the simple credulity of the inquisitive fools who support them, their trade would not prosper. It baffles La Fontaine how any man could pretend to predict the future or tell another's fortune, when such a man knows absolutely nothing of his own. That thousands of people fall victims to these impostors is but a tincture of the same major infirmity in human nature, namely, addiction to error.

Le cœur suit aisément l'esprit:  
De cette source est descendue  
L'erreur païenne, qui se vit  
Chez tant de peuples répandue.  
Ils embrassaient violemment  
Les intérêts de leur chimère:  
Pygmalion devint amant  
De la Vénus dont il fut père.  
Chacun tourne en réalités,  
Autant qu'il peut, ses propres songes:  
L'homme est de glace aux vérités;  
Il est de feu pour les mensonges.<sup>46</sup>

One wonders whether it is this general law that explains the poet's apparent contradiction of himself with regard to his attitude towards the theory of astral influences, for certain lines in Le Songe d'un habitant du Mogol cannot but surprise the unwary reader. Here the poet states :

Quand pourront les neuf Sœurs, loin des cours et des villes,  
M'occuper tout entier, et m'apprendre des Cieux  
Les divers mouvements inconnus à nos yeux,  
Les noms et les vertus de ces clartés errantes  
Par qui sont nos destins et nos mœurs différentes!<sup>47</sup>

These lines, particularly the last two, tend to give the impression that La Fontaine is now taking the doctrine of astral influences on

45. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 134, VIII, 16, ll. 85 - 86.

46. Ibid., p.142, IX, 6, ll. 25 - 36.

47. Ibid., p.158, XI, 4, ll. 26 - 30.

human destiny seriously, and that he is therefore contradicting himself. But is this really self-contradiction? We think not. These lines must not be taken at their face value, for they represent one of such statements which the poet often made with his tongue in his cheek. He is here ridiculing rather than upholding the doctrine. The next two lines to the ones quoted above and the two concluding lines reveal the tone of mockery in which the whole passage is couched :

Que si je ne suis né pour de si grands projets,  
Du moins que les ruisseaux m'offrent de doux objets!<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, "ces clartés errantes", implying the stars, whose "noms et vertus" are not even known, can have no more impact on man's moral behaviour and final destiny than "les ruisseaux doux". The apparent regret of not being born under a lucky star, expressed in the thirty-first line of the fable, reveals its true meaning in the satisfaction of having lived this life well enough to die without remorse, expressed in the concluding lines.<sup>49</sup> Put simply and briefly, the poet's stand is that you do not need the influence of any star in order to live a good and happy life. In the same way, when La Fontaine writes in La Souris métamorphosée en Fille :

Les âmes des souris et les âmes des belles  
Sont très différentes entre elles.  
Il en faut revenir toujours à son destin,  
C'est-à-dire, à la loi par le Ciel établie.  
Parlez au diable, employez la magie,  
Vous ne détournerez nul être de sa fin.<sup>50</sup>,

he is neither referring to "destiny" as used by the vulgar speculators nor advocating recourse to magic or to the devil. He is simply writing in a conventional language. Heaven, "le Ciel", is written in capital letters, thus suggesting that he means "Divine Providence" or God. Our poet's attitude to superstition and his insistence that man is naturally addicted to error have therefore not changed. If anything, he is now even more convinced that so long as human reason remains influenced by the imagination, so long will error be inevitable, and the claim to a sure knowledge a sham. It will be recalled that Gassendi also concludes his argument against Descartes on this note.

48. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.158, XI, 4, ll. 31 - 32.

49. Ibid., ll. 39 - 40.

50. Ibid, p.142, IX, 7, ll. 75 - 80.

While recognizing the superiority of reason over the senses, he severely limits the capacity of the former to attain absolute truth. We shall return to this controversy shortly. Meanwhile, it is his attitude that La Fontaine adopts in the fable of Un Animal dans la Lune.

This particular fable was inspired by an incident which took place in London in 1677, a year before the publication of the second collection of fables. A member of the Royal Society, Paul Neal, claimed that year to have sighted an enormous beast resembling an elephant on the surface of the moon. This claim was publicized with much fanfare. When, however, the telescope was dismounted and opened, it was discovered that what the astronomer actually saw consisted of nothing more than the magnified images of a tiny wing of some fly and a little mouse, caught up in the lens of the instrument.<sup>51</sup> This incident was caricatured by the English poet, Butler, in a poem entitled The Elephant on the Moon. But it was not from him that La Fontaine knew of the incident, for the above poem was only made public in the posthumous collection of Butler's verses, published in 1759. Our poet heard of the story from his friends in London, namely, Saint-Evremond and Barillon, the French Ambassador, both of whom were in regular contact with him. Converted into the fable, Un Animal dans la Lune, the episode provided La Fontaine with a subject of intellectual meditation upon the weakness of the senses :

Naguère l'Angleterre y vit chose pareille,  
 La lunette placée, un animal nouveau  
 Parut dans cet astre si beau;  
 Et chacun de crier merveille:  
 Il était arrivé là-haut un changement  
 Qui présageait sans doute un grand événement.  
 Savait-on si la guerre entre tant de puissances  
 N'en était point l'effet? Le Monarque accourut:  
 Il favorise en Roi ces hautes connaissances.  
 Le Monstre dans la Lune à son tour lui parut.  
 C'était une Souris cachée entre les verres;  
 Dans la lunette était la source de ces guerres.  
 On en rit....<sup>52</sup>

It also afforded the poet an occasion to elaborate his views on the relation between reason and the senses in the acquisition of knowledge:

---

51. Léon, Petit, La Fontaine et Saint-Evremond ou La Tentation de l'Angleterre, Toulouse, 1953, pp. 23 - 28.

52. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.126, VII, 18, ll. 42 - 54.



La Fontaine ayant appris la chose, on ne saurait s'étonner qu'il s'en soit aussitôt saisi. Mais l'on pouvait craindre que l'idée lui vînt d'enchérir sur les moqueries dont avait été saluée cette aventure saugrenue dans son propre pays. Sachons-lui gré de n'en avoir rien fait. Dans l'apologue qu'il en a tiré, sous le titre Un Animal dans la lune, il a surtout voulu broder sur ce sujet un développement philosophique visant les erreurs imputables à nos sens, et que la raison chaque fois est appelée à corriger.<sup>53</sup>

Having now entered the circle of gassendism by his initiation into the salon of Mme. de La Sablière, La Fontaine found himself at the very centre of the Descartes/Gassendi controversy over the theory of reason and the senses, which interested him during his association with Saint-Evremond. A brief review of this controversy will help to situate the intellectual context in which La Fontaine entered the debate.

Taking as his starting point, the metaphysical doubt established by Montaigne, Descartes sought in his Discours de la Méthode (1637) and other writings to evolve some principles which he considered would lead to a sure knowledge through methodical reasoning. He is persuaded that a sure and reliable knowledge can be acquired through systematic reasoning. To be conclusive and reliable, all reasoning, maintains Descartes, must follow four main stages, namely, intuition, analysis, synthesis and enumeration. The guiding principle of the system is, of course, never to accept anything as the truth unless it is proved to be so by reason or common sense.

....de ne recevoir jamais aucune chose pour vraie que je ne la connusse évidemment être telle; c'est-à-dire d'éviter soigneusement la précipitation et la prévention et de ne comprendre rien de plus en mes jugements que ce qui se présenteroit si clairement et si distinctement à mon esprit que je n'eusse aucune occasion de le mettre en doute.<sup>54</sup>

The application of this principle to mathematics proved very successful, enabling Descartes to perfect co-ordinate geometry and to make some progress in scientific investigation. This success encouraged the philosopher-scientist to apply the same principle to the study of man in

---

53. Léon, Petit, Op. Cit., p.24.

54. Descartes, R., Œuvres choisies, Nouvelle édition, Paris, (Garnier) 1755, Discours de la Méthode. p. 14.

nature. But to make the transition from abstract mathematics to man, he needs a first principle which would not only comply with the principles of his method but would equally incorporate a truth about something that is actually existing. In other words, his desired first principle requires an existential reference. This Descartes finds in the fact of God's existence as a perfect and omnipotent truth or force. But one question remains to be answered before Descartes can accept the existence of God as an evident truth. How is God's existence proved? Just as Descartes himself could not accept uncritically the validity of mathematical concepts, so he is unable to accept on pure faith the traditional belief in God. He needs certainty, and for him, there can be no certainty without proof. By the latter, he does not mean such proofs of God's existence as are advanced by the scholastics. These are worthless and the sceptic is perfectly right in refusing to accept them as valid. This awareness of the weakness of the traditional proofs of God's existence convinced Descartes of the necessity or the need for more rational proofs which would be clear and as demonstrative as the best demonstrations in geometry. By following mathematical reasoning, therefore, Descartes arrives at the conclusion that God's existence is adequately proved by the fact of the existence of Descartes himself, of his own obvious imperfection and doubt.

Je pense, donc je suis.<sup>55</sup>

The awareness of one's own imperfections implies the existence of a model or an ideal perfection. This antecedent perfection can only relate to an absolutely perfect source which is God himself. Having thus proved God's existence through rational argument, Descartes contemplates upon how the existence of such a perfect creator is compatible with the fact of man's fallibility. How, he asks, can one account for the imperfections of a creature created by an absolutely perfect being? Here again, reason persuades him to the conclusion that God made everything for the best from the beginning.

Il est bien plus vraisemblable que, dès le commencement, Dieu l'a rendu (le monde) tel qu'il  
devoit être.<sup>56</sup>

---

55. Descartes, Op. Cit., p.24.

56. Ibid., p.34.

Still there is possibility of doubt. It is just possible, argues Descartes, that there exists a powerful demon whose purpose is to deceive and distort the perfect truth. This possibility is sufficient to throw doubt on all our beliefs and opinions, a doubt which is sufficient to prevent us from accepting them as a sound basis upon which to construct a body of certain and true knowledge. Thus the upshot of the first Méditation, which deals with things as to which we may doubt, is that there is nothing in our experience absolutely free from doubt until we arrive at the fundamental intuition of the self-conscious "Moi". No other truth is so beyond suspicion that it can serve as an unshakable foundation for metaphysical thinking, that is, as a self-evident datum on which the edifice of a sure knowledge can be securely built. And since Descartes arrives at this datum through methodical or mathematical reasoning, he is persuaded that this method of reasoning, which permits the making of clear distinctions, the correct definition of the resultant component parts and the arrival at a logical, self-evident conclusion, must be a reliable one.

....Je ne jugeai que je pouvais prendre pour règle  
générale que les choses que nous concevons fort  
clairement et fort distinctement sont toutes vraies.... 57

It is on the basis of the clearness and distinctness of the ideas of the mind that Descartes banishes from the real world, the world as it is in itself, independently of ourselves and of our reason, all sensible qualities, all "form" and all consciousness. In short, everything that is not mechanical is a mere appearance.

If Descartes had stopped at merely stating the situation as he understood it, there might perhaps have been less controversy. But he did not stop there. He goes on to claim that those who use his method, such as geometers, are more likely to arrive at the truth, and as such, are better philosophers than the dialectical scholastics. By implication, the type of knowledge acquired from mathematical reasoning, being conceptual in nature, can only have its origin in one source, namely, the God of truth, whose existence has been proved beyond doubt and from whom the truth reaches the human intellect.

Considering the reliability of its source, therefore, conceptual knowledge, derived through methodical reasoning, is a sure knowledge. Knowledge acquired through the experience of the senses, while not being necessarily useless, is not as reliable as conceptual knowledge. Even though there would be no thought if no objects were perceived by the senses, since there would be nothing to think about, Descartes uses the argument of intuition to conclude that mind is wholly independent of the body :

Je connus de là que j'étais une substance dont toute l'essence ou la nature n'est que de penser, et qui pour être n'a besoin d'aucun lieu ni ne dépend d'aucune chose matérielle; en sorte que ce moi, c'est-à-dire l'âme, par laquelle je suis ce que je suis, est entièrement distincte du corps, et même qu'elle est plus aisée à connaître que lui, et qu'encore qu'il ne fût point, elle ne laisserait pas d'être tout ce qu'elle est. <sup>58</sup>

This is the basis of the Cartesian idealism which had such a widespread influence on contemporary thought and on modern theories of knowledge. It is founded upon the misconception that the mind knows itself more easily or more clearly than it knows objects. But what Descartes seems to have overlooked is the fact that while the existence of mind is a presupposition of our knowledge of objects, the objects to be known are equally a presupposition of the existence of mind. Furthermore, if the mind knowing itself is made our starting point for deductions, there is no possibility of getting beyond the mind or explaining how we ever came to suppose that there is anything external to the mind to be known. Thus Descartes reaches an intuitive truth of existence at the cost of entirely cutting off thought from its objects. Here we find ourselves face to face with the full implications of Descartes' separation of mind from its objects. As mind is regarded by him as pure thought, unextended and distinct from the body and all that pertains to the body, so matter, its counterpart, is pure extension devoid of any qualities except such as are involved in the nature of extension. Since what is distinctly and clearly conceived is true, nothing which is not clearly and distinctly conceived can exist. Another implication of Descartes' metaphysical elevation of the human

---

58. Descartes, R., Op.Cit., p.25.

mind to the supernatural order is the assumption that only an immaterial principle is capable of consciousness; the rest of nature, consisting of pure matter, is unconscious. God cannot have given the immaterial character of the spirit to the lower animals since the latter are denied the possession of immortality. This naturally led to Descartes' conclusion that since the lower animals are composed entirely of matter, and do not share in man's supernatural or dual nature, they must necessarily be unconscious entities or automata. We shall return to this point in our chapter on "The poet as philosopher". (Cf. Chapter V, 3).

Meanwhile, the more relevant issue is that this tendency on the part of Descartes to endow the faculty of reason with absolute powers was quickly challenged by Gassendi and his followers. Referring to Descartes' hypothetical dream to the effect that nothing is true except that which leaves no doubt in the mind, Gassendi declares:

Vous feignez de rêver afin de révoquer toutes choses en doute et de considérer tout ce qui se passe comme une illusion. Mais pouvez-vous ainsi vous faire violence au point de croire que vous n'êtes point éveillé, et de considérer comme incertain et comme faux tout ce qui est devant vous et se passe sous vos yeux? Quoi que vous en disiez, il n'y aura personne pour se persuader que vous soyez vous-même persuadé que rien ne soit vrai de tout ce que vous avez appris à connaître, et que le sens, ou le sommeil, ou Dieu, ou un mauvais Génie vous en ait toujours imposé.<sup>59</sup>

In an ironical tone, he condemns Descartes' cleverly camouflaged but evident intellectual presumption:

Vous affirmez que je ne suis pas philosophe. Or si le nom de philosophe se prend bien pour Sage, c'est un nom que je vous accorde sans conteste, à vous qui avez tant de confiance en votre sagesse; mais s'il signifie pas autre chose que ce qu'a voulu dire celui qui a inventé le mot, quand, dénonçant la vantardise des autres, il a dit que lui-même était non un Sage, mais quelqu'un qui étudiait la sagesse, alors vous avez tort de me refuser ce nom, à moi qui, bien que j'ignore la sagesse, puis cependant être appelé un homme qui étudie la sagesse par le seul fait de l'ardeur avec laquelle je désire être sage.<sup>60</sup>

---

59. Gassendi, P., *Disquisitio Metaphysica seu dubitationes et instantiæ adversus Renati Cartesii metaphysicam et responsa*, Texte établi traduit et annoté par Bernard Rochot, Paris, (Librairie philosophique J. Vrin), 1962, p. 30 : (Article I, 278a).

60. *Ibid.*, p. 34 : (Art. I, 279a).

This opposition to Descartes is the natural outcome of Gassendi's adoption of the Epicurean and Lucretian theory of knowledge. In order, therefore, to appreciate the background to his opposition and why La Fontaine, the practical epicurean, accepted his point of view, we have to go a little backwards in the history of ideas to examine briefly the theory of knowledge as formulated by Epicurus. For the latter, the aim of all knowledge is to achieve what he calls "ataraxia" or freedom from irrational fears and anxieties, that is, the enjoyment of mental peace :

First of all, then, we must assume that no other end is served by the study of celestial phenomena, whether considered by themselves or in some larger context, than mental composure and a sturdy self-reliance, just as in the case of the other disciplines. <sup>61</sup>

The stock of our knowledge of the world around us, holds Epicurus, is derived from experience by the senses rather than from innate "a priori" concepts; and our judgement and beliefs are true or false according as they correspond or contradict our sensations, feelings and general conceptions.

We must keep all our judgement in line with our sensations (especially our immediate perceptions, either of the mind or of any particular sense organ) and also in line with our actual feelings of pleasure and pain, in order to have the means with which to interpret a sense datum awaiting verification or a problem involving imperceptibles. <sup>62</sup>

Epicurus considers geometry, astronomy and kindred sciences as based upon false premises and as incapable of leading to true results. His concern is with the real world of sensible impressions as opposed to deductive logic, syllogism and abstract definitions. For him, things exist around us, and we know them only through sense experience which alone gives a conviction of reality. This conviction attaches not only to the external objects which can be perceived but equally to the internal states or feelings. What we immediately perceive and feel must be true.

61. Epicurus, *The Philosophy of Epicurus*, Translated by George K. Strodach, Easton, Pennsylvania, (Northwestern University Press), 1963, p.158, "Letter to Pythocles, 85".

62. *Ibid.*, p.115 : "Letter to Herodotus, 38."

This approach to knowledge is the logical result of Epicurus' atomistic theory. He traces the origin of the appearances or the things we see in nature to the interaction of atoms, for not only do the latter exist as the basic element of matter but they are the only things that exist apart from void.

Furthermore, the totality (of being) consists of bodies and space. The fact of sensation itself universally attests that there are bodies, and it is by reference to sensation that we must rationally infer the existence of imperceptible bodies, as I remarked previously. If what we call "the void" or "space" or "impalpable being" were non-existent, bodies would not have anywhere to exist, nor would they have a medium through which to move, as they manifestly do. In addition to these two entities it is impossible to think of anything else (by way of either concepts or analogues of concepts) as being a complete and independent entity and not, rather, a property or accident of body and space. As regards bodies, furthermore, some are compounds; others the components of which the compounds are made. These components are irreducible and immutable atoms - assuming that things are not destined to be completely annihilated but that something perdurable is left over at the time of the decomposition of the compounds - particles completely solid in nature and incapable of decomposition in any manner whatsoever. Thus the primal entities are necessarily indivisible corporeal atoms.<sup>63</sup>

Lucretius, one of Epicurus' early disciples and La Fontaine's well-known Latin mentor, describes the situation more vividly. To define atoms themselves, he uses a variety of terms, such as "elements", "first bodies", "first beginnings of things", "seeds" and other similar expressions which render the notion of atoms less ambiguous than the definition of Epicurus. Lucretius distinguishes more clearly, for example, the essential and the accidental qualities of bodies :

For whatever things are named, you will either find to be properties linked to these two things (bodies and void) or you will see to be accidents of these things. That is a property which can in no case be disjoined and separated without utter destruction accompanying the severance, such as the weight of a stone, the heat of fire, the fluidity of water. Slavery, on the other hand, poverty and riches, liberty, war, concord, and

---

63. Epicurus, Op.Cit., pp. 115-116: "Letter to Herodotus, 39-41"

other things which may come and go while the nature of things remains unharmed, these we are wont, as it is right we should, to call accidents.<sup>64</sup>

Later in this chapter we will show how La Fontaine makes an ingenious effort to put this scientific thought in poetic language.

For Epicurus and his disciples, all things which we perceive by the senses emanate from atoms whose number, according to Epicurus himself, is infinite. He leads from this point to an explanation of the manner in which we are affected by external objects. From the exterior surfaces of atoms, says Epicurus, there is a perpetual emission of particles of matter in the form of images. The latter are of the same shape as the composite atoms from which they originate; they preserve the same relative position and sequence which they had in the solid atoms, but their fineness far exceeds that of any objects that we can see. It follows from this definition that, for Epicurus, all sense data are infallible, being mechanically transmitted to us by atomic images from the outer world. They may be overlaid with misleading interpretations and lead to false opinions. But these images are usually true and reliable if confirmed by close inspection or if they are not contradicted.

If you summarily rule out any single sensation and do not make a distinction between the element of belief that is superimposed on a perception that awaits verification and what is actually present in sensation or in the feelings or some percept of the mind itself, you will cast doubt on all other sensations by your unfounded interpretation and consequently abandon all the criteria of truth. On the other hand, in cases of interpreted data, if you accept as true those that need verification as well as those that do not, you will still be in error, since the whole question at issue in every judgement of what is true or not will be left intact.<sup>65</sup>

Confirming the opinion of Epicurus on the importance and reliability of the senses as the gateway of knowledge, Lucretius adds :

What should we consider as having greater validity than sensation? Will reasoning that takes its rise from "false" sensation have power to contradict the

---

64. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Translated by H.A.J. Munro, (New edition), London, (Bell), 1908, I, 449.

65. Epicurus, *Op. Cit.*, p.200 : "Leading Doctrines, 24".



senses when it originates wholly from them? If they are not true, all reasoning likewise becomes false.<sup>66</sup>

It can be seen from the above that, for Epicurus and his disciples, there is nothing more basic or irrefutable than the testimony of the senses when correctly interpreted. Sense experience is the substructure upon which reasoning is built. In other words, the system of Epicurus, that is, his theory of knowledge, is based upon the superiority of experience over abstract reasoning, founded merely on personal conjectures.

This philosophy is the one adopted by Gassendi as opposed to Cartesian rationalism. It is little wonder, therefore, that La Fontaine in the Discours à Mme de La Sablière refers to Descartes as "le rival d'Epicure" (l. 138), for the gassendism that opposed cartesianism is a modified form of epicureanism as far as the theory of knowledge is concerned. Like Epicurus, Gassendi is concerned with the problem of explaining the origin of things by means of the atomistic theory. But he does so without contradicting the Providentialist basis of the universe. Thus, although he makes an admirable effort to give an impartial account of Epicurus' philosophy in his work entitled Epicurus, he does not accept his master's views without some modifications. For example, Epicurus' idea of eternal atoms existing eternally in random motion is replaced with a more Christian definition based upon the idea that Providence or God created these atoms and directs their motion according to his own design. In this sense, their motion is not only an ordered one but at the same time an evidence of God's providence. Gassendi also considers Epicurus wrong in assuming the number of atoms to be infinite within an infinite space, for this weakens the providentialist theory of the universe. The idea of an infinite number of atoms, moving eternally in an infinite space, and combining themselves in infinite varieties, would suffice to explain the presence in the world of various forms and entities, thus undermining the idea of the providential care of the world. But to make his modification of Epicurus acceptable to curious minds, Gassendi has first of all to establish the fact of God's existence without reference to dogmatic

---

66. Lucretius, Op. Cit. IV, 482-85.

theology. He does this by putting forward man's awareness of God and the harmony in nature as irrefutable proofs of God's existence. The human mind is predisposed from the beginning to know God, but this predisposition is made good only because of man's experience of the visible evidence of God's existence in the universe. Here again, the keyword is "experience", not "intuition", thus challenging Descartes' assumption that man's knowledge of God is an innate idea.

For Gassendi, therefore, ideas come to us through specific sense experiences which includes interaction with other people. What the mind or reason does is to convert these particular experiences into general ideas. An effective philosophical system should take these facts into consideration by basing its principles upon what actual experience shows to be the true nature of things and the relationship between them. In sensation an image strikes upon the sense-organ and the mind. A series of repeated images leave behind them, that is, in our minds, the shapes and properties of the external objects from which these images come. When the reception of these images is not interrupted, they usually correspond to the properties of their sources. But falsehood and error occur due to the intrusion of personal opinion before the data of sensation awaiting confirmation have had time to be verified. Thus, quite often, what we suppose that we perceive is our own mental presupposition or hasty inference from the sensation reaching us. When, for example, we see an oar which is half-immersed in water, appear bent, the image that reaches the eye is really bent. But the judgement of the mind that the oar itself is bent is no part of the perception. It is a gratuitous addition to it. The mind confuses two distinct processes: the perception which is infallible and the conscious or unconscious inference from it, which is mere presupposition or personal opinion. Sensations themselves must therefore be scrutinized and the element which reason has added in haste must be removed before we can get back to the original data, the perceptions which put us in touch with reality. Using the same example of an oar half-immersed in water, Gassendi concedes to his adversary the fact that reason or common sense should help to evaluate the evidence of the senses in any search for the reality of things. He writes:

Quand on regarde un bâton placé en partie dans l'eau, en partie dans l'air, l'imagination peut-elle le percevoir autrement que recourbé? Et néanmoins l'intelligence soutient avec force qu'il est droit.<sup>67</sup>

This suggests that while the senses play the major role of transmitting knowledge, all sensations they receive should be subjected to scrutiny or critical judgement before being confirmed as the truth.

En admettant que les sens puissent nous tromper quelque fois...notre raison, qui est supérieure aux sens, peut corriger la perception de telle manière qu'elle ne se rende jamais qu'à des sensation dûment rectifiées par elle, et puisse enfin raisonner sur les choses ou porter des jugements sur elles.<sup>68</sup>

Gassendi's concession to Descartes on the authority of reason stops here. On the rest, he vehemently attacks his rival's claim that human reason, no matter how methodically manipulated, can be absolutely reliable. Following Descartes' tendency to dogmatism (for so Gassendi understood him) his claim to have freed his mind from all prejudices and external influences is challenged as false and arrogant presumption by Gassendi.

Il est faux de supposer que l'on puisse se défaire de tout préjugé, et ensuite se trouver en possession de principes entièrement certains et évidents.<sup>69</sup>

Man as a finite creature, argues Gassendi, is endowed with a finite intellect, but with a quasi infinite will. Error is bound to occur from the incompatibility consequent on the exercise of a quasi infinite will without infinite intellect. The incidence of error, created by this limitation, can at best be minimized by the right use of reason to interpret sense experiences, but can never be completely eliminated, as Descartes' absolute principles of method tend to claim.

"Je pense", dites-vous; mais que pensez-vous?  
Car enfin toute pensée est pensée de quelque chose.  
Est-ce le Ciel? la Terre? ou n'importe quoi d'autre?  
ou vous-même? Vous avez désormais considéré tout cela comme faux, et n'avez pas changé d'avis: il en

---

67. Gassendi, P., Syntagma philosophicum, Paris, 1658, t.II, 453a.

68. Ibid., t.I, 81b.

69. Ibid., Disquisitio Metaphysica...., p.36 (art.2, 279b)

résulte que ce que vous pensez, quoi que ce soit, vous le pensez faussement, et que par conséquent votre pensée est fausse.<sup>70</sup>

Many disciples of Gassendi, who were La Fontaine's contemporaries, also attacked the undue importance which Descartes credits to reason. Saint-Evremond published his essay, Sur la morale d'Epicure (1674), stressing the severe limitations imposed on human reason, as demonstrated by the endless contradictions among the philosophers.<sup>71</sup> The following year, 1675, another gassendist, Guillaume Lamy, published his Discours anatomiques in which he too refuted the immense powers credited to the human intellect. He writes :

Assurément que notre esprit est extrêmement borné, et que les plus savants sont ceux qui sont persuadés qu'on ne peut rien savoir.<sup>72</sup>

Descoutures challenged the application of feeble reason to the interpretation of God :

Faible raison, penses-tu que Dieu soit l'ouvrage d'un syllogisme, et crois-tu trouver dans tes spéculations ce qui fut et ce qui sera toujours incompréhensible?<sup>73</sup>

And Mme. Deshoulières composed a poem in which she compared human reason with the perfection of animal instinct or the operation of the senses. Thus in Les Moutons, she writes :

Cependant nous avons la raison pour partage  
Et vous en ignorez l'usage.  
Innocents animaux n'en soyez point jaloux.  
Ce n'est pas un grand avantage.  
Cette fière raison dont on fait tant de bruit,  
Contre les passions n'est pas un sûr remède.  
Un peu de vin la trouble, un enfant la séduit,  
Et déchirer un cœur qui l'appelle à son aide,  
Est tout l'effet qu'elle produit.  
Toujours impuissante et sévère,  
Elle s'oppose à tout, et ne surmonte rien.<sup>74</sup>

Mme. Deshoulière's bitter invective against the presumptions of human reason approaches the utter humiliation of the same faculty by Montaigne, and it serves to show the intensity of the reaction of the gassendists to the cartesian faith in reason.

70. Gassendi, P., Op. Cit., pp. 82 - 84.

71. Saint-Evremond, Œuvres en prose, Edition René Ternois, Paris (Didier), 1966, t. III, pp. 418-438.

72. Lamy, G, Discours anatomiques, Rouen, 1675, p. 96.

73. Descoutures, Morale d'Epicure, Paris, 1685, Préface.

74. Deshoulières, A. (Mme.), Op. Cit., t. I, pp. 39-40.

In contact with these kindred spirits, La Fontaine received fresh intellectual stimulation, which enabled him to elaborate his ideas on the relationship between reason and the senses, as well as to formulate his own theory of knowledge. As would be expected, his theory follows the line of thought adopted by Gassendi. But he does not elaborate on the atomistic theory of his predecessors. In fact, he only alludes to it by way of synthesis in the fable entitled Démocrite et les Abdéritains where he refers to Democritus as "Le maître d' Epicure" (1.5) and summarizes their common atomistic theory.

Aucun nombre, dit-il, les mondes ne limite:  
Peut-être même ils sont remplis  
De Démocrites infinis.<sup>75</sup>

When it is recalled that it was Epicurus who rehabilitated the physics of Democritus and that Gassendi adopted the epicurean atomistic theory of knowledge, the intellectual link between La Fontaine and Democritus becomes clear. The reference to the atomistic theory of Democritus, Epicurus and their disciples does not make a physicist of our poet. He is here using the theory in much the same pragmatic way as he did when it served his political purpose early in this chapter. His main interest in the theory this time is limited to the aspect of it touching upon the derivation of knowledge through sensations emanating from atoms or what Gassendi calls "primary matter" from which external bodies are formed. Thus, like Gassendi, La Fontaine not only believes that knowledge is acquired through sense impressions and experiences from external bodies, but maintains that the evidence of the senses should be verified and evaluated by reason.

Ce sens ne me nuit point par son illusion.  
Mon âme en toute occasion  
Développe le vrai caché sous l'apparence.  
Je ne suis point d'intelligence  
Avecque mes regards peut-être un peu trop prompts,  
Ni mon oreille lente à m'apporter les sons.  
Quand l'eau courbe un bâton ma raison le redresse,  
La raison décide en maîtresse.  
Mes yeux, moyennant ce secours,

---

75. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.138, Fables, VIII, 26, ll. 16-18.

Ne me trompent jamais, en me mentant toujours.  
 Si je crois leur rapport, erreur assez commune,  
 Une tête de femme est au corps de la Lune.  
 Y peut-elle être? Non. D'où vient donc cet objet?  
 Quelques lieux inégaux font de loin cet effet.<sup>76</sup>

These densely compressed lines are an ingenious attempt to answer in poetic language the controversial question about the relative position of reason and the senses in the acquisition of a reliable knowledge. It will be recalled that the poet raised this question in the episode of Le Chameau et les Bâtons flottants (IV, 10) in the first collection of fables. He has now established firmly the importance of the senses as the source of perceptible knowledge, the moderating role of reason and the extent of its authority over the senses. Note that the seventh and eighth lines of the above quotation re-echo Gassendi's well-known illustration of an oar half-immersed in water. He realizes the complementary relationship between reason and the senses but credits neither with absolute powers. Rather he believes that the senses, when judiciously used, are the gateway to knowledge.

Tous les deux ont raison....  
 Les sens tromperont  
 Tant que sur leur rapport les hommes jugeront;  
 Mais aussi, si l'on rectifie  
 L'image de l'objet sur son éloignement,  
 Sur le milieu qui l'environne,  
 Sur l'organe et sur l'instrument,<sup>77</sup>  
 Les sens ne tromperont personne.

Thus, like Gassendi, La Fontaine finds actual experience far less suspect than the arguments of presumptuous reason, for the former deals with what actually happens rather than why it happens. Only those who study nature, using experience as their guide, can discover her secrets and perhaps gradually unmask the forces behind certain phenomena which seemed incomprehensible to our predecessors. Through such probings man will come to understand the causes of earthquakes, the tides, the role of the moon, the cause of thunder which was for the ancients and the ignorant man a sure sign of God's anger against the world. In this way, concludes the poet, it may one day be possible to discover that

---

76. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 126, VII, 18, ll. 24-37.

77. *Ibid.*, ll. 5 - 12.

La Lune nulle part n'a sa surface unie:  
 Montueuse en des lieux, en d'autres aplanie,  
 L'ombre avec la lumière y peut tracer souvent  
 Un homme, un bœuf, un éléphant....<sup>78</sup>

The results of recent lunar explorations have more than vindicated the accuracy of the opinion which our poet expressed three hundred years ago! We know now that there is neither man nor cow nor elephant on the surface of the moon. It is a rocky desert, devoid of uniform surface and mountainous in places. La Fontaine's theory of knowledge has therefore a message of hope for mankind: the combined effort of the human race can penetrate some secrets of nature, provided that doubtful or speculative metaphysics gives way to experimental science.

But note carefully, insists the poet, that not even experimental science, no matter how highly developed, can expect to attain the absolute truth, irrespective of what presumptuous human reason may claim. A certain measure of incomprehension is a part of human nature. There will always be some problems left unsolved, some questions which are impossible to answer, and no projected answer should deem itself beyond dispute. Experience is incapable of penetrating the ultimate principles of reality. It can never know, for example, what God is like, the nature of spirit or what follows after mortal life. Reason can only imagine and speculate, and the moment imagination and inference take the upper hand, all claims to reliance on reason cannot be accepted without question, for the finite nature of the human intellect contradicts such claims:

Il est impossible à ceux qui examinent les matières  
 à fond d'en venir jusqu'à la dernière précision, et  
 de ne laisser aucun doute.... On ne peut connaître  
 parfaitement la moindre chose qui soit au monde;  
 telle est l'intention de son auteur, qui l'a présenté  
 à notre raison comme une matière de s'exercer, et  
 qui l'a livré aux disputes des philosophes.<sup>79</sup>

And why this perpetual disputation? Why this folly? La Fontaine blames it partly on vanity, partly on imagination. The latter is influenced by customs, conventions, external circumstances and appearances. Yet, it is this same imagination that helps reason to combine

---

78. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 126-27, VII, 18, ll. 38 - 41.

79. Ibid., pp. 519 - 520.

ideas and draw conclusions, conclusions which are often as elusive as the imagination itself.

The point the poet is trying to put across here is clearly illustrated in the episode of Les Devineresses. Thus, although the claims of the so-called "Pythonesse" to a sure knowledge of the future are based upon mere psychological flair, aided by sheer chance, most people, in spite of reason, accept her as a divinely inspired prophetess. Crowds of gullible men, women and children flock to her hovel. She is invited out to town and to expensive dinners by admirers, who are prepared to worship her because in their judgement she deserves to be honoured like a goddess, for what else is she, if not divine?

On l'alloit consulter sur chaque événement:  
 Perdoit-on un chiffon, avoit-on un amant,  
 Un mari vivant trop, au gré de son épouse,  
 Une mère fâcheuse, une femme jalouse,  
 Chez la Devineuse on couroit  
 Pour se faire annoncer ce que l'on désiroit.  
 Son fait consistoit en adresse:  
 Quelques termes de l'art, beaucoup de hardiesse,  
 Du hasard quelquefois, tout cela concouroit,  
 Tout cela bien souvent faisoit crier miracle.  
 Enfin, quoique ignorante à vingt et trois carats,  
 Elle passoit pour un oracle.<sup>80</sup>

The astonishing degree to which human reason is a victim of appearances and illusions is seen when the supposed prophetess vacates her original hovel to move into a luxurious flat, and another woman, who is not a fortune-teller, moves into it. The fable tells us that, in spite of the protestations of the second woman that she herself has nothing to do with divination, in spite of the overwhelming evidence furnished by the different identities of the two women, and in spite of common sense, crowds still gather around the revered hovel to have their fortune predicted.

Femmes, filles, valets, gros Messieurs, tout enfin,  
 Alloit, comme autrefois, demander son destin:  
 Le galetas devint l'autre de la Sibylle.  
 L'autre femelle avoit achalandé ce lieu.  
 Cette dernière femme eut beau faire, eut beau dire,  
 "Moi devine! on se moque: eh! Messieurs, sais-je lire?  
 Je n'ai jamais appris que ma croix de par Dieu;  
 Point de raison: fallut deviner et prédire,  
 Mettre à part force bons ducats,  
 Et gagner malgré soi plus que deux avocats.<sup>81</sup>

80. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.124, Fables, VII, 15, ll. 9 - 20.

81. Ibid., ll. 28 - 37.



Utterly dismayed, himself, by the gullibility of men and the feebleness of their reason, our poet exclaims in bewilderment

.....Demandez-moi pourquoi.<sup>82</sup>

And the explanation he gives to this phenomenon sums up his attitude to human reason, whether it is applied to religion, politics, metaphysics or philosophy :

C'est l'opinion qui fait toujours la vogue.<sup>83</sup>

It is opinion formed from imagination and mere appearances. These latter influence reason and judgement. Since the newly acquired and well-furnished flat, occupied by the former fortune-teller, is no longer the ancient hovel, anything predicted in it, even by the acclaimed prophetess herself, could not be true. On the other hand, whatever predictions are made in the popular and idolized hovel are unquestionable, even if the new occupant is not, and does not claim to be, a fortune-teller. The power of divination, therefore, lies not in the personages but in the appearance of the hovel's surroundings. That, says La Fontaine, is the judgement of men; and after such folly, they claim to be capable of possessing a sure and certain knowledge of ultimate truths.

It is not clearly known from where the poet drew inspiration for this delightful story of a female diviner. It is most likely that he came by the episode through his readings in Latin literature, for so many "Sibylles" existed in Greek and Latin antiquity. But we are inclined to believe, judging from La Fontaine's good knowledge of Virgil's works, that he relied very much upon reminiscences of the Sybil of Cuma<sup>2</sup>, described by Virgil in the sixth Book of the Aeneid.<sup>84</sup> The similarities between Virgil's narrative and La Fontaine's description of the "Pythonesse" and her hovel are particularly striking. One cannot help admiring how the poet has skilfully used this antique story to illustrate an aspect of his philosophy of reason.

The application of the latter to the obviously insoluble problems of life is vain and futile, for reason, on account of its high susceptibility to prejudices, error and fanaticism, is incapable of reaching ultimate truth. It should therefore not be relied upon where it cannot

---

82. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., Fables, VII, 15, l. 50.

83. Ibid. l. 1.

84. Virgile, Enéide, VI, 42, 77, 98.

be effective. It is no wonder, therefore, that La Fontaine became easily irritated at all philosophical pretensions to pass beyond the bounds of human experience. To the impostors, presumptuous metaphysicians and arrogant philosophers, the poet puts a number of penetrating and challenging questions: If all theories about the ultimate nature of reality are questionable, can there be any basis for offering one as the absolute truth or persecuting people for accepting one rather than the other? And since the right or true beliefs cannot be easily distinguished from the false, is there any moral justification for religious, political and intellectual dogmatism and its attendant disruption of society?

La Fontaine's approach to the Descartes/Gassendi controversy over reason and the senses is thus a practical one, based on the facts of experience. While he affirms the final authority of reason over the senses, this does not detract from the belief that reason cannot operate without the senses. At the same time he recognizes the limits of human reason in certain spheres of inquiry. By adopting this attitude, the poet has cleverly modified the traditional thought dating back to the pre-Socratic philosophy of Heraclitus and Democritus. Both philosophers, it will be recalled, postulate that the human senses are always deceitful and unreliable as instruments of knowledge.

Heraclitus (540 - 480 B.C.) recognizes two channels through which something can be perceived, namely, the senses and reason. But of these two, he denounces the former and accepts the latter.

Il juge le témoignage des sens indigne de foi, et il pose la raison comme criterium unique. Il répudie le témoignage des sens en ces termes: "Pour les esprits barbares les yeux et les oreilles sont de mauvais témoins".<sup>85</sup>

But when Heraclitus speaks of reason, he means the universal rather than the individual or private opinion. The first, he argues, is usually in conformity with the truth; the second is not.

C'est pourquoi il faut se confier à la raison générale. Toutes les fois que nous nous mettons en communion avec elle, nous sommes dans le

---

85. Franck, Adolphe, M., Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques, Deuxième édition, Paris, (Hachette), 1875, pp. 698 - 699: (Article Héraclite).

vrai; nous sommes dans le faux, au contraire, toutes les fois que nous nous abandonnons à notre sens individuel.

As for Democritus (470 - 360? B.C.), he not only distrusts the senses completely, but goes further to question the claim by human reason to reliability. His approach to the problem is remarkably sceptical.

He declares :

Il n'y a rien de vrai, ou s'il y a du vrai, nous ne le connaissons pas. Il nous est impossible de connaître la vérité sur quoi que ce soit: la vérité est au fond d'un abîme. Nous ne savons pas même si nous savons quelque chose ou si nous vivons dans la plus complète ignorance; nous ne savons pas davantage s'il existe quelque chose ou si rien n'existe. <sup>87</sup>

These are the traditional fathers who established the intellectual scepticism that stretched through Montaigne and Gassendi to La Fontaine. But the novelty of the latter's thinking, the merit of his approach over that of his traditional masters, lies in the prominence he gives to experience. Conscious of the need and worth of observation, La Fontaine is determined not to allow rational argument alone to decide issues which of their nature demand inspection and verification. For the poet, we cannot be persuaded on rational grounds alone to accept scientific theories, but only on rational argument which is based upon, re-enforced or confirmed by the results of observation and experiment. Thus there are two ways of acquiring knowledge: experience and reasoning. Knowledge begins with experience and ends with reason. The latter alone may sometimes sound convincing but it cannot persuade for long if it is not backed up with practical results drawn from experience. Wisdom, therefore, lies in a judicious combination of mathematical reasoning with experimental observation. Reason "décide en maîtresse", no doubt, but it can do so effectively only on matters within the bounds of experience. By thus limiting the power of reason, La Fontaine concludes his theory of knowledge on the same note as Gassendi.

---

86. Franck, Op.Cit., pp. 698 - 699.

87. Ibid., p. 357; (Article Démocrite).

From the affirmation of our faith in the value of experimental knowledge, the poet goes further to defend it against those who underestimate its importance. The fable, L'Avantage de la Science, is a reaction to the tendency at that epoch to denigrate knowledge in favour of money and material wealth. This tendency was inherited from the sixteenth century, when Melin de Saint-Gelais wrote in one of his poems :

Dy moy, amy, que vaut-il mieux avoir?  
 Beaucoup de biens, ou beaucoup de sçavoir?  
 Je n'en sçay rien, mais les sçavans je voy  
 Faire la cour à ceux qui ont de quoy.<sup>88</sup>

Another sixteenth-century poet, Charles Fontaine, devoted the poem, L'Argent donne la science, to the argument that money is more important than knowledge, since no knowledge can be pursued without money:

En tout honneur et excellence  
 Quiconque veut aller avant,  
 Quierre l'argent, non la science,  
 Les lettres n'aille poursuivant.  
 Pour faire un sçavant, la ressource  
 La plus certaine, c'est l'argent  
 Aujourd'hui l'homme est fort sçavant  
 Qui sçait force écus en sa bourse.<sup>89</sup>

The adoption of this attitude by the seventeenth century provides the intellectual context in which La Fontaine commented on the relative importance of money and knowledge. Around 1672, French commerce and industry flourished thanks to Colbert's shrewd and sound economic planning. The flow of capital, consequent on this development, gave a new social importance and political power to the commercial and industrial middle class who controlled the capital. As would be expected, this social change reflected in the writings of the satirical poets and moralists, who discussed the importance of money vis-a-vis knowledge. Their reaction is a mixture of cynicism and open confession. La Fontaine's friend, Boileau, declares :

Quiconque est riche est tout. Sans sagesse il est sage.  
 Il a sans rien sçavoir la science en partage.  
 Il a l'esprit, le cœur, le mérite, le rang,  
 La vertu, la valeur, la dignité, le sang.

---

88. Melin de Saint-Gelays, *Œuvres complètes*, (édition Blanchemain), Paris, 1873, t.II. p.39.

89. Fontaine, Charles, *Les Poètes françois, depuis le XII<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à Malherbe*, Paris, (Crapelet), 1824, t.III, p.444. (6 vols).

Il est aimé des Grands, il est chéri des Belles.  
 Jamais Sur-intendant ne trouva de Cruelles.  
 L'or mesme à la laideur donne un teint de beauté:  
 Mais tout devient affreux avec la pauvreté.<sup>90</sup>

And La Bruyère adds later :

Une grande naissance ou une grande fortune annonce  
 le mérite, et le fait plus tôt remarquer.... A mesure  
 que la faveur et les grands biens se retirent d'un  
 homme, ils laissent voir en lui le ridicule qu'ils  
 couvraient, et qui y était sans que personne s'en  
 aperçût.<sup>91</sup>

It was in response to this situation that La Fontaine composed the fable quoted earlier. Although he himself lived for most of the time on the generosity of the rich, and was acutely aware of the social utility of wealth, he never resorted to cowardly cynicism, but spoke out courageously and straightforwardly against the situation which scandalized many of his contemporaries. In his usual ironical style, he first of all builds up a powerful argument for the opposing side, that is in favour of money and riches :

Entre deux Bourgeois d'une ville  
 S'émut jadis un différend:  
 L'un étoit pauvre, mais habile;  
 L'autre riche, mais ignorant.  
 Celui-ci sur son concurrent  
 Vouloit emporter l'avantage,  
 Prétendoit que tout homme sage  
 Etoit tenu de l'honorer....  
 "Mon ami, disoit-il souvent  
 Au savant,  
 Vous vous croyez considérable;  
 Mais, dites-moi, tenez-vous table?  
 Que sert à vos pareils de lire incessamment?  
 Ils sont toujours logés à la troisième chambre,  
 Vêtus au mois de juin comme au mois de décembre,  
 Ayant pour tout laquais leur ombre seulement.  
 La République a bien affaire  
 De gens qui ne dépensent rien!  
 Je ne sais d'homme nécessaire  
 Que celui dont le luxe épand beaucoup de bien.  
 Nous en usons, Dieu sait! notre plaisir occupe  
 L'artisan, le vendeur, celui qui fait la jupe,  
 Et celle qui la porte, et vous, qui dédiez  
 A Messieurs les gens de finance  
 De méchants livres bien payés".<sup>92</sup>

90. Boileau, D., Op. Cit., p. 46,

91. La Bruyère, Jean de, Les Caractères ou les Mœurs de ce siècle, Paris, (Garnier), 1962, p. 180 : "Des biens de fortune".

92. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 135, Fables, VIII, 19, ll. 1 - 28.

But he builds up this formidable argument for the ignorant rich only to smash it in just ten hard-hitting lines which lay bare the vanity and perishable nature of material wealth vis-a-vis the durability of knowledge.

Ces mots remplis d'impertinence  
Eurent le sort qu'ils méritoient.  
L'homme lettré se tut, il avoit trop à dire.  
La guerre le vengea bien mieux qu'une satire.  
Mars détruisit le lieu que nos gens habitoient:  
L'un et l'autre quitte sa ville.  
L'ignorant resta sans asile:  
Il reçut partout des mépris;  
L'autre reçut partout quelque faveur nouvelle:  
Cela décida leur querelle.<sup>93</sup>

The situation chosen by La Fontaine to illustrate his point of view may seem somewhat out of the normal and far-fetched, but those of us who have lived with the ignorant rich, and seen their condition in times of crisis, know how down to earth the poet's example is. His choice of a war situation should not be seen to mean that he lacked everyday instances that expose the countless advantages of knowledge and wisdom over wealth and riches. Indeed he had too many instances to give, but he wanted a situation in which the contrasts between the two pairs would be so strikingly evident as to need no further argument, and it is in such abnormal situations as the war that the truth of the matter becomes more obvious, hence he chose a situation of war. After such a vivid and concrete illustration, the reader is left with no other conclusion than the one drawn by the poet himself:

Laissez dire les sots : le savoir a son prix.<sup>94</sup>

Money and riches are but testimonies of what knowledge, that is, what the cultured human mind, can invent. In this sense, equating money with knowledge is as ridiculous as placing a creature and his creator on the same footing. For La Fontaine, it is knowledge and education, not money, that refine man's crude nature, give him some mastery over his environment, thus enhancing human dignity.

Le peu de soin, le temps, tout fait qu'on dégénère:  
Faute de cultiver la nature et ses dons,  
Oh! combien de Césars deviendront Laridons!<sup>95</sup>

93. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.135, Fables, VIII, 19, ll. 29 - 38.

94. Ibid., 1.39.

95. Ibid., p.137, VIII, 24, ll. 22 - 24.

The suggestion that sound knowledge (not vain speculations), can improve the lot of man within the limits imposed by nature, as well as heighten his dignity, is already an appreciable advance from the unqualified pessimism which coloured the poet's philosophy in the first collection of fables. This position anticipates the providentialist doctrine of the universe which he is to formulate later, as we shall see in the next ~~section~~ section. It is thus easy to see that the intellectual and gassendist milieu, in which the poet now found himself, was already having a profound impact upon his mental attitude. He was not only to cultivate the philosophical attitude of this milieu, but also to imbibe its scientific curiosity, its humanism and its providentialist tendencies.

## 2. The Manifestation of Providentialist Tendencies.

We have earlier in this study discussed La Fontaine's first contact with Christian religion through the "Collège de Château-Thierry" and the Oratory, and the traces which this experience left in his literary works and personal attitude. But, considerable as is the influence of these contacts, it is far from being decisive in the formation of the poet's religious attitude, particularly as he was neither amenable to religious indoctrination nor able to finish his training there. The influence of the seminary experience must therefore be weighed alongside other contacts and influences which also had some impact on the poet's mind. But before going on to discuss these other contacts, it is pertinent to recall that in addition to the positive influences which Port-Royal and the Oratory had on La Fontaine's mental outlook, the Jansenist doctrine of fallen human nature combined with the poet's reading of Montaigne to produce his pessimistic view of man or his fatalistic attitude in the first collection of fables. This pessimistic concept of man implies three main propositions, not clearly stated in La Fontaine's writing, but quite discernible in that of his model, namely, that man is cosmically insignificant or not a privileged creature; that he belongs entirely within the natural order along with the other animals; and that the idea of an all-watchful Providence regulating the affairs of men is an illusion. With maturity and greater intellectual independence, as represented in the second collection of fables, the poet is now to retain some of these propositions, reject some totally and modify the rest.

Let us begin by examining his opinion about man. Here, the evidence of the text of the second collection of fables points to the fact that the ten years separating the fables of 1668 and those of 1678 have made no appreciable change in La Fontaine's view of man. In L'Homme et la Couleuvre (X, 1), he appears to make some concession to man. For example, the poet states that man, in spite of his imperfections, is the king of creation. There is a suggestion that man is more generously endowed than any other earthly creature, exploiting for his own benefit, like an absolute monarch, the elements, plants and other animals. That man, although within nature, has distinctive characteristics which set him apart from other natural forms. Thus one gets the



impression that this distinctiveness of man is definitive and overrides in metaphysical and ethical importance the common realm of nature which man shares with other living things, since the choice and evaluation of action lie properly within the sphere of human power and judgement.

Je pourrais décider, car ce droit m'appartient....

Tout n'est que pour lui seul....

(Tous) ont pour but son plaisir ainsi que son besoin. <sup>96</sup>

But what La Fontaine has done here is to condemn man more than ever before by attacking man's prerogatives. The reader is struck by the poet's sarcastic turn of mind in this particular fable. He alludes to man's prerogatives in order to use the abuse of these self-arrogated rights by man as a basis for a more devastating attack on human beings. The poet considers a paradoxical approach to be more effective this time than the direct attack he launched on human nature ten years earlier. The fact that La Fontaine retains his opinion about man at this stage does not imply that opinions on human nature were not changing during the period 1668 - 1678. Indeed, the epoch was characterized by dual tendencies: the recognition of man's intellectual powers and admirable ingenuity, and the condemnation of his more selfish and base attitudes. Thus prolific writers, such as Bossuet, critic, theologian, providentialist and Augustinian to the core, while criticizing man's short-comings, spared no effort to point out his merits as well. Bossuet refutes Montaigne and accuses him of reducing human nature below that of brute beasts. He upholds man as a unique and inestimable creature, particularly in man's position as a being destined by Providence for eternity. Bossuet refers to man's ingenuity as a proof of his superiority over the material universe.

L'homme a presque changé la face du monde; il a su dompter par l'esprit les animaux qui le surmontaient par la force; il a su discipliner leur humeur brutale et contraindre leur liberté indocile; il a même fléchi par adresse les créatures inanimées. La terre n'a-t-elle pas été forcée par son industrie à lui donner des aliments

---

96. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 149 - 150, X, 1,

plus convenables, les plantes à corriger en sa faveur leur aigreur sauvage, les venins même à se tourner en remèdes pour l'amour de lui? Il serait superflu de vous raconter comme il sait ménager les éléments, après tant de sortes de miracles qu'il fait faire tous les jours aux plus intractables, je veux dire au feu et à l'eau, ces deux grands ennemis, qui s'accordent néanmoins à nous servir dans des opérations si utiles et si nécessaires. Quoi plus? Il est monté jusqu'aux cieus....<sup>97</sup>

The reference to man's ingenuity and privileged position in nature is a prelude to Bossuet's insistence on the fact that all these achievements are worthless if they are not backed by good moral behaviour on the part of man. This approach is representative of the new emphasis which formed the basis of an effort at conditioning behaviour by appealing to man's self-respect so as to encourage tendencies favourable to the general good and check the more selfish impulses. Although it seemed to some thinkers that the evil forces in man were too powerful to be overcome, nevertheless, many had faith in the possibility of social conditioning, and did not hesitate to remind man that his privileges impose high moral responsibilities. Parallel to this attitude was the tendency represented about this time in some of Boileau's writing. His eighth satire, published towards the end of 1668, emphasizes man's imperfections and permanent bad nature. Among other comments about man, Boileau notes that:

L'Homme de la nature est le chef et le Roy.  
Bois, prez, champs, animaux, tout est pour son usage,  
Et lui seul a, dis-tu, la raison en partage.  
Il est vrai, de tout temps la raison fut son lot:  
Mais de là je conclus que l'Homme est le plus sot. <sup>98</sup>

It was to this later group of thinkers that La Fontaine gave his sympathy. The fact that Boileau's eighth satire preceded the second collection of fables of La Fontaine combines with the similarities in the plan of attack and sarcastic irony between the satire and the fable, L'Homme et la Couleuvre, to suggest that La Fontaine drew some inspiration from Boileau's satire. Further inspiration was also drawn from the Pantchatantra, a collection of Oriental fables, published by

---

97. Bossuet, J.B., *Traité de la Concupiscence*, Paris, 1694, chapt. viii, See also Lagarde et Michard, (*Collection textes et littérature*), Paris, Bordas, 1964, t.III, pp. 269 -270.

98. Boileau D., *Op. Cit.*, p. 41; *Satire VIII*, ll. 10 -14.

Dubois in 1676. The last episode of this collection is entitled Le Brahme, le Crocodile, l'Arbre, la Vache et le Renard. But in adapting the fable, La Fontaine substitutes the serpent for the crocodile.<sup>99</sup> This modification loses nothing of the moral significance of the Oriental model. It was made obviously to satisfy local taste, for the serpent, "Cet animal traître et pernicieux",<sup>100</sup> evokes among the Christians of the West the same feeling of aversion that the crocodile arouses in the minds of the Brahmins of the East. The Oriental flavour of L'Homme et la Couleuvre is also discernible from the reference of the quarrel between man and the serpent to a series of independent arbitrators. According to Dubois,

C'est la coutume parmi les Indiens qui se querellent de prendre le premier venu pour arbitre de leur différend.<sup>101</sup>

The same fable narrated by Dubois appears also on pages 204 - 209 and 276 - 283 of the Livre des lumières and Les Fables de Pilpai, respectively. These are books with which La Fontaine was very familiar, and there is no doubt that they helped to provide the poet with the literary and intellectual material for further criticism of man. Thus he maintains that man never stops from abusing his privileged position in nature, thereby lowering himself to the level of the beasts. Man is prone to envy, greed, and, above all, inordinate ambition. As if to prove this charge beyond doubt, the poet lets himself loose in a moral meditation which constitutes one of the most penetrating analyses of human psychology in the whole of his fables :

L'homme est ainsi bâti : quand un sujet l'enflamme,  
L'impossibilité disparoît à son âme.  
Combien fait-il de vœux, combien perd-il de pas,  
S'outrant pour acquérir des biens ou de la gloire!  
"Si j'arrondissois mes Etats!  
Si je pouvois remplir mes coffres de ducats!  
Si j'apprenois l'hébreu, les sciences, l'histoire!"  
Tout cela, c'est la mer à boire;  
Mais rien à l'homme ne suffit.  
Pour fournir aux projets que forme un seul esprit,  
Il faudrait quatre corps; encor, loin d'y suffire,  
A mi-chemin je crois que tous demeureroient:  
Quatre Mathusalems bout à bout ne pourroient  
Mettre à fin ce qu'un seul désire.<sup>102</sup>

---

99. Dubois, Pantchatantra, Paris, 1676, pp. 49 - 54.

100. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.153, Fables, X, 9, 1.39.

101. Dubois, Op. Cit., p.342.

102. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.138, Fables, VIII, 25, ll. 31 - 44.

This reflection brings to a sort of climax the portrait of human nature, begun in L'Eunuque and continued through Adonis and the Contes, through the first collection of fables to Psyché. The central theme of this harangue is that it is the disorderly acts of man that are responsible for much of the evil and misery that beset the world, a world full of

Des trompeurs, des scélérats,  
Des tyrans, et des ingrats,  
Mainte imprudente pécore,  
Force sots, force flatteurs....  
Des légions de menteurs.<sup>103</sup>

and which has lost all the virtues of the original world created by the good God :

Ce monde que Dieu même exclut de son partage,  
N'est pas le monde qu'il a fait:  
C'est ce que l'homme impie ajoute à son ouvrage,  
Qui fait que son auteur le condamne et le hait.<sup>104</sup>

These four lines are full of significance, for they provide an important clue to La Fontaine's thinking on the relationship between man and the universe on the one hand and between the entire universe, including man, and Providence who created both, on the other. The poet has now affirmed that God or Divine Providence is essentially good, both in himself and in his original creation, now corrupted by man, after the latter has first corrupted himself. From this affirmation, our poet finds a new confidence in Nature and in the Intelligence that created her. The direct effect of this new faith was the evolution of a Providentialist philosophy which is reflected in the episode of Le Gland et la Citrouille. In this particular fable, the poet tries to illustrate that Nature and the Providence that governs her are well-intentioned, but man, because of the limitations of his intelligence, is incapable of perceiving fully either the details of his relationship with this Providence or the eternal order and interdependence of nature as a whole. It is man's ignorance that gives the impression of disequilibrium in nature, for this ignorance prevents him from recognizing the essentially restrictive character of every gift and every situation. Thus, the villager in the fable sees nothing more disproportioned and lacking in intelligence than the manner in which Providence has positioned the pumpkin and the acorn :

103. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.139, IX, 1, ll. 14 - 19.

104. Œuvres diverses, Paris, 1948, p. 768.

"A quoi songeait, dit-il, l'auteur de tout cela?  
 Il a bien mal placé cette citrouille-là.  
 Hé parbleu! je l'aurois pendue  
 A l'un des chênes que voilà.  
 C'eût été justement l'affaire,  
 Tel fruit, tel arbre, pour bien faire....  
 Pourquoi par exemple,  
 Le gland qui n'est pas gros comme mon petit doigt,  
 Ne pend-il pas en cet endroit?  
 Dieu s'est mépris : plus je contemple  
 Ces fruits ainsi placés, plus il semble à Garo  
 Que l'on a fait un quiproquo. . 105

But when Garo's eyes are opened by the incident of the acorn that hits his nose, he begins to appreciate the universal harmony in the works of nature :

Son nez meurtri le force à changer de langage.  
 Oh! Oh! dit-il, je saigne! et que sera-t-ce donc  
 S'il fût tombé de l'arbre une masse plus lourde,  
 Et que ce gland eût été gourde?  
 Dieu ne l'a pas voulu : sans doute il eut raison  
 J'en vois bien à présent la cause. 106

It follows from this example, continues La Fontaine, that what the limited intelligence of man views as evil or as an error in an individual piece of nature's work is but a part of the eternal perfection of that work in relation to the general design, imposed by Providence, which is beyond human understanding. The poet believes that it is possible to discover everywhere the unfailing marks of the perfect Intelligence that directs nature, provided that one does not surrender oneself to intellectual libertinism. What he seems to find most remarkable about the laws or the operations of this Intelligence is not so much the complexity of their effects as the simplicity of their causes. Those who consider these laws as too rigorous should remember that the continued existence of the universe would be impossible without them.

Sans ces lois et l'heureux secours  
 Qu'elles te fournissent sans cesse,  
 Comment, avec tant de faiblesse,  
 Pourrais-tu conserver et tes biens et tes jours? 107

105. Œuvres complètes, p. 141, Fables, IX, 4, ll. 4 - 19.

106. Ibid., ll. 26 - 31.

107. Recueil de poésies chrétiennes et diverses, Paris, 1671, (Préface).

It is to the extent that nature obeys these immutable laws that she bears witness to the supreme justice and perfection of her creator. In conclusion, therefore, La Fontaine affirms that the determinism which governs nature is no blind necessity, but a benevolent system, whose apparent imperfections are but signs of its eternal excellence :

Dieu fait bien ce qu'il fait. Sans en chercher la preuve  
En tout cet univers, et l'aller parcourant,  
Dans les citrouilles je la trouve.<sup>108</sup>

The evolution of this new providentialism was aided by two major influences, namely, the impact of Malebranchism, Spinozism and Leibnizianism, and the success of the effort made to explain the ethical basis of the Christian religion. The closely related doctrines of Malebranche, Spinoza and Leibniz provided the pivot around which the later seventeenth-century thinking on the human condition vis-a-vis Providence revolved.

Malebranche propounds a particularly providentialist philosophy of nature. According to him, the fact that nature operates through general rather than particular laws explains the paradox of good and evil, and he cites the incidence of monsters as an example. The birth of a human monster, he postulates, is due to the impact which the disordered imagination of an expectant mother has on the child in her womb. This impact is in turn the result of the law of communication, established between the brain of the mother and that of the unborn child. Would it be reasonable and fair, asks Malebranche, if Providence were to abrogate this law, so necessary for the perpetuation of the species, in order to forestall the infection of the child?

Dieu ne veut pas positivement ou directement qu'il  
y ait des monstres, mais il veut positivement cer-  
taines lois de la communication des mouvements,  
desquelles les monstres sont des suites nécessaires.<sup>109</sup>

In the same way, argues the philosopher, if the ground suddenly caved in beneath the feet of an honest man, his death would be the effect of gravity. But it would not be just for Providence to remove the law of gravity because of this effect, tragic though the latter may be. Elaborating his argument, Malebranche affirms that it is man's wanton

---

108. La Fontaine, Œuvres complètes, p.141, IX, 4, ll. 1 - 3

109. Malebranche, Op. Cit., t.III, p.47.

abuse of his free will, and not Providence, that is responsible for the faults ascribed to God. Led astray by concupiscence, man often does not hesitate to criticize Providence and to misuse his own natural faculties. But why, one may ask, does the supposedly omnipotent Providence not use its powers over man to prevent the latter from abusing his own faculties, thereby disrupting the harmony in nature? To this question, Malebranche answers that it would be contrary to divine wisdom to interfere with human freedom at every stage. If it is accepted that nature operates through simple and general laws, one cannot imagine the operation of these laws being ceaselessly disrupted for the sake of specific or isolated cases, except of course, in the case of miracles. Thus, having given man the power to lift his arms or to move his tongue, Providence would not interfere with this power if man, instead of lifting his arms for a just and righteous cause, uses them to strike his innocent and helpless neighbour, nor would Providence strike the man dumb for using his tongue to blaspheme and slander God and other people.

Spinoza, a Dutch philosopher, published his Tractatus-theologico-politicus in 1670. This work was widely read in the second half of the seventeenth century. In it, he asserts that the eternal order of nature wherein man is but a speck, is not that of human reason. Evil or the so-called error in nature is an appearance resulting from man's ignorance of the eternal order and interdependence of nature as a whole. What human reason views as an error or as an evil may not be so in respect of the laws of nature, but only in respect of the laws of reason. Each man is but a part of nature, lying within her bounds; but he is a part framed on the analogy of the whole, and is therefore prone to view that whole as it is referred to his own finite being, and not as it is for Providence as referred to the latter itself, who is the creator. This, argues Spinoza, means that man's view of himself, of God and of the universe in general is fragmented and confused. The integrity, eternity and cogency of this view are rendered deficient by partition, duration and striving. If man were to be liberated from this partial privation, he would realize that the errors seen in the operations of nature are mere appearances.

110

---

110. Spinoza, Benedict de, Tractatus-theologico-politicus, Amsterdam, 1670, p.202.

The philosophy of Leibniz is as sophisticated as that of Spinoza and basically providentialist. He attempts to construct a deductive system for a comprehensive view of the world order. He begins by asserting that God is the ultimate "raison d'être" of all particular things. As there was an infinite number of possible universes in the mind of God at the time of creation, and as only one of these could be actual, there must have been a sufficient reason for God's choice of one universe rather than another. This reason can be found only in the fitness or "convenance", that is, in the degrees of perfection that these worlds possessed, since each possible world had the right to aspire to existence in proportion to the amount of perfection it contained in germ. Thus, argues Leibniz, the actual existence of the best that infinite wisdom made known to Providence is due to the fact that his goodness made him choose it, and his power made him produce it. If the so-called errors which individuals complain about were to be eliminated from nature, this world would cease to be the best of possible worlds, for all is linked up in it. Failure to realize this situation is due to the privation inherent in the condition or the limits of created beings.<sup>111</sup>

It is not clearly known whether La Fontaine ever had a direct contact with Leibniz. What is certain is that the latter's philosophy had some impact on French literary and philosophical circles of the later half of the seventeenth century, particularly as from 1670 onwards. Professor Barber has in his book, Leibniz in France from Arnauld to Voltaire (1955) shown in a brilliant manner Leibniz' contacts with French intellectual circles of the epoch and his influence upon their thinking. Leibniz' first visit to Paris was in March, 1672, when he brought a secret message from his patron, Boineburg, to Louis XIV. But the philosopher took that opportunity to establish firm connections with French scientists and intellectuals among whom were the cardinal de Bouillon and Pierre-Daniel Huet who later became the Bishop of Soissons. These personalities were La Fontaine's well-known patrons and generous friends. It is to be recalled that the poet dedicated Le Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc to the cardinal de

---

111. Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (von), *Monadology*, Amsterdam, 1744, par. 53 - 55; See also *Théodicée*, 1710, par. 7.



Bouillon in 1673, and that one of the architects of La Fontaine's election to the French Academy was the Bishop of Soissons to whom the poet addressed an epistle in 1687.<sup>112</sup> These are sources through which our poet may have had contact with the doctrine of Leibniz. The latter, though an admirer of the cartesian principle of methodical doubt, is critical of Descartes. His attitude to Descartes and his disciples has been described by Barber in these words :

While he (Leibniz) acknowledges the merits of the Cartesian method of systematic doubt, he stresses Descartes' failure to practise it rigorously enough to achieve real progress in the sciences, and attacks his followers for their sectarian concern with expounding Descartes rather than applying his principles....He is prepared to maintain that Descartes' definition of matter solely in terms of extension and movement is nearer to Aristotle than are the teachings of the scholastics, Aristotle's declared disciples and Descartes' bitter enemies. It was in connexion with such cartesian themes as these that Leibniz was later to become widely known in France.<sup>113</sup>

This intellectual involvement with cartesianism is already a sufficient reason to suggest La Fontaine's interest in Leibniz. It is only natural, therefore, that having discovered an affinity of interest in the cartesian problems between himself and the German philosopher, our poet would become more interested in the latter's relationship with his own learned patrons. Thus, although the full impact of Leibnizianism was not felt in France until the period between 1680 and 1730, La Fontaine seems to have been in contact with the ideas of Leibniz earlier than this period through his contact with the above-named patrons.

The second influence that conditioned the poet's providentialist attitude in the second collection of fables was the argument advanced by his friends of Port-Royal and, indeed, by most contemporary theologians, in an effort to explain the ethical basis of the Christian faith in Divine Providence, an argument which La Fontaine seems to have found reasonable and borne out by experience. Contemporary Christian philosophy, both metaphysical and ethical, rests upon the firm corner-

---

112. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 493 - 494 : "Epître a Huet".

113. Barber, W.H., Leibniz in France from Arnauld to Voltaire. A Study in French reactions to Leibnizianism, (1670-1760), Oxford, (Clarendon), 1955, pp. 1 - 2.

stone of God's existence. It provides a solution to the ultimate problem in any ethics. The value of man's acts depends on their meaning as well as on their consequences. This meaning is to a large extent determined by man's relationship to the universe of which he is a part; that is, by the meaning or meaninglessness of human destiny and of the universe itself. Now, the existence of God, as conceived by Christianity and expounded by Gassendi and his disciples, portrays him as the infuser of order, meaning and value throughout his creation. This concept of God erects a firm ethics on the basis of imperatives that are unchallengeable by his lowly and utterly dependent creatures. The idea is emphasized not only by Malebranche, Spinoza and Leibniz, but by other contemporary thinkers, including Pascal<sup>114</sup> and Bossuet<sup>115</sup>, all of whom give a clear picture of man's complete dependence on God and the touchstone of obligation that derives from it. Here then was a settled concept of a structured cosmos, with a guaranteed destiny and authorized values for men. These ideas were actively propagated, stoutly and ably defended in the seventeenth century, not only as a vested institutional interest that was essential to all other institutions, but by many who sincerely thought that the Christian metaphysics was the best basis, indeed the only possible one, for an ethics that could be functionally operative in a rational universe. So, against all attacks and would-be compromises, society upheld in the first place the necessity of God's Providence as a metaphysical postulate.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that La Fontaine, born and bred in this society, held his belief in a rationally ordered universe, directed by a just and wise Providence. His own ethics are concerned above all with the problems of self-fulfilment in this life. This goal leaves him with a strong dislike for dogma and ritual, and with a firm aversion to restrictions or duties which seemed to him to be unrelated to the rational morality, based upon legitimate human desires and needs. At the same time, he was impregnated with an emotional sort of religiosity, revealed in a deep need for peace and order. It was in response to this need, the need to believe in a Being concerned with his personal destiny in an anthropomorphically just universe, that

---

114. Pascal, B., *Op.Cit.*, pp. 124 - 125.

115. Bossuet, J.B., *Oraisons funèbres*, Paris, (Garnier), 1961, pp. 60 - 61.

the poet conceived the kind of "Providence" that imprints the moral nature of God in the totality of his creation, rather than the capricious and sadistic chastiser, portrayed by certain religious sects. He found it difficult, even up to the last minutes of his mortal life, to reconcile the idea of an infinitely loving and watchful Providence with that of eternal chastisement in hell. Thus, addressing the young priest, le P. Poujet, sent to prepare him for a Christian death when he was seriously sick, La Fontaine declares :

"Je me suis mis depuis quelque temps à lire le Nouveau Testament; je vous assure que c'est un fort bon livre, oui, par ma foi, c'est un bon livre; mais il y a un article sur lequel je ne me suis pas rendu, c'est celui de l'éternité des peines; je ne comprends pas comment cette éternité peut s'accorder avec la bonté de Dieu."<sup>116</sup>

This is the sentiment which our poet shared in common with many members of Mme. de La Sablière's salon, particularly with Chaulieu. The latter in his first poem, addressed to the marquis de La Fare, comments on the portrayal of God as an implacable judge whose vengeance endures for all eternity. He writes :

Mon cœur à ce portrait ne connoit pas encore  
Le Dieu que je chéris, ni celui que j'adore....  
Eh! mon Dieu n'est point un Dieu cruel....,  
C'est un Dieu bienfaisant, c'est un Dieu pitoyable,  
Je n'ai pu concevoir que mes fragilités,  
Ni tous ces vains plaisirs qui passent comme un songe,  
Pussent être l'objet de tes sévérités....,<sup>117</sup>  
Qui jamais à mes cris ne fut inexorable.<sup>117</sup>

One sees in La Fontaine's adoption of this sentiment or attitude towards God an expression of the same faith in the goodness of Providence which the poet not only announces in Jupiter et le Métayer (VI, 4), but confirms in Jupiter et les Tonnerres. In the later fable, God is directly called not just the guardian but the father of the world, a father who is most sympathetic and unwilling to strike his children.

Le tonnerre ayant pour guide  
Le père même de ceux  
Qu'il menaçait de ses feux,  
Se contenta de leur crainte;  
Il n'embrasa que l'enceinte  
D'un désert inhabité:  
Tout père frappe à coté.<sup>118</sup>

116. Léon, Petit, La Fontaine à la rencontre de Dieu, Paris, (Nizet) 1970, p.157.

117. Chaulieu, (l'abbé de), Œuvres de Chaulieu, D'après les Manuscrits de l'Auteur, La Haye, 1777, t.I, pp. 12 - 13.

118. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.136, Fables, VIII, 20, ll. 35 - 41.

It is probably because of our poet's refusal to accept the gloomy representations of Providence that some critics classify him along with Molière as libertines, as "esprits forts" or atheists. Perrens, for instance, describes the two authors as examples of paganism and libertinism.

La Fontaine et Molière sont la gloire du libertinage sans épithète. Dans la période effacée où ils l'honorent, le sentiment est trop vif chez eux de leur impuissance pour qu'ils tentent de lui faire reprendre le haut du pavé; mais il témoigne avec éclat de sa vitalité persistante.<sup>119</sup>

This seems to be an error of judgement, particularly as applied to the "bonhomme", La Fontaine. The two authors, though contemporaries and literary friends, are miles apart in their attitude to religion. One has a deeper insight into it and tends to reflect this not only in his literary works but in his later life as well. The other sees religion as an outsider and only refers to it by way of ridicule and disparaging remarks. As Henri Busson puts it,

Molière n'est peut-être pas irrégulier, mais tenu hors de l'Eglise par sa profession, il n'a vu la religion que de l'extérieur et elle ne l'intéresse que pour son comportement social... Son œuvre en a pris un ton d'amertume et de dénigrement pour toutes ces choses que l'on voudrait pouvoir rectifier par des confidences plus personnelles.... La Fontaine, au contraire, a passé sa jeunesse dans des milieux religieux: il en est resté marqué; et il y paraît souvent dans son œuvre.<sup>120</sup>

Certainly, La Fontaine was neither a faithful husband nor an ideal father; he was often found in company of lewd women; like most of his contemporaries, he loved pleasure and amusements; and there is no doubt that he wrote the Contes. But all that does not make him an atheistic libertine, with no belief whatsoever in God. The term "libertins", as defined by Bossuet, a contemporary authority on Catholic dogma and theology, refers to those sceptics who

déclarent la guerre à la Providence divine, et ils ne trouvent rien de plus fort contre elle que la

---

119. Perrens, *Les Libertins en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1896, p. 353.

120. Busson, Henri, *La Religion des Classiques (1660 - 1685)*, Paris, (P.U.F.), 1948, p. 271.

distribution des biens et des maux qui paraît injuste, irrégulière....Le libertin inconsideré s'écrie qu'il n'y a point d'ordre. Il dit en son cœur : il ny a point de Dieu.<sup>121</sup>

From all we have so far known about La Fontaine, there is nothing to suggest that his thinking and attitude fit into this definition. If anything, he is rather, as we have seen in his handling of the fable of Le Gland et la Citrouille, a staunch believer in an intelligently ordered universe, governed by an ever-watchful and impartial Providence. But the most convincing proof of this is the testimony of the poet himself. In a letter to Saint-Evremond, dated 18th December, 1687, he not only justifies his Providentialist faith in the following words :

Rien ne m'engage à faire un livre;  
 Mais la raison m'oblige à vivre  
 En sage citoyen de ce vaste Univers;  
 Citoyen qui, voyant un monde si divers,  
 Rend à son auteur les hommages  
 Que méritent de tels ouvrages  
 Ce devoir acquitté, les beaux vers, les doux sons,  
 Il est vrai, sont peu nécessaires.<sup>122</sup>

but also denounces in strong terms the presumptuous liberty of the atheists :

J'en reviens à ce que vous dites de ma morale,  
 et suis fort aisé que vous ayez de moi l'opinion  
 que vous en avez. Je ne suis pas moins ennemi  
 que vous du faux air d'esprit que prend un libertin.  
 Quiconque l'affectera, je lui donnerai la palme du  
 ridicule.<sup>123</sup>

Clarac has interpreted this sentiment as a reaction

"en épicuriens et non en chrétiens."<sup>124</sup>

But even then, there is a vast difference between atheistic libertinism and prudent epicureanism, such as the type practised by Gassendi and his disciples. Gassendi's epicureanism has nothing of the profanity or irreligion of libertine epicureanism. Conscious of his ecclesiastical position, he endeavours to christianize the epicurean philosophy and to distinguish the truth from speculative reasoning. This is precisely what he admits when he declares :

121. Bossuet, J.B. Œuvres oratoires complètes, Paris, (Petit-Montrouge), 1845-46, t.I, pp. 690 - 693.

122. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 50

123. Ibid., p. 50.

124. Clarac, P., La Fontaine par lui-même, Paris, (Seuil, 1967, p.124.

De même que je trouve très beau de voir le vrai, de même il n'y a pas de plus grande honte que de prendre le faux pour le vrai. Combien facilement cela arrive-t.-il, si l'on n'use pas de précautions plus grandes qu'on ne saurait le stipuler? Mais de toute façon, soit que je soutienne une opinion dogmatiquement, soit que j'en mette une autre à l'épreuve à la manière sceptique, et soit que j'avance une chose comme vraie, soit que j'en déclare une autre probable...., je me sou mets toujours, moi avec tout ce qui est mien, au jugement de l'Eglise Une, Sainte, Catholique, Apostolique et Romaine, dont je suis le fils, et pour la foi de laquelle je suis prêt à donner ma vie avec mon sang....<sup>125</sup>

It would be ridiculous to take Gassendi's brand of scepticism for atheism. Yet his intention is precisely the same as that of La Fontaine.

Je prends Dieu et ses saints à témoin que j'ai un grand zèle pour découvrir la vérité.<sup>126</sup>

Our poet's type of epicureanism is that of Gassendi; it is neither opposed to the idea of the existence of divine Providence nor contrary to the kind of pleasures defined in his ethics of "volupté".

Mais qui dira qu'ils soient contraires  
A ces éternelles leçons?  
On peut goûter la joie en diverses façons:  
Au sein de ses amis répandre mille choses,  
Et, recherchant de tout les effets et les causes,  
A table, au bord d'un bois, le long d'un clair ruisseau,  
Raisonner avec eux sur le bon, sur le beau,  
Pourvu que ce dernier se traite à la légère,  
Et que la Nymphé ou la bergère  
N'occupe notre esprit et nos yeux qu'en passant:  
Le chemin du cœur est glissant.<sup>127</sup>

La Fontaine has in these verses reconciled epicureanism and the ethics of "volupté" with the Christian ideals of fellowship, prudence and moderation. The last two virtues in particular are the keynotes of the Ballade sur Escobar and the Stances sur Escobar, both of which ridicule the casuistry and relaxed moral teaching of the Jesuits vis-à-vis the too austere standards of morality advocated by their rivals of Port-Royal.

125. Gassendi, P., *Dissertations en forme de paradoxes contres les Aristotéliciens*, Livres I et II; Texte établi, traduit et annoté par Bernard Rochot, Paris, (Librairie philosophique J. Vrin), 1959, pp. 10 - 18.

126. *Ibid.*, pp. 10 - 18.

127. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p. 50.

Fi des auteurs qu'on crut au temps jadis!  
 Qu'ont-ils d'égal aux maximes des nôtres?  
 Ils promettaient au plus un paradis:  
 En voici deux, pour ce monde et pour l'autre.<sup>128</sup>

This reaction is against hypocrisy, not against the truths of religion.

Our poet is, in the words of Pierre Clarac,

indigné sincèrement de telles ou telles maximes  
 d'Escobar qui semblaient autoriser l'homicide,  
 le vol, le parjure. Poète de la volupté, il  
 s'amusait des naïfs détours par lesquels certains,  
 qui prétendaient la bannir, essayaient après coup  
 de justifier leurs faiblesses ou celles de leurs  
 pénitents.<sup>129</sup>

It is significant that a later literary historian than Perrens, namely, Antoine Adam, thinks it proper to exclude La Fontaine from the list of libertines and atheists, made in his Les Libertins au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, published as recently as 1962. Our poet was no more libertine than any of his friends, such as La Rochefoucauld, Boileau or Racine, none of whom can rightly be described as an "esprit fort". And if La Fontaine wrote the Contes, he certainly was not the first French writer to do so. He followed the tradition established by such predecessors as Rabelais, Marguerite de Navarre and Des Périers, and these latter have never been classified as atheists for writing tales. If Parts III and IV of the Contes were banned by the authorities, it was mainly because of the audacity of the work in exposing the scandal and hypocrisy practised by the higher clergy and the respectable gentry. The relation between La Fontaine and his society is similar to that between a criminal and the prosecuting witness. The latter cannot be accused of immorality for candidly and sincerely exposing the immoral conduct of the former.

Besides the poet's virtually Christian attitude to Providence, already noted, there is abundant evidence to show his involvement with contemporary religious problems. That he offers no *final* solutions to these problems is secondary to the fact that deeply religious sentiments permeate his writings. It has already been seen, how he attacks, in L'Astrologue qui se laisse tomber dans un puits, the futile and superstitious metaphysics of his epoch and proclaims the omnipotence of

---

128. La. Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.476.

129. Clarac, P., La Fontaine par lui-même, p.74.

divine Providence.<sup>130</sup> His language and moral in Jupiter et le Métayer are those of a believer rather than of an "esprit fort":

Concluons que la Providence  
Sait ce qu'il nous faut mieux que nous.<sup>131</sup>

He collaborated with his friends of Port-Royal in editing and publishing the Recueil des poésies chrétiennes et diverses which appeared in three volumes in 1671. The first volume contains several Stances, inspired partly by Arnauld d'Andilly's Poème sur la vie de Jésus-Christ and partly by the works of De Sacy, another member of Port-Royal, on a number of Christian doctrines. To these are added other pieces drawn from the verses of Gomberville, Godeau, Des Barreaux, Mlle. de Scudéry, Maucroix, Gombault, l'abbé Cotin, Racan, Conrart and Desmarets, all dealing with various Christian themes. Finally, the volume is crowned with a paraphrase of the seventeenth Psalm, taken from the Holy Bible. The contents of volumes two and three are admittedly not as edifying as those of the first, for they include pieces from a different group of writers among whom are Maynard, Sarrazin, Brienne, Racine, Pellisson, Furetière, Benserade and Perrault. To these heterogeneous pieces La Fontaine himself adds two poems which he composed in defence of Fouquet, namely, the Elégie aux Nymphes de Vaux and the Ode au Roi, some versified fragments of Psyché, and sixteen fables drawn from the first collection of fables. But this mixture of edifying and somewhat profane poetry in the same volume should not be misconstrued to mean irreverence to holy literature, given the fact of the title of the work. The collection, judging from its title, was obviously not intended to be just a collection of religious pieces but a medley. Thus the non-edifying verses were included to justify the title and the intended scope of the work. Besides, the less edifying pieces were, in fact, not composed by our poet himself. Later, he was to compose an essentially Christian poem on the theme of chastity which we have already discussed (Le Poème de la capitivité de Saint-Malc), as well as translate the Dies Irae. Whether or not La Fontaine was sincere in expressing these attitudes is a different matter. The relevant issue, at least as far as his intellectual develop-

---

130. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.86, Fables, II, 13, ll.13, 18-20.

131. Ibid., p.112, VI, 4, ll. 30 - 31.



ment is concerned, is the fact that he was able to acquire and brilliantly express broad religious ideas or knowledge which made his works wholesome and acceptable to his readers.

The formation and growth of the poet's Providentialist thought and tendencies are therefore not based on abstract dogma and ritual of one religious sect or the other. His thinking developed from his own personal conception of Providence, that is, from what he actually observed from nature. Thus experience taught him that this Providence, all perfect and all powerful, operates in a way which his lowly creatures cannot fully understand. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways his own. He must, by the necessity of his nature, allow certain situations which the limited human intelligence may view as errors or evils in a given piece of nature's work, but which, in reality, are parts of the perfection of the whole. Struck with profound admiration at the way La Fontaine simplifies the abstract philosophy of Gassendi, Malebranche, Spinoza and Leibniz, on the pre-established harmony of the universe, Chamfort cries out :

Et craindrois-je d'être égaré par mon admiration pour La Fontaine si j'osois dire que le système abstrait : "Tout est bien" paroît peut-être plus vraisemblable, et surtout plus clair, après le discours de Garo, dans la fable de La Citrouille et le Gland, qu'après la lecture de Leibnitz et de Pope lui-même.<sup>132</sup>

And commenting on the principal characteristics of La Fontaine's philosophy, Emile Faguet writes :

Il croit à la Providence, il croit à l'intervention de la divinité dans les affaires humaines.... Il est frappé de ce qu'il y a de vénérable, et peut-être d'indispensable à la moralité dans la créance en l'immortalité de l'âme; pour la sauver, il a recours à des distinctions qui lui permettent de dire qu'il y a une âme chez les animaux, mais qui n'est pas capable d'éternité; qu'il y en a une autre chez les hommes, qui en est capable.<sup>133</sup>

Perhaps Faguet's observation goes farther in the history of La Fontaine's

132. Chamfort, Sébastien, R.N., Op.Cit., t.I, p.242.

133. Faguet, E., La Fontaine, Paris, (Oudin et Cie), 1913, pp. 108 - 109.

intellectual development than we have readed so far, since it incorporates some ideas or items that are yet to be discussed. Nevertheless, his remark reinforces our stand on the Providentialist basis of the poet's view of the world. With this affirmation of faith in Providence and in the latter's goodwill towards nature, La Fontaine can be said to have parted ways with the extreme or the atheistic epicureans who, by Bossuet's definition, neither believe in Providence nor see any order in the universe. Léon Petit, who has made a brilliant study of our poet's religious sentiment writes :

Pendant son âge adulte, La Fontaine a toujours témoigné une religiosité assez vague, croyant en un Dieu auteur de l'univers, et qu'il respecte; il goûte lui aussi l'harmonie du monde et loue d'un cœur sincère la Providence. Plus d'une fois, dans ses œuvres, perçoit son finalisme.<sup>134</sup>

But if La Fontaine's views, accepting a well-ordered universe, presided over by an omniscient and omnipotent Providence, are unchallengeable, their implication that all is for the best in the world that we know, is suspect. With physical evil, such as calamity, disease and pain, it could be argued that these are indifferent things in themselves, and that they could be put to a right or wrong use, depending on how one views them. It is equally legitimate to argue that advantages to mankind at large do sometimes result from physical evils. Disease and the like, for example, have a moral effect, partly as deterrent or reformatory punishments, partly as a stimulus for the exercise of human ingenuity. The scourge of cholera, for instance, may lead to the destruction of slums and to improved sanitation; sleeping sickness may result in fresh discoveries in medical science. The same argument can, of course, be used for folly, sin and wickedness. But the question is, why should these imperfections exist in the first place? Why is it necessary to pass through them to something better? Is it because Providence could not, or because it would not, that it refrained from removing these positive ills from the universe? If what the generality of rational beings see and believe to be evil could be lightly explained away as a prelude to some pre-ordained good, would this not amount

---

134. Léon, Petit, *La Fontaine et Saint-Evremond ou La Tentation de l'Angleterre*, Toulouse, 1953, p. 237.

to a total denial of the reality of the human condition? Are we to believe that in all nature each degree of good is allied with an equal degree of evil, and that the total quantity of each is at every stage equal? Would this not be an admission that the harmony of the universe is always static and that progress is an illusion? It is really difficult to believe that certain evils are mere appearances or just errors in the human mind or that partial evil is absolutely necessary for the realization of universal good in a world directed by an omniscient and perfect Providence. It is possible to argue that all that is, is necessary; or that all is the best it can be; but to say that all is perfect seems false. Perhaps what La Fontaine and his fellow Providentialists mean is that the natural universe is good, not as a result of balances and cancellations, but because the world, as part of the entirety of God's creation, is inherently good.

Be that as it may, the shift of emphasis in the poet's thinking, from the affirmation of evil to the postulate that every dark cloud has its silver lining, is significant. He can now be said to have joined the ranks of the famous thinkers who have a say on the paradox of human nature, on both sides of the Channel, namely, Malebranche, Leibniz, Pope and others. Together, they were to form the object of Voltaire's biting satire in Candide. Put briefly, our poet has become an intellectual in the true sense of the word. His philosophy places man at the disposal of nature, guided by Providence. Inasmuch as one is a part of this nature, one should be contented with one's lot as assigned by her. Since Providence has made and kept everything in its right place, following a universal order, perfect harmony with nature and with oneself consists in recognizing and observing this order. This position thus brings to a logical conclusion the poet's earlier insistence on respect and support for the established order in France. Since it had pleased Providence to place Louis XIV in the position of King and leader of the nation, Frenchmen would be in harmony with nature and with themselves by recognizing the King's role as Head, and taking their own place as dutiful citizens. It can thus be seen that, although La Fontaine's horizon of thought has enlarged, and although his earlier hypothesis for domestic harmony in France has widened out to include universal harmony with nature, unity of thought and attitude is maintained

at every stage. This unity hinges upon his insistence on respect for the natural order of things. His unflinching faith in the goodness of Providence and in its unfailing power over nature leads the poet to accept a situation in which nature's legitimate impulses would not be the ones that society has nourished and corrupted, but rather those of virtue and innocence, as defined in the ethics of "volupté".

The later concept has, at this stage, also enlarged its original scope in the first collection of fables, thanks to further inspirations drawn from Gassendi's interpretation of the term. As understood and interpreted by Gassendi, "volupté" means three things: meditation upon the nature of God so as to become enamoured of his perfections and seek his love; contemplation of death, not as a source of fear, but as a gateway to greater felicity; making full use of the present by schooling oneself in wisdom which alone can discern what is good from what is bad. Gassendi proclaims the right of every man to happiness, but is persuaded that religious felicity is superior to ordinary enjoyment, and that perfect happiness is impossible in a material universe. It behoves men, therefore, continues the philosopher, to content themselves with what is available, and to follow always "la sagesse souriante":

Bonheur est repos du corps et de l'esprit, mais  
à titre de condition nécessaire et non suffisante.  
Il faut que la raison fixe le choix des moyens d'y  
parvenir, qui sont les vertus.<sup>135</sup>

He stresses the importance of virtue in the pursuit of true and lasting "volupté":

Il faut se maintenir dans la résolution de n'abandonner  
jamais le chemin de la vertu et de l'honnêteté, quelque  
occasion qui se présente; de ne préférer jamais l'utile  
à l'honnête, l'injuste à ce qui est juste, et se tenir  
prêt à échouer en gardant sa conscience pure et nette,  
plutôt que de réussir en l'abandonnant; car celui qui  
ne se reproche rien ne doit pas être estimé malheureux,  
ni celui qui se sent criminel être dit heureux.<sup>136</sup>

Virtue and discretion are thus the keynote of the Gassendist concept of "volupté".

135. Gassendi, P., *Syntagma philosophicum*, Paris, 1658, t. II, p. 664.

136. *Ibid.*, p. 664.

In the Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi Bernier stresses the same thing. The search for pleasure, he declares, is in man's nature, but he must choose the right type of pleasure. Total abstinence from pleasure, in the name of virtue or morality, is a false attitude and a sin against nature. The best form of pleasure is derived from bodily health and mental peace. This means that happiness in its essential nature consists in the cheerfulness and well-being, the right disposition and harmony which enable a man to live a calm and steadfast life. He also exalts mental above bodily pleasures and lays stress upon ignorance, fear, superstition and folly as the main causes of those mental pains which disturb most in life by destroying "volupté". Thus, for Bernier, the major obstacle to happiness is whatever contributes to disturb man's serenity and mental satisfaction; whatever causes fear and anxiety. In conclusion, he gives practical suggestions for safeguarding one's mental independence and serenity: groundless fear must be removed by the study of nature which will help one to understand that the fear of death, of the gods, belief in superstitious practices and speculations are chimeras. Desire must be regulated by prudence, and essential virtues cultivated as the means to mental peace. The doctrine of predestination is as much an illusion as the theory that all things happen by chance. Nevertheless, the future is not in our hands or power; our actions alone are in our power to make them what we please. Some desires are natural, some groundless. Of the natural ones, some are necessary as well as natural, while some are natural only. Of the necessary desires, some are necessary if one is to be happy, some if one is even to exist. He who has a clear understanding of these facts should direct every preference or choice towards securing health of body and tranquillity of mind, seeing that these are the sum and the end of a happy life.<sup>137</sup> It can be seen from the tone of these maxims that Bernier was even closer to Epicurus than his master had been.

Re-inforced by the new source of inspiration, La Fontaine enlarged his concept of "volupté" with a new emphasis on the serenity of solitude as a necessary condition for a contemplative, quiet and happy

---

137. Bernier, F., Op. Cit., t.VII, pp. 1 - 3.

life. The pleasure of solitude, which was only mentioned in Psyché as the "sombre plaisir d'un cœur mélancolique"<sup>138</sup>, is now celebrated in exquisite and compelling verses, imitated from lines 475 - 489 of the second Book of Virgil's Géorgiques.

Si j'osois ajouter au mot de l'interprète,  
 J'inspirerois ici l'amour de la retraite:  
 Elle offre à ses amants des biens sans embarras,  
 Biens purs, présents du Ciel, qui naissent sous les pas.  
 Solitude, où je trouve une douceur secrète,  
 Lieux que j'aimai toujours, ne pourrai-je jamais,  
 Loin du monde et du bruit, goûter l'ombre et le frais?  
 Oh! qui m'arrêtera sous vos sombres asiles?<sup>139</sup>

Although the verse pattern of the fable in which these lines appear, namely, Le Songe d'un Habitant du Mogol, is imitated from Virgil, the framework of the narrative and part of the moral are inspired by an episode in Gulistan ou l'Empire des Roses. The latter was written by the Persian poet, Sadi, and translated into French in 1634 by André du Ryer, sieur de Malezair.

Un Dervis vit un jour en songe un Roy qui estoit en Paradis, et un Religieux qui estoit en Enfer, dont il fut tout estonné, croyant que le Religieux devoit estre en Paradis, et le Roy en Enfer, et fit son pouvoir pour sçavoir le sujet du malheur de l'un et du bonheur de l'autre. Ce Roy, luy dit-on, est allé en Paradis, parce qu'il avoit créance aux Religieux, et ce Religieux est allé en Enfer, parce qu'il avoit créance aux Roys. Le Roy est heureux, qui fréquente les convents des Religieux, et le Religieux devient meschant, qui fréquente la cour.<sup>140</sup>

In adapting this story, La Fontaine modifies some of the details to suit his own moral purpose. The circumstances leading to the salvation of the "Vizir" and the perdition of the "Ermite", for example, are modified in order to convey more effectively the idea of solitude which the poet wishes to express. The Vizier is saved, not because of his religious enthusiasm, as in the original version of the episode, but because he profits from the wisdom and peace of solitude. On the other hand, the hermit is lost because he spends his life playing the role of an adroit courtier thereby failing to know himself and his own needs:

---

138. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.453.

139. Ibid., p.158, Fables, XI, 4, ll. 18 - 25.

140. Sadi, Gulistan ou l'Empire des Roses, Texte traduit par André du Ryer, sieur de Malezair, Paris, 1634, p.88.

..... Pendant l'humain séjour,  
 Ce Vizir quelquefois cherchoit la solitude;  
 Cet Ermite aux Vizirs alloit faire sa cour.<sup>141</sup>

Certainly, one understands and appreciates the place of solitude in the search for "volupté"; the other, while pretending to cultivate the habit of solitude, betrays the concept, and becomes a victim of his own duplicity. The theme is very dear to La Fontaine. He takes it up again in the twelfth Book of the fables.

Meanwhile, the second aspect of "volupté", elaborated as a result of his contact with Bernier and other Gassendists of Mme. de La Sablière's circle, is freedom from the fear of death. In the fables of 1678 his thinking on death has undergone a complete change. Applying his new-found Providentialist idea to the interpretation of death, the latter becomes no longer a miserable obsession or the greatest of all evils but a necessary action of nature, an eventuality to be always anticipated and accepted with courage, fortitude and serenity whenever it occurs. Life too, becomes a wonderful opportunity, whose worth and dignity consist not in how long but how well and naturally one lives. Living naturally implies being prepared to leave life as naturally as one entered it, given the fact that death is part of the essential order of nature, an order over which, as we saw earlier, man has little or no jurisdiction.

Death is now visualized as the climax of a process of evolution, which begins at birth, but may stop at any time:

Et le premier instant où les enfans des rois  
 Ouvrent les yeux à la lumière,  
 Est celui qui vient quelquefois  
 Fermer pour toujours leur paupière.  
 Défendez-vous par la grandeur,  
 Alléguez la beauté, la vertu, la jeunesse:  
 La Mort ravit tout sans pudeur.<sup>142</sup>

La Fontaine here emphasizes the random character of death. He speaks of it with a greater resignation than in the first collection of fables.

One cannot help admiring how vividly the poet portrays the fragility of

141. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.158, Fables, XI, 4, ll. 15 - 17.

142. Ibid, p. 127, VIII, 1, ll. 9 - 16.

mortal life. We all know that even when one does not die at the moment of birth, the threat of death continues at every stage of one's life until the moment life leaves the body. As soon as we are born, the body begins to grow, develop and fortify itself. Then it starts to depreciate; the quantity of life diminishes progressively until it reaches a point where nothing is left of it. All the forces of depreciation act continually on man's material frame and it is this action that leads naturally to its final dissolution. By implication, therefore, this change of state, so much dreaded by mortals, is merely a part of the process of growth. It is the last stage of the progressive and necessary evolution and disintegration of one body in order that another may be formed. Thus we cannot but agree with our poet that, this being the case, death should not come as a surprise to anyone except the fool and the unwary :

La Mort ne surprend point le sage;  
 Il est toujours prêt à partir,  
 S'étant su lui-même avertir  
 Du temps où l'on se doit résoudre à ce passage.  
 Ce temps, hélas! embrasse tous les temps:  
 Qu'on le partage en jours, en heures, en moments,  
 Il n'en est point qu'il ne comprenne  
 Dans le fatal tribut; tous sont de son domaine. <sup>143</sup>

But at the same time that the poet admonishes men to be ever vigilant and prepared for death, he admits that no mortal is sufficiently armed against the surprise of death. The most philosophical of men pales before it; he needs all the resources of moral courage and fortitude in order to face death with serenity. Thus, in spite of the commonplace nature of death, it still comes to most mortal men as a surprise. This, explains the poet, is due largely to human presumption.

Il n'est rien de moins ignoré,  
 Et puisqu'il faut que je le die,  
 Rien où l'on soit moins préparé. <sup>144</sup>

To illustrate this fact, he presents the example of a centenarian who, in spite of the manifest ageing and disintegration of his body, is still reluctant to part with life. He accuses death of taking him by surprise; adduces a thousand and one excuses to stay the fatal blow: His wife wants him to wait for her; he has yet to write his will, put his house in order, provide for his dependants and complete his outstanding com-

---

143. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.127, ll. 1 - 8.

144. Ibid., ll. 17 - 19.



mitments. Why should death not tarry a little? Thus he cries out :

.....attendez quelque peu.  
 Ma femme ne veut pas que je parte sans elle;  
 Il me reste à pourvoir un arrière-neveu;  
 Souffrez qu'à mon logis j'ajoute encore une aîle.  
 Que vous êtes pressante ô déesse cruelle!<sup>145</sup>

The force and compelling tone of the argument, which death advances in reply to the centenarian, reflect vividly the attitude of our poet at this time: The flame of life begins to dim long before being finally extinguished. Do the ageing process, the gradual weakening of the body and the countless demise of men, women and children around not constitute sufficient warning for the centenarian? What other signal does he expect from death?

Vieillard, lui dit la Mort, je ne t'ai point surpris;  
 Tu te plains sans raison de mon impatience:  
 Eh! n'as-tu pas cent ans....?  
 Ne te donna-t-on pas des avis, quand la cause  
 Du marcher et du mouvement,  
 Quand les esprits, le sentiment,  
 Quand tout faillit en toi? Plus de goût, plus d'ouïe;  
 Toute chose pour toi semble être évanouie;  
 Pour toi l'astre du jour prend des soins superflus;  
 Tu regrettes des biens qui ne te touchent plus.  
 Je t'ai fait voir tes camarades  
 Ou morts, ou mourants, ou malades:  
 Qu'est-ce que tout cela, qu'un avertissement?<sup>146</sup>

Having thus confounded the hesitant old man with this vigorous logic and tremendous force of argument, death says to him :

Allons, vieillard, et sans réplique.  
 Il n'importe à la République  
 Que tu fasses ton testament.<sup>147</sup>

And our poet approves that death is right :

La Mort avait raison. Je voudrais qu'à cet âge  
 On sortît de la vie ainsi que d'un banquet,  
 Remerciant son hôte, et qu'on fît son paquet;  
 Car de combien peut-on retarder le voyage?  
 Tu murmures, vieillard! Vois ces jeunes mourir,  
 Vois-les marcher, vois-les courir  
 A des morts, il est vrai, glorieuses et belles,  
 Mais sûres cependant, et quelquefois cruelles.  
 J'ai beau te le crier; mon zèle est indiscret:  
 Le plus semblable aux morts meurt le plus à regret.<sup>148</sup>

145. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.127, VIII, 1, ll. 25 - 29.

146. Ibid., ll. 30 - 47.

147. Ibid., ll. 48 - 50.

148. Ibid., ll. 50 - 60.

But how did La Fontaine come by the half-pathetic, half-authoritarian dialogue between death and the centenarian? This dialogue is contained neither in Æsop's nor in Phædrus' collection of apologues. We are persuaded to believe that this episode was inspired by a narrative recorded in Le Faut-Mourir et les excuses inutiles que l'on apporte à cette nécessité. In this curious but popular work by Jacques-Jacques, published first in 1661, the author introduces death who, in a monologue, celebrates his exploits and his unchallengeable domination over all created things :

Que ces Disputes sont frivoles,  
 Qu'on agite dans les Escholes,  
 Pour sçavoir quel est le plus fort;  
 L'amour, le vin, ou bien la mort.  
 Je crois qu'il faut faire litière  
 Du débat de cette matière,  
 C'est un compte à dormir debout;  
 Sçait-on pas que par dessus tout,  
 Glorieusement je l'emporte;  
 Et que je suis toujours plus forte?<sup>149</sup>

This monologue is followed by a succession of curious dialogues between the almighty death and a number of men, including the Pope, a young damsel, engaged to be married, a convict, a King, a rich and decrepit old man, a canon, a nun, a blind man, a wounded soldier, lying mortally ill on a hospital bed, and a destitute old beggar, each of whom adduces one excuse or the other to stay or delay the hand of death. Only the Pope indicates his readiness to follow death there and then, since it is the law of God and Nature that all created things should die. He declares :

Non, vous ne me surprenez pas,  
 Je suis tout prest à comparestre,  
 Devant mon Dieu; devant mon Maistre:  
 C'est une Loy, c'est un Edict,  
 Que de sa bouche il nous a dit,  
 Que tout homme se doit resoudre,  
 Tost ou tard, de tomber en poudre:  
 Nul m'appelle de cet Arrest,  
 De te subir je suis tout prest....<sup>150</sup>

The popularity which Jacques' book enjoyed, having gone through

---

149. Jacques, J., *Le Faut-mourir et les excuses inutiles que l'on apporte à cette nécessité*, Lyon, (Michel Duhan), 1661, p.9.

150. *Ibid.*, p.21.

several editions between 1661 and 1710, leaves little doubt that our poet had access to it. Besides, the argument built up in his fable, both by death itself and by its victim, recaptures all the vivacity and naturalness of the ones which appear in Le Faut-mourir... It is possible that the poet also drew inspiration from Bossuet's funeral orations. It was usual at that time for people, including non-believers, to gather around the orator-theologian whenever a Christian died, to hear him preach. It is one of the strange weaknesses of the human mind, declares Bossuet, that death never seems imminent to mortal men, although it manifests itself everywhere and at all times :

S'il passe dans son esprit quelque désir volage de  
s'y préparer, il dissipe bientôt ces noires idées....  
les mortels n'ont pas moins de soin d'ensevelir les  
pensées de la mort que d'enterrer les morts mêmes. 151

The last sentence of the above quotation recalls immediately the episode of the three young men, described by La Fontaine in Le Vieillard et les trois jeunes Hommes. Drunk with the vanity of youth, and forgetful of the fragile nature of human life, the young men mock at an octogenarian planting some crops which he apparently will not live to harvest :

A quoi bon charger votre vie  
Des soins d'un avenir qui n'est pas fait pour vous?  
Ne songez désormais qu'à vos erreurs passées;  
Quittez le long espoir et les vastes pensées;  
Tout cela ne convient qu'à nous. 152

But suddenly, the natural order seems reversed by a higher power; the three young rascals are stricken by death; and the octogenarian outlives them! The human condition , argues our poet in this fable, is such that youth should never boast of the future nor accuse the aged of having lived for too long, since the ephemeral character of human life renders all mortals equally susceptible to death at any time.

151. Bossuet, J-B., Œuvres, Tours, (Gallimard), 1961, p.1073.

152. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.160, Fables, XI, 8, ll. 8 - 12.

.... Tout établissement  
 Vient tard et dure peu. La main des Parques blêmes  
 De vos jours et des miens se joue également.  
 Nos termes sont pareils par leur courte durée.  
 Qui de nous des clartez de la voûte azurée  
 Doit jouir le dernier? Est-il aucun moment  
 Qui vous puisse assurer d'un second seulement?<sup>153</sup>

These lines re-echo the precise warning issued by Epicurus :

Quant à ceux qui conseillent au jeune homme de  
 bien vivre, et au vieillard de bien mourir, ce  
 sont des naïfs, non seulement parce que la vie a  
 du charme, même pour le vieillard, mais parce  
 que le souci de bien vivre et le soucis de bien  
 mourir ne font qu'un.<sup>154</sup>

La Fontaine's debt to the ideas of Epicurus for the development of his thinking on death will be taken up later in this chapter. But it is important to note that he did not have to read the volumes of moral maxims written by Epicurus. He reached Epicurus through Lucretius and Seneca. The latter belabours the theme of the uncertainty of the future and the brevity of human life in his Epistles or his Lettres à Lucilius:

Quelle sottise d'organiser par avance notre vie,  
 quand nous ne sommes même pas maîtres du  
 lendemain! Quelle folie de se lancer dans de  
 longs espoirs! J'achèterai, je construirai, je  
 prêterai, je me ferai rendre, j'exercerai des  
 charges, enfin, las et plein de jours, je prendrai  
 ma retraite. Tout, crois moi, même pour les  
 heureux est incertain. Nul homme n'a le droit  
 de s'assurer sur l'avenir.<sup>155</sup>

Considering the fact that Seneca's Lettres à Lucilius, from which this quotation is taken, is the very work which La Fontaine helped his cousin, Pintrel, to translate into French, it is only to be expected that it had a more direct impact on the poet than the volumes of Epicurus. This is not to suggest that the latter had no influence on La Fontaine's thinking on death in the second collection of fables. In fact, as we shall see shortly, the teachings of Epicurus on this subject were the credo of the milieu in which our poet found himself at

---

153. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.160, Fables, XI, 8, ll. 14 - 20.

154. Cresson, A., Op.Cit., p.69.

155. Sénèque, L.A., Op.Cit., t.III, p.121.

this time. All that we are trying to add is that the influence of his reading of Seneca did much to colour his epicurean ideas on death with stoic prudence and mental resignation, similar to the Christian attitude, for his insistence that no one should be quick to laugh at a man weakened by age, nor accuse him of living for too long, nor pride oneself at being still too young to die, since no age is too early or too late for the cold hand of death, is the essence of Seneca's moral and the official position of the Christian church. Thus, at the same time that La Fontaine reminds the reader of the imminence and the inevitability of death, he shows him how best to avoid being surprised and extreme pessimism. Contemplate death, he now seems to say, not to nourish your fears of it, but to reassure yourself of your readiness to face it whenever it comes. Men should therefore enjoy themselves as much as possible while there is still time, so that they may have little to regret when death knocks at their doors.

Hâte-toi, mon ami. Tu n'as pas tant à vivre....  
 Jouis. Je le ferai. Mais quand donc? Dès demain,  
 Eh! mon ami, la mort te peut prendre en chemin.  
 Jouis dès aujourd'hui....<sup>156</sup>

This attitude surely contrasts sharply with the emotional fear and dread of death which permeate the fables of 1668. How then can we account for this change of mental attitude? The secret seems to lie in the attitude of the milieu or the society in which La Fontaine found himself at this time. As we already know, Mme. de La Sablière's circle was a centre of Gassendism and of the brand of epicureanism adopted by Bernier. The latter's epicureanism stresses contempt of death as an essential ingredient of "volupté". So, in this circle, virtually dominated by him, death was viewed philosophically, rather than emotionally, as a necessary action of nature. La Fontaine was thus frequenting the company of kindred spirits to whom he was temperamentally drawn. The group included Chaulieu, Mme. Deshoulières and Dehénault. What unites them is their common contempt for death and their acceptance of Epicurus and Lucretius as their ancestral masters. It will be recalled that Epicurus despises death and teaches

---

156. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.138, Fables, VIII, 27, ll. 7 - 10.

his disciples to expect no punishment or reward after this life. Death is nothing, he maintains; it is simply the end of life which should not be allowed to disturb our peace of mind :

La mort n'est rien pour nous puisque le bien et le mal n'existent que dans la sensation. D'où il suit qu'une connaissance exacte de ce fait que la mort n'est rien pour nous permet de jouir de cette vie mortelle, en nous évitant d'y ajouter une idée de durée éternelle et en nous enlevant le regret de l'immortalité. Car il n'y a rien de redoutable dans la vie pour qui a compris qu'il n'y a rien de redoutable dans le fait de ne vivre plus. Celui qui déclare craindre la mort non pas parce qu'une fois venue elle est redoutable, mais parce qu'il est redoutable de l'attendre est donc un sot.<sup>157</sup>

Lucretius, re-echoing his master's voice, likens death to a well-deserved rest. Men, he insists, should depart this life as if from a banquet hall, thanking their great hostess, Nature, for the quiet rest granted to them.

Qu'est-ce donc qui te tient tant à cœur ô mortel, pour t'abandonner à cette douleur et à ces plaintes sans mesure? Pourquoi la mort t'arrache-t-elle ces gémissements et ces pleurs? Car si tu as pu jouir à ton gré de ta vie passée, si tous ces plaisirs n'ont pas été comme entassés dans un vase percé, s'ils ne se sont pas écoulés et perdus sans profit; pourquoi, tel un convive rassasié, ne point te retirer de la vie; pourquoi, pauvre sot, ne point prendre de bonne grâce un repos que rien ne troublera?<sup>158</sup>

This idea of equating departure from life with departure from a banquet hall is the same analogy which La Fontaine uses in his argument against the hesitant centenarian (VIII, 1). But again, although he is, as he tells us himself, a "disciple de Lucrèce", it is not known whether he seized this analogy directly from Lucretius or through Seneca, for the latter, also our poet's cherished mentor, expresses the same view, quoting Epicurus.<sup>159</sup>

The foregoing thinkers were the acknowledged patron saints and heroes of the group with whom La Fontaine was associating at this time. Their credo was deeply entrenched in the idea that death is nothing to be feared. This attitude, they argue, makes the morta-

---

157. Cresson, A., Op. Cit., p. 68..

158. Lucrèce, C.T., Op. Cit., t.I, pp. 137 - 138.

159. Sénèque, L.A. Op. Cit., t.I, p.121 (Lettre xxii).

lity of life more bearable, not by prolonging life itself, but by removing the yearning for immortality. Life has no terrors for those who have thoroughly understood that there are no terrors for them on ceasing to live. Death, therefore, is nothing to us, seeing that when we live, it has not come, and when we die, it ceases to affect us.

Mme. Deshoulières, in particular, stresses the commonplace character of death and urges her readers to be prepared.

Prépare-y ton cœur, dis-toy, c'est une dette  
Qu'en recevant le jour j'ay faite,  
Nous ne naissons que pour mourir. 160

She returns to this theme over and over again, sometimes associating it with vanity and false pleasures :

Que l'homme connoist peu la mort qu'il appréhende,  
Quand il dit qu'elle le surprend!  
Elle naist avec lui; sans cesse luy demande  
Un tribut dont en vain son orgueil se défend. 161

Chaulieu's third poem opposes to the inevitability of death the art of living happily. He proposes a studied reaction to the nothingness of life. Man has been brought into this life without being consulted, continues Chaulieu, and it is only to be expected that he will equally depart from it without warning. There is no reason why human wisdom should not devise ways to enjoy to the fullest, the little time man is given to live among sensible beings. In conclusion, he denies the existence of dark abodes of horror for souls after death, the reality of demons, hell and heaven. All these speculations are false. Death is simply the end of life, and they are wise who have got themselves used to this idea.

Aux penses de la mort accoutume ton âme;  
Hors son nom seulement elle n'a rien d'affreux. 162

In contact with these practical epicureans, our poet saw in practice what he had known theoretically from Epicurus, Lucretius and Seneca. He was first in touch with them through Chaulieu, who was a frequent visitor to Mme. de La Sablière's salon, and later through his attendances at the brilliant parties organized at the Temple by the

160. Deshoulières, A. (Mme.), Op. Cit., p. 92 : "Reflexions diverses".

161. Ibid., p. 92.

162. Chaulieu, (l'abbé de), Op. Cit., t. I., p. 20. "Sur la Mort".

Condés and the Contis. It is little wonder, therefore, that he readily adopts the attitude of the group towards death. Surprisingly, their influence does not seem to have affected his Providentialist faith. But let us not forget that our poet has a way of taking out whatever he wants from an individual or group without necessarily surrendering his deep personal convictions or mental liberty. In this particular instance, what he imitates from his new associates is their contempt for death, not their libertinism. His attitude is the human one of seeking happiness in liberation from fear and superstition, that is, the attitude of a humanist, who must rise above the ignorant commoner by his readiness to confront death philosophically, with self-mastery and stoic resignation, whenever it comes. This attitude virtually breaks the siege of apprehension that dominates the earlier collection of fables.

But if maturity liberated La Fontaine from the fear of death, it did nothing to clear the uncertainty that beclouded his mind on the controversial question of what follows after mortal life, that is, the question of immortality. Whether or not the poet believed in the latter is a subtle problem to resolve, but we shall examine the evidence of his works and his life, and from there draw some conclusions. We have noted that he was at one and the same time a disciple of Epicurus and Lucretius, of Seneca and Gassendi. Now, for the first two masters, death is simply the end of life, which is not followed by anything by way of immortality, punishment or reward. Commenting on the unity of the human soul and the body, as a single perishable entity, susceptible to identical physiological processes, Lucretius declares :

Naissant avec le corps, l'âme croît avec lui  
 Et comme lui vieillit: un pied faible, inhabile,  
 Fait chanceler l'enfant, sa pensée est débile;  
 Quand la force de l'homme avec l'âge a grandi,  
 La raison est plus sûre et le cœur plus hardi;  
 Que de son bras puissant nous brise la vieillesse,  
 Que nos membres usés succombent de faiblesse,  
 L'âme boîte, la langue extravague, l'esprit \*  
 Ne faut-il pas aussi que l'âme consumée  
 Se perde avec le corps, comme au vent la fumée,  
 Puisque ensemble naissant, croissant en même temps,  
 Ils s'affaissent tous deux sous le fardeau des ans....  
 Si la substance en est ainsi décomposable, 163  
 Et change avec le corps, l'âme est donc périssable.

---

163. Lucretius, C.T., Op.Cit., pp.101-102 (Livre III, ll.436-518.)

\* A line is obviously omitted. Cf. source.



Of the second two masters of our poet, namely, Seneca and Gassendi, the former gives an impression of professing his belief in the immortality of the soul. But he does not make it quite clear whether by "soul" he means the essence of man, as represented in the eternal goodness of his virtuous works, or as symbolized in the concept of an immaterial, and therefore, immortal spirit, inhabiting the human body. He appears to have sentimentally mixed up the two elements when he declares :

Il me plaisait d'examiner, ou plutôt, pardi,  
de me persuader de l'immortalité de l'âme.  
Je me confiais en effet volontiers à l'opinion  
des grands hommes qui promettent la félicité  
suprême plus qu'ils ne la prouvent. Je me  
donnais à un si grand espoir, je me dégoûtais  
déjà de moi-même, je méprisais déjà le reste  
d'une vie affaiblie, prêt à faire le saut vers  
ce temps sans limite, vers cette éternité que  
j'allais posséder. Et voilà que soudain, dans  
mon lit, ta lettre est venue m'enlever à un  
si beau rêve.<sup>164</sup>

Elsewhere in the same work, he conceives the soul as an idea, "une idée immortelle, immuable, indestructible". This implies that the human soul or the "soul" of mankind is the same thing as the great idea of humanity, that is the idea of creating a being called man, as eternally conceived by God. Viewed in this sense, asserts Seneca, the soul is immortal :

Les hommes meurent; mais l'humanité, c'est-à-dire le  
modèle suivant lequel l'homme est fait, demeure et ne  
souffre de rien, tandis que l'homme peine et disparaît.<sup>165</sup>

According to this interpretation, the soul of man is related to man in the same way that God is related to the universe. Individuals may die but the soul of humanity will endure as long as its creator.<sup>166</sup> This, for Seneca, is immortality. It can be seen from this that he does not take the idea of immortality literally or in the way the generality of men, particularly the Christians, understand it. Judging from the bantering tone of the work in which this quotation appears, we can only deduce that Seneca is, in fact, ridiculing the idea of immortality as did Epicurus and his followers. For Gassendi, however, such an extreme position would be untenable. He has to adapt his own brand of

---

164. Sénèque, L.A., Op.Cit., t.III, p.127, (Lettre cii).

165. Ibid., t.I, p.341 (Lettre lxxv).

166. Ibid., p. 337 - 349.

epicureanism to Christianity, the principal tenet of whose doctrine is the belief in the immortality of the soul. The question then is, which of these masters is most likely to have had a greater impact on La Fontaine's thinking on immortality? Here, our only guide seems to be the testimony provided partly by the personal attitude of the poet himself and partly by his writings. We have already noted from his Providentialist philosophy his parting of ways with the atheistic epicureans and his opting for what one might call the "épicurisme blanchi" or the prudent epicureanism of Gassendi. This is already an important indication, for nothing stops the critic from seeing in this prudent approach to life the source of the poet's decision to renounce his Contes, confess his sins, and receive the viaticum, when he was seriously sick in 1693. It was this prudence, translated in the desire to regain his health or, failing that, to gain eternal salvation, that induced him to receive the last sacraments of the Church. For it was, and still is, an important article of the Catholic dogma that the viaticum, when worthily received, has the power not only to remove all kinds of sin and ensure salvation, but also to restore good health to the sick, if God wills it. La Fontaine was well aware of this possible though doubtful escape route, having learnt of the doctrine of salvation at the Oratory, and may have wished to exploit it. If not, what else could have induced a person like our poet to take the panic measures that he took? Knowing him as we do, it is possible that he may have been prompted to take those steps more by the desire to try this possibility of clinging to the only life he knew and cherished, namely, his earthly life, than by considerations of immortality. Perhaps, he was guided by sincere repentance, pious sentiments, and the hope of immortality. One can never be sure. But it is evident from his writings that of all the moderate epicurean poets of the seventeenth century, only he seems to have considered the idea of life after death possible. He composed edifying poems in which he makes an effort to conform to the doctrines of the Church on this subject. Thus, the poem, Féronde ou le Purgatoire is in harmony with the principles of Catholic theology on immortality.

Puis il demande aux gens comme on les nomme,  
 Ce qu'ils font là, d'où vient que dans ce lieu  
 L'on le retient; et qu'a-t-il fait à Dieu?  
 L'un d'eux lui dit: "Console-toi, Féronde;  
 Tu te verras citoyen du haut monde  
 Dans mille ans d'hui, complets et bien comptés;  
 Auparavant il faut d'aucuns péchés  
 Te nettoyer en ce saint purgatoire;  
 Ton âme un jour plus blanche que l'ivoire  
 En sortira". L'ange consolateur  
 Donne, à ces mots, au pauvre receveur  
 Huit ou dix coups de forte discipline,  
 En lui disant, "C'est ton humeur mutine,  
 Et trop jalouse, et déplaisant à Dieu,  
 Qui te retient pour mille ans en ce lieu. 167

Considering the fact that this piece appeared with the Contes, considering its bantering tone, and the date of its composition, which was before the poet's emergency conversion, the possibility is great that he was merely ridiculing the doctrine of purgatory. But even then, in the most philosophical of his writings, namely, the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, he gives us some reason to believe that he had faith in immortality, for, like Gassendi, he endows man with two kinds of soul: one corporeal, perishable and shared in common with other animals; the other spiritual, immaterial and peculiar to man. We shall come back to this discourse later on. Meanwhile one can only imagine that, as an intellectual, La Fontaine must have known clearly that immateriality implies immortality. Whatever can be said for or against La Fontaine's attitude to the doctrine of immortality, it is difficult to deny the fact that his mind was constantly haunted by the gloomy uncertainty of eternity. This is borne out by the anxious tone of a letter which he wrote to his life-long friend, Maucroix, dated 10th February, 1695, shortly before his death. The concluding part of the letter reads:

O mon cher! mourir n'est rien; mais songes-tu que  
 je vais comparoître devant Dieu? Tu sais comme j'ai  
 vécu. Avant que tu reçoives ce billet, les portes de  
 l'Eternité seront peut-être ouvertes pour moi. 168

The implication of this letter is self-evident. This is no longer a question of being ironical or using conventional language; the poet is here writing from the very bottom of his heart in an attempt to pour

---

167. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.264.

168. Ibid., p.63.

out his innermost disquietude to his trusted friend. It is obvious from the tone of this letter that the poet was obsessed with the thought of immortality, and wanted some consolation and reassuring words from his ecclesiastical friend. The latter knew it, and did not fail to expedite, four days later, the much needed encouragement and consolation. In his reply, dated 14th February, Maucroix wrote:

Mon cher ami, la douleur que ta dernière lettre me cause est telle que tu te la dois imaginer. Mais en même temps, je te dirai que j'ai bien de la consolation des dispositions chrétiennes où je te vois. Mon très cher, les plus justes ont besoin de la miséricorde de Dieu. Prends-y donc une entière confiance, et souviens-toi qu'il s'appelle le Père des miséricordes et le Dieu de toute consolation. Invoque-le de tout ton cœur. Qu'est-ce qu'une véritable contrition ne peut obtenir de cette bonté infinie? Si Dieu te fait la grâce de te renvoyer la santé, j'espère que tu viendras passer avec moi les restes de ta vie, et que souvent nous parlerons ensemble des miséricordes de Dieu...<sup>169</sup>

Two months later, La Fontaine was dead.

His cynical and lucid intelligence abhorred uncertainties as much as it hated vain speculations. He dreaded being deceived either by the theologians and philosophers or by the metaphysicians and atheists. In reaction to all these, he kept an open and flexible mind, trusting only in the goodness of Nature and the goodwill of the supreme Intelligence that guides her, hence his Providentialist attitude. The latter is based upon a three-dimensional approach to existence, combining the lightheartedness of Gassendi, the sternness of Lucretius and the resignation of Seneca.

---

169. Maucroix, François de, Œuvres diverses, Reims, 1854, t.II. pp. 214 - 215.

### 3. The Poet as Philosopher : Discours à Mme. de La Sablière

La Fontaine's Providentialist faith, which we discussed in the last section, is based on three main propositions, namely, that the natural universe is harmoniously ordered; that it is presided over by a wise and infallible Providence; that the latter is fair and just to all creatures and has put everything, including the lower animals and even plants, in its right place in the world. This concept of a well-organized cosmos was, however, destined to be rudely and implicitly, if not explicitly, challenged by yet another aspect of the controversy between Descartes and Gassendi. This time, the quarrel is not exactly about reason and the senses in man alone, but over the issue of animal intelligence or animal soul. Descartes was led by a long train of argument to postulate that animals were machines, devoid of soul and intelligence (Cf. Chapter V, pp. 347-49). His intellectual rival, Gassendi, challenged this theory. The quarrel between the two men, which continued among their disciples long after both of them were dead, posed a moral and philosophical problem to La Fontaine's new Providentialism. Was the poet to assert that the lower animals are endowed with the same faculties as men or was he to accept the postulate that they are mere automata? If he accepted the former, how was he to prove it? If the latter, how would he reconcile it with his own cherished idea that Providence is fair and just to all creatures? Is it possible that such a Providence denied intelligence of some kind to some of his creatures, which are expected to live and survive in a universe inhabited by rational beings? This problem was to provide the surest test of La Fontaine's intellectual maturity. We shall examine later in this chapter his attitude to the problem, as represented in his Discours à Mme. de La Sablière. Meanwhile, it is pertinent to survey briefly the evolution of the intellectual context in which he reacted, if only to show the basis upon which the various groups based their arguments.

The problem of animal soul, which had a great impact on seventeenth-century thought, has a very long history dating back to Greek and Roman antiquity. Plato (427? - 347 B.C.) believes in the existence of a single world-soul that animates the universe. He thinks of it as consisting of three components: reason, spirit and de-

sire. Reason is the defining property of an immaterial substance which survives bodily death, while spirit and desire die with the body. In the cognitive sphere, he considers sensation and imagination as inferior to reason and intimately connected with the perishable body.<sup>170</sup>

Aristotle (384 - 322 .B.C.) approaches the matter from a biological rather than an epistemological standpoint. Reason, spirit and desire represent different levels of being alive. To be alive is to possess a self-originating tendency towards an end. This condition is represented at the lowest level of being in nutrition and reproduction. Thus plants, which are endowed with the power of nutrition and reproduction only have a low-grade soul. Animals add to these two faculties those of sensation, locomotion and desire; while men possess, in addition to all these, the faculty of reason or intellect by means of which desire is regulated. The lower level of soul is a prerequisite for the higher; and the possession of a higher-grade soul changes the manner in which the lower one functions. Thus men, being rational, in addition to possessing all the other characteristics, perceive and act in a way different from that of the animals.<sup>171</sup> From this explanation, Aristotle deduces three levels of soul : the vegetative, the sensitive and the rational soul.<sup>172</sup> This doctrine was later challenged by Lucretius, who attacks the supernatural character credited to the human soul by the later interpreters of Aristotle. For Lucretius, the human soul is basically the same and as mortal as that of the lower animals.<sup>173</sup>

In the Middle Ages, a distorted form of aristotelianism reappeared, mixed with animism, magic and other irrational elements. By the sixteenth century, a new form of naturalism which tended to include man entirely within the animal species evolved. Man, it was thought, belongs entirely to the animal world. He is not a superior being destined for eternity, but merely differs from the other animals

---

170. Plato, *The Republic*; quoted in R. Demos, *The Philosophy of Plato*, New York, 1939, p.92.

171. Aristotle, *De Anima*, (translated by R. D. Hicks, Cambridge), 1907, pp. 49 - 61.

172. Philippe, M.D. *Initiation à la philosophie d'Aristote*, Paris, 1956, pp. 49 - 61.

173. Lucrece, C.T., *Op.Cit.*, pp. 101 - 102.

in the same way that one species differs from the other. Each species is distinguished by some specific faculty. Thus man's use of reason and speech is counterbalanced by the perfection of the instinct and sensitivity in the lower species. This doctrine is usually associated with Montaigne. Rejecting the distinctions made by Aristotle, Montaigne goes to the extreme of equating human reason with or even reducing it below, the level of animal instinct :

Au reste, quelle sorte de nostre suffisance ne reconnoissons nous aux opérations des animaux? Est-il police réglée avec plus d'ordre, diversifiée à plus de charges et d'offices, et plus constamment entretenue que celle des mouches à miel? Cette disposition d'action et de vocation si ordonnée, le pouvons nous imaginer se conduire sans discours et sans Providence?<sup>174</sup>

Montaigne equates animal soul with instinct and human soul with intelligence, and concludes that the beasts can do more and better with instinct than men can do with reason, judging from the incidence of human folly and inconsistency. This inference leads naturally to one conclusion, namely, that man would do better to trust his animal instincts than his reason. It can thus be seen that before Descartes, attempts to find an answer to the problem of animal soul or intelligence followed three main currents of thought : the platonist theory of a single pantheistic world-soul (anima-mundi), permeating all forms of life, and forming the very essence of all living things, the aristotelian doctrine of three forms of soul, namely, the vegetative, the sensitive and the rational soul, and finally the radical naturalism of Montaigne which saw little or no difference between man and animals.<sup>175</sup>

The publication of Descartes' Discours de la Méthode in 1637 intensified the debate in the seventeenth century, with Gassendi and his disciples providing the main opposition to the new cartesianism. Impressed by the regularity and perfection of animal behaviour, which Montaigne also admires, Descartes visualized this as part of a coherent mechanistic pattern, whose very consistency and perfection are proofs

---

174. Montaigne, Op. Cit., p. 432.

175. Rosenfield, L.C., From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine, New York, 1941, pp. 1 - 10.

of its mechanical character. The principle of the new theory is that man possesses a soul assigned to his body to direct it. Animals, on the other hand, are mere machines. Descartes advances three reasons in support of his theory. Animals do not possess an articulate language in which to express themselves as clearly as men do. While the beasts might do certain things as well as or even better than men, they fail in others, thus suggesting that they act not from knowledge but only from the disposition of their organs. For, while reason is a universal tool that may serve in all kinds of circumstances, these organs need a special arrangement for each specialized action. It is therefore morally impossible that an automaton should contain so many varied arrangements as to act in all the circumstances of life in the same way reason enables men to act. It is a very remarkable thing, argues Descartes, that there are no men so dull and so stupid, not even lunatics, that they cannot arrange various words and form a sentence to make themselves understood. No other animal, however perfect or well-bred, can do the like. This failure to do so does not come from their lacking the organs, for magpies and parrots can utter words like men, and yet they cannot talk like them, that is, with any sign of awareness of their own effort. But even the deaf and dumb among men usually invent ways of making their thoughts understood by those around them. It follows, therefore, that what the beasts do better than men is no proof that animals have intelligence, for in that case, they would have a better one than any man, and would excel men all round. Just as a clock, composed merely of wheels and springs, can reckon the hours and measure time more accurately than men, so the disposition of the animal organs enables them to act perfectly well in specific circumstances.<sup>176</sup> In conclusion, Descartes asserts that after the error of denying God, there is none more likely to turn weak minds from the straight way of virtue than the supposition that the souls of brutes must be of the same nature as that of men, thus suggesting that, after this life, men have no more to hope for or fear than flies and ants :

---

176. Descartes, R., Op.Cit., pp. 43 - 45.



Après l'erreur de ceux qui nient Dieu, il n'y a point qui éloigne plutôt les esprits faibles du chemin de la vertu que d'imaginer que l'âme des bêtes soit de même nature que la nôtre, et que par conséquent, nous n'avons rien à craindre ni à espérer après cette vie, non plus que les mouches et les fourmis.<sup>177</sup>

Descartes' conclusion to the effect that animals are automata is a logical development of his argument on reason. It will be recalled that, for him, only self-conscious and perceptive beings, such as man, can be said to possess a soul and to be capable of sensation, feeling and intuition. Descartes' demonstration of the value of methodical reasoning, as used by the geometers, in solving human practical and intellectual problems, not only gives an enormous boost to man's intellectual and moral activities, but also removes the faculty of consciousness and feeling from the rest of nature. Since animals are incapable of intuition along the lines outlined by the philosopher, what else can they be except unconscious mechanical entities consisting purely of matter? The soul, argues Descartes, is an entirely spiritual being whose whole nature or essence is to think, to be conscious. The idea of pure matter does not and cannot include consciousness or feeling. Body is neither less nor more than extension and the latter can only be the object not the subject of thought. Man knows, feels, and is perfectly aware that he has a body to which he is united, and that with it he forms a real and intimate unity. Man is able to know all these facts because he possesses a soul which is rational and spiritual. It is only this unity of body and soul that explains the existence in the latter itself of the ideas of the senses: feeling of bodily pleasures and pain and of the passions. It is this unity too which explains that our bodily faculties of imagination and sense are still, somehow, permeated with thought, and are able to perceive and grasp, though sometimes imperfectly, things that are objects of pure understanding, such as space and geometrical forms, thus enabling us to give value to common experiences and to devise scientific experiment. Given these attributes of the soul, argues Descartes, it would be absurd to imagine that the animals, which have shown by their lack of the power

---

177. Descartes, R., Op. Cit., p. 45.

of intuition, that they do not possess any soul, are capable of feeling, of consciousness and other operations incumbent upon the existence of the soul.

The delicate implication of the doctrine of automatism, namely, the possible inference from animal-to human-machines is noted by no less a person than the famous historian of cartesiansim, namely, Bouillier. If between man-made machines and creatures of God, argues Bouillier, there is but a difference of degree of complexity of the machines, and if the machine implies a technician whose power and intelligence are commensurate with each other, there is no need to infer from animal-and human-machines the existence of a being of infinite power and intelligence, for just as human power and ingenuity suffice to explain the possibilities of man-made machines, just so is it possible to imagine the presence in the world of Intelligencês other than God. Viewed in this way, concludes Bouillier, the fabricator of man may well turn out to be more than human but less than omnipotent. The cartesian doctrine of automatism, stretched to its logical limits, would lead to just this conclusion.<sup>178</sup>

In spite of this implication, in spite of the denial of feeling and consciousness to the rest of nature, the cartesian doctrine won over a large number of adherents, particularly among the scholastics who welcomed the distinction which it makes between the spiritual and the purely material nature of man. Descartes himself does not use the term "Animal-machine", but it was soon to be in common use among both his adherents and his opponents. Thus Mme. Deshoulières refers to her dog as "la machine aboyante"; and Nicole alludes to animals as "ces machines animées";<sup>179</sup> while Fênelon sees the mechanical perfection of the animal instinct as a proof of God's infinite wisdom

Qu'y a-t-il plus beau qu'une machine qui se répare  
et se renouvelle sans cesse elle-même!<sup>180</sup>

Rohault examines the behaviour of animals from the physical point of view and affirms that the conduct of the brute beasts can be sufficiently explained mechanically, that is, without any inference to soul. For

---

178. Bouillier, *Essai philosophique sur l'âme des bêtes*, (2ème édition) Amsterdam, 1737, t.I, p.64.

179. Busson, H., et Gohin, F., *Discours à Mme. de La Sablière*, Paris, 1938, p.81.

180. Fênelon, *Traité de l'existence et des attributs de Dieu*, Paris, pp. 38, 36-38.

him, animals are incapable of either feeling or perception, but are endowed with the power of motion. It is true that the mechanism of animal automation is complicated, but so is that of a clock. As the winding of a clock makes it work so also the food taken by the animals enables their body-machine to work.<sup>181</sup> Bossuet, the shrewd Providentialist, views animal behaviour as a mechanical operation. He emphasizes the great difference between man and beast, and accuses Montaigne of having committed a serious error of judgement by equating animals with men.<sup>182</sup>

The cartesians have no thought of analysing what the Church prescribed about the dual nature of man. They seem to have been more concerned with proving that such prescriptions are necessary, and with justifying that view of the world upon which the prescriptions are based. This is the source of cartesian dualism. Descartes and his followers have to find room in their system for two entirely disparate worlds. They never really give any explanation of the connection of these two worlds, except to affirm that they are both there, and that their interaction is mysterious. But it was not just this dogmatic attitude and the paradox, implied in the analogy of animal-automatism, that sparked off Gassendi's attack on the cartesian doctrine. He challenged Descartes mainly because the latter's denial of feeling and sensation to the animals contradicts his atomistic view of the universe and the basis of his whole philosophy. (Cf. Chapter V, pp. 287.- 288).

It is little wonder, therefore, that Gassendi and his followers challenged the new doctrine in spite of its widespread popularity. Against it, they oppose the epicurean theory of atoms combining with each other to form sensitive bodies of various shapes and sizes. For Gassendi, there is a material soul commonly shared by the various species in nature according to the manner in which the atoms forming these species are ordered. This form of soul takes charge of the corporeal functions of nutrition, growth, reproduction, feeling and sensation.

---

181. Rohault, *Entretiens*, Paris, 1671, pp. 152-161. In the seventeenth century the clock was a symbol of an extremely complex mechanism just like the electronic brains of today.

182. Bossuet, J.B., *De la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même*, Paris, 1722, p.167.

Vous considérez l'Ame ou l'Esprit non comme une partie, mais comme la totalité même de l'Ame pensante; et je n'insiste pas sur le fait qu'il y aura donc dans l'homme et dans tout animal deux Ames, l'une par laquelle existe la pensée; l'autre qui produit la nutrition, la croissance, la génération; ou en tout cas que la nutrition, la croissance, la génération se rapportent à un autre principe que l'Ame.<sup>183</sup>

The material soul, envisaged by Gassendi, exists in plants in the form of a very active, flame-like substance which pervades the whole plant. This substance is capable of feeling, contrary to what Descartes and his supporters would have people to believe. The sensitivity of the soul-substance in plants is evident from the fact that plants feel the sunlight and have a tendency to turn towards it; the more sensitive plants react to touch; all plants feed, reproduce themselves and die when deprived of nourishment. These operations would not have been possible if plants were not really living, and to be alive implies the existence of some form of soul. Thus this material soul cannot be separated from the body of a living thing.

Celui qui, ayant à prouver que l'Ame ne se fortifie, ne s'affaiblit, ni ne se trouble avec le corps, ne dit rien d'autre sinon que l'Ame se sert du corps comme d'un instrument, celui-là ne démontre rien, mais pose ce qui est en question.<sup>184</sup>

In his Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi, Bernier defines the character of the animal soul. This corporeal soul exists in the form of a contexture of very fine and mobile particles similar to those of heat, and moving in the cavities and passages of the animal body :

une substance, une contexture de corpuscules très subtils, et très mobiles ou actifs, semblables à ceux qui font le feu et la chaleur.<sup>185</sup>

It exists as a real principle, not merely an effect of the arrangement of the organs of the animal body, for in the absence of an animating principle, such an arrangement would still lack a motive force and source of life. This material soul, capable of feeling and sensation, is commonly shared by men, animals and plants. But in addition to this corporeal soul, man also possesses a spiritual and immaterial soul, denied to the rest of the animal creation. This makes him aware of his own thoughts and enables him to conceive abstract ideas.

183. Gassendi, P., *Disquisitio metaphysica*...., p.128.

184. *Ibid.*, p.108.

185. Bernier, F., *Op. Cit.*, t.V, p.486.

Il doit conséquemment y avoir dans l'homme une double faculté, l'une qui soit de la partie incorporelle et soit appelée esprit, entendement, souveraine raison; l'autre qui soit de la partie corporelle, et soit dite faculté imaginatrice, imagination, fantaisie....<sup>186</sup>

This implies that whereas the spiritual and immaterial soul gives men the intellectual powers of perception and cogitation, beyond the capability of the other animals, the simpler and more straightforward operations of the intelligence are common to men and animals. Thus the difference between animal and human intelligence is one of degree, not of kind.

L'homme, en tant qu'il vit ou qu'il est animé est par une sienne partie fort peu au-dessous des Anges, et subsistant après le trépas, et par l'autre partie il n'est point différent des brutes....en sorte qu'il est dit selon la première vivre une vie intellectuelle et angélique, et, selon la dernière, une vie animale et pareille à celle des bêtes....Par la première, il est dit fait à l'image et ressemblance de Dieu, de même qu'il est dit par la seconde avoir été semblable aux fols et aux animaux déraisonnables.<sup>187</sup>

For the Gassendists, it is difficult to deny sensation and feeling to animals, since the latter are endowed with brain, eyes, ears and other organs which are susceptible to sense impression. To deny a measure of intelligence to animals on the grounds that intelligence belongs to pure thought and that the latter is independent of the body, is to suggest that the brain, which is a part of the body, plays no part whatsoever in the process of feeling and thought.

Par la distinction conceptuelle qui existe entre la pensée et la corporéité, on ne saurait prouver une distinction réelle entre ces choses; et il ne convenait pas de dissimuler l'objection qui a été faite au sujet du raisonnement des bêtes et de la nécessité du cerveau pour raisonner.<sup>188</sup>

Animals, argue the gassendists, can distinguish one thing from the other, thus suggesting that they can discriminate. If they are denied these powers, how do the cartesians explain why the images in the animal brain do not blur out each other? The animal organs would be useless unless one can posit a form of soul, with powers of attention, feeling and discrimination, to take charge of their functioning.

---

186. Bernier, F., Op.Cit., t.VI, p.238.

187. Ibid., t.V, p.486.

188. Gassendi, P., Op.Cit., p.118.

Si l'Ame est une chose qui sent, qui imagine, etc...., il semble nécessaire d'attribuer une âme aux Bêtes.... Il y a chez les Bêtes des nerfs, des esprits, un cerveau; il y a dans le cerveau un principe connaissant qui de la même manière reçoit ce que lui est rapporté par les esprits et accomplit la sensation.<sup>189</sup>

This concept of the soul is the basis of the hierarchy of beings, ranging from basic matter to spirit, which Gassendi visualizes in nature.<sup>190</sup>

But logical as his argument seems, it is not without its own weaknesses too. The inference from animal behaviour to a sensitive soul is no more valid than an inference from the same argument to a rational soul. The cartesians, challenged to show why men are not machines, defy the gassendists to prove why the sensitive soul they assign to the animals cannot suffice for man. Conscious of this dilemma, some adherents of the doctrine of animal soul, such as Daniel, go to the extent of suggesting the existence of some form of animal soul, situated midway between matter and pure spirit, capable of sensation and feeling, but different from the human soul.<sup>191</sup> But the idea of a substance halfway between matter and spirit envisages an impossible situation, for not even God can create such a substance. It is the essence of everything that feels, thinks and knows to be spirit, and of everything deprived of these faculties to be matter. The twisting of ideas through dialectical manipulations was so characteristic of the whole controversy that all sides were in dilemma. If we grant the power of perception to man when he performs a certain operation, what justification have we to deny this power to an animal when it carries out the same operation? An eclectic, such as Du Hamel, is driven in both directions. He argues that the activities of the instinct in animals are proofs of automatism. At the same time, he admits that the operation of the instincts involves sense experience and that the latter is impossible in the absence of some form of soul. Per-

189. Gassendi, P., Op.Cit., p.148.

190. Bernier, F., Op.Cit., t.V, p.486.

191. Daniel, Voyage du monde de Descartes, Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée d'une cinquième partie, ajoutée aux quatre précédents, par le Père Daniel, de la Compagnie de Jésus, Paris, (Nicolas Pepie), 1702, 5ème partie, pp. 437, 504, 509 - 510.

plexed and in dilemma, Du Hamel concludes by warning against putting the animals on the same level as men or making them only a shade inferior to men, or even conceding them liberty and a rational soul.<sup>192</sup>

Three facts emerge from the diversified character of the controversy which we have reviewed. Firstly, although La Fontaine is not a professional philosopher, the impact of cartesianism and the Descartes/Gassendi controversy arising therefrom was too widespread to escape the attention of a curious intellectual such as our poet was. Secondly, the problem of animal soul was at that time, as now, bound up with the much-discussed question as to whether animals reason at all or not. Thirdly, in the intellectual context that prevailed at the epoch, this matter could scarcely be investigated or the problem formulated without taking a stand with respect to the metaphysical question of the soul. Let us examine how these implications affected La Fontaine as a mature intellectual. Descartes' metaphysical elevation of the human soul to the supernatural order produced that form of idealism which shuts the soul up in itself and tends to deny the existence of the external world of sensitive objects. This is so because there can be no object for a soul conceived of as separate from the body, an idea which suggests the same thing as the concept of a Providence separate from its world. By affirming that animals are insensitive automata, Descartes struck down with this single blow the whole basis upon which La Fontaine's moral philosophy is based. Firstly, it challenged the poet's providentialist view of a harmoniously ordered cosmos and substituted for it a new conception of the universe, based upon mere extension and motion. Secondly, the cartesian doctrine weakened the moral and intellectual foundation of the Fables. La Fontaine's image or vision of animals, as seen in the Fables, reveals a personal sympathy for these creatures. The fabulist has such an interest in the characteristic details of animal behaviour that the idea of animals being mere unfeeling automata must have been abhorrent to him. For the poet, animals are so like men that their behaviour provides moral lessons for human beings.

---

192. Du Hamel, *De Corpore animato*, Paris, 1673, pp. 320-331.

Je me sers d'animaux pour instruire les hommes.<sup>193</sup>

He could not have made this statement if animals appeared to him to be no more than unfeeling machines. Machines are very different from men. Only the animals seem to fulfil the conditions required by the fables, for they are creatures sufficiently different from men to create the effect of fiction, and at the same time, so close to men as to symbolize the reality about humanity.

Les propriétés des animaux et leurs divers  
caractères y sont exprimés; par conséquent,  
les nôtres aussi, puisque nous sommes  
l'abrégé de ce qu'il y a de bon et de mauvais  
dans les créatures irraisonnables.<sup>194</sup>

To La Fontaine, therefore, the cartesian doctrine of animal automatism appeared more absurd and incomprehensible than the most ridiculous speculation of the charlatans and astrologers.

But to challenge the doctrine, the poet needed a strong intellectual backing, that is, a good understanding of the doctrine itself and the arguments for and against it. The question then is, how did La Fontaine, a mere poet, come by the knowledge, the intelligent understanding of the problem, and the formidable force of argument, which poses such a rude challenge to cartesianism in the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière and Les Souris et le Chat-huant? Put briefly, what were the forces and influences which contributed to the development of the poet's thinking on this subject? To answer this question, it is important to realize, to begin with, that La Fontaine's approach to the problem is essentially gassendist. And to find out how the poet came by Gassendi's philosophy on animal intelligence, we have to return to that bastion of gassendism in which our poet found himself as he was working on the second collection of fables, namely the circle of Mme. de La Sablière. Here, the first influence on La Fontaine that springs readily to mind is that of Bernier, the gassendist philosopher and scientist who rehabilitated his master's philosophy in eight volumes. It was mainly through him that our poet became familiar with the anti-cartesian ideas which so admirably suited his own views and added weight to his arguments.

---

193. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.66, Fables, "Dédicace à Monseigneur le Dauphin". (1668).

194. Ibid., pp. 66 - 68, (Préface).



Bernier was certainly well-qualified to present Gassendi's philosophy to La Fontaine. As mentioned earlier on, Bernier had served Gassendi as private secretary. He had also toured India and other Oriental countries, and was well-acquainted with their civilisations and culture. He observed, for example, that the doctrine of "Anima-Mundi" was an important feature of many Oriental religions, particularly Indian Brahminism. It was from him that La Fontaine got the ideas he uses in the fable of La Souris métamorphosée en Fille (IX, 7). Bernier completely rejects Descartes' mechanistic conception of animals, arguing that both Plato and Empedocles had believed animals to be endowed with feelings, a measure of intelligence and a lot of sensitive power. The fact that animals are living things presupposes the existence of some form of soul in them.

L'Ame est une chose qui étant dans le corps  
fait que l'animal est dit vivre et exister.... Cette  
substance.... semble être une espèce de petite  
flamme, qui, tant qu'elle est en vigueur, ou  
qu'elle demeure allumée, fait la vie de l'animal,  
lequel meurt lorsqu'elle s'éteint....<sup>195</sup>

Besides Bernier's ideas, La Fontaine also consulted other sources of information on the subject, for there was a long line of interesting works treating the same problem during that epoch. The more immediate ones, which the poet is most certain to have read, include G. Pardie's Discours de la connaissance des bêtes (1672), Du Hamel's De mente humana (1672) and De corpore animato (1673), Guillaume Lamy's Discours anatomiques (1675), and Dilly's De l'âme des bêtes (1676). All these works were circulating shortly before the publication of the fables of 1678, and nearly all of them manifest gassendist sympathy. Their anti-cartesian tendency could not have failed to draw our poet's attention to them.

His first reaction to the cartesian doctrine of automatism is naturally one of strong opposition. In Psyché, he takes a position which certainly anticipated this opposition by granting the faculties of feeling and of some form of communication to the lower animals.

---

195. Bernier, F., Op.Cit., t.V, p.476.

Je vous nie vos deux propositions, aussi bien la seconde que la première. Quelque opinion qu'ait eue l'école jusqu'à présent, je ne conviens pas avec elle que le rire appartienne à l'homme privativement au reste des animaux. Il faudrait entendre la langue de ces derniers pour connaître qu'ils ne rient point. Je les tiens sujets à toutes nos passions....<sup>196</sup>

The opposition, signalled in Psyché, is intensified in the fable, La Souris métamorphosée en Fille. The framework of this fable was borrowed from Le Livre des lumières ou la conduite des Rois. Combining this source with the stories about the Brahminic religion and belief of the Oriental lands, told to him by Bernier, La Fontaine composed the philosophical fable quoted above. Under the guise of discussing the doctrine of Brahminism, he attacks and refutes the neoplatonic theory of Pythagoras relating to the transmigration of souls. The pythagorean doctrine is a distorted form of Platonism, based upon the concept of a single World-soul animating the whole universe, and diffused into every living creature. According to this doctrine, as soon as a creature dies, be it a man or an animal, the soul of the dead creature infuses itself into other natural forms, such as plants or other living organisms, in order to maintain the cycle of existence.

L'homme ne meurt point tout entier; le cadavre qu'on brûle ou qu'on inhume n'est pas tout l'homme. Ce qu'il y a de plus précieux en lui survit à son corps : son âme passe dans celle de l'ami qu'il laisse; son cœur, dans celui de sa veuve et de ses orphelins qui le pleurent. Son esprit est passé dans la doctrine qu'il a transmise à ses élèves; et le souffle de vie qui circulait dans tous ses membres et mettait en jeu tous les ressorts de la frêle machine humaine, du moment que ces ressorts sont usés ou rompus, retourne à la grande âme du monde; celle de l'homme en est une parcelle, une émanation; elle remonte à sa source première, pour aussitôt transmigrer dans d'autres corps à peine organisés, soit dans l'air, soit au fond des eaux, soit dans les entrailles de la terre : car tous les êtres sont parfaitement égaux aux yeux maternels de la nature.<sup>197</sup>

---

196. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 424.

197. Pythagore, Voyage de Pythagore en Egypte, dans la Chaldée, dans l'Inde, en Crète, à Sparte, en Sicile, à Rome, à Carthage, à Marseille et dans les Gaules, suivis de ses lois politiques et morales, Paris, (Deterville), 1799, t.I, pp. 114 - 115.

As a prelude to the attack he is to launch on cartesian automatism, therefore, La Fontaine first of all refutes the equally abhorrent pythagorean doctrine. He begins by summarizing the doctrine :

Ils ont en tête  
 Que notre âme, | au sortir d'un roi,  
 Entre dans un ciron, ou dans telle autre bête  
 Qu'il plaît au Sort : c'est là l'un des points de leur loi.  
 Pythagore chez eux a puisé ce mystère.<sup>198</sup>

Then follows a clear-cut and brilliant refutation of the theory.

Je prends droit là-dessus contre le Bramin même  
 ...D'où vient donc que ce corps si bien organisé  
 Ne peut obliger son hôtesse  
 De s'unir au Soleil? Un Rat eut sa tendresse.  
 Tout débattu, tout bien pesé,  
 Les âmes des souris et les âmes des belles  
 Sont très différentes entre elles.<sup>199</sup>

With this side but closely related issue thrashed out, La Fontaine concentrates his entire intellectual energy upon the refutation of the new cartesianism. This exercise is carried out in two major works, namely, the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière and Les Souris et le Chat-huant. It is not clearly known which of the two pieces preceded the other in the date of their composition. But in the arrangement which the poet gives Books IX, X and XI of the Fables, the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière in the ninth Book precedes Les Souris et le Chat-huant in the eleventh. This seems to give some indication about the development of La Fontaine's thought and a final statement of his position on the question, particularly as the later fable is the last episode of the eleventh Book of fables, coming just before the Epilogue. Given this arrangement, and for chronological reasons, it has been considered more systematic to treat the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière first.

This latter is not, strictly speaking, a fable, although it incorporates some fables. After the introductory compliments to Mme. de La Sablière, and the distinction between "la bagatelle" and "science" (ll. 1 - 25), the poet embarks upon his subject, taking every care to arrange his argument in the true philosophical fashion. Accordingly, he begins with a clear exposition of the theory he is about to refute,

---

198. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.142, Fables, IX, 7, ll. 8 - 12.

199. Ibid., ll. 63, 71 - 80.

namely, the cartesian doctrine of automatism (ll. 26 - 72). This is followed by a set of clear-cut laboratory cases of the deer (ll. 73-81), the mother partridge (ll. 82 - 91), the beavers (ll. 92 - 115) and the Polish boubaks (ll. 116 - 135), all of them logically arranged to lead to the desired conclusion.

In a mixture of humour and irony, he presents an intelligent analysis of the cartesian doctrine which he describes as new, subtle, attractive and audacious.

De certaine philosophie,  
Subtile, engageante, et hardie,  
On l'appelle nouvelle....<sup>200</sup>

Then he goes on to analyse the cartesian theory :

...Ils disent donc  
Que la bête est une machine;  
Qu'en elle tout se fait sans choix et par ressorts:  
Nul sentiment, point d'âme; en elle tout est corps.  
Telle est la montre qui chemine  
A pas toujours égaux, aveugle et sans dessein.  
Ouvrez-la, lisez dans son sein:  
Mainte roue y tient lieu de tout l'esprit du monde;  
La première y meut la seconde;  
Une troisième suit : elle sonne à la fin.  
Au dire de ces gens, la bête est toute telle :  
"L'objet la frappe en un endroit;  
Ce lieu frappé s'en va tout droit,  
Selon nous, au voisin en porter la nouvelle.  
Le sens de proche en proche aussitôt la reçoit.  
L'impression se fait." Mais comment se fait-elle?  
Selon eux, par nécessité  
Sans passion, sans volonté  
L'Animal se sent agité  
De mouvements que le vulgaire appelle  
Tristesse, joie, amour, plaisir, douleur cruelle,  
Ou quelque autre de ces états.  
Mais ce n'est point cela : ne vous y trompez pas.  
Qu'est-ce donc? Une montre. Et nous? C'est autre chose.<sup>201</sup>

The full and impartial exposition of Descartes' doctrine is made for two main reasons. Firstly, such an exposition provides La Fontaine with an occasion to lay bare through a subtle combination of direct reporting and emphasis the salient features of the new philosophy, namely, his rival's denial of feeling and sensation to the animals and

---

200. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.147, IX, Discours à Mme de La Sablière, ll. 25 - 28.

201. Ibid., ll. 29 - 52.

his attribution of all animal behaviour to mechanical necessity. Secondly, the widespread popularity enjoyed by the theory of automatism at that time demands that in order to attack the doctrine effectively one must adopt a paradoxical approach based upon a system of contrasts. And to heighten the effect of these contrasts, the basic principles of the rival's theory must be placed side by side with the opposing arguments before the reading public. This, of course, follows the same paradoxical approach used by Gassendi in his attack on Descartes in the Disquisitio Metaphysica...

If there is any doubt left in the mind of the reader about La Fontaine's intention in making this long analysis of the cartesian doctrine, this doubt is immediately dispelled by the next five lines. Here the poet ingeniously shifts the emphasis from the theory itself to its formulator, Descartes himself. The intellectual personality of the latter is given an added stress by means of a well-chosen metaphor which portrays him as a mortal, believed to be intelligent enough to be considered as a god among the pagans.

Voici de la façon que Descartes l'expose,  
 Descartes, ce mortel dont on eut fait un dieu  
 Chez les païens, et qui tient le milieu  
 Entre l'homme et l'esprit, comme entre l'huître et l'homme  
 Le tient tel de nos gens, franche bête de somme.<sup>202</sup>

This image of Descartes is immediately followed by a graphic, two-line summary of his doctrine, made obviously to render the preceding lengthy exposition of the theory more tangible to the reader.

Voici, dis-je, comment raisonne cet auteur:  
 "Sur tous les animaux, enfants du Créateur,  
 J'ai le don de penser; et je sais que je pense".<sup>203</sup>

There is no doubt that the above is a subtle reference to Descartes' statement: "Je pense donc je suis". This method of presentation is admirably logical and in line with the true philosophical tradition. It brings out early in our poet's Discours... and in a more vivid manner the contrast between Descartes' image as an intellectual demi-god, who is supposed to be methodical in his reasoning and the indefensibility of his theory denying feeling and consciousness to all living creatures except man. It must be emphasized, however, that La Fontaine is by no means casting aspersion on the person of Descartes.

---

202. La Fontaine, p. 147, IX, Discours à Mme. de La Sablière.  
 ll. 53 - 57.

203. Ibid., ll. 58 - 60.

He has no doubt at all about the latter's intellectual ability and compares him with Epicurus. What the poet is saying here is that in this particular theory, as in that of reason and knowledge, the postulate of this great thinker, Descartes, is not borne out by the evidence of experience. The whole of La Fontaine's argument in the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière and in Les Souris et le Chat-huant is based upon this system of contrasts, built up between Descartes' subtle reasoning and the facts of experience.

Thus against his rival's argument that man alone possesses the faculty of feeling and sensation, the poet opposes a series of evidence based upon the observation of the actual behaviour of animals. He cites the case of "le vieux cerf", who gets a young deer to take its place and who uses hundreds of other tricks to elude the hunter and his dogs :

Que de raisonnement pour conserver ses jours!  
Le retour sur ses pas, les malices, le tours,  
Et le change, et cent stratagèmes....<sup>204</sup>

Could these operations be possible without a measure of feeling and reflection? Apart from this example, argues the poet, there are also the cases of the mother partridge who limps away from its defenceless young ones in order to draw away the attention of the hunters, and when it has done so, and its young ones are out of danger, flies away. (ll. 82 - 91), the beavers, who have a society more highly organised than that of the primitive savages, and who contrive to build dams, bridges and the type of houses they need (ll. 92 - 115). At this point La Fontaine draws a tentative conclusion :

Que ces castors ne soient qu'un corps vide d'esprit,  
Jamais on ne pourra m'obliger à le croire.<sup>205</sup>

Then the poet goes on to quote his fourth example, namely, that of the Polish boubaks who, from one generation to the next, wage bloody wars against their enemies on the other side of the border, wars that are conducted according to well-laid plans and stratagems:

204. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.147, ll. 76 -78.

205. Ibid., ll. 114 - 115.

Corps de garde avancé, vedettes, espions,  
 Embuscades, partis, et mille inventions  
 D'une pernicieuse et maudite science,  
 Fille du Styx et mère des héros,  
 Exercent de ces animaux  
 Le bons sens et l'expérience.  
 Pour chanter leurs combats, l'Achéron nous devrait  
 Rendre Homère. Ah! s'il le rendait....<sup>206</sup>

With this vital evidence our poet yields the floor to the rival of Epicurus, Descartes, and challenges him to comment on these cases :

Que dirait ce dernier sur ces exemples-ci?  
 Ce que j'ai déjà dit : qu'aux bêtes la nature  
 Peut par les seuls ressorts opérer tout ceci;  
 Que la mémoire est corporelle;  
 Et que, pour en venir aux exemples divers  
 Que j'ai mis en jour dans ces vers,  
 L'animal n'a besoin que d'elle.<sup>207</sup>

The reference to Descartes as Epicurus' rival (l.138) rather than that of Gassendi has a strategic implication. It reveals La Fontaine's awareness of his model's source of intellectual strength, and of the fact that although Gassendi enjoyed considerable respect among his contemporaries, he was by no means Descartes' intellectual equal. Epicurus has a better claim to this honour than Gassendi. What our poet is trying to put across here is the fact that by opposing Descartes, he is not merely aping Gassendi, but drawing inspiration from an equally great and respected philosopher, namely, Epicurus. The recognition of the latter as a distinguished moral philosopher was widespread in the second half of the seventeenth century and his name was quoted as a justification for various attitudes and ways of life. Epicurus, it will be recalled, bases his system upon the evidence of experience rather than abstract reasoning. It is little wonder, therefore, that La Fontaine's argument is abundantly illustrated with examples drawn from what experience has shown to be the true nature of animals. To the episode of the Polish boubaks, the poet adds yet another striking example, Les deux Rats, le Renard et l'Œuf. The ingenuity with which the two rats, mentioned in this story, transport an egg cannot be explained away by reference to mere mechanical adaptation. The operation is, for our poet, a clear proof of some measure of intelligence, thus proving

206. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.147, ll. 116-123. Cf. ll. 124 - 137.

207. Ibid., ll. 138 - 144. Cf. ll. 145 - 178.

that animals are not just automata devoid of all feeling and sensation and intelligence. The vehemence of La Fontaine's argument is reflected in the emphatic tone of the challenge which he throws to the cartesians at the end of these examples :

Qu'on m'aïlle soutenir après un tel récit,  
Que les bêtes n'ont point d'esprit.<sup>208</sup>

This opposition is profound and total and reveals the poet's deep personal involvement with the cartesian theory of animal automatism. La Fontaine has to fight and refute it if his literary masterpiece, the Fables, and his own conception of man and the universe are to stand. From the rationalistic point of view too, he finds the doctrine of the cartesians indefensible. A system which denies any form of soul, feeling and sensation to the animals, seems to him to be guilty of a serious error of method. For, in this particular circumstance, as in others, the only reasonable way to ascertain the truth would be to trace visible effects to their probable causes. Since animals behave as if they are capable of thought, inductive logic, worshipped by Descartes himself, forbids seeing them as no more than pieces of automata, otherwise one could as well renounce all faith in experimental truth and accept the proposition that God is deceiving us. This is the culminating point in the series of contrasts which La Fontaine builds up against Descartes. There is no doubt that this last paradox, by hitting at the very foundation of the opponent's argument, namely, his methodical reasoning, is intended to deal the most devastating blow of all to the cartesian system.

Having thus refuted the opposing theory, our poet proceeds to propound his own doctrine of soul. As a prelude to this, he defines the soul in the same way that his models have done. For him, as for Epicurus, Gassendi and Bernier, the animal soul is the principle of life and intelligence in the animal; it is a subtle substance similar in nature to a flame of fire :

....un morceau de matière,  
Que l'on ne pourrait plus concevoir sans effort,  
Quintessence d'atome, extrait de la lumière,  
Je ne sais quoi plus vif et plus mobile encor  
Que le feu; car enfin, si le bois fait la flamme,  
La flamme, en s'épurant, peut-elle pas de l'âme  
Nous donner quelque idée?<sup>209</sup>

208. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 147, ll. 197 - 198.

209. Ibid., ll. 207 - 213.



After defining this basic life substance, which all living things share in common, La Fontaine goes further to describe the way in which he thinks the substance is distributed among various creatures. Animals have a soul inferior to that of man and, consequently, a lesser degree of intelligence than men. Animal intelligence is comparable to that of little babies. The latter think, although they may not be aware of the fact that they are thinking. It would be most fallacious to conclude from this that little babies have no intelligence at all.

The analogy drawn between the intelligence of the animals and that of little children follows Gassendi's answer to Descartes' contention that only a creature conscious of its own thoughts can be said to possess a soul. With a touch of irony, Gassendi declares that the process of thought is going on even when a baby is in the womb. He writes :

Je ne dis rien de ce qu'on pense dans le sein maternel : si l'embryon y pense quelque chose, il ne semble guère que ce puisse être ni au ciel, ni à la terre, ni à la lumière; ni à son propre corps, ni à son âme, ni à rien d'autre qui puisse être soit à l'intérieur soit à l'extérieur de ces enveloppes; mais tout au plus à l'abondance ou au manque d'aliment, à la commodité ou à la gêne de sa position, et à quelques rares choses de ce genre qui concernent surtout le toucher,....le rappel des pensées que l'esprit a eues depuis tout le temps qu'il a été joint au corps requiert que certaines traces de ces pensées soient imprimées dans le cerveau, traces vers lesquelles l'esprit venant à se tourner ou à s'appliquer, il se souvient; il n'y a rien d'extraordinaire si le cerveau d'un enfant ou d'un léthargique est impropre à recevoir de telles traces.<sup>210</sup>

Adopting this trend of thought, La Fontaine argues that the fact that animal intelligence, like that of a little baby, is not sufficiently developed to render the animals conscious of their own thoughts, is no justification for assuming that animals are no more than a mere set of springs.

---

210. Gassendi, P., *Disquisitio metaphysica*...., pp. 128 - 130.

Pour moi, si j'en étais le maître.  
 Je leur en donnerais aussi bien qu'aux enfants.  
 Ceux-ci pensent-ils pas dès leurs plus jeunes ans?  
 Quelqu'un peut donc penser ne se pouvant connaître.  
 Par un exemple tout égal,  
 J'attribuerais à l'animal,  
 Non point une raison selon notre manière,  
 Mais beaucoup plus aussi qu'un aveugle ressort. 211

As for men, continues the poet, they possess, in addition to this material soul commonly shared by all living things, an immaterial or spiritual soul. The latter accounts for man's intellectual superiority over the lower animals as well as gives him a dual nature : material and spiritual.

A l'égard de nous autres hommes,  
 Je ferais notre lot infiniment plus fort;  
 Nous aurions un double trésor :  
 L'un, cette âme pareille en tous tant que nous sommes,  
 Sages, fous, enfants, idiots,  
 Hôtes de l'univers, sous le nom d'animaux;  
 L'autre, encore une autre âme, entre nous et les anges  
 Commune en un certain degré.... 212

Here again, La Fontaine makes a conscientious effort to conform to Gassendi's doctrine of dualism of the human soul. The granting of a spiritual soul to man seems to be the only meeting point between the cartesians and the gassendists, for both sides agree that man is endowed with a supernatural soul. By adopting this dualism, our poet automatically accepts the resultant visualization of a scale of beings, based upon the hierarchy of creatures, which Gassendi visualizes in nature. Following this, the poet conceives a continuous scale of creatures, at the base of which are the oysters; between these and an average man are the other animals, such as the beavers; above the average man are situated men of genius, like Descartes himself, who take their place below the angels or pure spirits. There is therefore a hierarchy of intelligences from the lowest brute to the divinity. Each degree of soul, fixed within the limits defined by its specific difference, may exploit more and more fully its capacity, but always within the restrictions of these limits. The animal mind reveals its limitations in that it cannot perceive abstract ideas nor conceive of

---

211. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.148, Fables, IX, Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, ll. 119 - 206.

212. Ibid., ll. 218 - 225.

God, religion and morality. But it participates in the faculty of thought without being aware of it.

Or vous savez, Iris, de certaine science,  
 Que, quand la bête penserait,  
 La bête ne réfléchirait  
 Sur l'objet ni sur sa pensée. 213

La Fontaine here ends his argument in this discourse on exactly the same note as Cassendi.

The attack on cartesianism is continued by our poet in Les Souris et le Chat-huant. Here, he first narrates the story as it was related to him by Bernier. After narrating the episode (ll.10 - 15) he affirms explicitly that

Cet oiseau raisonnait, il faut qu'on le confesse. 214

Following this affirmation is yet another challenge, defying the opposing camp to show that the admirable foresight exhibited by the tawny owl is the sole result of the action of a series of blind mechanical springs such as one would expect to find in a clock. If the conduct of this owl does not reflect an element of reason and intelligence, then the true meaning of reason is yet to be defined.

Si ce n'est pas là raisonner,  
 La raison m'est chose inconnue. 215

One cannot help admiring the delicacy and compelling force of reasoning with which La Fontaine discusses this problem. The doctrine of automatism defines a predicament for which no solution comes readily to hand. In the traditional scale of created things from matter to spirit, man's position above the animals and below the angels is quite secure. The cartesian dualism, in one sense, destroys this hierarchy, but safely places man's soul above physical nature. However, when the relation of men and animals is envisaged in terms of this dualism, there is the danger that too much may be discovered or proved. Man might lose his uniqueness in creation. In so far as it can be shown that man possesses powers and skills not granted to the animals, then at least, this much is fixed, namely, that the animal soul, if there is one, must be of an order different from the human soul. On the other hand, the more successfully physiology, biology and neurology can ex-

---

213. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.147, ll. 61 - 64.

214. Ibid. p.161, XI, 9, l. 16.

215. Ibid., ll. 32 - 33.

plain more facts as due to mechanism the less the need for a soul. Success in dispensing with animal soul, however, poses precisely the danger that the same argument would be extended to man, to the undermining of his claims to the possession of an immortal soul. Gassendi's hypothesis, as adopted by La Fontaine, is an attempt to escape this dilemma as well as an intelligent effort to reconcile the old and the new. It was therefore readily acceptable to those who were impressed by the wisdom of the beavers, the bees and the ants, but were worried about the possibility of the materialistic concept of soul being applied to the human soul. The merit of our poet's position in the argument is that his doctrine proposes a solution which does justice to the animals without encroaching upon human prerogatives. One can therefore say that La Fontaine's defence of the gassendist doctrine of animal soul is one of his significant contributions to philosophical literature, and for the intellectual inspiration used in this defence, the poet owes much gratitude to the gassendist intellectuals gathered around Mme. de La Sablière, particularly Bernier.

In one of his articles on La Fontaine's Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, published in 1935 - 36, Henri Busson challenges the credit given to Bernier as an influence on La Fontaine's thinking on the Descartes-Gassendi controversy over animal intelligence. Busson maintains that our poet's ideas and attitude towards the subject were influenced more by the writings of Pardies and Du Hamel than by Bernier's gassendist philosophy. He argues that the works of Pardies and Du Hamel, on account of their format and size (both works are quite handy), seem to have been more easily accessible to our poet than the eight-volume compendium of Gassendi's philosophy, published by Bernier.<sup>216</sup>

However, what Busson appears to have overlooked is the fact that Bernier's influence on La Fontaine does not derive from books as such, but from personal contact. It was therefore more direct, more effective and naturally more lasting than anything the poet could have read from books on the subject. He discussed a lot of contemporary intellectual problems with Bernier while both of them were living together as guests of Mme. de La Sablière. Our poet therefore

---

216. Busson, H., "Discours à Mme. de La Sablière"; article published in *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de France*, Paris, 1935, pp. 1-32. Cf. *ibid.*, 1936, pp. 257, 631 - 636.

did not need to read the eight volumes of Bernier's work in order to understand Gassendi's philosophy on animal intelligence. He heard direct from one who heard from Gassendi, and that was Bernier. Furthermore, it is known that whenever La Fontaine had the option of getting the facts he needed from book reading or from oral discussion, he usually preferred the latter, which he naturally found more enjoyable, conversation being one of the important ingredients of "volupté". His relationship with Bernier was not based upon discussions alone but upon a close friendship which generated a lot of mutual confidence and understanding between them. Thus Louis Roche sees in Bernier's amicable disposition not only the main cause of La Fontaine's attachment to him but also a source of great delight for the poet.

Sa conversation dans l'intimité sera pour notre poète un agrément de tous les jours; et l'on peut les voir très souvent l'un près de l'autre, la jolie figure de Bernier près du grand nez de La Fontaine, tous deux content d'échanger leurs méditations, de s'entendre si bien sur la vie; et même quand ils ne disent rien, heureux d'être ensemble.<sup>217</sup>

Thus, when La Fontaine discusses, as he does in La Souris métamorphosée en Fille, the Brahminic doctrine of a single World-Soul or the Pythagorean theory of transmigration of souls, he is not so much quoting from books as recounting the gist of his discussions with his friend around the fireside in the house of Mme. de La Sablière. It is no wonder, therefore, that Walckenaer, commenting on this aspect of our poet's relationship with Bernier, writes :

On avait publié de part et d'autre, des traités que La Fontaine n'avait pas lus. Mais il avait chez Mme. de La Sablière, entendu débattre ces matières par Bernier et par d'autres savants; et comme une telle question l'intéressait vivement, il y rêva de son côté, et voulu aussi en parler, mais à sa manière, et dans son langage naturel, c'est-à-dire en vers.<sup>218</sup>

And Menjot d'Elbenne confirms that

La Fontaine n'avait pas lu ses traités, mais il les avait entendu discuter chez son amie par Bernier et par Menjot, très opposés à Descartes.<sup>219</sup>

---

217. Roche, L., Op. Cit., pp. 245 - 246.

218. Walckenaer, A. C., Op. Cit., pp. 161-162.

219. Menjot d'Elbenne, Op. Cit., p. 86.

In view of the overwhelming evidence, provided by the opinion of La Fontaine scholars and by the comments of the poet himself, it is difficult to deny the dominance of Bernier's influence on our poet's attitude to the cartesian doctrine.<sup>220</sup> For example, La Fontaine was present when Bernier narrated the story of the tawny owl, quoted earlier in our chapter on the circle of Mme. de La Sablière. The poet does not fail to emphasize the fact that the story was not derived from any collection of fables or from philosophical books. He declares

Ceci n'est point une fable, et la chose quoique  
merveilleuse et presque incroyable, est véritable-  
ment arrivée.<sup>221</sup>

This suggests that Bernier, in telling the story, treated it not as a piece of fiction picked up from a book, but as a real event. La Fontaine's opposition to cartesianism is therefore an intellectual attitude acquired mainly from the pro-Gassendi atmosphere of Mme. de La Sablière's salon.

Having thus established and defended the position of animals in the hierarchy of created things, the poet has not only remained consistent with his providentialist doctrine to the effect that all creatures receive due attention from Providence, but he has also secured the foundation of his moral philosophy as seen in the Fables. The maturity of his thinking is demonstrated in the brilliant way he proposes a solution to a controversial problem by adopting a doctrine which does justice to both men and animals. His intellectual development, his sagacious, witty mind, is yet to receive a greater stimulation in an effort to go from philosophical to scientific discourse, made in the Poème du Quinquina.

---

220. Jasinski, R., "Sur la philosophie de La Fontaine dans les Livres VII à XII des Fables" in Revue d'Histoire de la philosophie, 15 décembre, 1933, pp. 316; - 330; 15 juillet, 1934, pp.218-242; and Busson, H. et Gohin, F., Op.Cit., pp.24 - 29.

221. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.161, Fables, XI, 9, (Explanatory Note)

4. From Philosophy to Scientific Speculation : Le Poème du Quinquina.

The publication of the second collection of fables was followed by an interval of four years during which La Fontaine published no known work of major importance. But this does not mean that the poet was inactive all the time. The truth is that he was all along busy and working; his ever inventive mind was still producing pieces of poetry of various descriptions, including some of those that appeared in the twelfth and last Book of fables, but for some reasons best known to him, he chose not to publish them at the time they were composed. This is not strange, for it is in line with his usual practice; he does it in the cases of Adonis and Psyché and even Clymène. It was therefore not until 1682 that he gave the reading public yet another surprise. For instead of releasing a collection of fables or contes, as many of his readers obviously expected, the poet demonstrated the great heights which his intellectual development had attained by coming out with a long poem on a scientific subject. This was the Poème du Quinquina. Thus the effort made in the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière to write philosophical poetry is followed up in the genre of poems with an attempt at scientific speculation.

The project of composing this complex poem was not initiated by La Fontaine himself. Having successfully completed and published the second collection of fables, which he seems to have regarded as the climax of his literary career (XI, Epilogue), he probably would not have, on his own, undertaken to bother his head with so scientific and complicated a theme as the "Quinquina", were it not for the pressing request to do so, made by his friend and former protectress, the duchesse de Bouillon.

C'est pour vous obéir, et non point par mon choix,  
 Qu'à des sujets profonds j'occupe mon génie,  
 Disciple de Lucrece une seconde fois.<sup>222</sup>

In fact, the poet embarks upon writing this poem with some element of scepticism about his own ability to manipulate such a highly specialized subject, being neither a professional scientist nor a physician :

---

222. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 373, Poème du Quinquina, ll. 10 - 12.

Je ne voulais chanter que les héros d'Esopé;  
 Pour eux seuls en mes vers j'invoquais Calliope,  
 Même j'allais cesser, et regardais le port....<sup>223</sup>

But having taken or accepted to take the bull by the horns, says d'Olivet, our poet depended partly on what he heard from the science-orientated discussions among Mme. de La Sablière's guests, notably Bernier, and partly on what he could gather from other sources, for the necessary inspiration.

Dans son Poème du Quinquina, il devait les traits de physique qu'il y a placés moins aux livres qu'à ses entretiens avec Bernier, le gassendiste, qui logeait comme lui chez Mme. de La Sablière.<sup>224</sup>

No one denies the impact of Bernier on La Fontaine's intellectual development. Indeed, we have spared no words in emphasizing this fact. But in this particular poem, the credit which d'Olivet gives to the gassendist philosopher seems out of proportion to the reality of the facts, as shown in the evidence provided by the poem itself. Although Mme. de La Sablière's guests, such as Menjot, Bernier and others introduced La Fontaine to scientific discussions, this was not the main factor that aided the poet. There is also the factor of the mood of the epoch and its attitude to the subject of the poem. But judging from the actual text of the work, and comparing it with some other works on quinine, fever and the circulation of the blood, published at that epoch, one cannot avoid the conclusion that in the Poème du Quinquina, La Fontaine owes his intellectual inspiration to one major source, more than to any other, namely, the famous treatise by his physician friend, François de Monginot. The poet's ideas and references, including the decision to focus his poem on the three closely related themes, mentioned above, follow the pattern adopted by Monginot. We shall, in the course of this chapter, point out further proofs of the latter's influence on La Fontaine's treatment of the Quinquina, as we review the various factors that contributed to condition the poet's thinking on the subject.

After the somewhat apologetic prologue or preamble (ll. 1 - 17) and the brief reflection on the mythological origin of suffering and disease (ll. 18 - 54), La Fontaine enters straight upon his subject, with

---

223. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 373, ll. 1 - 3.

224. D'Olivet, Op.Cit., t.II, p.306.



a statement of the general situation as related to the scourge of fever at the time. We are introduced to the fact that fever was one of the commonest killer-diseases of the time that, although the physicians found some criteria for identifying the condition, its real cause remained a subject of speculation :

Le mal le plus commun, et quelqu'un même assure  
 Que seul on le peut dire un mal, à bien parler,  
 C'est la fièvre, autrefois espérance trop sure  
 A Clothon, quand ses mains se lassaient de filer.  
 Nous en avons en vain l'origine cherchée;  
 On prédisait son cours, on savait son progrès,  
 On déterminait ses effets;  
 Mais la cause en était cachée.<sup>225</sup>

Then he reviews the various theories on the cause and character of the disease, dwelling particularly upon the hypothesis of the school of thought which identified the origin of fever with the body humours. According to this school, fever has its seat in the humours. These are the centres from which vapours move up to the heart. The latter distributes them through the arteries to all parts of the body. If, however, continue the adherents of this school, vapours originate from a particular humour, namely, the bilious humour or the black bile, or if the humour is over-heated due to one cause or another, then the entire bloodstream is poisoned by it, resulting in different types of fever.

"La fièvre, disait-on, a son siège aux humeurs.  
 Il se fait un foyer qui pousse ses vapeurs  
 Jusqu'au coeur qui les distribue  
 Dans le sang dont la masse en est bientôt imbue.  
 Ces amas enflammés, pernicieux trésors,  
 Sur l'aile des esprits aux familles errantes,  
 S'en vont infecter tout le corps,  
 Sources de fièvres différentes.  
 Si l'humeur bilieuse a causé ces transports,  
 Le sang, véhicule fluide  
 Des esprits ainsi corrompus,  
 Par des accès de tierce à peine interrompus,  
 Va d'artère en artère attaquer le solide.  
 Toutes nos actions souffrent un changement:  
 Le test et le cerveau piqués violemment  
 Joignent à la douleur les songes, les chimères,  
 L'appétit de parler, effets trop ordinaires.  
 Que si le venin dominant  
 Se puise en la mélancolie,  
 J'ai deux jours de repos, puis le mal survenant  
 Jette un long ennui sur ma vie."  
 Ainsi parle l'Ecole et tous ses sectateurs.<sup>226</sup>

225. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 373, Poème du Quinquina, ll. 55-62

226. Ibid., ll. 63-84.

The medical school of thought whose theory is summarized above, was effectively represented in France of La Fontaine's epoch in the works of Lazare Rivière (1589 - 1655). The latter published three major works in Latin: Praxis Medicæ (1640), Methodus curandarum Februm (1648) and Institutiones Medicæ (1655). He broadly divides the constituents of the human body into solids, fluids and vital spirits; and postulates that all human physiology rests upon the humours and temperaments. The primary humours are the familiar blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. The vital spirits are formed in the heart and flow through the arteries to all parts of the body. This random movement sometimes causes the body to be infected with injurious vapours emitted from the black bile, thus causing fever.<sup>227</sup>

Although La Fontaine makes a brilliant summary of this theory of fever, he does not seem to have been directly inspired by Rivière. There is nothing to suggest that he ever read any of the works of this physician. It will be recalled, however, that the theory adopted by Rivière was that of Hippocrates, based on the hypothesis of the four body humours:

Le corps de l'homme a en lui sang, pituite, bile jaune et noire; c'est là ce qui en constitue la nature et ce qui y crée la maladie et la santé. Il y a essentiellement santé quand ces principes sont dans un juste rapport de crase, de force et de quantité, et que le mélange en est parfait; il y a maladie quand un de ces principes est soit en défaut soit en excès, ou, s'isolant dans le corps, n'est pas combiné avec tout le reste.... Il y a, pour suivre ce propos, deux espèces de fièvre: l'une, commune à tous, appelée peste; l'autre, due à un mauvais régime, et survenant sporadiquement chez ceux qui vivent mal....<sup>228</sup>

and that Hippocrates himself was extensively quoted by La Fontaine's Latin master, Lucretius. It is more probable that the poet came by this theory through his reading of Lucretius, since the doctrine is contained neither in the works of Monginot nor in that of Bernier, nor even of Menjot. Indeed he confesses early in the poem that he undertook to write it as a disciple of Lucretius, the poet of scientific specu-

---

227. Rivière, L, *Institutions médicales*, Paris, 1655, t.II, Chapitre 6.

228. Hippocrate, *Œuvres complètes*, Traduction de Littré parue pour la première fois chez Baillièrre et Fils de 1839 à 1861, t.II, pp. 201, 215.

lation.<sup>229</sup> The theory could also have been made known to him from other sources, such as the public institutions, established by Royal edict and charged with responsibility of encouraging research and disseminating information on science and medicine. These institutions were open to anyone asking for information on any developments or particular theories within the sphere of science and medicine. Thus the "Académie Royale des Sciences" was already publishing learned journals, such as the Journal des Savants (1665), which was the first scientific journal to be published in the French language. Then there was also the medical journal, Nouvelles Découvertes sur toutes les parties de la médecine (1679-81), edited by Nicolas de Blégnny, surgeon to Louis XIV and his queen. These journals carried articles on such controversial issues as the circulation of the blood, the killer diseases of plague, dysentery and relapsing fever, as well as on the discovery of new drugs or the introduction of better instruments and theories. Here then were sources which an eclectic like La Fontaine is most likely to have consulted when he found himself handling a specialized subject.

He states the body-humour theory, of course, only to dismiss it with ridicule, after having shown that he knows of the existence of such a theory. The atmosphere of uncertainty, created by the suggestion that one is not sure whether to attribute the supposed cure of the disease to an act of God or to the prescribed concoctions, brings out clearly the ridicule with which the poet treats the theory:

Leurs malades debout après force lenteurs  
 Donnaient cours à cette doctrine:  
 La nature, ou la médecine,  
 Ou l'union des deux, sur le mal agissait.  
 Qu'importe qui? l'on guérissait.  
 On n'exterminait la fièvre, on la lassait.<sup>230</sup>

The last line of this quotation is an obvious reference to the point of view held by Gui Patin and his friends of the Faculty of Medicine, and

---

229. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 373, Poème du Quinquina, l. 12

230. Ibid. p. 374, ll. 85 - 90.

maintained in the series of theses presented to the Faculty on the subject of fever and quinine. We shall come back to this later.

Having rejected the doctrine of the body humours as the origin of fever, La Fontaine describes a new theory, which appeared to him to be more reliable than the first. This second one is based upon the facts of the circulatory system as explained by William Harvey. In order to appreciate fully the admirable effort made by our poet in this direction, we have to digress a little to examine Harvey's theory of the circulation of the blood and its impact on contemporary medical thought, for it was one of those attitudes or situations which affected La Fontaine's thinking in the Poème du Quinquina.

William Harvey, an English physician (1578 - 1657), discovered and accurately described the circulatory system of the blood; this event revolutionized medical thought. Before the discovery, it was believed that the blood moved, of course, but a to-and-fro, random motion was envisaged. The dilatation or diastole of the heart and the arteries was thought to be the motive power which drew the blood along, and it was believed that blood could pass from the right to the left ventricle and vice versa through pores in the septum. Furthermore, the liver was thought to be the central blood organ.<sup>231</sup> Harvey's discovery altered all that, and proved the heart to be the centre of the circulatory system :

The heart, at that time whilst it is in motion, suffers constriction, and is thickened in its outside, and so straightened in its ventricles, thrusting forth the pure blood contained within it...and presently after, purple and crimson-coloured blood returns to the heart....The heart, at that time when it beats against the breast, and the pulsation is outwardly felt, it is believed that the ventricles of the heart are dilated and replete with blood, though you shall understand that it is otherwise, and that when the heart is contracted, it is emptied. For that motion, which is commonly thought to be the diastole of the heart, is really the systole, and so the proper motion

---

231. Macleod, J.R. "Harvey's Experiments on circulation"; published in: Annals of Medical History, London, 1928, vol.X, p.338. See also

Rolleston, H., "Harvey's predecessors and contemporaries", in Annals of Medical History, Vol.X, p.323.

of the heart is not the diastole but the systole, for the heart receives no vigour in the diastole, but in the systole, for then it is extended, moveth, and receiveth vigour.<sup>232</sup>

The new theory gave rise to much heated controversy on both sides of the Channel. But Harvey treated his critics with patience and dignity. He replied only to two French critics, namely, Jean Riolan, Professor of Anatomy in Paris, and his friend, Gui Patin, also Professor at the Royal College, and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Paris, both of whom questioned the accuracy of his theory.<sup>233</sup>

It speaks much for La Fontaine's sense of judgement and intellectual independence that, in spite of this stiff opposition to Harvey from highly respected medical circles of his epoch, he himself, a non-professional, was able to quickly identify the truth, for it is Harvey's theory of the circulatory system that he accepts and summarizes in lines 137 - 158 of the Poème du Quinquina. Although our poet does not use many of the medical terms employed by Harvey, for understandable reasons, nevertheless, he recaptures the spirit or central idea of the theory: The heart is a hollow muscle, and pulse is the effect of this muscle pumping blood into the arteries. The latter have small passages at their ends through which the blood passes into the veins and returns to the heart in a systematic, rather than a random movement.

Deux portes sont au cœur; chacun a sa valvule.  
Le sang, source de vie, est par l'une introduit;  
L'autre huissière permet qu'il sorte et qu'il circule,  
Des veines sans cesser aux artères conduit.  
Quand le cœur l'a reçu, la chaleur naturelle  
En forme ces esprits qu'animaux on appelle.  
Ainsi qu'en un creuset il est raréfié.  
Le plus pur, le plus vif, le mieux qualifié,  
En atomes extrait quitte la masse entière,  
S'exhale, et sort enfin par le reste attiré.  
Ce reste rentre encore, est encore épuré;  
Le chyle y joint toujours matière sur matière.<sup>234</sup>

232. Harvey, William, *Anatomical Exercises concerning the motion of the Heart and Blood in living creatures*, London, 1653, pp.4-9.

233. Donley, J., "Riolan and Harvey", article published in Annals of Medical History, London, 1923, Vol.V, p.26., See also: Packard, F.R., "Gui Patin and the Medical Profession in Paris in the seventeenth century", *Ibid.*, 1922, Vol.IV, pp.137-251, 357; and Courtney, J.W., "The Multiple personality of Dr. Gui Patin", *Ibid.*, 1924, Vol.VI, p.1.

234. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p.374, Poème du Quinquina, ll. 137 - 158.

It is upon the framework of this theory of blood circulation that La Fontaine constructs his own hypothesis of fever.

But to reach Harvey and understand his theory correctly, the poet had to pass through the French physician, François de Monginot. The latter was a good friend of La Fontaine and one of the first French doctors not only to accept Harvey's account of the circulatory system, but to publicize the use of quinine as a cure for fever. His famous treatise entitled De la guérison des fièvres par le quinquina, first published in Lyons in 1679, was so popular that it was re-edited in quick succession in Paris in 1680, 1681, 1682, 1683 and 1688. Apart from the bond of friendship, which kept La Fontaine close to Monginot, the popularity of the latter's book leaves no doubt that it was the main source of the poet's inspiration in the Poème du Quinquina. Indeed, it is to this book that La Fontaine refers in the following lines:

Ce détail est écrit; il en court un traité.  
 Je louerais l'auteur et l'ouvrage,  
 L'amitié le défend et retient mon suffrage.  
 C'est assez à l'auteur de l'avoir mérité.  
 Je lui dois seulement rendre cette justice  
 Qu'en nous découvrant l'art, il laisse l'artifice.<sup>235</sup>

The poet is very much indebted to Monginot's treatise for the difficult physiological analysis made in the first canto of the poem and for many of his ideas on quinine, expressed in the second canto. Cabanès writes:

Grâce à Monginot La Fontaine s'initia superficiellement  
 à notre art; de même que par la lecture de Descartes  
 et de Harvey,<sup>236</sup> il avait acquis un vague teinture de  
 physiologie.

The second half of Cabanès' declaration, crediting so much to readings from Harvey and Descartes, is an overstatement. La Fontaine read Descartes, no doubt, as we saw earlier on, and perhaps came by some translation of Harvey's work, but in the particular poem which we are discussing, he follows faithfully the physiological descriptions made by Monginot more than he does that of any other scientist or medical man of the epoch. In the famous treatise quoted earlier, for example, Monginot states what he honestly believed to be the origin or cause of fever:

---

235. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.377, Poème du Quinquina, ll. 470-475.

236. Cabanès, A. (Dr. Med.), Médecins amateurs, Paris, 1932, pp.85-104  
 "La Curiosité scientifique de La Fontaine".

La fièvre est un bouillonnement ou fermentation extraordinaire excitée dans la masse du sang...., cette fermentation contre-nature altère ce sang, en trouble le mouvement, et pervertit l'économie de tout le corps...., le principe ou la cause immédiate de cette fermentation est un mauvais levain qui tient de l'aigre ou de l'âcre.<sup>237</sup>

This is the very idea which La Fontaine elaborates in lines 196 - 210 of the first canto of his poem. Following as faithfully as possible, and even using the very terms employed by his model, he declares that fever is caused by the entry into the blood stream of pernicious foreign matter, such as a drop of injurious vapour from the black bile. The presence of this matter in the blood system causes the heart to pump in more blood into the system, as greater heat is manufactured by the body, in an attempt to get rid of the febrile matter. The resultant commotion and fermentation of the active red blood cells produce the pathological crisis known as fever :

Des portions d'humeur grossière,  
 Quelquefois compagnes du sang,  
 Le suivent dans le cœur, sans pouvoir, en passant,  
 Se subtiliser de manière  
 Qu'il naisse des esprits en même quantité  
 Que dans le cours de la santé.  
 Un sang plus pur s'échauffe avec plus de vitesse;  
 L'autre reçoit plus tard la chaleur pour hôtesse.  
 Le temps l'y sait aussi beaucoup mieux imprimer:  
 Le bois vert, plein d'humeurs, est long à s'allumer;  
 Quand il brûle, l'ardeur en est plus véhémence.  
 Ainsi ce sang chargé repassant par le cœur  
 S'embrase d'autant plus que c'est avec lenteur,  
 Et regagne au degré ce qu'il perd par l'attente.  
 Ce degré, c'est la fièvre.<sup>238</sup>

From this point, the poet attempts a speculative diagnosis of the disease: the pulse which, as stated earlier, is the effect of the dilatation and contraction of the cardiac ventricle and the arteries, is regular and normal in a healthy person. As soon as health is impaired, as in the case of fever, the pulse is immediately affected. The first pathological sign of fever, therefore, is the preternatural rapidity of the pulse.

Notre santé n'a point de plus certaine marque  
 Qu'un pouls égal et modéré;  
 Le contraire fait voir que l'être est altéré.<sup>239</sup>

Increase of pulse is quickly followed by shivering and high temperature, caused by the commotion and fermentation of the blood in the veins.

237. Manginot, François de, *De la guérison des fièvres par le quinquina*, Paris, 1679, pp. 32-37.

238. La Fontaine; *Op. Cit.*, p. 375, ll. 196 - 210.

239. *Ibid.* p. 374. ll. 166 - 168.

Here La Fontaine seems to have indulged in his characteristic digression, probably to permit personal reflections, for he breaks down the continuity of his diagnosis. Thus, although the condition of high temperature is one of the early symptoms of fever, he does not treat it until late in the second canto of the poem, where he mixes it up with his discussion of the remedy. This, however, does not surprise us. Such a breakdown in logic is an inevitable characteristic of long and difficult expositions of highly specialized ideas, particularly when they are handled by a non-professional. We are therefore compelled to modify slightly the order of the poem and to treat the subject of high temperature as part of the symptoms of fever. The preternatural rapidity of the pulse is, therefore, quickly followed by shivering and high temperature, caused, according to the poet, by the commotion and fermentation of the blood in the veins :

C'est ainsi que le sang fermente dans nos veines,  
 Qu'il y bout, qu'il s'y meut, dilaté par le cœur.  
 Les esprits alors en fureur  
 Tâchent par tous moyens d'ébranler la machine.  
 On frissonne, on a chaud. J'ai déduit ces effets  
 Selon leur ordre et leur progrès.  
 Dès qu'un certain acide en notre corps domine,  
 Tout fermente, tout bout, les esprits, les liqueurs;  
 Et la fièvre de là tire son origine.  
 Sans autre vice des humeurs.<sup>240</sup>

The terms, "fermentation" and "ebullition", are used by the poet here to mean a severe agitation or turbulence of component parts; that is, a bubbling over with gas production, which is so prominent in most cases of vigorous fermentation. What he is trying to explain is that the febrile condition has caused viscid humours to accumulate in the blood. Against these humours, the active blood cells, like the mutinous crew of a ship, imprisoned against their will, struggle to liberate themselves. But they find themselves entangled, netted in, and held back. It is this struggle, says the poet, that excites the ebullitions characteristic of fever.

Je reviens au frisson, qui du défaut d'esprits  
 Tient sans doute son origine.  
 Les muscles moins tendus, comme étant moins remplis,  
 Ne peuvent lors dans la machine  
 Tirer leurs opposés de même qu'autrefois,  
 Ni ceux-ci succéder à de pareils emplois.



Tout le peuple mutin, léger, et téméraire,  
Des vaisseaux mal fermés en tumulte sortant,  
Cause chez nous dans cet instant  
Un mouvement involontaire.<sup>241</sup>

The progress of the disease is characterized by daily and sometimes hourly fluctuations in the body temperature. Then the volume of urine diminishes due to loss of fluid through increased vaporization. The patient feels more chilly and succumbs to a convulsive movement of the whole body. This is followed by a complete disruption of the various processes affecting heat production, muscle tone, flushing, sweating and appetite, leading finally to delirium and often to death. Here, our poet, the epicurean humanist, now turned physician, paints a pathetic image of a being about to succumb unwillingly to a final disintegration :

Alors, alors, il faut oublier ces plaisirs.  
L'âme en soi se ramène, encor que nos désirs  
Renoncent à regret à des restes de vie.  
"Douce lumière, hélas! me sera-tu ravie?  
Ame, où t'envoies-tu sans espoir de retour?"  
Le malade, arrivé près de son dernier jour  
Rappelle ces moments où personne ne songe  
Aux remords trop tardifs où cet instant nous plonge.  
Sur ce qu'il a commis il tâche à repasser:  
En vain; car le transport à ce faible penser  
Fait bientôt succéder les folles rêveries,  
Le délire, et souvent le poison des furies.  
On tente l'émétique alors infructueux,  
Puis l'art nous abandonne au remède des vœux.<sup>242</sup>

Throughout the whole of this diagnosis, excepting the poet's own personal reflections, he follows faithfully the details recorded by Monginot.

From this gloomy picture of death and abject despair, La Fontaine, the arch-providentialist, passes on to a message of hope, and introduces the Heaven-sent remedy, the "Quinquina". Thus, the second canto of the poem opens with an optimistic invocation of the Muses for light and inspiration to celebrate the new drug.

Enfin, grâce au démon qui conduit mes ouvrages,  
Je vais offrir aux yeux de moins tristes images;  
Par lui j'ai peint le mal, et j'ai lieu d'espérer  
Qu'en parlant du remède il viendra m'inspirer.<sup>243</sup>

241. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 375, ll. 224 - 233.

242. Ibid., p. 375, ll. 270 - 283.

243. Ibid., p. 376, ll. 308 - 311.

It is interesting to note that in the midst of an audacious scientific task undertaken by an amateur, La Fontaine does not forget that he is still a poet before anything else; that is, a poet placing his perfected talents at the service of medical science.

As one reads through this section of the poem, one cannot avoid the impression that the poet shared in every detail the enthusiasm or shall we say, the infatuation of his protectress over this wonder drug. For he not only refers to it as a God-sent blessing, but associates it with the glory of Louis XIV as part of the saving wonders of the reign.

On ne craint plus cette hydre aux têtes renaissantes,  
 La fièvre exerce en vain ses fureurs impuissantes  
 D'autres temps sont venus, Louis règne; et les dieux  
 Réseraient à son siècle un bien si précieux;  
 A son siècle ils gardaient l'heureuse découverte  
 D'un bois qui tous les jours cause au Styx quelque perte.  
 Nous n'avons pas toujours triomphé de nos maux:  
 Le Ciel nous a souvent envoyé des travaux.  
 D'autres temps sont venus, Louis règne; et la Parque  
 Sera lente à trancher nos jours sous ce monarque.  
 Son mérite a gagné les arbitres du sort:  
 Les destins avec lui semblent être d'accord.  
 Durez, bienheureux temps; et que sous ses auspices  
 Nous portions chez les morts plus tard nos sacrifices. 244

But while revealing La Fontaine's enthusiasm for the progress of science, this passage also served the strategic purpose of wooing the King. In under two years from the date of the publication of this poem, our poet would be seeking an election to the French Academy, for which he needed the support and approval of the King. Besides, it was usual for literary men of the time to resort to this practice of flattering the King and people in authority for some material reward. For example, in flattering Louis XIV in this way, La Fontaine was following the pattern set by the royal surgeon, Nicolas de Blégnny. The latter had sung the praises of the King as the protector of all that is good and salutary in the arts, science and medicine, mentioning specific and eminent personalities, including the Prime Minister, who owed their lives to the

---

244. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 376, ll. 312 - 325.

royal patronage of "quinquina".<sup>245</sup> His book, entitled La Connoissance certaine et la prompte et facile guérison des fièvres, avec des particularités curieuses et utiles sur le remède anglois, and published in 1680, went through four editions between 1680 and 1683. There is no doubt that La Fontaine read it.

After this brief digression, the poet resumes his task and, this time, mocks at such doctrines of fever as that of Rivière, which he compares with the ancient Egyptian belief that the inundation of the Nile was caused by nymphs. The wonder drug of "Quinquina" has shown that fever,

Ce mal si craint n'a pour raison  
Qu'un sang qui se dilate, et bout dans sa prison.<sup>246</sup>

From this, the poet plunges into a critical reflection on the traditional, futile and often fatal methods of trying to cure the disease through blood-letting and purging. Here again, he draws inspiration partly from personal experience and partly from Monginot. The latter states in his treatise :

Il est constant qu'en plusieurs occasions on ne peut se dispenser d'y avoir recours avant l'usage du remède. Il faut pourtant prendre garde que l'abus qu'on en pourroit faire épuiserait les forces et altérerait les fonctions des parties.<sup>247</sup>

It is admirable to see how beautifully and with what embellishments La Fontaine puts the above warning into poetic meditation :

Que faisaient nos aïeux pour rendre plus tranquille  
Ce sang ainsi bouillant? ils saignaient, mais en vain.  
L'eau qui reste en l'éolipyle  
Ne se refroidit pas quand il devient moins plein;  
L'airain soufflant fait voir que la liqueur enclose  
Augmente de chaleur, déchuée en quantité:  
Le souffle alors redouble, et cet air irrité  
Ne trouve du repos qu'en consumant sa cause.  
Du sentiment fiévreux on tranche ainsi le cours:  
Il cesse avec le sang, le sang avec nos jours.<sup>248</sup>

---

245. Blégny, Nicolas de, *La Connoissance certaine et la prompte et facile guérison des fièvres, avec des particularités curieuses et utiles sur le remède anglois*, Paris, 1680, pp. 8, 47 - 48.

246. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.376, ll. 339 - 340.

247. Monginot, François de, *Op.Cit.*, p.66.

248. La Fontaine, *Op.Cit.*, p.376, ll. 368 - 378.

Blood-letting, as practised at that time, was aimed at controlling or diminishing the ebullience of the blood. If the blood was too active or too strong, the operation would reduce its strength and activity, thus lessening or rather slowing down the manifestation of the febrile symptoms. There is no doubt that in these lines, La Fontaine is also drawing inspiration from his reminiscences of certain scenes in Molière's comedy, L'Amour Médecin. In this play, performed in September, 1665, the playwright exposes the logic behind the practice of blood-letting to ridicule. One of the two physicians caring for a fever patient declares that the latter must be bled as soon as possible, while the other physician emphatically opposes the suggestion, prescribing an emetic instead. To this, his professional colleague replies

Je soutiens que l'émétique la tuera.

and the other retorts:

Et moi, que la saignée la fera mourir.

Addressing the patient's father, one says :

Si vous ne faites pas saigner tout à l'heure votre fille, ce'est une personne morte.

and the other :

Si vous la faites saigner, elle ne sera pas en vie dans un quart d'heure.<sup>249</sup>

In either case, the patient is sure to die, for none of the physicians speaks of her in terms of living but of dying. That was the type of situation sure to throw our lucid "bonhomme" into fits of laughter :

Je laisse à la porte ma raison et mon argent, et je ris après tout mon soûl.<sup>250</sup>

He certainly recalled this scene as he was composing those lines on the subject of blood-letting, for he draws in his poem the same conclusion to which his friend had intended the scene to lead. Whichever prescription is followed, the result is always the same — death.

Tous deux s'étant trouvés différent pour la cure,  
Leur malade paya le tribut à nature.<sup>251</sup>

That was the nature of the killer disease of fever before the advent of "Quinquina".

The latter, "un remède à mainte blessure" (II, 1.96), came as a salutary blessing from Providence. Here, La Fontaine traces the

---

249. Molière, L'Amour Médecin, Acte II, scène 4.

250. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 424.

251. Ibid., p. 108, Fables, V, 12, ll. 5 - 6.

legendary origin of the "quinquina" to the metamorphosis of the love-starved nymph who was turned into a bitter, flowering plant in Greek mythology (II, ll. 125 - 150). Why the poet chose to substitute a mythical allegory for the historical accounts, given of the origin of the drug, is not quite well-known. Perhaps he wanted to speak in the language of poets, since poets speak of gods and goddesses. Possibly, he wanted to avoid getting involved with the many and conflicting accounts of the genesis of "quinquina". However, he does mention briefly that the drug was produced from the bark of a tree, identical in colour with the cinnamon,

Cet arbre ainsi formé se couvre d'une écorce  
Qu'au cinnamome on peut comparer en couleur. <sup>252</sup>

but gives the impression that this tree was the nymph, turned into a plant by the gods.

The drug has, apart from conflicting, half-legendary, half-historical accounts, a generally accepted version of its historical origin and introduction into France of our poet's epoch. The history of quinine dates back to the romantic tale of the discovery of the Cinchona tree. Dr. A. W. Haggis records that early in the seventeenth century, the Countess of Chinchon, wife of the Viceroy of Peru, was miraculously cured of fever with some powder, prepared from the bark of this tree. The remedy came to be known later as the "Countess Powder". As a thank-offering, the Countess distributed large quantities of the drug to the citizens of Lima, and was said to have introduced it into Spain. <sup>253</sup> Research by Haggis himself, based on a study of the original diary of the Count of Chinchon, has, however, proved that the Countess died in Spain before her husband was posted to Peru. The second wife, who accompanied him there, led a remarkably healthy life, and was never cured with the chinchona bark, nor did she introduce it into Europe. <sup>254</sup>

The version of the story usually accepted today is that in 1638, a Peruvian revealed the secret of "quinquina" to the Director of the Jesuits in Peru. The Director carried the drug to Rome in 1649, and for a long time, it was known as the "Poudre des Pères" or "Poudre des Jésuites", and was sold for its weight in gold. In 1679, an English-

252, La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 376, ll. 100 - 101.

253. Haggis, A. W., "Fundamental Errors in the Early History of Cinchona", article published in: Bulletin of the History of Medicine, London, 1941, Vol. X, p. 417.

254. Ibid., p. 417.

man named Talbot discovered how to infuse it in wine, and then introduced it into France. There it became known as "le remède anglais". Many French noblemen, including the Prime Minister, Colbert, were cured with it. As a gesture of gratitude, the King offered Talbot 2000 louis d'or and an annual pension of 2000 francs. It is to this gesture that La Fontaine refers in his praise of Louis XIV in the poem.

But despite this royal patronage, the new drug was received in France with mixed feelings. While some medical men rejected it, others, including many ordinary people, welcomed it.

Les discussions des médecins sur ce fébrifuge  
avaient à cette époque attiré l'attention des gens  
du monde, qui, selon l'usage, prenaient parti  
pour ou contre, sans connaissance de cause....  
Certains médecins s'élevèrent contre ce remède,  
et il ne réussit pas en Europe.... Cependant, s'il  
eut ses détracteurs, il eut aussi ses partisans.<sup>255</sup>

Gui Patin and his friends not only made an open mockery of "quinquina", but actively directed the preparation of scholarly theses against it. The learned journal, Nouvelles de la république des Lettres reports of numerous theses written in the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris against the use of "quinquina", mentioning in particular, the theses submitted by Denyau, Perreau and Mauvilain. Perreau's thesis, as summarized by the journal, is interesting for the dismal picture it paints of the new drug.

Celles (thèses) de M. Perreau affirment en propres termes que toute la vertu de cette poudre ne va qu'à donner un peu de répit, mais que c'est une fausse trêve qui ne promet la paix qu'afin de renouveler une guerre plus dangereuse, et que, si le poison se cache pour un peu de temps, ce n'est qu'afin de faire plus de ravages après cela; que plus on se sert de ce remède, plus on consume le suc génital des parties, et qu'enfin cela rend la vie beaucoup plus courte.<sup>256</sup>

The above was the substance of the thesis to which La Fontaine alludes in line 90 of his poem. In his own thesis, also supervised by Gui Patin, Denyau made a concentrated attack on Monginot's treatise which publicized the merits of "quinquina" and the theory of Harvey on blood circulation. Part of his thesis reads:

---

255. Walckenaer, A. C., Op. Cit., pp. 176 - 177.

256. Nouvelles de la république des lettres, Paris, avril 1685, article viii.

Le livre de la guérison des fièvres par le Quinquina, composé par M. de Monginot, fameux médecin de Paris, a été si bien reçu et imprimé tant de fois, qu'on peut dire que c'est s'opposer au torrent que de soutenir les thèses dont nous avons fait mention. <sup>257</sup>

In spite of this manifest hostility from an influential section of the medical faculty, the faith of some doctors and the majority of French citizens, particularly the aristocrats, in the new drug remained unshaken. Mme. de Sévigné, noted for her sarcastic attitude towards drugs and physicians in general, applauded "quinquina" as a welcome relief from the strange prescriptions and the harmful blood-letting to which patients were hitherto subjected.

Ce remède de l'Anglais, qui sera bientôt publié, rends les médecins fort méprisables, avec leurs saignées et leurs médecines. <sup>258</sup>

The duchesse de Mazarin was particularly enthusiastic about the new remedy and did not fail to communicate her infatuation to her friends and to her sisters, particularly to the duchesse de Bouillon. As a result, the latter commissioned La Fontaine to celebrate "quinquina" in the language of the Muses. This explains in part the side taken by our poet in the "quinquina" controversy.

Accordingly, he attacks the anti-quinquina "doctes", and reproaches them for their intellectual cabalism, and expresses the hope that this handful of agitators would accept the facts of experience and welcome the new drug.

Le quin règne aujourd'hui: nos habiles s'en servent.  
 Quelques-uns encore conservent,  
 Comme un point de religion,  
 L'intérêt de l'Ecole et leur opinion.  
 Ceux-la même y viendront; et désormais ma veine  
 Ne plaindra plus des maux dont l'art fait son domaine.  
 Peu de gens, je l'avoue, ont part à ce discours. <sup>259</sup>

Then the poet re-emphasizes the curative powers of "quinquina" as if to bring the fact home to the dissident physicians. His friend, Monginot, attributes these powers to the bitterness of the drug:

---

257. Nouvelles de la république des lettres, avril 1685, article viii.

258. Sévigné, (Mme. de), Lettres, quoted in Cabanès, A., Op. Cit., p. 110.

259. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 376, ll. 382 - 388.

Son amertume combat et mortifie le levain des  
fièvres, l'amer et l'acide ne pouvant compatir  
ensemble.<sup>260</sup>

Amplifying this idea, La Fontaine states that the bitter, earthy, gently astringent and resinous-balsamic content of "quinquina" acts upon the febrile agent that infected the body; it also corrects the texture and crisis of the blood, while at the same time strengthening the pores and subcutaneous vessels which were too lax and too disposed to stasis.

Quant à ses qualités, principes de sa force,  
C'est l'âpre, c'est l'amer, c'est aussi la chaleur.  
Celle-ci cuit les suc de qualité louable,  
Dissipe ce qui nuit ou n'est point favorable;  
Mais la principale vertu  
Par qui soit ce ferment dans nos corps combattu,  
C'est cet amer, cet âpre, ennemis de l'acide,  
Double frein qui, domptant sa fureur homicide,  
Apaie les esprits de colère agités.<sup>261</sup>

As a follow-up, our poet describes how to prepare the new drug. In an earlier work about the treatment of plagues, entitled Secrets Polydaedales contre la peste, and published by Monginot's father in 1606, it is stressed that, for drugs to be more effective, they must be infused in liquor.

Ce remède, pour agir subtilement et promptement  
et multiplier assurément les effets avec vivacité,  
doit être raffiné, épuré et préparé par la chimie en  
le fondant légèrement en liqueur.<sup>262</sup>

In Monginot's own treatise of 1679, he stresses that it matters very little with what type of liquor the drug is taken. The important thing is to have the right dosage of the basic ingredient, namely, "quinquina" itself, for cures depend essentially on it. Liquor merely serves to make the drug work more promptly.

De quelque manière qu'on donne le quinquina, il  
est toujours la principale chose, pour ne pas dire  
l'unique, à laquelle est due la guérison.<sup>263</sup>

La Fontaine does not deviate from this. Like Monginot, he repeats that the basic ingredient, that is, the drug itself, should be diluted in any type of drink, and gives more reasons for his adherence to this prescription.

---

260. Monginot, François de, Op.Cit., pp. 44, 48 - 49.

261. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 377, ll. 409 - 417.

262. Monginot, (Père), Secrets Polydaedales contre la Peste, Rouen, 1606, pp. 26 - 27.

263. Monginot, F, Op.Cit., p.13.



La base du remède étant ce divin bois.....,  
 Nulle liqueur au quina n'est contraire:  
 L'onde insipide et la cervoise amère,  
 Tout s'en imbibe....

Et Bacchus vous envoie  
 De pleins vaisseaux d'un jus délicieux,  
 Autre antidote, autre bienfait des cieux.  
 Le moût surtout, lorsque le bon Silène,  
 Bouillant encor le puise à tasse pleine,  
 Sait au remède ajouter quelque prix;  
 Soit qu'étant plein de chaleur et d'esprits  
 Il le sublime, et donne à sa nature  
 D'autres degrés qu'une simple teinture;  
 Soit que le vin par ce chaud véhément  
 S'emprenne alors beaucoup plus aisément,  
 Ou que bouillant il rejette avec force  
 Tout l'inutile et l'impur de l'écorce:  
 Ce jus enfin pour plus d'une raison  
 Partagera les honneurs d'Apollon;  
 Nés l'un pour l'autre ils joindront leur puissance.  
 Entre Bacchus et le sacré vallon  
 Toujours on vit une étroite alliance.<sup>264</sup>

The drug, thus prepared, must be administered in measured doses, depending on the age and strength of the patient and the gravity of the febrile condition.

.....Examinez la fièvre,  
 Regardez le tempérament;  
 Doublez, s'il est besoin, l'usage de l'écorce;  
 Selon que le malade a plus ou moins de force,  
 Il demande un quina plus ou moins véhément.<sup>265</sup>

As for the state of the liquor to be used, Monginot prescribes as follows :

Cette même préparation sera encore meilleure et moins désagréable, si on la fait dans le temps des vendages, mêlant les mêmes choses avec le vin lorsqu'il cuvera.<sup>266</sup>

This is what La Fontaine repeats in the following lines :

Mais, comme il faut au quina quelque choix,  
 Le vin en veut aussi bien que ce bois:  
 Le plus léger convient mieux au remède.<sup>267</sup>

The more fermented and lighter the liquor the more effective it will be. Monginot was the only physician of the epoch to add this vital detail about the condition of the liquor best suited for "quinquina":

264. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 377, ll. 457, 478-503.

265. Ibid., p. 377, ll. 462-466.

266. Monginot, François de, Op. Cit., p. 26.

267. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 377, ll. 504 -506.

Monginot est le seul qui conseille cela, et qui recommande de prendre le remède dans le temps des vendages. C'est tout le contraire dans les traités de ce temps que j'ai consulté: dans tous on recommande de préparer le quinquina avec du bon vin de Bourgogne, et même du vin d'Espagne.<sup>268</sup>

That our poet repeats this very detail shows how heavily he depended upon Monginot for inspiration, since no other contemporary physician mentions it.

The efficacy of "quinquina" concludes La Fontaine, is seen in the hundreds of people cured with it. These included a number of eminent personalities, such as the Great Condé and his son, the Prime Minister, Colbert, members of the Royal Household and other fashionable noblemen, some of whom were drinking the febrifuge in bottlefuls. In a letter to Boileau, dated 17th August, 1687, Racine observes that the royal court was full of aristocrats with a bellyful of "quinquina":

On ne voit à la cour que des gens qui ont le ventre plein de quinquina.<sup>269</sup>

This gives an idea of the popularity enjoyed by the drug in certain quarters, as well as explains why it was so topical among medical and literary men.

Using this popularity and the salutary role of the wonder drug as a springboard, our poet plunges into philosophical meditation, linking the episode of "quinquina" with his Providentialist philosophy. He reflects upon the essential and undeniable goodness and benevolence of nature, and reaffirms his faith in Providence, in man's original innocence, and in the fact that much of the folly that besets the world is man-made. This last idea is conveyed by means of the Greek myth of Pandora's box which the poet vividly recalls:

Si le quina servait à nourrir nos défauts,  
Je tiendrais un tel bien pour le plus grand des maux  
Les Muses m'ont appris que l'enfance du monde,  
Simple, sans passions, en désirs inféconde,  
Vivant de peu, sans luxe, évitait les douleurs:  
Nous n'avions pas en nous la source des malheurs  
Qui nous font aujourd'hui la guerre.

268. Régnier, A.D., Op.Cit., t.VI, p.348; Cf. note 6.

269. Racine, J., Op.Cit., (édit. A.D.Régnier), Paris, Hachette, 1865, t. VI, pp. 587-590.

Le Ciel n'exigeait lors nuls tributs de la terre:  
 L'homme ignorait les dieux, qu'il n'apprend qu'au besoin.  
 De nous les enseigner Pandore prit le soin.  
 Sa boîte se trouva de poisons trop remplie:  
 Pour dispenser les biens et les maux de la vie,  
 En deux tonneaux à part l'un et l'autre fut mis  
 Ceux de nous que Jupin regarde comme amis  
 Puisent à leur naissance en ces tonnes fatales  
 Un mélange des deux par portions égales;  
 Le reste des humains abonde dans les maux.  
 Au seuil de son palais Jupin mit ces tonneaux.  
 Ce ne fut ici-bas que plainte et que murmure;  
 On accusa des maux l'excessive mesure.  
 Fatigué de nos cris le monarque des dieux  
 Vint lui-même éclaircir la chose en ces bas lieux. 270

Men, in their vanity, ignore the fact that mother nature has in her bosom the cure for every ill; they despise her basic, simple, and untainted gifts in pursuit of chimerical fortune and luxury, only to discover that by so doing, they have disrupted the general equilibrium to their own disadvantage.

Qu'ils imputent leurs maux à leur dérèglement, 271  
 Et non point aux auteurs de leur tempérament.

In conclusion, La Fontaine adds a moral remedy to the physical one, and prescribes for the proper administration of the former moderation, temperance and discretion in the use of the wonderful gifts of nature.

Corrigez-vous, humains; que le fruit de mes vers  
 Soit l'usage réglé des dons de la nature, ... 272  
 Le quina s'offre à vous, usez de ses trésors.

The "disciple de Lucrèce" has thus ended his scientific discussion on the same note as his honoured master. Science is blended with morality and in that way shows the balanced character of La Fontaine's intellectual growth.

The Poème du Quinquina is a clear evidence of the poet's maturity as well as a testimony of the versatility of his genius. He himself regards it as such. The task of a poet discussing science and medicine, he admits, is an arduous one, but the effort is equally rewarding and worthwhile, hence he concludes :

Eternisez mon nom, qu'un jour on puisse dire:  
 "Le chantre de ce bois sut choisir ses sujets;  
 Phébus, amis des grands projets,

270. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 378, ll. 565 - 586.

271. Ibid., p. 378, ll. 599 - 600.

272. Ibid., p. 378, ll. 623 - 624; Cf. ll. 625 - 628.

Lui prêta son savoir aussi bien que la lyre."  
 J'accepte cet augure à mes vers glorieux;  
 Tout concourt à flatter là-dessus mon génie.... 273

The diptych form of the poem, presenting a terrible malady in the first canto and the remedy in the second, follows the pattern of contrasts developed in Psyché. But in the latter, good and happiness precede evil and sorrow, while the position is reversed in the Poème du Quinquina. The last quatrain of the first canto (I, ll. 304 - 307) and the first quatrain of the second part (II, ll. 1 - 4) represent the change of tone from pessimism to providentialist optimism; an optimism founded upon the faith that

Tout mal a son remède au sein de la Nature. 274

This delightful line, pregnant with philosophical implications, is the poetic translation by our poet of Monginot's reflection to the effect that

Nous ne voyons jamais tout ce que la nature nous met  
 pour ainsi dire devant les yeux. 275

The providential care provided for man by nature is symbolized in the solar myth of Apollo (I, ll. 36 - 38). This enthusiastic optimism looks ahead with confidence in the future of humanity, aided by experimental science. But it does not obliterate La Fontaine's moral pessimism which springs from his tragic awareness of man's reckless abuse of human ingenuity and the gifts of nature, thereby creating evil and misery where none should normally exist.

In conclusion, we dare to state that as a work of art, Le Poème du Quinquina is an excellent poem. As a scientific exposition, it lacks empirical exactitude, and for this, a number of factors are responsible. The first of these is La Fontaine's relationship with the scientific and technical ideas which he uses in the poem. It is to be noted that, in no other work of the poet, is the metaphor of "Papillon du Parnasse",<sup>276</sup> as applied to him, more appropriate than in this poem. Flying like the honey bee from flower to flower, and wandering over the gardens and meadows of the Muses and the honey-flowering fountains of ideas, he gathered the sweet material with which he pro-

---

273. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.378, ll. 629 - 634.

274. Ibid., p. 376, l. 378.

275. Monginot, François de, Op.Cit., p.4.

276. Maucroix, F.de, et La Fontaine, J.de, Op.Cit., p.133.

duced his pithy, half-serious, half-humorous discourse. This is only to be expected. La Fontaine is neither a scientist nor a professional physician, but a literary man, a poet, who puts existing thoughts into golden words. Thus for most of the first and the second cantos of the poem, he is more of a chronicler than an originator of ideas; that is, he is a reporter, setting down with running commentary, the facts of the situation as he understood them at the time. It should also be appreciated that much of the seventeenth-century medical science was contaminated with speculation. Thus, some of the poet's ideas on pathological conditions and drugs are based upon inference rather than upon sound experimentation. The grounds on which he bases his clinical observations are, by modern standards, rather feeble, as his critical acumen was seriously hampered by lack of thorough medical knowledge.

But despite these observations, our poet's work is in fashion, audacious and admirable for adapting exciting new developments in science and medicine to poetry. While his exposition leaves many gaps, it does provide a series of interlocking concepts, integrated one with the other in a coherent manner. The poem is the product of a more serene wisdom; a wisdom which the experience of years has conditioned to appreciate courage, effort and generosity. It is also the reaction of a disillusioned but alert old age in the face of the inexhaustible wonders of nature. Its audacious modernity and cautious optimism in the future of medical science make it the most forward-looking, even if the most speculative of La Fontaine's poems. The poet is now not only in the limelight of the literary world, but has entered the main stream of scientific thought. Thus our former fabulist has, thanks mainly to his eclecticism, gradually grown to be, in turn, a literary artist, philosopher, scientist and amateur physician. The three broad aspects of intellectual growth, namely, the literary, the philosophical and the scientific, have now crystallized and fertilized each other in the same personality. If we accept ideas as the vital source of creative power; if we take the sum total of a man to be what he knows, then we have to accept the fact that La Fontaine has become an intellectual in the true sense of the word. It only remains for a grateful and appreciative nation to endorse this fact formally by honouring him with a seat in the Academy.

5. Election to the Academy (1684)

By the time the Poème du Quinquina appeared (1682), La Fontaine had published several works of various descriptions : many poems, all his tales and most of his fables. He had, for all intents and purposes, become a fully mature intellectual, as we have already noted. Boileau too had published his Art Poétique, his Lutrin, nine Satires and several Epîtres. Yet neither he nor La Fontaine had a seat in the Academy, remarkable wits though they were. On March 22, 1684, M. de Bezons, State Counsel and Member of the Académie Française, died, thus creating a vacant seat in the Academy. There was a lot of heated debate as to which of the two writers, namely, La Fontaine and Boileau, should be elected to fill the vacant seat.

La Fontaine eagerly desired this honour which he considered as a fitting climax of his intellectual aspirations. Naturally, he put in everything in his power to win nomination. But his detractors and enemies also did everything to frustrate his effort. They quickly pointed to his licentious Contes as a sufficient reason for his disqualification. According to the records kept by Louis Racine, our poet did not sit idly by to allow his opponents to ruin his chance of a lifetime. He went out of his way to petition a prelate, probably Huet, who was an influential member of the Academy, renouncing his Contes and promising never to write such tales again.<sup>277</sup> He even consulted with his prospective rival, Boileau, requesting him to decline nomination. Boileau, while reassuring La Fontaine of his intention not to contest the seat seriously, made it clear, however, that he would not decline the seat if the august assembly of the Academy thought him worthy of that honour by nominating him. In the meantime, his supporters endeavoured to throw obloquy upon our poet by spreading all sorts of scandal about him. Rozé, the King's cabinet secretary, President of the Royal Court and Member of the Academy, was particularly hostile to La Fontaine. When, in spite of stiff opposition from Boileau's supporters, the Academy voted overwhelmingly in favour of La Fontaine, Rozé threw upon the table of the august Assembly a copy of La Fontaine's Contes, as if to shame a body that could propose to take the author of such a work into its number. This action, reports Walckenaer, created a row in the assembly.<sup>278</sup>

---

277. Racine, Louis, Op. Cit., t. V, p. 96.

278. Walckenaer, A. C., Op. Cit., p. 181.

The row over, La Fontaine's election was yet to face a major obstacle, namely, Royal opposition. Louis XIV, in spite of the strategic effort which the poet made in Le Poème du Quinquina and in other occasional pieces to woo his support, preferred Boileau, and would not allow our poet to be elected until after his favourite candidate had gone through. Thus, the next morning after the rowdy meeting of the Academy, when a delegate of the latter, M. Doujat, approached the King to ratify La Fontaine's nomination, His Majesty capitalized on the row that ensued during the voting and refused to approve the nomination.

Je sais qu'il y a eu du bruit et de la cabale dans  
l'Académie....Je le sais très bien, mais je ne  
suis pas encore déterminé; je ferai savoir mes in-  
tentions à l'Académie.

Unfortunately, the King left on his Flanders campaigns without giving any ruling on the matter. It was then that our poet changed his plan of action and concentrated all his effort on winning over the King. He composed the Ballade au Roi in January, 1684, to celebrate the King's victory in Flanders. Mme. de Thianges, one of Louis XIV's court ladies and an admirer of La Fontaine, took it upon herself to present the piece to His Majesty. She read it out with great feeling and emotion, taking care to emphasize the concluding verses, in which the poet associated the royal victory with his own cause :

Ce doux penser depuis un mois ou deux  
Console un peu mes Muses inquiètes.  
Quelques esprits ont blâmé certains jeux,  
Certains récits qui ne sont que sornettes;  
Si je défère aux leçons qu'ils m'ont faites,  
Que veut-on plus? Soyez moins rigoureux,  
Plus indulgent, plus favorable qu'eux,  
Prince, en un mot, soyez ce que vous êtes,  
L'événement ne peut m'être qu'heureux.

In spite of this touching plea, Louis XIV remained inflexible, not so much because of the scandal caused by La Fontaine's Contes, as the fact that the poet seemed to him to belong to the wrong camp, that is, the camp associated with the duchesse de Bouillon, Fouquet, Saint-Evremond, La Rochefoucauld, the Princes of Condé and Conti, all of whom were not in the good books of His Majesty.

279. Pellisson et d'Olivet, Op.Cit., t.II, p.22.

280. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.490, Ballade au Roi, ll. 41 - 49.

By chance, the death of the Prime Minister, Colbert, about this time, served two purposes towards enhancing our poet's chances of success. First, the incident reduced La Fontaine's enemies by one secondly, it created another chance in the Academy, for Colbert himself was an "Académicien". The position having eased, M. de Bezons' seat was given to Boileau, while La Fontaine took that of Colbert. Perhaps our poet, the convinced providentialist, saw this situation as yet another act of Providence in support of justice and fair play, for the King, satisfied that his candidate, Boileau, had been elected, withdrew his opposition to La Fontaine's candidature.

Le choix qu'on a fait de Despréaux m'est très agréable, et sera généralement approuvé. Vous pouvez recevoir incessamment La Fontaine; il a promis d'être sage.<sup>281</sup>

The Academy received the royal approval of our poet's nomination with joyous applause. Without waiting for the official or formal reception of Boileau, they proceeded to organize that of La Fontaine, which took place during a public meeting of the Assembly on May 2, 1684, thus bringing to a most successful climax some forty years of literary and intellectual aspiration.

The poet's maiden address to the members of the Academy is contained in two documents. The first one, written in prose, follows the traditional pattern of reception speeches read on such occasions. It begins with compliments to his predecessor, Colbert, to Richelieu and the King, founder and patron of the Academy respectively, and to the illustrious members of the august body.<sup>282</sup> This is followed by a review of the literary projects of the Academy, which included the compilation of an authoritative dictionary of the French language, the establishment of its grammar, and the publication of a standard work on the rules of French verse and prosody.

Vous me recevez en un corps où non seulement on apprend à arranger les paroles; on y apprend aussi les paroles mêmes, leur vrai usage, toute leur beauté et leur force. Vous déclarez le caractère de chacune, étant pour ainsi dire, nommés afin de régler les limites de la poésie et de la prose, aussi bien que ceux de la conversation et des livres.<sup>283</sup>

---

281. Walckenaer, A.C., Op.Cit., p.184.

282. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.518, "Remerciement du sieur de La Fontaine à l'Académie française".

283. Ibid. p.518.



The second address, a verse complement to the formal prose acknowledgements he has just read, is entitled Discours à Mme. de La Sablière: In the latter, the poet, finding himself on his more familiar ground, namely, poetry, returns into the innermost recesses of his mind in what looks like an examination of conscience. He reviews his past and present life and expresses hopes for the future.<sup>284</sup> He also takes the opportunity to express his eternal gratitude to the gracious lady, Mme. de La Sablière, whose influence and generosity had been so instrumental to his intellectual development.

Si j'étais sage, Iris (mais c'est un privilège  
Que la Nature accorde à bien peu d'entre nous),  
Si j'avais un esprit aussi réglé que vous,  
Je suivrais vos leçons, au moins en quelque chose:  
Les suivre en tout c'est trop; il faut qu'on se propose  
Un plan moins difficile à bien exécuter,  
Un chemin dont sans crime on se puisse écarter  
Ne point errer est chose au-dessus de mes forces.<sup>285</sup>

By means of this warm tribute, La Fontaine thus associates the name of his most beloved benefactress not only to the immortality of his work but also with the climax of his own success. This tribute is a more eloquent testimony of Mme. de La Sablière's contribution to the poet's intellectual development than anything said of her so far.

Reception into the Academy was also an occasion for La Fontaine to reaffirm his eclecticism :

Tu changes tous les jours de manière et de style;  
Tu cours en un moment de Térence à Virgile;  
Ainsi rien de parfait n'est sorti de tes mains.<sup>286</sup>

and the diversity of his genius :

Je suis chose légère, et vole à tout sujet,  
Je suis volage en vers comme en amours.<sup>287</sup>

In reply to the poet's addresses, the Director of the Academy, M. l'abbé de La Chambre, made a short but compelling speech in which he, in the name of the solemn Assembly, formally recognized La Fontaine as a literary genius :

L'Académie reconnaît en vous, Monsieur, un génie  
aisé, facile, plein de délicatesse et de naïveté,

284. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 491, Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, (1684), ll. 1-24.

285. Ibid., ll. 36 - 43.

286. Ibid., ll. 55 - 57.

287. Ibid., ll. 69, 74.

quelque chose d'original, et qui dans sa simplicité apparente, et sous un air négligé, renferme de grands trésors et de grandes beautés....<sup>288</sup>

Thus, from a mere writer of fairy tales, La Fontaine has, by dint of effort and courage, aided by the goodwill and assistance of well-meaning friends, become a distinguished intellectual and literary genius, recognized as such by the highest intellectual organ in contemporary France. He was yet to publish more fables, compose more prose work, as well as play an active role as a member of the Academy, but his intellectual aspiration has, by this single act of his election to the august body, received the highest stimulation of which it was capable. He has assured himself of a place in posterity.

---

288. Quoted in Walckenaer, A.C., Op.Cit., p.185.

## CHAPTER VI

OLD AGE AND DECLINE (1684 - 1695)1. The Poet Historian and Biographer : Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince.

If La Fontaine's election to the French Academy was the climax of his literary career and intellectual development, it also marked the beginning of his decline due mainly to old age and physical weakness. The poet himself confirms this view in certain lines of the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière which he read to the members of the Academy in 1684.

Désormais que ma Muse, aussi bien que mes jours,  
Touche de son déclin l'inévitable cours,  
Et que de ma raison le flambeau va s'éteindre,  
Irai-je en consumer les restes à me plaindre,  
Et, prodigue d'un temps par la Parque attendu,  
Le perdre à regretter celui que j'ai perdu?<sup>1</sup>

One indication of this decline is the Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince in which the poet uses bare prose for a work which would normally have been composed in golden verses or at least in a combination of verse and prose. This work compares the military career and personality of Louis II de Bourbon-Condé, otherwise known as the Great Condé, with those of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. It was published shortly after our poet's election to the Academy in 1684, and was dedicated to Louis-Armand, the elder Prince of Conti and nephew to the Great Condé.

La Fontaine had known the two Conti brothers since their childhood. The elder one, Louis-Armand and the younger, François-Louis, who were born in 1661 and 1664, respectively, were the sons of Armand de Conti and his wife, Anne-Marie Martinozzi, who was Mazarin's niece. Armand de Conti died in 1666 and his wife a few years later, leaving their two sons to the care and guardianship of the Great Condé. The latter was very kind to the children, brought them up in his castle of Chantilly and supervised their education. Their upbringing was such that they not only spoke fluent German and Spanish but were familiar with literature, history and philosophy as represented in the works of Cicero, Horace, the Fathers of the Church

---

1. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 490 - 491 : Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, ll. 1 - 6.

and the historian Froissart. It was to the elder prince, Louis-Armand, that La Fontaine dedicated the Recueil de poésies chrétiennes et diverses in 1671. On the occasion of the prince's marriage with Mlle. de Blois, the daughter of Louis XIV and Mlle. de la Vallière, in 1680, the poet also celebrated the event in an elaborate epithalamium in which he gives the young couple some advice on conjugal relations. The essence of marriage, he reminds them, is love :

.... Couple heureux et parfait,  
 Couple charmant, faites durer vos flammes  
 Assez longtemps pour nous rendre jaloux:  
 Soyez amants aussi longtemps qu'époux.  
 Douce journée, et nuit plus douce encore!  
 Heures, tardez, laissez au lit l'Aurore.  
 Le temps s'envole; il est cher aux amants;  
 Profitez donc de ses moindres moments.<sup>2</sup>

And when the prince died of smallpox at Chantilly in November, 1685, La Fontaine wrote a letter full of grief and condolence to the younger brother, paying tribute to both the dead and the surviving Conti.

Conti dès l'abord nous fit voir  
 Une âme aussi grande que belle.  
 Le Ciel y mit tout son savoir,  
 Puis vous forma sur ce modèle.  
 Digne du même encens que les dieux ont là-haut,  
 Vous attiriez des cœurs l'universel hommage.  
 L'un et l'autre servait d'exemplaire et d'image:  
 Vous aviez tous deux ce qu'il faut  
 Pour être un parfait assemblage.  
 Je n'y trouvais qu'un seul défaut,  
 C'était d'avoir trop de courage.<sup>3</sup>

It can thus be seen that when La Fontaine a year earlier embarked upon writing the comparison of the prince's uncle, the Great Condé, with Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, he was acting in the name of a long established friendship and respect for his patron. As he began to rely more and more on the generosity of the Conti brothers for his material needs, this bond of friendship tightened more than ever before. Although he was still living in lodgings provided by Mme. de La Sablière, he saw less and less of her on account of her change from worldly to devout life. He was often not

---

2. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.488.

3. Ibid. p.495, "A.S.A.S.Monseigneur le prince de Conti"

only short of funds but had to a large extent to provide his own food and meet his minor expenses. Naturally, there was a tendency for him to go closer to his old friends, the duc de Vendôme and his cousins the Princes de Conti, and to be more frequent at the libertine parties held at the "Hôtel du Temple". Here, there was freedom of speech and manners mingled with feasting and various forms of orgies. La Fontaine recalls one of such parties in a letter he wrote to the duc de Vendôme, dated August, 1689. He writes :

Nous faisons au Temple merveilles.  
 L'autre jour on but vingt bouteilles;  
 Rénier en fut l'architriclin.  
 La nuit étant sur son déclin,  
 Lorsque j'eus vidé mainte coupe,  
 Langeamet, aussi de la troupe,  
 Me ramena dans mon manoir.  
 Je lui donnai, non le bonsoir,  
 Mais le bonjour : la blonde Aurore  
 En quittant le rivage maure,  
 Nous avait à table trouvés,  
 Nos verres nets et bien lavés,  
 Mais nos yeux étant un peu troubles  
 Sans pourtant voir les objets doubles.  
 Jusqu'au point du jour on chanta,  
 On but, on rit, en disputa.<sup>4</sup>

Such lavish parties were regularly thrown by Louis-Armand, the elder prince de Conti, his younger brother, François-Louis, and more often by their cousins, the Vendômes, to friends whose company was congenial and who were admired for their ready wit, scepticism, freedom of speech and morals. The two Vendômes, Louis-Joseph, duc de Vendôme, born in 1654, and Philippe, born in 1655, were the sons of Louis de Vendôme, an illegitimate son of Henri IV. The elder Vendôme was an outstanding military man and the younger one later became Grand Prior of Malta in 1685. The latter, in particular, was immensely rich but, like the Contis, disliked at Court by Louis XIV who suspected the Princes of intriguing in collusion with the enemies of the throne. In reaction, the wealthy Princes resigned themselves to a life of luxury and pleasure and were always surroun-

---

4. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 58 - 59, "A Son Altesse Monseigneur le duc de Vendôme".

ded by courtesans and friends of both sexes, including Chaulieu, Chapelle, La Fare and Mme. Deshoulières. Similar gatherings were also frequent at the Chantilly home of the Prince of Condé, uncle to the Contis, and La Fontaine rarely missed these occasions except when his rheumatism prevented him from going out. He describes with a lot of enthusiasm one of such parties which Condé's son, Henri-Jules de Bourbon, now prince de Condé, gave in August, 1692, in honour of his cousin the prince de Conti after the latter's resounding victory at the battle of Steinkirk. The new prince de Condé was reputed for his ability to organize entertainments and to satisfy his guests. On this particular occasion, large sums of money were distributed among the favourites and dependents of the house of Condé and La Fontaine received a purse of one hundred louis of which he writes :

Moi j'en tiens cent louis : chacun m'en fait la cour.<sup>5</sup>

Of the generous prince himself the poet says :

Il a déifié ma veine.  
 Mes soins en valaient-ils la peine?  
 Il ne s'en faut point étonner:  
 Que ne lui vit-on pas donner  
 Dans le temps qu'il tint cour plénière  
 Pour une fête singulière?  
 Chantilly fut la scène, endroit délicieux.  
 Tous rapportèrent de ces lieux  
 De grosses et notables sommes  
 Il a payé comme les dieux  
 Ce qu'ils ont fait comme des hommes.<sup>6</sup>

It is little wonder, therefore, that La Fontaine felt completely at home among these friends and kindred spirits whose somewhat dissolute way of life suited his own temperament. Given this background of his relationship with the princes of Condé and Conti, it is still less surprising that he undertook to compare one of them with Alexander the Great and Julius Cæsar.

The Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince should therefore be seen as part of the series of literary compositions by means of which the poet wished to compensate or to express his appreciation and gratitude to his benevolent patrons. It is

---

5. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 61 : "A M. le Chevalier de Sillery".

6. Ibid., p. 61.

possible that the prince de Conti himself, who at that time was in disgrace at Chantilly, suggested this comparison, for La Fontaine begins by saying that he himself would have gone to Chantilly to offer his humble respects to the prince, had a slight indisposition and the search through ancient and contemporary history and literature for worthy figures of comparison not prevented him :

Sans une indisposition qui me retient, j'aurais été à Chantilly pour m'acquitter de mes très humbles devoirs envers Votre Altesse Sérénissime. Ce que je puis faire à Paris est de chercher dans les ouvrages des Anciens et parmi les nôtres quelque chose qui vous puisse plaire et qui mérite d'entrer dans les contestations de Monsieur le Prince.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of comparing the lives of great men dates back to the Roman times when Plutarch first compared the careers of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Since La Fontaine mentions his search in ancient literature for the details of the lives of great men worthy of comparison with M. le Prince, it is possible that he drew some inspiration from Plutarch's work. But the main bulk of the intellectual material which he used in his own comparison was drawn from three other sources : the thirty-sixth chapter of Montaigne's Essais entitled Des plus excellens hommes; then there was the Parallèles et éloges historiques d'Alexandre le Grand et de Monseigneur le duc d'Anguien, published in 1645 by Jean Puget de La Serre, and two other works by Saint-Evremond : Eloge de Monsieur le Prince (1652-1653) and La Comparaison de César et Alexandre (1688?).

What La Fontaine did was to adapt the historical details contained in these models to the circumstances of the life and career of M. le Prince. In fact, the poet admits having done precisely that :

Je ne serais pas le premier qui aura tenté un pareil dessein; ç'est à moi de lui donner une forme toute nouvelle.<sup>8</sup>

Montaigne compares Homer, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, recognizes all three as great men but declares Alexander to be the greatest of them all.<sup>9</sup> The comparison attempted by Montaigne was

7. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 520.

8. Ibid., p. 520.

9. Montaigne, Michel de, Op. Cit., pp. 730-36.

continued by Saint-Evremond in his La Comparaison de César et Alexandre. Although the collection in which this comparison appeared, namely, the Œuvres mêlées de M. de Saint-Evremond, was not published until 1688, the comparison itself was written much earlier than this date, that is, between 1680 and 1684, and the manuscript was known to La Fontaine long before it was incorporated into the Œuvres mêlées... In the comparison, Saint-Evremond quotes Plutarch and Montaigne and observes that the former, having examined the temper, actions and fortunes of the heroes, left the final decision to the public; and that Montaigne, more courageous and confident than Plutarch, declared himself in favour of Alexander the Great. But he, Saint-Evremond, will not pretend to make any positive decision for or against either of the two heroes, but will follow the example of Plutarch in leaving the final judgement open to the reader.

Plutarque, après avoir examiné leur naturel, leurs actions, leur fortune, nous laisse la liberté de décider, qu'il n'a osé prendre. Montaigne plus hardi se déclare pour le premier.... Pour moi qui ai peut-estre examiné leur vie avec autant de curiosité que personne, je ne me donnerai pourtant pas l'autorité d'en juger absolument.<sup>10</sup>

La Fontaine adopts the same conventional modesty with regard to M. le Prince as we shall see shortly.

He begins by comparing the prince with the Greek warrior, Achilles. What both heroes have in common is their military skill, their bravery and stubborn resistance against all odds. Their youth has also a lot in common :

Je pourrais aussi le comparer à Achille. Un ferme résolution de ne point céder, l'amour des combats, la valeur y sont tout entiers des deux côtés. Ils se ressembloient assez quand M. le Prince était jeune;.... Puis j'ai réservé le caractère d'Achille pour Votre Altesse Sérénissime; et je crois qu'en temps et lieu l'opiniâtreté et la véhémence ne vous manqueront non plus qu'à ce Grec.<sup>11</sup>

But comparison between Achilles and the Prince is by no means the most appropriate, for the latter, on account of his culture and learning and his other combinations, possesses qualities which are

---

10. Saint-Evremond, Œuvres meslées, Paris, (Claude Barbin), 1689, pp. 111 - 112.

11. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 521.



lacking in his Greek counterpart. Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar provide a more equitable comparison by reason of their greater resemblance to the Prince. Like him, both had the advantage of an illustrious birth and were passionate lovers of learning. As a prelude to comparing the two ancient heroes with M. le Prince, La Fontaine first of all compares the pair with each other

Pour les mieux comparer à M. le Prince, il faut que je les compare auparavant l'un à l'autre.<sup>12</sup>

He discovers in Alexander the Great a kind of prodigy similar to Achilles; a hero who undertook the conquest of the then world at a tender age of twenty years. Alexander's spectacular courage and bravery, his audacity and indomitable will combine to give his life and career something of a supernatural character.

Je laisserai pourtant Alexandre en possession du privilège que tout le monde lui attribue: car d'entreprendre à vingt ans la conquête de l'Asie avec aussi peu de troupes qu'il en avait, et ne vouloir démordre d'aucune chose, cela ressemble assez à Achilles; aussi se proposait-il de l'imiter.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis laid on Alexander's tender age and on the comparatively limited strength of his army when he embarked upon the conquest of Asia follows the pattern of argument used by Montaigne. The latter writes :

Car qui considérera l'aage qu'il commença ses entreprises; le peu de moyen avec lequel il fit un si glorieux dessein; l'autorité qu'il gagna en cette sienne enfance parmy les plus grands et expérimentez capitaines du monde,....avoir, à l'aage de trente trois ans, passé victorieux toute la terre habitable et en une demye vie avoir atteint tout l'effort de l'humaine nature!<sup>14</sup>

It is easy to see that La Fontaine adopts the same line of thought as Montaigne. But to avoid being accused of having copied his model word for word, he reduces the extent of Alexander's conquest at the age of thirty-three years from the whole of the then world, as estimated by Montaigne, to just the conquest of Asia; and accordingly

12. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.521.

13. Ibid. p.520.

14. Montaigne, M. de, Op.Cit., pp. 730-36.

he also changes the hero's age to read twenty instead of thirty-three years.

Julius Caesar too performed wonders not only in the military but in other fields of endeavour. But his career seems to many people to have less of the miraculous element that colours that of Alexander the Great. Both men delighted in honour and glory and were often motivated in their actions by the desire to win the praise and esteem of men. But again, the Greek general seems more motivated in this way than his Roman counterpart. Here La Fontaine quotes a statement credited to Alexander the Great as he was about to cross a river in quest of military conquests. Referring to the difficult and hazardous nature of the campaign, the Greek general is quoted as having declared :

"O Athéniens, pourriez-vous bien croire combien de travaux j'endure pour être loué de vous?"<sup>15</sup>

Whether Alexander the Great was really more vainglorious than Julius Caesar is a debatable proposition but in the opinion of our poet a more pertinent question is to determine which of the two great generals of antiquity had a more wonderful career. In this connection the poet thinks that, wonderful as the exploits of Alexander the Great may seem to a superficial observer, his career is not really more spectacular than that of either Julius Caesar or M. le Prince, considering the fact that the Greek warrior had the overwhelming advantages of royal birth, fortune and universal adulation as his starting point, as against his Roman and French counterparts who were comparatively less fortunate at the early stages of their life. In other words, argues La Fontaine, to attain the heights which Julius Caesar and M. le Prince reached in the absence of the initial advantages enjoyed by Alexander the Great, is a much more prodigious feat to accomplish and therefore deserves a greater praise, particularly with regard to M. le Prince.

---

15. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.521.

Je donne plus de louange à ceux-ci: car quelle merveille y a-t-il que, la fortune et l'opinion des hommes ayant résolu d'en mettre un au-dessus de tous les autres, il profite de ces faveurs, et y contribue du sien? Mais de parvenir sans ces avantages aux degrés de gloire où César et M. le Prince sont parvenus, c'est ce que j'admire, et plus encore en M. le Prince que dans le Romain.<sup>16</sup>

From this point, La Fontaine goes on to compare the two heroes of antiquity with the Prince of Condé. The reader is made to see that what all the three men have in common is vivacity and speed of action, courage and intelligence; all were well-read and much more intellectually cultured than would be expected of men of their profession. Thus Caesar combined military prowess with the gift of eloquence and political sagacity.

....Ce Romain a excellé en trois choses principales, la politique, l'art militaire, et l'art de bien dire.<sup>17</sup>

Although Alexander the Great had one of the world's greatest masters of eloquence, namely, Aristotle, as his teacher, he regarded eloquence with disdain but admired it in others when it was used to sing his own praises; M. le Prince prefers positive action to sheer eloquence, and is less avid of popular glory than either of the two heroes of antiquity; both Alexander and Caesar started their military career early in life; M. le Prince's military capabilities were not made manifest until at the battle of Rocroi when he was already a middle-aged man, but he is by no means inferior to his Greek and Roman predecessors in the field of action :

Pour comparer ces trois personnages selon l'ordre que je me suis imposé, ils ont fait voir au sortir de leur enfance beaucoup de vivacité, de hardiesse, et d'esprit; mais M. le Prince n'ayant eu aucune occasion d'éclater avant la bataille de Rocroi,.... les compétiteurs que je lui donne l'emporteront à l'égard du premier temps. Ce que je trouve de singulier, c'est que tous trois ont eu du savoir, et que la lecture les a occupés plus qu'elle n'a coutume de faire des gens de leur sorte. Outre le savoir, César eut de l'éloquence. Alexandre et M. le Prince se sont peu souciés de porter cet avantage aussi haut que Jules César a fait. Alexandre l'a méprisé, lui

16. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 521.

17. Ibid., p. 522.

qui avait Aristote pour précepteur, et qui était fils d'un père fort éloquent. Il voulait tout emporter de force, et eût cru se faire tort s'il se fût servi d'insinuations; mais je crains fort que M. le Prince ne tienne un peu de lui de ce côté-là.<sup>18</sup>

This general comparison is followed up with a personal evaluation by La Fontaine himself of the heroes. He singles them out one by one and assesses the impact of their career on posterity. Alexander the Great had a good excuse for attacking and destroying the Persian Empire; he wanted to avenge the Greeks and to contain the barbarian infiltration. But the same thing cannot be said of his unprovoked invasion of India. This act was motivated by the general's greatest weakness, namely, his inordinate ambition to conquer the world in order to win the esteem of men. For this singular act of indiscretion and for many other acts of inhumanity, Alexander the Great stands condemned by the judgement of history.

Pourquoi troubler le repos d'une nation qui ne lui en avait donné aucun sujet et qui faisait un meilleur usage que lui des bienfaits de la nature?<sup>19</sup>

It is admirable to note that in a work like this, in which La Fontaine's objective is to celebrate military heroism, he still maintains the unqualified condemnation of unprovoked aggression and the policy of foreign conquests which he first pronounced in Le Paysan du Danube. The mere fact that the poet took this stand at an age when ambitious generals tended to sacrifice humanitarian considerations to military conquests places his intellectual meditations centuries ahead of his own epoch. In military operations, La Fontaine distinguishes between justice and expediency, and condemns the latter as being cowardly and robbing all military achievements of true heroism.

On ne regarde pas s'ils sont justes, on regarde s'ils sont habiles- c'est assez même qu'ils soient heureux: on les loue alors.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand,

Quand la témérité est heureuse, elle met les hommes au nombre des dieux.<sup>21</sup>

18. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 521.

19. Ibid., p. 522.

20. Ibid., p. 522.

21. Ibid., p. 523.

As for Julius Caesar, he carried out a greater number of campaigns equally hazardous with those of Alexander the Great and his career is distinguished by a more advanced military skill and ingenuity. His conquest of Gaul may not have been as spectacular as Alexander's triumph over Darius of Persia, but when the latter's victory is matched against Caesar's exploits in Pharsalia, North Africa and other barbarian lands, its glory fades into insignificance. Caesar made himself master of the Roman world in a more subtle and admirable manner than Alexander the Great did of the Greek world. And Caesar's humanitarian qualities are in themselves more praiseworthy than the violent and inhuman destruction of cities accomplished by the Greek General. On these grounds, our poet finds Julius Caesar a greater man than Alexander the Great.

Ainsi je donnerais volontiers l'avantage à Jules  
César....<sup>22</sup>

On the question of his final judgement on M. le Prince, La Fontaine gives the impression that this is no easy task. It is not difficult for him to pass an unequivocal judgement on Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar both of whom have played their role and left the stage for posterity to judge them. But this is not the case with M. le Prince who is still alive as this work is being composed. It is more difficult to pass judgement on a living hero. If the judgement is unfavourable, it embarrasses the hero; if favourable, it draws upon him the envy and antagonism of his rivals, and in the case of the prince in particular, a favourable judgement would injure his sense of modesty and humility. Thus the poet seems to hesitate a little before pronouncing judgement on M. le Prince, and, like Saint-Evremond, he declares :

Mon intention n'a été que de prononcer entre ceux  
qui ne sont plus. On en peut parler comme on veut:  
ce sont les gens du monde les plus commodes. Pour  
les vivants, il faut prendre garde avec eux à ce que  
l'on dit....Si par hasard....j'allais mettre M.le Prince  
au-dessus des autres, je lui attirerais trop d'envie, et  
offenserais la délicatesse qu'il a sur le fait des pané-  
gyriques. De le faire marcher le dernier, il en aurait  
du dépit.<sup>23</sup>

22. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 523.

23. Ibid. p.522.

But the adoption of this artifice by La Fontaine is only a clever way of covering his judgement and giving the impression that he is not lavish with praises for the Great Condé, for he goes round to pronounce in an indirect manner the same judgement which he claims to suspend. The poet does not quite succeed in his effort to hide the fact that he is merely flattering his patron. One of the points that betray him is his allusion to the prince's "délicatesse....sur le fait des panégyriques". If the prince is really opposed to being praised by others, why then does he take it in bad part if he is made to "marcher le denier"? Again, when the poet says of the prince :

Je ne lui dirai jamais en face: "Vous êtes plus grand qu'Alexandre"; et lui dirai encore moins: "Alexandre doit être mis au-dessus de vous",<sup>24</sup>

he has for all intents and purposes pronounced his judgement, even if ironically. As if to draw the attention of his patron to the fact that he has done so, La Fontaine follows up this statement with a subjective review of the prince's military career, pointing out with a great deal of emphasis the material advantages which both Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar had over the prince and the difficulties the latter had to overcome with very limited resources : an ill-equipped army, shortage of funds, coupled with royal distrust and the opposition of a better organized and more formidable army than either Alexander or Caesar ever had to fight.

Il a quelquefois commandé de mauvaises troupes,....  
la fortune ne lui a pas toujours été favorable....  
la fortune a toujours mené ses deux rivaux par la main, et lui a été souvent opposée;....il n'a été maître ni de l'argent ni des troupes dont il s'est servi;....il a eu à combattre d'habiles gens et de vaillants hommes, au lieu que les Perses étaient imbéciles, les Gaulois courageux et forts à la vérité, mais sans expérience à la guerre,....  
César a eu les meilleures troupes du monde et les plus affectionnées à leurs capitaines.<sup>25</sup>

There is no doubt that in laying emphasis on the handicaps suffered by the prince, La Fontaine has in mind the idea of pronouncing M. le Prince's achievements more praiseworthy than those of his rivals.

---

24. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.522.

25. Ibid., p. 523.

In spite of these handicaps, the prince was able to distinguish himself as a gallant and brave man at Rocroi, Lens, Arras and in many other battles. His heroism is therefore no less remarkable than that of his relatively better placed counterparts. He conducted himself in the true heroic fashion when the need arose.

Les héros se laissent emporter à la chaleur du combat. Cela n'est-il pas arrivé quelquefois à M. le Prince?<sup>26</sup>

Granted that the three men being compared are all great and famous heroes, there is still something that gives M. le Prince an edge over his rivals. The essence of true greatness, says La Fontaine, is not the acquisition of power and the accumulation of glory; it consists in the way this power is used. In this respect, Alexander the Great is less than great. He was often unreliable, selfish, as vain as Nero, recklessly destructive and - - - cruel to those who looked up to him for protection.

Il tue son ami, et fait bâtir une ville à la mémoire de son cheval....Plutarque fait mention d'un incident qui doit noircir davantage la mémoire de ce prince: c'est un manque de parole à certaines troupes qui s'étaient accommodées avec lui sous certaines conditions. La débauche et la flatterie de ses courtisans, ou plutôt son propre tempérament, ne sont pas seulement coupables de ce qu'il fit pour punir Clitus; on voit à mille autres actions qu'il porte tout dans l'excès. Il fit brûler le palais des rois de Perse sur la proposition qu'en avait faite une courtisane....tout cela par une vanité aussi ridicule qu'était celle de Néron....<sup>27</sup>

This catalogue of cruelty contrasts sharply with the admirable humanity of Julius Caesar. When the latter was informed that Brutus was plotting against his very life, and advised to destroy the traitor, Caesar ignored the advice and pardoned Brutus. In the same way, he pardoned Ligarius at the request of Cicero. These singular acts of clemency are more heroic than Alexander's conquest of the world and his deification of himself.

Je tiens celle-ci plus grande que toutes celles du Prince de Macédoine, et d'une conséquence toute autre que de se faire appeler dieu, ce qui déplut aux Macédoniens et aux Perses.<sup>28</sup>

---

26. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 523

27. Ibid., p.524.

28. Ibid., p.524.

In his discussion of Julius Cæsar's humanitarian qualities La Fontaine drew inspiration from English history; he quotes the example of Charles I, who freely forgave in the true heroic spirit, certain of his countrymen who were caught conspiring to destroy him :

Charles Stuart a empêché de tout son pouvoir qu'on n'ait cherché les conspirations qui se faisaient contre lui. Il ne voulait point qu'on punit les conspirateurs. Par là il se fit aimer, et ne se fit pas assez craindre.<sup>29</sup>

There is no doubt that the poet also recalled Corneille's play, Cinna, which was first performed in 1640. The theme of this play is the remarkable act of clemency on the part of the Emperor Augustus who generously pardons Cinna and the other conspirators who plot to assassinate the emperor.<sup>30</sup>

Leading from this point, La Fontaine goes on to show that M. le Prince resembles both Cæsar and Charles I in their humanitarian qualities. The prince is more than a mere friend, he is a loving father to those around him.

Qui ne sait que M. le Prince est un père à adorer?<sup>31</sup>

From the point of view of practical wisdom too, M. le Prince is superior to both Alexander the Great and Julius Cæsar. These latter became victims of their own excesses and inordinate ambition. To illustrate this point more clearly, our poet returns to English history, and this time finds an argument in the story of Cromwell's career to prove that moderation is the secret of happiness. Cromwell was a monarch in everything but name; he enjoyed all the honours and privileges befitting a king. Yet he was not satisfied with all that; he wanted to be also a king in name, that is, to be officially crowned monarch. This ambition, like that of Julius Cæsar, led to his downfall.

Cependant Cromwell est aussi tombé dans cette erreur, tout habile qu'il était. Ne suffisait-il pas à l'un et à l'autre d'avoir l'essentiel de la royauté, sans en affecter aussi les apparences, qui ont pensé perdre Cromwell, et qui ont été cause de la mort de Jules Césaire? Pauvres gens, de courir après le nom, quand la chose leur devait suffire!<sup>32</sup>

29. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 524.

30. Corneille, P., Op. Cit., (édition Régnier), t. III, p. 459; Cinna, Acte V, scène 3, ll. 1693 - 1714.

31. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 524.

32. Ibid., p. 524.



This is no doubt a discreet allusion to the relationship between the Court and M. le Prince. At the time this work was produced, the Great Condé was in disgrace at Chantilly. But the strained relations between him and Louis XIV, who cut him off from the affairs of the Royal Court, did not affect the prince's normal, easy-going life. He quietly retired to the castle at Chantilly, visiting Paris only occasionally and doing his utmost to live as royally and as happily as his considerable means could afford. Aware of this situation, La Fontaine is here seeking to console and reassure his patron by confirming him in the attitude he has adopted towards royalty and courtly honours. Accordingly, the poet sees the prince's comfortable adaptation to circumstances as a mark of strength and wisdom rather than of weakness. Unlike Caesar and Cromwell, M. le Prince is wise enough to realize that there is nothing in the name "king", and to avoid falling into the same errors committed by the other two men :

Mais j'ai tort de me défier de la sagesse de M. le Prince. Son séjour à Chantilly en fait voir assez pour ne pas donner à croire qu'il fût tombé dans les fautes qu'ont faites les autres, s'il fût parvenu au même degré de fortune.<sup>33</sup>

What matters is for one to be happy and contented with one's lot. A hero who has learnt to master his ambitions in the way M. le Prince has done is a very great and wise man indeed because he has learnt the lesson of moderation and self-contentment.

La modération est une vertu de particulier et de philosophe, et non point de Majesté ni d'Altesse.<sup>34</sup>

Moderation, the keynote of La Fontaine's philosophy of "volupté", is therefore the virtue upon which he bases his judgement and assessment of the three heroes whom he is comparing. And from what we have so far known about them, M. le Prince is the only one who has cultivated this virtue through a judicious combination of heroism with humanitarianism, glory with humility, and even country life with city life :

---

33. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.524.

34. Ibid., p.524.

M. le Prince, sans y renoncer entièrement, trouve le secret de jouir de soi. Il embrasse tout à la fois et la Cour et la campagne, la conversation et les livres, les plaisirs des jardins et des bâtiments. Il fait sa cour avec dignité: aussi fait-il à un prince qui mérite qu'on la lui fasse, et qui en est plus digne qu'aucun monarque qui ait su régner.<sup>35</sup>

Since the desire of every man is to secure happiness, and since one's success or failure in life depends to a large extent upon the degree to which one succeeds in realizing this objective, can there be a greater, a more successful man than he who has mastered the secret of "volupté"? This argument naturally leads the poet to the final statement of his opinion on the three heroes: Alexander the Great is just a spoilt military hero, Julius Caesar a great man, and M. le Prince both.

Alexandre s'y comporta comme un homme que la bonne fortune et la gloire avaient achevé de gâter. Jules César a des traits d'humanité et de clémence,.... M. le Prince participe de tous les deux.<sup>36</sup>

M. le Prince is therefore the greatest of the three heroes compared in this work:

N'est-il pas au-dessus de l'homme à Chantilly, et plus grand cent fois que ses deux rivaux n'étaient sur le trône? Il y a mis à ses pieds ses passions dont les autres ont été esclaves jusques au dernier moment de leur vie.<sup>37</sup>

The project of comparing M. le Prince with the great heroes of antiquity is an ambitious one. As Mathieu Marais rightly observes,

Ce n'était pas une petite entreprise de traiter une matière si haute, qui devait passer par les mains des plus grands héros, qui étaient en même temps les plus grands connoisseurs.<sup>38</sup>

The admirable manner in which La Fontaine handles this delicate comparison reveals not only the maturity of his judgement but also the exactitude and accuracy of his historical knowledge. He portrays the dominant traits of character which history attributes to each of the heroes as well as maintains a fairly balanced judgement throughout the work.

---

35. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 525.

36. Ibid., p.525.

37. Ibid., p. 525.

38. Marais, M., Contes et Nouvelles de La Fontaine, Paris, (Delahays), 1858, p. lxxiii.

One of the interesting points of the comparison is the basis upon which the poet gives his final assessment of the heroes, namely, the virtue of moderation, shown in the ability to combine heroism with humanitarianism and glory with humility. He no doubt admired these qualities. But what he seems to have left undefined is the boundary between moderation and excess in human desires. If, as he suggests, the enjoyment of the rights and privileges attached to a particular state in life can provide full satisfaction without our aspiring to enter that state, one wonders why he himself usurped the title of "écuyer" and, in spite of the fame and honour which his Fables won for him, aspired to have a seat in the Academy! Either our poet forgot or chose to ignore the fact that ambition is like water from an enchanted spring; the more you drink from it the more you thirst. In any case, the excellence of the work as a whole is not seriously affected by the poet's tendency to be too idealistic. We have to distinguish between La Fontaine as a moralist and La Fontaine as a man. Few moralists, if any, can honestly claim to have rigorously attuned their private lives to the morals they preach. Not even the great master, Epicurus, does this. Viewed in this light, La Fontaine's insistence on moderation can be regarded as an ideal worthy of emulation but not always easy to attain.

More important still is the place of the Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince as a development of the pattern of thought initiated in Le Songe de Vaux. The prince's happy retirement at Chantilly and his ability to combine public life with pleasure and relaxation contrast with Fouquet's ambitions and his ill-fated enslavement to public life and the service of the Court.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike the fallen Finance Minister, M. le Prince has sufficient wisdom and prudence to maintain a happy balance between the glamour of worldly life in Paris and the pleasures of solitude in Chantilly. The Lord of Chantilly possesses better than the Master of Vaux the secret of enjoying himself to the full. Whereas Fouquet rarely gave himself a breathing space from State duties, M. le Prince judiciously blends various aspects of life and enjoyment. The

---

39. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 393 - 394 : Le Songe de Vaux, II; Cf. "Epître à M.le Surintendant", Ibid. pp. 461 - 463.

correspondence between Le Songe de Vaux and the Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince provides another example of La Fontaine's remarkable skill in the art of varying his themes and developing his ideas. We shall see in the twelfth Book of Fables how the poet manipulates this notion of retreat or solitude into the great idea of self-knowledge which forms the ethical basis of his moral philosophy.

From the artistic point of view, the Comparaison d'Alexandre.... is not among La Fontaine's best compositions. The total absence of verse in the work suggests a decline from poetry to prose. A parallel decline from diversity to medley is equally discernible in Les Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine, published jointly the following year by the poet and his friend Maucroix (1685). This joint enterprise seems to have been more of a symbol of their life-long friendship than a serious literary project aimed at breaking new grounds.

C'est une ancienne amitié qui en est la cause.<sup>40</sup>

Most of the material contributed by La Fontaine to this collection, with the exception of five new fables, are old poems. Maucroix contributed the majority of the prose passages. Prose and poetry are comfortably juxtaposed, each completing the other without losing its identity. This is the arrangement to which our poet refers when, in the epistle dedicating the work to M. de Harlay, he declares :

....Harlay, favori de Thémis,  
Agréez ce recueil, œuvre de deux amis;  
L'un a pour protecteur le démon du Parnasse,  
L'autre de la tribune étale tous les traits.<sup>41</sup>

The strictly new poems contributed by La Fontaine to this collection lack something of the beauty and elegance of style which characterize his earlier compositions. The signs of this artistic degeneration include a tendency to be too academic in the use of figures of speech,

40. Maucroix, F. de. et La Fontaine, J. de. Op. Cit., (Avertissement).

41. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 492 : "A Mgr. le Procureur Général du Parlement".

artificial and cold elegance of style, loss of force in poetic diction, and a certain negligence and obscurity in expression. All these and many other stylistic flaws combine to indicate that while being more mature in thought, the poet has lost much of the lively force of poetic imagination which distinguishes his best-known poems. That creative imagination, that burning curiosity and taste for diversity, which created the Contes and Fables, seem now to have degenerated into mere medley of old materials blended together to satisfy the craving for variation and contrast. Certainly, old age and its consequent physical weakness are beginning to affect the poet's literary efficiency.

But if these factors caused some visible decline in the quality and quantity of his literary output, they do not seem to have seriously affected his active participation in the purely intellectual business of the Academy. He was actively involved in the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns started by Charles Perrault. During a royal celebration to mark the King's recovery from a serious illness, Perrault, member of the Academy, read a poem entitled Le Siècle de Louis le Grand in which he celebrated the achievements of Louis XIV's era in particular and modern times in general. He criticized the men of antiquity and argued that their achievements in all fields of endeavour, while being commendable, have nothing to compare with those of modern times. Perrault cited scientific and technological progress, the emergence of Christianity with its purer and nobler ideal of humanity, the refinement and piety of the modern christian heroes as opposed to the barbaric pagan warriors of antiquity among the factors which make modern times superior to antiquity. Besides, he argued, just as a son becomes greater than his father by improving upon the latter's achievements so modern culture and civilisation are superior to those of ancient times from which they are built up.

Les Modernes, bien loin d'être des enfants par rapport aux Anciens, sont les seuls véritables adultes. Ils bénéficient de l'apport du passé, de ces âges impitoyables qui gardent un certain mérite mais où nous ne saurions chercher des exemples....<sup>42</sup>

Following this contention, Perrault mentions neither La Fontaine nor Boileau nor even Racine among the illustrious men of the epoch, since these three artists were faithful imitators of the ancients. Naturally, Perrault's poem sparked off a controversy which was to plague the peace of the Academy for more than half a century.

As would be expected, our poet took the side of the defenders of the ancients. In an epistle addressed to his friend Huet, La Fontaine extols the merit and superiority of the ancient arts and culture :

Ne pas louer son siècle est parler à des sourds.  
Je le loue; et je sais qu'il n'est pas sans mérite;  
Mais près de ces grands noms notre gloire est petite.<sup>43</sup>

He acknowledges his debt to the literature of antiquity as a vital element in the formation of his mind and art :

Terence est dans mes mains; je m'instruis dans Horace;  
Homère et son rival sont mes dieux du Parnasse....  
Je chéris l'Arioste et j'estime le Tasse;  
Plein de Machiavel, entêté de Boccace,  
J'en parle si souvent qu'on en est étourdi;  
J'en lis qui sont du Nord, et qui sont du Midi.<sup>44</sup>

and restates his theory of imitation :

Quelques imitateurs, sot bétail, je l'avoue,  
Suivent en vrais moutons le pasteur de Mantoue:  
J'en use d'autre sorte; et, me laissant guider,  
Souvent à marcher seul j'ose me hasarder.  
On me verra toujours pratiquer cet usage;  
Mon imitation n'est point un esclavage:  
Je ne prends que l'idée, et les tours, et les lois,  
Que nos maîtres suivaient eux-mêmes autrefois.  
Si d'ailleurs quelque endroit plein chez eux d'excellence  
Peut entrer dans mes vers sans nulle violence,  
Je l'y transporte, et veux qu'il n'ait rien d'affecté,  
Tâchant de rendre mien cet air d'antiquité.<sup>45</sup>

---

42. Perrault, Charles, *Le Siècle de Louis le Grand*; quoted in Marc Soriano, *Les Contes de Perrault*, Paris (Gallimard), 1968, p. 302.

43. La Fontaine, *Op. Cit.*, p. 493 : "A Mgr. l'évêque de Soissons", ll. 40-42.

44. *Ibid.*, ll. 37 - 38, 77 - 80.

45. *Ibid.*, ll. 21 - 32.

For La Fontaine, therefore, the controversy between the Ancients and the Moderns was an occasion to reaffirm with an air of finality his eclecticism and his doctrine of originality in imitation. The Epître à Huet, at the time it came, was the poet's profession of faith in the excellence of antiquity and his acknowledgement of its influence on his intellectual development. His remarkable familiarity with antiquity is not only evident from the many adaptations he makes from its literature but also from the accurate knowledge of ancient history which he exhibits in the Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince. It is little wonder, therefore, that he should return to ancient history and literature for inspiration in the last two poems of Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée both of which are adapted from the Metamorphoses of Ovid.

2. The Return to Ovid : "Philémon et Baucis" and "Les Filles de Minée"

By the time La Fontaine became an "Académicien", he had defined his literary world and had also, or at least gives the impression of having done so, exhausted the available sources which he could effectively exploit with the skill at his disposal. One indication of this fact is the tendency for him to go back to the earlier sources, that is, to those models in ancient literature which served him so well during his formative years, particularly the Metamorphoses of Ovid from which he drew inspiration for his earliest successful poem of Adonis. It was to this same source that he now returned when, in 1685, he needed material with which to compose the twin poems of Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée. These were the new poems which appeared together in the second volume of Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine, published in 1685. There has been a lot of speculation about the date of composition of these poems. Some critics believe that although the poems were not published until 1685, they were in fact composed about the same time as Adonis. Pierre Clarac, for example, gives the impression that at least part of the poems is as old as Le Songe de Vaux:

A quelques œuvres récentes se mêlent des vers  
écrits autrefois pour Fouquet, deux poèmes,  
Philémon et Baucis et Les Filles de Minée....  
Avec ses deux poèmes La Fontaine revenait à  
Ovide qui lui avait inspiré Adonis, Daphné,  
Galatée. Il y a d'ailleurs de fortes raisons  
de penser qu'une partie au moins des Filles de  
Minée était composée depuis longtemps.<sup>46</sup>

Gustave Michaut mentions the possibility of earlier composition but refrains from concluding.<sup>47</sup> The same attitude is maintained by Pierre Collinet.<sup>48</sup> What led to this speculation is the similarity in genre and source between Adonis and these later poems. But this ground alone cannot justify the dating of Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée with Adonis. La Fontaine has the habit of re-  
turning to his favourite sources now and again, and nothing stops

46. Clarac, P., La Fontaine, Nouvelle édition revue et corrigée,

Paris, (Hatier), 1959, pp. 131 - 132.

47. Michaut, G., La Fontaine, Paris, (Hachette), 1914, t.II, pp.241-242.

48. Collinet, J-P., Op.Cit., p.385.



him from selecting materials which he previously left out, if he now considers them appropriate for a new purpose. Moreover, if these poems were composed at the same time as Adonis or Le Songe de Vaux, it is more than probable that the poet would have published them at the same time that Adonis and Psyché appeared, that is, in 1669, when, according to La Fontaine himself, the epic genre was in demand. Is it possible that the poet could have delayed for nearly twenty years the publication of a poem that was in fashion around 1669? It is also to be noted that much of the youthful exuberance and poetic imagination which characterize Adonis are lacking in the later poems. There is therefore little doubt that Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée were composed about the same time that they were published and that La Fontaine came back to Ovid in his old age.

What he sought in the Latin model at this time was an inspiration that would enable him to portray another aspect of love. That is, to put across another concept of "Amour" whose very immortality would contrast with the pagan love of Adonis conquered by death. Ovid is well-placed to provide our poet with what he needed, for apart from being an epic poet, the Latin author is also the poet of love. The Roman love elegy, whatever had preceded it in the later Greek literature, received a new meaning and greater stimulation in the hands of Ovid. He endowed love with the qualities of heroism and durability. In the eighth Book of his Metamorphoses, Ovid tells of a surprise visit which the king of gods, Jupiter himself, pays to a certain town in the Phrygian hill-country in company with Saturn. Both gods, disguised as travellers, are denied shelter by the wicked and inhospitable inhabitants of the town. Only the poor old couple, Philemon and Baucis receive the strangers into their humble cottage and offer them as much hospitality as their modest circumstances can permit. As they all sit at table, the visitors perform a miracle by multiplying the quality and quantity of the dry bread offered to them, thus revealing their true identity to their host and hostess. The gods also disclose their mission to destroy the town and to spare no one but Philemon and his wife. The latter are removed to a nearby hill; the town is destroyed and turned into a

marsh, while the couple's cottage becomes a beautiful marble temple. At the end of their exceptionally long life, Philemon and Baucis are, at their own request, changed into an oak and linden tree respectively.<sup>49</sup>

The suggestion has been made by Huet that La Fontaine may also have drawn inspiration from the biblical story of the visit of two angels to Lot and his wife, recorded in the nineteenth chapter of Genesis.<sup>50</sup> Huet cites the washing of the guests' feet which features in the poem as a typically Hebrew custom.<sup>51</sup> But this argument is not a valid one, for the practice of washing the feet of a guest as a sign of hospitality was common to the ancient Greeks and Hebrews. It is therefore a feeble ground upon which to base the argument. However, judging from La Fontaine's good knowledge of the scriptures as a result of his early contacts with the Christian religion, and considering the skill with which he has demonstrated this knowledge not only in Le Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc but in his other religious poems, it is possible that he recalled the episode in the Book of Genesis when he was composing Philémon et Baucis. We are inclined to believe that the poet drew the bulk of his inspiration from Ovid but may have supplemented it with reminiscences of his knowledge of the Old Testament history and religion.

In adapting Ovid's story, La Fontaine remains remarkably faithful to his model, particularly with regard to the details of the domestic life of the hero and the heroine. But he transfers the emphasis which Ovid laid on the couple's piety to the amazing solidity of their love which enables them to remain happy and contented even in the midst of indigency. For example, Ovid elaborates on the modest circumstances of the couple, and dwells particularly upon the humble details of the couch, the three-legged and unsteady table, the earthenware dishes, the meagre meal of vegetables, milk and fruits and dry bread:

Philémon le premier présente un banc rustique;  
Baucis d'un vieux tapis couvre ce siège antique;

---

49, Ovide, Naso Publius, Les Métamorphoses, Traduites en vers, avec des remarques et des notes par M. Desaintange, (Nouvelle édition), Paris, 1808, t. III, p. 65: (Livre VIII, ll. 9-16).

50. The Holy Bible with the Books called Apocrypha, Revised version, Cambridge and London, pp. 19-20 : Genesis, 19, 1-28.

51. Huet, Demonstratio evangelica, Paris, 1690, p. 123.

Puis autour des tisons, sous la cendre cachés,  
 Amassant de l'écorce et des rameaux séchés,  
 D'un souffle haletant avec peine réveille  
 Les charbons endormis qu'elle a couverts la veille;  
 Et donnant au foyer de nouveaux alimens,  
 Sous un vase à trois piés allume des sarmens.  
 Elle y met, dépouillé de sa grossière feuille,  
 Le légume arrondi que le pauvre recueille.  
 Le vieillard la seconde, et d'une fourche armé,  
 Détache un lard qui pend au chevron enfumé,  
 En coupe une parcelle, et dans l'onde bouillante  
 Adoucit sur le feu sa saumure écumante.<sup>52</sup>

But he uses these details as a means of bringing out more vividly the admirable piety of the old couple, whose hospitality in the face of crushing poverty, contrasts sharply with the wickedness of the rich people of the town. The reader is made to appreciate the couple's charitable disposition by means of the little detail of the *partridge*. Although the latter is the couple's only companion in the house, they try to kill it for their guests as a further sign of hospitality but are dissuaded from doing so by the visitors. We are told that, impressed by this singular act of virtue, Jupiter himself can no longer hide his admiration :

Mais surtout Jupiter avec plaisir observe  
 Cet accueil simple et vrai, ce bon cœur sans réserve,  
 La richesse du pauvre, et qui donne au repas  
 Un prix que bien souvent de grands festins n'ont pas.<sup>53</sup>

La Fontaine retains all these details. He stresses the "étroite cabane" which serves as the couple's dwelling and which he describes as

Demeure hospitalière, humble et chaste maison,<sup>54</sup>

and adds the following comment on the paucity of the furniture and the frugality of the meal

La table où l'on servit le champêtre repas  
 Fut d'ais non façonnés à l'aide du compas:  
 Encore assure-t-on, si l'histoire en est crue,  
 Qu'en un de ses supports le temps l'avait rompu.

---

52. Ovide, N.P., Op.Cit., ll. 23 - 36.

53. Ibid., ll. 67. - 70.

54. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.380 : Philémon et Baucis, ll. 36 - 37.

Baucis en égala les appuis chancelants  
 Du débris d'un vieux vase, autre injure des ans.  
 Un tapis tout usé couvrit deux escabelles:  
 Il ne servait pourtant qu'aux fêtes solennelles.  
 Le linge orné de fleurs fut couvert, pour tous mets,  
 D'un peu de lait, de fruits, et des dons de Cérès.<sup>55</sup>

But our poet accumulates these details for a purpose quite different from that of his Latin model. They no longer serve merely to reflect the piety of the couple but are used here as a means of forcing the antithesis between the couple's abject material poverty and their sublime happiness and contentment. This disposition derives not from any material wealth, honour or glory but from the good relationship and undying love which bind the couple together, thus illustrating the importance of "amitié" and "amour" in the quest for happiness. The prologue of the poem is devoted to defining the ephemeral and elusive nature of material wealth and glory as instruments of happiness. The latter consists in the enjoyment of physical health and mental tranquillity, in being contented with what one has and in scorning the vain promptings of inordinate ambition. The wise and happy man mocks at the transitory splendour of kings and their favourites, and is unwilling to exchange his modest but satisfying dwelling for the palaces of kings.

Ni l'or ni la grandeur ne nous rendent heureux;  
 Ces deux divinités n'accordent à nos vœux  
 Que des biens peu certains, qu'un plaisir peu tranquille:  
 Des soucis dévorants c'est l'éternel asile;  
 Véritables vautours que le fils de Japet  
 Représente, enchaîné sur son triste sommet.  
 L'humble toit est exempt d'un tribut si funeste:  
 Le sage y vit en paix, et méprise le reste;  
 Content de ces douceurs, errant parmi les bois,  
 Il regarde à ses pieds les favoris des rois.<sup>56</sup>

When it is recalled that this poem was dedicated to the duc de Vendôme, the motive for La Fontaine's insistence on self-contentment and his contempt for kings and their favourites becomes clearer. The duc de Vendôme, one of the poet's benefactors during this time, was, in spite of his bravery and distinguished talents, disliked by Louis XIV. He was virtually in disgrace. From an early age he and his brother were constantly intriguing with their aunt, the duchesse de Bouillon, in whose house La Fontaine must have met them. Naturally, the king

---

55. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.380 : Philemon et Baucis, ll. 61 - 70.

56. Ibid., ll. 1 - 10.

considered their manners to be atrocious. It was to the elder brother, Louis-Joseph, that La Fontaine dedicated Philémon et Baucis. Ignoring the King, the royal palace and its honours, the young duc de Vendôme endeavoured to make his own country home as attractive and happy as possible. The voluptuous supper parties which were organized here, like those of the Duc's cousins, the Princes of Conti, attracted many of the pleasure-loving epicureans of the epoch, including La Fontaine. In this way the duc de Vendôme and his brother succeeded in being quite happy and contented despite the King's hostility. This was the historical context in which our poet's prologue to Philémon et Baucis was composed. The poet is here trying to convince the Duc that "ces douceurs" and "plaisir tranquille" which the Duc's home afforded are superior in every way to the vain splendour and honours of the royal palace. The ostentatious glory that surrounds the King and his favourites is purchased at a more costly price than it is really worth.

Il lit au front de ceux qu'un vain luxe environne  
Que la Fortune vend ce qu'on croit qu'elle donne. <sup>57</sup>

This subtle reference to "Fortune" and her supposed free gifts to the great among men, suggests reminiscences of Montaigne, Voiture and Chapelain. In the second Book of Essais Montaigne declares that the favours of the gods are not given free but sold to men.

Les dieux nous vendent tous les biens qu'ilz nous  
donnent. <sup>58</sup>

Vincent Voiture reiterates the same idea in his epistle to the comte de Guiche :

Sans mentir...., La Fortune est une grande trompeuse!  
Et pour l'ordinaire elle nous vend bien chèrement les  
choses qu'elle semble nous donner. <sup>59</sup>

And Jean Chapelain takes it up again in one of his letters :

Reconnoissez que la Fortune ne veut pas qu'un  
homme ait jamais du bien sans peine, et qu'il  
faut toujours qu'elle se paie de ses faveurs à  
nos dépens. <sup>60</sup>

What La Fontaine has in common with his mentors is their insistence on the fact that the so-called royal honours, wealth and glory are

---

57. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., ll. 11 - 12.

58. Montaigne, M. de, Op.Cit., p.655 (Essais, II, xx).

59. Voiture, V., Œuvres, Paris, 1677, t.I, p.255 : (Lettre cxxiii)

60. Chapelain, J. Correspondance, Paris, 1669, t.I, p.77.

neither true happiness nor indispensable to it: they are merely troubles in disguise. In this sense, this prologue is a reaffirmation by our poet of his ethics of "volupté". True "volupté" consists in the peaceful enjoyment of the simple pleasures of life as outlined in L'Hymne à la Volupté, not in the accumulation of wealth and elusive glory. It is to illustrate this fact that La Fontaine gives the story of Philémon et Baucis to his patron.

Philémon et Baucis nous en offrent l'exemple:  
Tous deux virent changer leur cabane en un temple.  
Hyménée et l'Amour, par des désirs constants,  
Avaient uni leurs cœurs dès leur plus doux printemps:  
Ni le temps ni l'hymen n'éteignirent leur flamme;  
Clothon prenait plaisir à filer cette trame....  
L'amitié modéra leurs feux sans les détruire, 61  
Et par des traits d'amour sut encor se produire.

It is significant that when Philemon engages the guests in conversation, in order to allow his wife time to prepare the frugal meal, their discussion centres

....non point sur la Fortune,  
Sur ses jeux, sur la pompe et la grandeur des rois,

but

....sur ce que les champs, les bergers et les bois  
Ont de plus innocent, de plus doux, de plus rare. 62

This is a further development of the emphasis laid on the beauty of nature as an important ingredient of "volupté" in Psyché. 63

The main value of the final metamorphosis of the aged couple into trees is strategic in Ovid's work. It serves to provide the tree-shrine upon which Lelex is finally to pin his offering and pronounce his moral epigram. In La Fontaine's poem, this change assumes a metaphysical character to symbolize the omnipotence of love. In the prologue to the opera, Daphné, where the poet makes a symbolic representation of the most dominant human passions: anger, fear, hope, despair, joy and love, he singles out the last as the most powerful of them all.

Rien n'a d'empire sur l'Amour,  
L'Amour en a sur toutes choses.  
Le plus magnifique don  
Qu'aux mortels on puisse faire,  
C'est l'amour. 64

61. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 380, ll. 15-20, 27-28.

62. Ibid., ll. 55 - 59.

63. Ibid., p. 453, Psyché, II, "L'Hymne à la Volupté".

64. Ibid., p. 327, Daphné, (Prologue)

In the heated debate between Venus and Minerva over the relative strength of love and reason in men, Minerva argues that

Le don le plus nécessaire  
Aux hôtes de ce séjour  
C'est la raison.<sup>65</sup>

and Venus insists that

C'est l'amour.<sup>66</sup>

In the end, it is love that carries the day as the entire choir of gods sing its praises :

Heureux qui par raison doit plaire!  
Plus heureux qui plaît par amour!<sup>67</sup>

It is this opinion that La Fontaine now re-enforces in Philémon et Baucis. Love can triumph over all wants and obstacles to establish itself as the immortal essence of a happy relationship. Thus the hero and the heroine of this poem, now changed into the oak and the linden tree respectively, stand out before the poet's vision as models of love and conjugal fidelity.

Baucis devient tilleul, Philémon devient chêne.  
On les va voir encore, afin de mériter  
Les douceurs qu'en hymen Amour leur fit goûter:  
Ils courbent sous le poids des offrandes sans nombre.  
Pour peu que des époux séjournent sous leur ombre,  
Ils s'aiment jusqu'au bout; malgré l'effort des ans.<sup>68</sup>

It is possible that La Fontaine recalled the failure of his own marriage as he meditated upon the conjugal fidelity, harmony and love between Philemon and Baucis, for he lets fall an exclamation which seems to express regret and self-condemnation

Ah! si....Mais autre part j'ai porté mes présents.<sup>69</sup>

Some critics, notably Saint-Marc Girardin, have seen this exclamation as the only sincere evocation of the poet's regret over the failure of his marital relations in the whole of his literary work.

Cette exclamation, "Ah! si...." est le seul signe de vocation conjugale que La Fontaine ait montré dans ses œuvres.<sup>70</sup>

65. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 327.

66. Ibid., p. 327.

67. Ibid., p. 327.

68. Ibid., p.381, Philémon et Baucis, ll. 156 - 161.

69. Ibid., l. 162.

70. Saint-Marc Girardin, La Fontaine et les fabulistes, Paris, 1867, t.I. p. 283.

How far Girardin is correct in describing this exclamation as sincere is yet to be seen. After all, is it not the same La Fontaine who, in a letter to the prince and the princesse de Bourbon shortly before their marriage in 1685, writes :

S'il faut changer, donnez-vous patience,  
Et ne soyez époux qu'à soixante ans.<sup>71</sup>

In another letter to the younger prince de Conti over <sup>the</sup> Parliament's dissolution of Mlle. de La Force's marriage with Briou's son in 1689, he also speaks disparagingly about marriage :

Je soutiens et dis hautement  
Que l'hymen est bon seulement  
Pour les gens de certaines classes;  
Je le souffre en ceux du haut rang,  
Lorsque la noblesse du sang,  
L'esprit, la douceur, et les grâces,  
Sont joints au bien; et lit à part.  
Il me faut plus à mon égard.  
Et quoi? De l'argent sans affaire;  
Ne me voir autre chose à faire,  
Depuis le matin jusqu'au soir,  
Que de suivre en tout mon vouloir;  
Femme de plus assez prudente  
Pour me servir de confidente....  
Et quand j'aurais tout à mon choix,  
J'y songerais encor deux fois.<sup>72</sup>

What Girardin seems to have overlooked is that La Fontaine distinguishes between marriage as a social institution and marriage as related to happiness or to "volupté". Whereas the poet pays lip service to marriage as an institution, he personally does not see the contract as contributing to the realization of "volupté" beyond the physical level of satisfying the immediate sexual urge. For him, conjugal fidelity is a difficult imposition which is very hard to carry out when the couple are still young and attractive to third parties.

In any case, as far as the poem of Philémon et Baucis is concerned, the theme of marriage is incidental to the poet's main objective. It is neither conjugal fidelity nor the institution of mar-

71. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 496 : "A Leurs Altesses Sérénissimes Mademoiselle de Bourbon et Monseigneur le Prince de Conti."

72. Ibid., pp. 53 - 54 : "A Son Altesse Sérénissime Mgr. le Prince de Conti".



riage that La Fontaine is interested in. If these ideas were uppermost in his mind, he certainly would not have dedicated a poem on such themes to the duc de Vendôme who himself was extremely dissipated, indulging in all sorts of excesses and quite libidinous in his tastes. Certainly what La Fontaine wanted to put across to his patron in this poem is the idea that friendship and love are eternal virtues and the essence of true happiness. One shows one's love and friendship by being generous to friends even in the midst of scarcity as the story of Philemon and Baucis has demonstrated. Generosity and hospitality create a good and amicable relationship which in turn induces love and "volupté". Viewed in this light, the dedication of this poem to the duc de Vendôme is a token of La Fontaine's appreciation of the Duke's past favours and at the same time an anticipation of more generosity. This idea is symbolized in the dual petition which Philemon and Baucis address to Jupiter. They first thank the King of gods for showering them with so much favour :

Vous comblez, dirent-ils, vos moindres créatures.<sup>73</sup>

Then they add the request to be consecrated priest and priestess respectively so that they may worship the gods in their cottage, now turned into a marble temple. This request is immediately granted.

Aurions-nous bien le cœur et les mains assez pures  
Pour présider ici sur les honneurs divins,  
Et prêtres vous offrir les vœux des pèlerins?  
Jupiter exauça leur prière innocente.<sup>74</sup>

But that is not all; the couple also ask for the favour of simultaneous death when the time comes for them to depart this world, so that neither of them will suffer the loss of the other.

"Hélas! dit Philémon, si votre main puissante  
Voulait favoriser jusqu'au bout deux mortels,  
Ensemble nous mourrions en servant vos autels:  
Clothon ferait d'un coup ce double sacrifice;  
D'autres mains nous rendraient un vain et triste office:  
Je ne pleurerais point celle-ci, ni ses yeux  
Ne troubleraient non plus de leurs larmes ces lieux."<sup>75</sup>

Here again the reader is clearly made to understand that

Jupiter à ce vœu fut encore favorable.<sup>76</sup>

The analogy implied in this subtle manipulation of the ancient myth

73. La Fontaine, Op.Cit. p.38, Philémon et Baucis, l. 123.

74. Ibid., ll. 124 - 127.

75. Ibid. ll. 128 - 134.

76. Ibid. l. 135.

could not have escaped the attention of the Duke. It is in the nature of gods to reward amply, to be generous and to grant the requests of needy but sincere and obliging hearts. It therefore behoves those who take the place of the gods among men (and the Duke himself was one of such men) to take a leaf from their models. One cannot help admiring the clever manner in which La Fontaine applied his vast knowledge of literature to the solution of his own problems. One of such problems was the need to have always at hand a number of rich and influential patrons who helped to supply his material needs while he devoted himself entirely to his literary pursuits. As he grew older and weaker, this need became increasingly acute. It is therefore very much to the poet's credit that he was able to draw from across the ages sufficient inspiration, appropriate arguments, anecdotes and analogies with which he not only attracted but also retained the attention of a vast number of patrons and sympathizers whose generosity sustained him throughout his career. If the essence of education, and indeed of intellectual growth, is the application of knowledge to the solution of the problems of life, then La Fontaine's success in this sphere is yet another index of his intellectual growth.

Like Philémon et Baucis, the second poem, Les Filles de Minée was adapted from the fourth and seventh Books of Ovid's Metamorphoses and supplemented with an episode drawn from Boccaccio's The Decameron. In Ovid's account of the daughters of Minyas, the story begins with a brief account of the general acceptance of Bacchus as a god and of the festival being held in his honour. In older Greek art Bacchus had always been represented as a bearded man crowned with ivy or grape leaves and swathed in a long tunic. As an improvement upon this, Ovid describes the god as a very young man endowed with almost maidenly beauty and with perennial youth.

O Lyée! ô liber! inventeur de la vigne,  
 Astre nouveau du ciel, gloire à ton heureux signe!  
 O fils de Sémélé! dans le cours de neuf mois,  
 Toi seul, enfant divin, tu vins au jour deux fois.  
 Ton visage riant, quand ta tête sacrée  
 Dépouille l'ornement de sa mître dorée,  
 D'une vierge au front pur a les traits ingénus. 77

In place of this physical description of the god of wine, La Fontaine substitutes an account of Bacchus' exploits among mortals and gives the god a more dissolute character :

Je ne dis rien des vœux dus aux travaux divers  
De ce dieu qui purgea de monstres l'univers:  
Mais à quoi sert Bacchus, qu'à causer des querelles,  
Affaiblir les plus sains, enlaidir les plus belles,  
Souvent mener au Styx par de tristes chemins?<sup>78</sup>  
Et nous irions chommer la peste des humains.

In portraying Bacchus in this manner, the poet is guided by the usual practice in ancient Greece and Rome. Here, it was natural for the worshippers of any god to recall the famous exploits of the deity on his feast day. La Fontaine makes this festival an occasion for introducing the three spinning sisters or the daughters of Minyas who defy the god and incur his vengeance. He presents the sisters as ordinarily industrious and pious; they do honour to Minerva, the goddess of household arts, admit that a real god is omnipotent; and they usually recognize the wisdom of the gods; but they refuse to acknowledge the divinity of Bacchus for the reasons quoted above. Thus the initial portrayal of the character of Bacchus has the strategic importance of being the prelude or the reason for the sacrilegious attitude of the daughters of Minyas. In Ovid's work, their sacrilege is punished by their being metamorphosized into bats; La Fontaine improves upon this detail by following it up with a moral reflection aimed at ridiculing the gods.

Bacchus entre, et sa cour, confus et long cortège:  
"Où sont, dit-il, ces sœurs à la main sacrilège?  
Que Pallas les défende, et vienne en leur faveur  
Opposer son égide à ma juste fureur:  
Rien ne m'empêchera de punir leur offense.  
Voyez: et qu'on se rie après de ma puissance!"  
Il n'eut pas dit, qu'on vit trois monstres au plancher,  
Ailés, noirs et velus, en un coin s'attacher.  
On cherche les trois sœurs; on n'en voit nulle trace.<sup>79</sup>

The ironical comment with which La Fontaine follows up this metamorphosis will be quoted later. Meanwhile the innovation made by the poet is not limited to the mere introduction of new details; he

---

78. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 382, Les Filles de Minée, ll. 15 - 20.

79. Ibid., ll. 543 - 551.

also changes the entire structure of his model. For example, he imagines that while the three sisters stay at home weaving or spinning their thread, they also entertain themselves with stories. Whereas in the Latin model these stories cannot enter easily into the sequence of the poem and have to be treated as separate compositions, La Fontaine contrives to incorporate all of them into one long poem under the common title of Les Filles de Minée. This architecture is rendered possible by means of his eight-line prologue.

Je chante dans ces vers les filles de Minée,  
 Troupe aux arts de Pallas dès l'enfance adonnée,  
 Et de qui le travail fit entrer en courroux  
 Bacchus, à juste droit de ses honneurs jaloux.  
 Tout dieu veut aux humains se faire reconnaître.  
 On ne voit point les champs répondre aux soins du maître,  
 Si dans les jours sacrés, autour de ses guérets,  
 Il ne marche en triomphe à l'honneur de Cérés.<sup>80</sup>

The stories which Ovid puts in the mouth of the sisters are of three groups, one told by each of the girls. Every group begins with a short introductory passage and alludes to a number of myths each of which contains a metamorphosis of some sort.<sup>81</sup>

Our poet converts Ovid's fourth story, namely, the famous myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, into his own first tale. The Latin model tells how these two lovers, finding that their parents are opposed to their marriage, plan to flee covertly. But their plan miscarries and both perish in tragic circumstances.<sup>82</sup> La Fontaine retells the story with admirable brevity and vividness. In a few lines he names the lovers, sketches the setting, and describes the intensity of their love which is engendered by proximity and stimulated further by parental opposition.

Deux jeunes cœurs s'aimaient d'une égale tendresse:  
 Pyrame, c'est l'amant, eut Thisbé pour maîtresse.  
 Jamais couple ne fut si bien assorti qu'eux:  
 L'un bien fait, l'autre belle, agréables tous deux,  
 Tous deux dignes de plaire, ils s'aimèrent sans peine;

80. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., Les Filles de Minée, ll. 1 - 8.

81. Ovide, N.P., Op. Cit., t. II, pp. 9 - 39.

82. Ibid., pp. 9 - 18.

D'autant plus tôt épris, qu'une invincible haine  
 Divisant leurs parents ces deux amants unit,  
 Et concourut aux traits dont l'Amour se servit.  
 Le hasard, non le choix, avait rendu voisines  
 Leurs maisons, où régnaient ces guerres intestines:  
 Ce fut un avantage à leurs désirs naissants.<sup>83</sup>

Then the poet recounts the circumstances leading to the discovery by the lovers of a hidden fissure in the wall dividing their houses and the naive converse of the lovers at nightfall. This detail which Ovid treats very casually is exploited by our poet as a means of reiterating the warning he gave earlier in the Contes to the effect that the suppression of love impulses only serves to intensify the urge to love :

La défense est un charme: on dit qu'elle assaisonne  
 Les plaisirs, et surtout ceux que l'amour nous donne.  
 D'un des logis à l'autre, elle instruit du moins  
 Nos amants à se dire avec signes leurs soins....  
 Un vieux mur entr'ouvert séparait leurs maisons;  
 Le temps avait miné ses antiques cloisons:  
 Là, souvent de leurs maux ils déploreraient la cause....<sup>84</sup>

The painting of this scene suggests reminiscences of certain verses of Théophile de Viau. The latter depicts a similar image in his tragedy, Les Amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé, mis en vers françois, which was published in 1626. In this scene, de Viau writes :

Privés de tous moyens de nous parler ailleurs,  
 Et ne pouvant venir à des accès meilleurs,  
 Une petite fente en cette pierre ouverte,  
 Par nous deux seulement encore découverte,  
 Nous fait secrètement aller et revenir  
 Les propos dont Amour nous laisse entretenir.<sup>85</sup>

Indicating with a few poetic touches the return of day, La Fontaine outlines the lovers' plan of escape, mentions their rendezvous under a beautiful statue instead of the tall mulberry tree used by Ovid,<sup>86</sup> and describes the circumstances of their death.

"Demain, dit-il, il faut sortir avant l'aurore;  
 N'attendez point les traits que son char fait éclore.  
 Trouvez-vous aux degrés du Terme de Cérés;

83. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 382, ll. 37 - 47.

84. Ibid., ll. 53 - 61.

85. Théophile de Viau, Les Amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé, mis en vers françois, Paris, (Martin), 1626, Acte II, scène i.

86. Ovide, N. P., Op. Cit., pp. 9 - 18.

Là, nous nous attendrons : le rivage est tout près,  
 Une barque est au bord; les rameurs, le vent même,  
 Tout pour notre départ montre un hâte extrême;  
 L'augure en est heureux, notre sort va changer;  
 Et les dieux sont pour nous, si je sais bien juger."<sup>87</sup>

Although more concise than his model, our poet portrays every scene of the tragedy with an artistic touch personal to his ironical style. The episode of the lioness, fresh from devouring a lamb, and which tears and stains Thisbe's cloak with blood, is given an air of improbability in Ovid's poem by the suggestion that the beast first of all filled its stomach with water from a nearby spring :

Voilà qu'une lionne, aux yeux de flamme ardents,  
 Teinte du sang des bœufs déchirés par ses dents,  
 Vient de se désaltérer dans la source voisine.<sup>88</sup>

La Fontaine, aware of this element of improbability, suppresses the drink episode and gives the incident a more realistic touch.

Une lionne vient, monstre imprimant la crainte;  
 D'un carnage récent sa gueule est toute teinte.  
 Thisbé fuit; et son voile, emporté par les airs,  
 Source d'un sort cruel, tombe dans ces déserts.  
 La lionne la voit, le souille, le déchire;  
 Et, l'ayant teint de sang, aux forêts se retire.<sup>89</sup>

After Pyramus has committed suicide, believing that his lover has been devoured by a wild beast, Thisbe returns timidly to the place of rendezvous; she is at first doubtful whether this could be the appointed place. La Fontaine suggests that in the bright moonlight, and being shaken with fear and agitation, the heroine's doubt is only natural. This contrasts with Ovid's explanation to the effect that Thisbe's perplexity is caused by the moonlight giving a frightful colour to the mulberries. There is no doubt that our poet finds this explanation a little ridiculous. As a prelude to the tragic conclusion of the story, it is essential that Thisbe should know how Pyramus died. Yet the Latin model introduces the heroine's discovery of her lover's death under very improbable circumstances.<sup>90</sup> Ignoring Ovid's deviation, our poet goes straight into the details of the discovery of Pyramus' action and sword by Thisbe. The model's unnecessary digressions and rigmaroles are completely cut off and

Thisbe is made to witness the expiration of her lover:

87. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 382-83, ll. 89-96; Cf. also ll. 101-125.

88. Ovide, N.P., Op. Cit., p. 13.

89. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 383, ll. 105 - 110

90. Ovide, N.P., Op. Cit., pp. 13 - 15.

Thisbé vient; Thisbé voit tomber son cher Pyrame.  
 Que devint-elle aussi? Tout lui manque à la fois,  
 Les sens et les esprits, aussi bien que la voix.  
 Elle revient enfin; Clothon, pour l'amour d'elle,  
 Laissa à Pyrame ouvrir sa mourante prunelle.  
 Il ne regarde point la lumière des cieux;  
 Sur Thisbé seulement il tourne encor les yeux.  
 Il voudrait lui parler, sa langue est retenue:  
 Il témoigne mourir content de l'avoir vue.<sup>91</sup>

Driven to despair, Thisbe also ends her own life with the same weapon used by her lover. Nothing brings out more vividly La Fontaine's contention that legitimate love impulses should not be suppressed than the tragic end of these two ill-fated lovers.

As if to bring this lesson nearer home to the reader, the poet adds the episode of Cephalus and Procris. The original Greek legend tells that Cephalus used to spend the morning hunting wild beasts and at noon would visit a particular spring on Mount Hymettus to enjoy the cool, refreshing breeze (aura). He often addressed the breeze as if it were a human being, urging it to visit him. Informed of this, Cephalus' wife, Procris, thought that her husband was courting some beautiful nymph named Aura. In great distress, she went alone to the spring and concealed herself, alternately hoping and fearing. On this occasion Cephalus addressed not only aura but also zephyr. Happy to find herself mistaken, Procris would have rushed to him to apologize for her jealousy, but as she stirred the leaves, Cephalus mistook her for an approaching wild beast and wounded her fatally with his arrow. She lived long enough to regret her unfounded suspicion.

La Fontaine ignores much of this account in his adaptation of the myth, and follows the version established by Ovid. Accordingly, he uses material from Ovid's L'Art d'Aimer.<sup>92</sup> Both husband and wife are to be loyal to each other and yet without cause both are to indulge in mutual suspicion. Then the poet associates the story with the poetic myth of Aurora in which the goddess of dawn is usually represented carrying off some handsome youth. Thus, shortly after

---

91. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.383, ll. 126 -134.

92. Ovide, N.P., L'Art d'Aimer, Traduit en vers français par M. le Président Nicole, Paris, 1662, Livre III, ll. 686 - 746.

Cephalus' marriage with Procris, the goddess finds him hunting and abducts him. La Fontaine presents this abduction as an interruption in the early happiness of Cephalus and Procris, and makes it an occasion for the couple's mutual jealousy and suspicion to intensify. Tradition has always referred to the handsome young hunter as being responsive to the overtures of his abductress. But in La Fontaine's poem, Cephalus rejects them and continually laments his absence from his wife to the extent that, angered by such a degree of constancy, Aurora declares that he should return to his wife but forecasts that he would live to regret having ever married her.

"Retournez, dit l'Aurore, avec votre moitié;  
Je ne troublerai plus votre ardeur ni la sienne....  
Un jour cette Procris qui ne vit que pour vous  
Fera le désespoir de votre âme charmée,  
Et vous aurez regret de l'avoir tant aimée."<sup>93</sup>

To this gloomy prediction our poet adds a personal reflection:

Tout oracle est douteux, et porte un double sens.<sup>94</sup>

This comment reveals the turn of mind common to Corneille and Racine. In reply to Julia's comment about consulting oracles in Corneille's tragedy, Horace, Camille declares:

Un oracle jamais ne se laisse comprendre  
On l'entend d'autant moins que plus on croit l'entendre.<sup>95</sup>

And in Racine's Iphigénie, one of the characters expresses a similar idea:

Un oracle toujours se plaît à se cacher:  
Toujours avec un sens il en présent un autre.<sup>96</sup>

La Fontaine may have recalled these scenes as he reflected upon Aurora's predictions to Cephalus. The disloyalty of the goddess to her own husband, Tithonus, becomes in La Fontaine's poem Cephalus' reason for suspecting that his wife too could be unfaithful to him. Furthermore, the poet refines and elaborates upon his model's account of the temptation. Disguised as a stranger, Cephalus revisits Athens and finds Procris lamenting the absence of her beloved husband. Although he now has every reason to be reassured of his wife's constancy, he persists in his purpose of tempting her. By

93. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 383, ll. 192 - 193, 196 - 198.

94. Ibid., l. 119.

95. Corneille, P, Op. Cit., t. III, pp. 318-319: Horace, Acte III, scène 3.

96. Racine, J., Op. Cit., t. III, p. 173 : Iphigénie, Acte II, scène 1.



many clever shifts he succeeds in visiting her repeatedly and always in disguise; he courts her again and again but Procris maintains her stand that she cannot love any other man except Cephalus. Ovid mentions the offer of some valuable gifts to her as an enticement :

Comme elle, tant de biens, de dons et de trésors  
Auraient pu me tenter....<sup>97</sup>

La Fontaine not only retains this detail but heightens the scene of temptation to the point of credibility thus making the strong-willed wife to show some hesitation in the face of so many rich presents.

Il fallut recourir à ce qui porte coup,  
Aux présents : il offrit, donna, promit beaucoup,  
Promit tant, que Procris lui parut incertaine;  
Toute chose a son prix....<sup>98</sup>

At this slight sign of weakness, Cephalus immediately throws off his disguise and accuses his wife of infidelity. In the Latin model, Procris leaves her husband's dwelling and all the society of men in anger and shame and goes to share the sports of the maiden goddess, Diana, from whom she obtains the gifts of the unerring javelin and the unfailing dog. Ovid also gives a lengthy account of the reconciliation between the estranged couple. But it is Cephalus who makes the initial overtures towards reconciliation. Admitting that he has done wrong, he asks for his wife's pardon. Procris accepts the apology and returns to him. As a token of her renewed love, she presents him with the unfailing dog and the unerring javelin with which he later kills her by mistake.<sup>99</sup>

Our poet completely ignores Ovid's version of the reconciliation. The idea of a husband taking the initiative of reconciling with a jealous wife would not appeal to La Fontaine for obvious reasons : it would spell out clearly his conjugal responsibility towards his own wife. So in place of Ovid's account, he makes the initial overtures towards reconciliation come from Procris rather than from Cephalus. It is no longer a question of Procris abandoning her matrimonial home to join Diana but of Cephalus himself running away in despair to seek solace in hunting and invocation of the Aurora.

---

97. Ovide, N.P., Op. Cit., t. II, p. 365.

98. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 383. ll. 211 - 214.

99. Ovide, N.P., Op. Cit., pp. 365 - 375.

.....Voilà Céphale en peine:

Il renonce aux cités, s'en va dans les forêts,  
 Conte aux vents, conte aux bois ses déplaisirs secrets,  
 S' imagine en chassant dissiper son martyre.  
 C'était pendant ces mois où le chaud qu'on respire  
 Oblige d'implorer l'haleine des zephyrs.

"Doux vents, s'écriait-il, prêtez-moi des soupirs!  
 Venez, légers démons par qui nos champs fleurissent;  
 Aure, fais-les venir, je sais qu'ils t'obéissent:  
 Ton emploi dans ces lieux est de tout ranimer."<sup>100</sup>

Procris' desire for reconciliation is shown in the fact that she goes out to the forest in search of Cephalus, and the impression is given that she takes this step less because of love than because of her realization of the fact that she is partly at fault and because of her jealousy:

....Et la voilà jalouse.

Maint voisin charitable entretient ses ennuis.

"Je ne le puis plus voir, dit-elle, que les nuits!  
 Il aime donc cette Aure, et me quitte pour elle?  
 Nous vous plaignons: il l'aime, et sans cesse l'appelle:  
 Les échos de ces lieux n'ont plus d'autres emplois  
 Que celui d'enseigner le nom d'Aure à nos bois;  
 Dans tous les environs le nom d'Aure résonne.  
 Profitez d'un avis qu'en passant on vous donne:  
 L'intérêt qu'on y prend est de vous obliger"....  
 Elle cherche Céphale....<sup>101</sup>

As for the transfer of the javelin and the dog, La Fontaine also discards the account given by Ovid since the later version is based on the rejected account of reconciliation. Cephalus is now made to receive the unerring javelin as a souvenir from his abductress Aurora:

"Recevez seulement ces marques de la mienne"  
 (C'était un javelot toujours sûr de ses coups.)<sup>102</sup>

The death of the heroine is blamed by our poet on her jealousy and suspicion of her husband:

Céphale prend le dard toujours sûr de ses coups,  
 Le lance en cet endroit, et perce sa jalouse.<sup>103</sup>

The stress laid on the element of jealousy and mutual suspicion between husband and wife is deliberate and for strategic reasons. It affords La Fontaine yet another opportunity to launch a devastating attack on marriage as a form of human relationship. It is a relationship founded on conflict. Thus commenting on the tragic end of

100. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 383 - 84, ll. 214 - 223.

101. Ibid., ll. 226 - 235, 245.

102. Ibid., ll. 194 - 195.

103. Ibid., ll. 260 - 261.

Procris' marriage with Cephalus, one of the daughters of Minyas indicts conjugal relationships in general. If what is thought to be the best of marriages ends in this way, she asks, is it worth while subjecting oneself to its chains?

"Fuyons ce nœud, mes sœurs, je ne puis trop le dire:  
Jugez par le meilleur quel peut être le pire.  
S'il ne nous est permis d'aimer que sous ses lois,  
N'aimons point."<sup>104</sup>

Here again the poet makes a distinction between love and marriage. He approves of one and condemns the other. He is temperamentally apprehensive of marriage not only because of the responsibilities and obligations attached to it but mainly because he considers its chains, particularly the mutual jealousy, checks and inhibitions as great obstacles in the way of "volupté". Marriage is blamed for frustrating the immediate satisfaction of natural sexual passion through its series of delays and inhibitions. When marriage inflames this passion, it turns round to destroy it through lassitude, monotony and jealousy:

Et toutes, d'une voix conclurent que nos cœurs  
De cette passion devroient être vainqueurs:  
Elle meurt quelquefois avant qu'être contente;  
L'est-elle, elle devient aussitôt languissante;  
Sans l'hymen on n'en doit recueillir aucun fruit,  
Et cependant l'hymen est ce qui la détruit.  
Il y joint...une âpre jalousie,  
Poison le plus cruel dont l'âme soit saisie.<sup>105</sup>

It is easy to see from this reflection that the tribute which La Fontaine is supposed to have paid to conjugal affiliation in Philémon et Baucis is mere lip service. His attitude remains the same.

After yet another episode of tragic relationship, namely, the story of Damon and Chloris,<sup>106</sup> the poet no doubt senses that the pattern is becoming monotonous and boring. Accordingly he switches from Ovid to Boccaccio from whom he draws inspiration and material with which he demonstrates his final emphasis on the omnipotence of love. The transition from Ovid to Boccaccio is cleverly and smoothly made by means of a few lines put into the mouth of one of the sisters, Iris, at the conclusion of the story of Damon and Chloris. She declares :

104. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp. 383 - 84, ll. 273 - 276.

105. Ibid., ll. 151 - 158.

106. Ibid., ll. 300 - 478.

Laissons, reprit Iris, cette triste pensée.  
 La fête est vers sa fin, grâce au Ciel, avancée;  
 Et nous avons passé tout ce temps en récits  
 Capables d'affliger les moins sombres esprits:  
 Effaçons, s'il se peut, leur image funeste.  
 Je prétends de ce jour mieux employer le reste,  
 Et dire un changement, non de corps, mais de cœur.  
 Le miracle en est grand; Amour en fut l'auteur:  
 Il en fait tous les jours de diverse manière;  
 Je changerai de style en changeant de matière.<sup>107</sup>

The tale which follows this transition is the account of the mysterious transformation of Zoon's mental attitude and personality by his love for Iole. The episode is adapted from the story of Cimon and Iphigenia in Boccaccio's The Decameron. The aim of the Italian model is to illustrate the power of love by showing that

....souvent l'amour faict l'homme  
 sage et vaillant.<sup>108</sup>

Although La Fontaine changes a few details of the original, such as the names of the characters, and curtails some of his model's lengthy description of scenes, he remains remarkably faithful to the model. Like Boccaccio, he ends up with a warm tribute to "Amour":

....un chemin à la gloire  
 C'est l'amour. On fait tout pour se voir estimé:  
 Est-il quelque chemin plus court pour être aimé?  
 Quel charme de s'ouïr louer par une bouche  
 Qui, même sans s'ouvrir, nous enchante et nous touche!<sup>109</sup>

The cycle is thus completed; La Fontaine's first successful poem, Adonis, is on love; it is only natural, therefore, that the concluding composition in this genre should be about love.

But more than anything else that the poet ever wrote, these last poems lay bare his own attitude to the mythological figures and gods of antiquity which were prominent features of the classical French literature. After reading Adonis and Psyché, Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée, one is no longer left in any doubt as to the sense in which our poet uses these figures of antiquity. His attitude to them is one of demystification. The gods are dethroned from their Olympian citadel, deprived of their divine crowns, and subjected to the same passions, weaknesses, follies, vices and

107. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 383 -84, ll. 469 - 478.

108. Boccace, J. Op. Cit., (Édit. Antoine le Maçon), Paris, 1569,  
 pp. 299 - 308.

109. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 386, ll. 536 - 540.

virtues, in fact to the same circumstances as the humans. For example, the heroine of Adonis, Venus herself, is at one and the same time a powerful goddess and the weakest of females; she is neither exempt from feminine jealousy nor immune to despair; her very immortality is a formidable and insurmountable obstacle since it prevents her from sharing the fate of or rejoining her beloved Adonis. The Cupid of Psyché is seen to be as vulnerable to a drop of hot oil as any mortal being, and he is also subject to depression, disease and illness. In Philémon et Baucis, Jupiter, the king of gods, is also humanized, for he is shown to be both formidable and weak, both wicked and good-natured, sly and simple and enamoured of vengeance. In the same way, Bacchus, the revengeful god of liquor, who demonstrates his anger upon the recalcitrant sisters, is in the end portrayed more as an artful trickster, who uses his magic to play some tricks on the bystanders than as an omnipotent god. This treatment of the gods is hardly surprising. It will be recalled that La Fontaine's literary masters, particularly Epicurus, Lucretius, Apuleius and Bernier, not only condemned belief in gods but denounced the fear of them as groundless and stupid. Apuleius speaks of gods and makes them speak with all degrees of meanness.<sup>110</sup> Bernier regards belief in fatalism or the intervention of the gods in human affairs as the worst form of ignorance and superstition which not only militate against the full realization of happiness but also turn men away from their legitimate aspirations.<sup>111</sup>

In the seventeenth century the invocation of the deities of ancient Greece and Rome was an important element of literature and the arts, and not even the overwhelming influence of Christianity could stop the classical poets from alluding to Mars, Castor, Zeus or Jupiter, Cupid, Venus, Bacchus and other deities of antiquity. These were put forward in literary works as models for men. The latter saw in these gods and goddesses symbols of beauty, power, virtue, vice and of all that was enjoyable on earth. This attitude

---

110. Apulée, Op.Cit., t.II, pp. 32 - 93.

111. Bernier, F, Op.Cit., t.VII, pp. 1 - 3, 119.

led inevitably to a gradual but effective humanization, humiliation and indeed vulgarization of the deities. Thus among the "précieux" and the "précieuses" of the epoch mythological figures became conventional symbols or ornaments of art. Courtly ladies decorated their mirrors with the image of the goddess of beauty, Cupid became the accepted metaphor for love in the same way that his mother, Venus represented beauty, and Mars war. Naturally, La Fontaine, obsessed with the idea of conforming to the taste of his epoch, was not insensitive to the popular convention. He artistically decorates his works with mythological figures which are so subtly animated and incorporated into the works that both become inseparable from each other. The reader is thrilled with the love affair between Venus and Adonis, between Psyche and Cupid; the journey of Venus to Cythera is no less thrilling; the god of wine, Bacchus, is not left out of the show and this is understandable in the writings of an epicurean poet such as La Fontaine. Indeed we are made to share in the solemn celebration in honour of this "powerful" god as we follow the account of the circumstances leading to the punishment of the daughters of Minyas.

But underneath all this show of reverence lies our poet's ridicule and epicurean contempt for the so-called deities. The height of La Fontaine's epicurean irreverence is attained in certain lines of Les Filles de Minée. One of the sisters speaks of the gods and goddesses as being too many to be accommodated on Mount Olympus:

....Quoi donc! toujours de dieux nouveaux!  
L'Olympe ne peut plus contenir tant de têtes,  
Ni l'an fournir de jours assez pour tant de fêtes. <sup>112</sup>

The poet's initial comment about Bacchus is anything but respectful. <sup>113</sup>

One can thus see that his attitude to the pagan deities of antiquity is ironical. He uses them as mere literary conventions demanded by the taste of his age. His real feeling about mythological figures can be best described in the words of Mme. Odette de Mourgues. She writes:

---

112. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.382, ll. 12 - 14.

113. Ibid., ll. 15 - 21.

L'attitude de La Fontaine envers la mythologie est un peu différente de celle de Racine. Il sait que l'univers mythologique n'est plus qu'une convention littéraire, qui d'ailleurs lui est chère. Il se permet d'être ironique à son égard, sans jamais tomber dans la parodie burlesque.<sup>114</sup>

It is in this light that the concluding quatrain of Les Filles de Minée must be viewed:

Profitons, s'il se peut, d'un si fameux exemple;  
Chommons: c'est faire assez qu'aller de temple en temple  
Rendre à chaque Immortel les vœux qui lui sont dus:  
Les jours donnés aux dieux ne sont jamais perdus.<sup>115</sup>

The poet is extremely ironical here, and the irony is accentuated by the denigratory tone of the lines in which Bacchus is first introduced.<sup>116</sup> The image depicted of the god in these opening lines not only contrasts with Ovid's description of the same god but is hardly a credit to any deity. The ironical quatrain above covers La Fontaine's disdain for the countless number of the so-called feast days during which men, in the guise of doing honour to the gods, find excuses to justify their idleness, irresponsibility, vice and all sorts of debauchery. It is important, therefore, that in reading these poems, the reader should distinguish between La Fontaine the classical poet who invokes the deities of antiquity, decorates his verses with their images and endows them with human qualities for purely conventional reasons, from La Fontaine the providentialist, the epicurean "bonhomme" who believes in no other god but Providence. For the poet, the idea of mythological gods is no more than the result of human imagination, of man's metaphysical projection of himself and his capabilities.

Car Jupiter et Louis, c'est le même.<sup>117</sup>

With Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée La Fontaine's literary itinerary can be said to have come back to the starting point. His intellectual powers have grown along with his artistic skill as we watched him move from one author to the other, from poetry to prose, from prose to medley; he has also passed from pure literature to philosophy, philosophy to science, science to history and from history back to literature. The cycle is completed. It only remains now for him to establish a synthesis of his wisdom and intellectual maturity. This he does in the twelfth and last Book of Fables.

114. Mourgues, Odette de, O Muse, fuyante proie, Essai sur la poésie de la Fontaine, Paris, (José Corti), 1962, p. 36.

115. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 386, ll. 559 - 562.

116. Ibid., ll. 15 - 25.

117. Ibid., p. 466.

### 3. The Last Collection of Fables, 1693.

In the epilogue of the second collection of fables La Fontaine gives the impression of having said his last word on that form of writing. After defining his pioneering role in the genre, he expresses the hope that future generations of writers would improve upon the invention which he has made :

Si mon œuvre n'est pas un assez bon modèle,  
J'ai du moins ouvert le chemin:  
D'autres pourront y mettre une dernière main. <sup>118</sup>

Whether an improvement has actually been made on the poet's work is another question; in fact it is doubtful that the standard he set in the genre of verse fable has ever been equalled. Our concern with this epilogue is the impression it created in the minds of La Fontaine's contemporaries. They certainly took him for retired at least from composing fables. Indeed an interval of more than fifteen years elapsed before a new collection of fables, the crowning piece of his literary edifice, was made public. On the 1st of September, 1693, the poet summoned his last reserve of energy and published in one volume all the fables which were already circulating in manuscript. These were put together with a number of fables which had already appeared in his previous publications. The following ten fables, for example, were published earlier in the Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine (1685):

Le Corbeau, et la Gazelle, la Tortue, et le Rat (XII, 15),  
La Forêt et le Bûcheron (XII, 16)  
Le Renard, le Loup et le Cheval (XII, 17)  
Le Renard et les Poulets d'Inde (XII, 18)  
Le Singe (XII, 19)  
Le philosophe Scythe (XII, 20)  
L'Elephant et le Singe de Jupiter (XII, 21)  
Un Fou et un Sage (XII, 22)  
Le Renard anglais (XII, 23)  
Daphnis et Alcimadure

---

118. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., Fables, XI, Epilogue, ll, 11 - 13.



Three other fables

Les Compagnons d'Ulysse (XII, 1)

Les deux Chèvres (XII, 4)

Du Thésauriseur et du Singe (XII, 3)

had also appeared in the Mercure galant of December, 1690, February 1691 and March 1691 respectively, while Le Juge arbitre, l'Hospitalier, et le Solitaire (XII, 24) was first published in P. Bouhours' Recueil de vers choisis in 1693. It can be seen from this that the last collection of fables contains little that was new at the time it was published. It is more of a selected list of old fables which La Fontaine considered suitable for use as a summary of his moral philosophy by reason of their conclusive tones.

The collection is dedicated to the young duc de Bourgogne who apparently commissioned it and inspired some of the fables himself.

Vous m'avez même ordonné de continuer; et si vous me permettez de le dire, il y a des sujets dont je vous suis redevable, et où vous avez jeté des grâces qui ont été admirées de tout le monde.<sup>119</sup>

The fables alluded to in this quotation are Le vieux Chat et la jeune Souris (XII, 5) and Le Loup et le Renard (XII, 9):

De votre esprit, que nul autre n'égale,  
Prince, ma muse tient tout entier ce projet.  
Vous m'avez donné le sujet,  
Le dialogue, et la morale (XII, 9)

As a product of La Fontaine's more mature years, the fables of 1693 tend to be more philosophical than artistic. The collection has neither an "avertissement" nor a "préface", and the epistle dedicating it to Mgr. le duc de Bourgogne adds virtually nothing new to the theory of fables. The formulation, demonstration and defence of the poet's literary theories have obviously been completed in the previous works, thus rendering further forewords and prefaces unnecessary. However, the epistle gives some indication of what the new collection is intended to be, namely, a synthesis of La Fontaine's final statement on the central theme of his philosophy, human nature. There is a reaffirmation of the poet's admiration for Æsop; he acknowledges his indebtedness to the rich collections of the Greek fabulist as the main source of the diversity of his own fables.

---

119. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.162. "A Monseigneur le duc de Bourgogne".

Les fables d'Esopé sont une ample matière pour ces talents. Elles embrassent toutes sortes d'événements et de caractères.<sup>120</sup>

There is a redefinition of the fable as

une manière d'histoire où on ne flatte personne<sup>121</sup>

and a confirmation of the role of animals as

Les précepteurs des hommes.<sup>122</sup>

The experience of years has tended to harden rather than soften the poet's attitude towards man. The tone of the first fable of this collection, namely, Les Compagnons d'Ulysse, leaves no one in doubt about the pessimism of La Fontaine. The ingenious parallel between men and animals, which stretches through the fables as well as permeates the entirety of the poet's literary works, has now reached a point where the undisciplined, cruel and insatiable creature, man, is no longer contented with merely admiring the life and conduct of animals vis-a-vis his own debased nature, and has descended to the level of preferring the nature of animals to his own. The intellectual content of this fable, our poet's last and certainly the most devastating attack on human baseness, owes something to La Fontaine's reminiscences of Homer,<sup>123</sup> Virgil,<sup>124</sup> Horace,<sup>125</sup> and Ovid<sup>126</sup>. Each of these authors narrates in a more or less elaborate manner the adventures of Ulysses and his Greek warriors. Virgil, in particular, expresses the evil disposition of the enchantress, Circe, in very beautiful verse :

120. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 162,

121. Ibid., p. 162.

122. Ibid., p.162.

123. Homère, *Odyssée*, Texte établi et traduit par Victor Bérard, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1933, t.II, pp. 60 - 72 : (X, ll. 135 - 399).

124. Virgile, M. *Œuvres complètes* traduites en vers par Hippolyte Cournol, Paris, (Didot Frères), 1860, t.III, pp. 1 - 2 (VII, ll. 10 - 24).

125. Horace, *Epîtres*, Texte établi et traduit par François Villeneuve, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1934, p.46 : (I, ll, ll.17-26)

126. Ovide, N.P., Op.Cit., (édit. G. Lafaye), Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1930, t.III, pp. 99-100 : (XIV, ll. 251 - 307).

On rase de Circé les bords insidieux,  
 Toujours retentissants de chants mélodieux.  
 La fille du soleil, dans son palais splendide,  
 Embaumé, rayonnant d'une clarté perfide,  
 A d'innocents tissus semble occuper ses mains,  
 Et trame en son esprit de sinistres desseins.  
 Déjà, près des vaisseaux, sourdement retentissent  
 Les lamentables voix des lions qui rugissent,  
 Des ours, des sangliers et des loups enchaînés,  
 Hommes jadis, au piège enivrant entraînés,<sup>127</sup>  
 Et réduits désormais au plus vil esclavage.

More modern and supplementary to our poet's ancient sources of inspiration are Boileau's Satire sur l'homme<sup>128</sup> and Fénelon's Ulysse et Grillus which appeared as the sixth dialogue of his famous work entitled Dialogues des morts, composed for the education of the young duc de Bourgogne.<sup>129</sup> There was also the interesting fable by le P. Bouhours, entitled Ulysse et les Sirènes which was one of the pieces of poetry he published in 1693, as the Recueil de vers choisis.<sup>130</sup> All these works express a common philosophy on man, namely, the idea that human nature and conduct are far less estimable than those of the lower animals, the latter being supposed to be more courageous, more temperate and prudent than men. But the sole desire to lament the weakness of man does not suffice to explain why La Fontaine recalled the ancient story of Ulysses and his warriors at this time. The fable as he adapts it has a historical setting. The poet intended it to be a piece of advice on how to conduct a successful military campaign, that is, a lesson on bravery, courage and determination for the young duc de Bourgogne to whom the fable was dedicated. Between 1688 and 1690, Louis XIV was carrying on a devastating military campaign along the countries bordering the River Rhine in order to strengthen the French defence line against the Germans. The Great Dauphin was charged with the difficult task of capturing the German stronghold of Philips-bourg. The battle for this city was fierce and savage but the French

127. Virgile, M., Op.Cit., pp. 1 - 2.

128. Boileau, D.N. Op.Cit., pp. 41 - 48; (Satire, VIII)

129. Fénelon, Dialogues sur l'Eloquence, Memoire sur les occupations de l'Académie Française. De l'Education des filles. Recueil des fables - Opuscules divers. Dialogues des morts, édition Bausset, Paris, (Garnier), pp. 356 - 361.

130. Bouhours, le P., Recueil de vers choisis, Paris, 1693, p.248.

hero and his gallant troops, like Ulysses and his Greek warriors, succeeded in capturing the formidable fortress on 29 October, 1688. This was quickly followed by the fall of Manheim and Frankenthal in November of the same year. By 1690, the Rhine frontier had been secured. But genuine peace was still a far cry, for instead of working towards this by disciplined self-control, the victorious French army of the Rhine tarried for more adventures and excitement in much the same way as Ulysses and his warriors did after their conquest of Troy. The French commanders lost virtually all control over their marauding troops who became irresponsible, self-destructive and easy prey to enemy ambushes and traps. This situation no doubt reminded our poet of the ancient Greek heroes of Troy. The lesson he wished to communicate to his royal friend and master through this analogy is quite clear : military valour is important, if wars are to be won at all, but more important still is the discipline of the army. An unruly army may be able to capture and destroy cities but can never win peace. At best, such an army can only succeed in bringing disrepute and harm to itself and its own nation. The case of the soldiers of Ulysses proves this.

Consultez ces derniers sur un fait où les Grecs  
Imprudents et peu circonspects,  
S'abandonnèrent à des charmes  
Qui métamorphosaient en bêtes les humains. 131

It is significant that only the leader, Ulysses himself, escapes the danger that swallows up his undisciplined companions. La Fontaine emphasizes that the leader escapes because he has sufficient wisdom to combine sheer valour with discretion and circumspection.

Le seul Ulysse en échappa;  
Il sut se défier de la liqueur traîtresse.  
Comme il joignait à la sagesse  
La mine d'un héros et le doux entretien... 132

Our fabulist has now enlarged his field of knowledge to include military ideas. But his allusion to military matters, that is, his stock of information on wars and battles is not the result of a sudden in-

131. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.162, Fables, XII, 1, ll. 8 - 26.

132. Ibid., ll. 41 - 44.

spiration; it is the product of a gradual and steady growth. It started in Adonis when the poet describes the strategic attack on the formidable boar which killed the hero; then it is elaborated in the Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince, where he analyses the essential qualities of a successful military man and a true hero; and reaches the present stage in the last Book of fables in which the poet now singles out the two most important of these qualities: intelligence and self-discipline, for greater and final emphasis. That La Fontaine returns to the problem of human indiscretion at this stage is a reaffirmation of his indictment of man. This emphasis on the dominance of indiscipline, folly, cruelty and error over men suggests an intensification of the initial pessimism about the human condition with which the poet started in the first collection of fables. Mature and disillusioned, he has come to the bitter but valid conclusion that man, on account of his shortcomings, will always be a wolf to his fellow man.

Ne vous êtes-vous pas l'un à l'autre des loups?<sup>133</sup>

But the poet does not stop there; he goes on to affirm that all things considered, man is even worse than the wolf:

Tout bien considéré, je te soutiens en somme  
Que, scélérat pour scélérat,  
Il vaut mieux être un loup qu'un homme.<sup>134</sup>

This is doubtless the height of a denunciation far more extreme than the position taken by Montaigne. La Fontaine's comment on human nature here raises a number of questions: can man help being other than what he is? Is he responsible for his natural inclination to vice and folly? If not, is there any justification for condemning him for obeying his natural instincts? How far has La Fontaine taken these facts into consideration before his utter condemnation of man? Is the poet now renouncing his providentialist and humanist faith amidst man's apparently irreparable evil disposition? There is no doubt that at this stage humanist optimism is struggling with utter pessimism for the possession of his mind. He feels like changing his mind about men being essentially diabolic but then the evidence of experience to the contrary is overwhelming. Men have an idea of right and wrong,

---

133. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.163, l. 94.

134. Ibid., ll. 95. - 97.

but they have usually taken the road to folly and vice; they are capable of good but find it easier to do evil. The hope for a change seems slim and foolish. Human nature cannot be changed; it is made like that and will always remain so :

Prétendre ainsi changer est une illusion:

L'on reprend sa première trace  
A la première occasion.<sup>135</sup>

The world will always be a scene of human folly, cruelty and social injustice. Thus the picture one gets of La Fontaine at this stage is that of a disillusioned intellectual torn between opposing tendencies, that is, between doctrinal opposition to optimism and providentialist hope. He seems to find some consolation in the realization of the fact that if the weak is the victim of the vanity and caprices of the great, the latter is in turn the object of the ruse and intrigues of the weak; this balances the situation of conflict :

On ne voit sous les cieux  
Nul animal, nul être, aucune créature,  
Qui n'ait son opposé: c'est la loi de la nature.<sup>136</sup>

From the conclusion that all human relationship is based on conflicting self-interests, La Fontaine goes on to review his doctrine of egoism. He has already accepted this passion as a legitimate natural impulse. But being an apostle of moderation in every aspect of life, he now sounds a strong note of warning against the tendency to carry this impulse to excess. Personal pride and esteem could be grossly abused and turned away from their natural course into empty arrogance and vanity. Thus in the episode of L'Eléphant et le Singe de Jupiter the poet demonstrates the painful repercussions that invariably follow whenever legitimate self-regard is replaced with arrogance.

The exact source of this fable is not clearly known. It does not feature in the aësoptic collections used by La Fontaine nor in the fables of Phædrus. We would be inclined to believe that the inspiration for this fable came from Oriental sources. But no single apologue either in Le Livre des lumières or in Les Fables de Pilpai

---

135. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 167, Fables, XII, 9, ll. 62-64.

136. Ibid., p. 166, XII, 8, ll. 38 - 40.

matches with the exact episode narrated by La Fontaine, even allowing for any modifications which the poet may have made. A more authentic source of influence seems to be the work entitled Histoire naturelle published by Pliny the Elder. In this work Pliny makes a detailed description of the character of elephants, and stresses in particular the animal's vain disposition. He also describes the endless war between the dragon and the rhinoceros on one side and between the rhinoceros and the elephant on the other. The rhinoceros is described as the

second ennemi naturel de l'éléphant; il aiguise  
sa corne contre les pierres et dans le duel vise  
au ventre.<sup>137</sup>

La Fontaine repeats this detail in his fable :

Mon cousin Jupiter, dit-il, verra dans peu  
Un assez beau combat, de son trône suprême;  
Toute sa cour verra beau jeu....  
Quoi! vous ne savez pas  
Que le Rhinocéros me dispute le pas;  
Qu'Eléphantide a guerre avecque Rhinocère? <sup>138</sup>

It is possible that the above is a satirical allusion to the perpetual rivalries among the Dukes, Counts and Princes of Louis XIV's realm. Given the striking similarity between the description of animal characters in Pliny's work and in that of La Fontaine, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the poet drew inspiration, particularly for the traits of animal character used in this fable, from Histoire naturelle. The rest of the fable including the "tours" relative to the chastisement and humiliation of arrogance as well as the providentialist conclusion of the fable are of La Fontaine's own invention. It is usual for him to improvise in this manner whenever he wants to express or emphasize in his own way an important idea that he has very much at heart. In this particular case, he is relating his providentialist philosophy to the natural law of egoism by qualifying the latter's limits. Divine Providence approves reasonable self-love and all legitimate aspiration or effort to better one's lot, but it is vehemently opposed to idle arrogance and vanity such as the type manifested in the snobbish attitude of the elephant. Everyone tries to push himself to the top. In every

---

137. Pline, l'Ancien, Histoire Naturelle, Livre VIII, Texte établi, traduit et commenté par A. Ernout, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1952, pp. 23 - 34 : ( 1 - 33); p.48 : (XXIX, 71)

138. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.172, XII, 21, ll. 23-29.

occupation and rank, one always strives to acquire some sort of prominence, authority, command, consideration, and to extend one's power as far as possible. All these are, for our poet, quite legitimate aspirations. But a time comes when one is pushed by vanity to think and behave as if nobody else exists or matters but oneself. This is the point where egoism starts to turn into a criminal impulse, where "amour de soi" becomes "amour-propre". This is exactly the stage at which the elephant of the fable is placed in its rivalry with the rhinoceros. Thus "His Majesty the Elephant" cannot imagine any other reason for the visit of Jupiter's delegate to the world if it is not for the quarrel between the elephant and the rhinoceros:

Aussitôt l'éléphant de croire  
 Qu'en qualité d'ambassadeur  
 Il venait trouver Sa Grandeur.  
 Tout fier de ce sujet de gloire,  
 Il attend maître Gille, et le trouve un peu lent  
 A lui présenter sa créance.<sup>139</sup>

These lines portray the feeling which Pierre Nicole describes as the most general inclination inhering in "amour-propre" whose sole desire is to be esteemed, loved and adored above all else.<sup>140</sup>

Most human beings, like the elephant in this fable, want others to satisfy as well as justify their thirst for domination by treating them as great, powerful and different from others, while at the same time insisting that everyone else humiliate himself before them. The indifference of the gods to the quarrel, which "His Majesty the Elephant" regards as the greatest of its kind on earth, produces the contrast that spells the doom and humiliation of arrogance and empty vanity. According to Jupiter's delegate, the news of such a quarrel, believed to have shaken the foundation of the whole universe, has not even reached the court of his master.

....l'attention  
 Qu'il (l'Eléphant) croyait que les dieux eussent à sa querelle  
 N'agitait pas encor chez eux cette nouvelle.  
 Qu'importe à ceux du firmament  
 Qu'on soit mouche ou bien éléphant?<sup>141</sup>

139. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 172, ll. 8 - 13.

140. Nicole, P., Op. Cit., pp. 111 - 160.

141. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 172, Fables, XII, 21, ll. 18 - 21.



The immortal gods are too busy to take note of the trifles which the great among men consider as of major importance.

....On ne s'entretient guère  
De semblables sujets dans nos vastes lambris. <sup>142.</sup>

The apprehension, confusion, bitterness and mortification consequent upon the humiliation of this form of pride are vividly represented in the elephant's short, brisk and faint reaction, condensed in one line of verse :

....Et parmi nous que venez-vous donc faire? <sup>143</sup>

This question, in its context, translates humiliation and frustration whose effects are heightened by the ape's crisp reply to the effect that his mission to the earth is specifically to

Partager un brain d'herbe entre quelques fourmis. <sup>144</sup>

The above statement leads La Fontaine to the final reaffirmation of his providentialism : all creatures, irrespective of size and rank receive due care and attention from Providence.

Nous avons soin de tout....  
Les petits et les grands sont égaux à leurs yeux. <sup>145</sup>

Our poet's stand contrasts with the attitude of the great among men. The latter's pride feeds upon imaginary perfections. It cannot bear what disturbs the picture which the ego paints of itself, be it scorn, insult or humiliation. On the other hand, it passionately seeks out and collaborates with whatever flatters and augments its idea of itself: esteem, praise and admiration. The utility of esteem lies in the confirmation it confers upon self-approval. It is little wonder, therefore, that man cares more for the apparent merit which the esteem of others confers on him than for the real merit which deserves this esteem. The reaction of the elephant to its own humiliation illustrates the fact that man desires so much not to be submerged into others that he goes to the extreme of despising them in order to appear the greater by their abasement. When he does not succeed, he is filled with implacable envy and all its attendant passions. Thus all the human passions discussed directly or indirectly by the poet meet in this fable to find their common source in vanity.

---

142. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.172, ll. 32 - 33.

143. Ibid., l. 35.

144. Ibid., l. 36.

145. Ibid., ll. 37, 39.

Chamfort sees in this particular fable an indisputable proof of the poet's knowledge of human psychology, particularly the psychology of vanity in arrogant and selfish individuals. He writes :

Cette fable est excellente; on la croirait du bon temps de La Fontaine. La vanité de l'Eléphant, le besoin qu'il a de parler voyant que Gille ne lui dit mot, l'air de satisfaction et d'importance qui déguise mal son amour-propre, le ton qu'il prend en parlant du combat qu'il va livrer, et de sa capitale, tout cela est parfait. La réponse du Singe ne l'est pas moins, et le cénouement du brin d'herbe à partager entre quelques fourmis est digne du reste.<sup>146</sup>

The merit of La Fontaine's position lies in his ability to distinguish between the need for approval and self-approval. Accordingly he condemns the elephant for seeing only the relation of self-esteem to the need for security, but not that of self-respect to moral conscience. In this sense, our poet's ideas constitute a useful contribution to human psychology. He is therefore a worthy ancestor of the eighteenth-century analysts of human nature : Bernard de Mandeville, Abbadie, Rousseau and others.

It is not only in La Fontaine's attitude to egoism that one notices a modification at this stage. The poet's political thinking too has undergone a change; his initial enthusiasm for the monarchy has cooled off. We have seen that his monarchist sympathies in the first and second collections of fables were based upon his conception of human nature. Men would not need to be governed if they were not inclined to folly, wickedness and selfishness. By implication, the first and foremost responsibility of all constituted authority, including the monarchy, should be to develop men's capability to resist the evils that beset the world, that is, to help them to be good and honest men and women by showing them, through examples seen in the life and conduct of the monarch himself, how to eschew greed and excess, how to cultivate the spirit of moderation and forgiveness rather than of vindictiveness and repression.

---

146. Chamfort, S., *Eloge de La Fontaine*, Paris, 1774, pp. 3 - 47.

Comme les Dieux sont bons; ils veulent que les Rois  
 Le soient aussi : c'est l'indulgence  
 Qui fait le plus beau de leurs droits,  
 Non les douceurs de la vengeance.<sup>147</sup>

This reflection is based upon inspiration drawn from one of Bossuet's memorial speeches. The fable from which the above lines are drawn, namely, Le Milan, le Roi, et le Chasseur, appeared in the Mercure galant of March, 1691, thus suggesting that the date of its composition was between 1688 and 1690. Prior to this date, Bossuet delivered on March 10, 1687, a powerful speech during a memorial service held in honour of La Fontaine's former friend and patron, the prince de Condé who died in 1686. In this pathetic address, Bossuet spotlighted the sterling qualities of the dead prince, among which were his military valour, his honest and gentlemanly character and, above all, his readiness to forgive and forget, all of which formed the basis of his piety.<sup>148</sup> La Fontaine was present at this ceremony organised in memory of his benefactor, and it was to the younger brother of the deceased, François-Louis de Bourbon, that he dedicated the fable. Thus recalling the touching tributes which Bossuet paid to the memory of Louis de Bourbon, the poet admonishes the surviving prince to emulate the good qualities which have immortalized the dead brother's name. Great souls, he says, are remembered more by their good works than by singular acts of vengeance. What makes a hero is not transitory glory or vindictiveness but a considerate and forgiving nature :

Prince, c'est votre avis. On sait que le courroux  
 S'éteint en votre cœur sitôt qu'on l'y voit naître.  
 Achille, qui du sien ne put se rendre maître,  
 Fut par là moins héros que vous.  
 Ce titre n'appartient qu'à ceux d'entre les hommes  
 Qui, comme en l'âge d'or font cent biens ici-bas.  
 Peu de grands sont nés tels en cet âge où nous sommes:  
 L'univers leur sait gré du mal qu'ils ne font pas.  
 Loin que vous suiviez ces exemples,  
 Mille actes généreux vous promettent des temples.<sup>149</sup>

147. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., pp. 167-68, XII, 12, ll. 1 - 4.

148. Bossuet, Oraisons funèbres, (édition Alfred Rébelliau), Paris, (Hachette), 1922, pp. 491 - 558.

149. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 168, XII, 12, ll. 5 - 14

The tone of this exhortation suggests that La Fontaine may also have recalled his readings in Virgil and Seneca, for both authors emphasize virtue, courage and generosity as the essence of a good and heroic life. Virgil writes :

La vie humaine fuit, rapide, irréparable;  
La vertu, le courage, et les faits éclatants,  
Voilà ce qui la rend durable.<sup>150</sup>

And Seneca, as if inspired by his countryman re-echoes:

Tout ce qui est bon est désirable.  
Et c'est un grand avantage de mourir glorieux  
En faisant quelque action vertueuse.<sup>151</sup>

Inspiration drawn from these sources enabled our poet to pass a discreet judgement on Louis XIV. What the poet implies in the stress he lays on the quality or the virtue of forgiveness is simply that the prince who possesses this virtue is, in his opinion, a greater soul than the monarch who has distinguished himself by his unrelenting vengeance and animosity towards those he dislikes. Thus the French monarch, symbolized in Achilles, possesses a negative quality, which La Fontaine does not expect in his ideal king who should be a loving father of all his subjects.

"Pour moi, qui sais comment doivent agir les rois,  
Je les affranchis du supplice."  
Et la cour d'admirer. Les courtisans ravis  
Elèvent de tels faits, par eux si mal suivis:  
Bien peu, même des rois, prendraient un tel modèle;  
Et le Veneur l'échappa belle,  
Coupable seulement, tant lui que l'animal,  
D'ignorer le danger d'approcher trop du maître.<sup>152</sup>

As a monarch, Louis XIV was more feared than he was really loved by his subjects. Till now, he has neither succeeded in being an impartial and forgiving father of his people nor shown any signs of his readiness to do so in future. In fact, rather than improving the political and social lot of the common people, the monarchy has helped to make it worse by the exercise of absolute power thus creating greater tumult, violence, misery and despair:

150. Virgile, M., Op. Cit., t. III, p. 168, (X).

151. Sénèque, L.A. Op. Cit., t. II, pp. 25-33: (Lettre LXVII).

152. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 168, Fables, XII, 12, ll. 65-72.

C'est une époque tumultueuse, de violence et de guerre....Ce ne sont qu'incendies, pendaisons, pillages. Dans les œuvres littéraires....le goût de l'allégorie, les souvenirs antiques émoussent l'expression des angoisses, des terreurs même. Toutefois, l'écho des guerres se fait entendre presque chez tous....Les poètes s'intéressent aux fluctuations de la politique, suivent les événements, s'apitoient sur le sort des campagnes dévastées, soutiennent tel parti, s'indignent ou louent...153

Even in the face of this crushing misery and disaffection, the main principle of the King's foreign policy was war and conquest. This policy rallied the new League of Augsburg (1686) which united the German Emperor, the kings of Spain and Sweden, the rulers of Holland and Italy against France. In 1689 when William of Orange took the English throne from James II, he took England into the anti-French coalition and the odds became really heavy against France. Yet Louis XIV would neither change his policy of aggression nor surrender the lands he annexed in Germany, Holland and other parts of Europe. But with increasing economic difficulties, heavier losses in men and material, mounting unrest and disenchantment at the home front,

Le torrent à la fin devient insurmontable.<sup>154</sup>

The King was compelled to accept the Treaty of Ryswyk. This treaty, concluded in 1697, was disastrous for France, for she lost nearly all her territorial conquests. Although the new peace treaty dealt a big blow to the French prestige and hegemony in Europe, La Fontaine, prophet of peace and mutual harmony, thinks that no price is too great for peace. This was his opinion on the treaty when it was first proposed to France in 1689, but was rejected by Louis XIV. La Fontaine viewed the acceptance of a peace at that time as a wise and prudent step to take. Accordingly, he composed a fable on the subject and suggested that the King should sue for peace for strategic reasons and in view of the precarious state of the nation at the time. For our

---

153. Kohn, R., Op.Cit., p.29.

154. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.167, Fables, XII, 10, 1.14.

poet, the country needed some respite at all cost. A state of endless war is a state of hell; it pays sometimes to make some tactical concessions in the interest of domestic harmony and good foreign relations. He writes :

Les sages quelquefois, ainsi que l'Ecrevisse,  
 Marchent à reculons, tournent le dos au port.  
 C'est l'art des matelots : c'est aussi l'artifice  
 De ceux qui, pour couvrir quelque puissant effort,  
 Envisagent un point directement contraire,  
 Et font vers ce lieu-là courir leur adversaire.  
 Mon sujet est petit, cet accessoire est grand:  
 Je pourrais l'appliquer à certain conquérant  
 Qui tout seul déconcerte une ligue à cent têtes.<sup>155</sup>

In spite of this prudent warning, Louis XIV continued with his militant policy until 1697, when he was forced by circumstances to sign the treaty, thus taking (now with greater humiliation) the action suggested by our poet eight years previously. La Fontaine's diplomatic skill in this fable is evident from the way he flatters Louis XIV by making the latter's surrender appear as a tactical withdrawal. This was done to make things easier for the proud King. But in reality the poet knew that Louis XIV had woefully failed the nation. At the same time the illusory splendour of the royal court and its honours, which our poet has all along regarded partly with envy, partly with scepticism, now lost all its charms as far as he was concerned. The endless intrigues, rivalry and cabals among those who frequented the Court, the unstable nature of the favours granted to them for discrediting and spying upon each other, and the shameless manner in which the courtiers lowered their own moral integrity, sacrificed their personal liberty in exchange for fleeting favours, have all combined to convince a mature La Fontaine that the royal court is a place of hypocrisy, mutual deceit and restricted freedom.

Ce n'est pas ce qu'on croit que d'entrer chez les Dieux:  
 Cet honneur a souvent de mortelles angoisses.  
 Rediseurs, espions, gens à l'air gracieux,  
 Au cœur tout différent, s'y rendent odieux....  
 Il faille dans ces lieux  
 Porter habit de deux paroisses.<sup>156</sup>

155. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 167, Fables, XII, 10, 1.1 - 9.

156. Ibid., p.167, XII, 11, 11. 25 - 30.

Maturity therefore brought with it political disillusionment for La Fontaine. The excesses of the monarchy, the avidity, hypocrisy and corruption of the Court have shaken his confidence in the efficiency and integrity of absolute monarchy as a form of government. But he neither revolts openly against constituted authority nor advocates violent revolutions. Thus, even though his fascination with and enthusiasm for the monarchy have diminished, he still believes that, all things considered, violent political revolutions are no effective solution to the problem; such revolutions merely replace one set of "loups" with another more avid of corruption and tyranny than the preceding one. This opinion is based upon political inspiration drawn from his traditional source, the fables of Æsop. One of the fables attributed to Æsop opposes the practice of replacing old and corrupt officials, who have had their surfeit of public funds, with fresh ones who are more greedy, more corrupt and therefore more dangerous to the community.

Eh bien! vous de même, Samiens; celui-là ne vous fera plus de mal; car il s'est enrichi; mais, si vous le condamnez à mort, il en viendra d'autres, des pauvres qui vous voleront et dépenseront les deniers publics.<sup>157</sup>

The same episode is quoted by Aristotle in the second Book of his Rhetoric, where he discusses the effective modes of rhetorical proof.

He quotes Æsop as his source :

"Esopé, parlant devant le peuple de Samos, pour un démagogue accusé d'un crime capital, leur conta qu'un renard traversant un fleuve avait été emporté dans un trou, d'où il ne pouvait sortir et où il souffrit longtemps de nombreuses tiques attachées à sa peau; un hérisson passant par là fut pris de pitié en le voyant et lui demanda s'il devait lui ôter ses tiques; mais le renard ne le permit point; l'autre lui demandant pourquoi, celles-ci, répondit-il, sont maintenant grevées et ne me tirent plus qu'un peu de sang; mais, si tu me les ôtes, il m'en viendra d'autres affamées, qui me boiront le reste de mon sang."<sup>158</sup>

There is no doubt that La Fontaine went further than Æsop's apologue in his search for the inspiration used in this argument. Indeed, the

157. Nevelet, Isaac Nicolas, *Mythologia Æsopica*, Paris, 1610, p. 533.

158. Aristote, *Rhétorique*, Texte établi et traduit par Médéric Dufour, Paris, (Les Belles Lettres), 1960, t. II, p. 1393<sup>b</sup> (*Rhétorique*, II, chapitre 20).

concluding lines of the fable in which the argument appears suggest that the poet combined Æsop's apologue with the Rhetoric of Aristotle, for he writes :

Aristote appliquait cet apologue aux hommes.  
 Les exemples en sont communs,  
 Surtout au pays où nous sommes. 159  
 Plus telles gens sont pleins, moins ils sont importuns.

Visualizing the parallel between the situation in ancient Samos and the one in seventeenth-century France, La Fontaine naturally prescribes what he thinks is a known remedy for a known social ill. He is not unaware of the negative character of his prescription but it would at least prevent an escalation of the situation and any political change through violence and bloodshed. Thus, like his ancient models, he advises :

Laisse-les, je te prie, achever leur repas.  
 Ces animaux sont souls; une troupe nouvelle  
 Viendrait fondre sur moi, plus âpre et plus cruelle.  
 Nous ne trouvons que trop de mangeurs ici-bas:  
 Ceux-ci sont courtisans, ceux-là sont magistrats. 160

It is characteristic of our poet's intellectual discussions that problems are seldom created without suggesting solutions. Accordingly, against the tumult, intrigues and uneasiness of public glory he opposes the peace and serenity of solitude. Thus in Le Juge arbitre, l'Hospitalier, et le Solitaire, he gives his last word on the importance of solitude, the profound source of his poetic genius. This time, the poet seems to have not only recalled the age-long maxim, "Man, know thyself", which has descended from Socrates to Montaigne, but also drawn inspiration mainly from an episode translated by his Jansenist friend and collaborator, Arnauld d'Andilly in the work entitled Les Vies des Saints Pères des déserts et de quelques saints, écrites par les Pères de l'Eglise et autres anciens auteurs ecclésiastiques grecs et latins, traduites en français par M. Arnauld d'Andilly. Arnauld's translation was completed and published between 1647 and 1653, and was re-edited in 1668. The episode which La Fontaine adapts in his fable was originally intended to illustrate the idea that the calmness of solitude enables people to discover their own sins and to do penance.

159. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.169, Fables, XII, 13, ll. 27 - 30.

160. Ibid., ll. 22 - 26.



for them. In adapting the story, the poet makes the idea of sin and penance subservient to philosophical interpretation. He bases his argument upon the opposition between realism and idealism. The "Juge arbitre", touched by the grinding slowness, corruption and inefficiency of the legal system, decides to spend the rest of his life in trying to reform the system :

Le conciliateur crut qu'il viendrait à bout  
De guérir cette folle et détestable envie.<sup>161</sup>

The "Hospitalier" mobilizes his resources in an all out war against suffering and disease the complete eradication of which is his life's ambition. But subjected to calumny, degradation and all sorts of frustration by the very community he is out to serve, he succeeds no better in this venture than his legal counterpart :

Ces plaintes n'étaient rien au prix de l'embarras  
Où se trouva réduit l'appointeur de débats.  
Aucun n'était content....<sup>162</sup>

Only the "Solitaire", who retires into solitude,

....au silence des bois  
Là, sous d'âpres rochers, près d'une source pure,  
Lieu respecté des vents, ignoré du soleil....<sup>163</sup>,

finds the peace of mind that he needs. The entire fable thus becomes part of the Machiavellian philosophy of self-knowledge and self-preservation.

Apprendre à se connaître est le premier des soins  
Qu'impose à tous mortels la Majesté suprême.<sup>164</sup>

If you live among wolves, you have either to behave like wolves in order to survive or remove yourself from their midst. An idealistic approach is doomed to failure in a situation where it is not appreciated. Thus given the character of the society in which the three friends find themselves, the "Juge arbitre" cannot improve the working of the law nor can the "Hospitalier" obtain encouraging results from his humanitarian effort. The only power they all share in common is that of choice. Whereas one cannot change the essential nature of

161. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p.173, Fables, XII, 24, ll. 6 - 14.

162. Ibid., ll. 15 - 33.

163. Ibid., ll. 34 - 36.

164. Ibid., ll. 39 - 40.

the wolf, one can choose not to live among wolves but to retire to the solitude of the "désert". Viewed in this way, this fable stands out in special relief against the bulk of the other fables, against the background of the grim picture of the human condition painted by La Fontaine. It is the centre around which all other works of the poet revolve. After showing man how deceitful, ungrateful, cruel and stupid human society is, the poet now shows him how best to adapt himself to the situation. He urges man to learn to contemplate his own nature in the quietness and serenity of solitude, symbolized in the fable by the metaphor of "désert".

Pour vous mieux contempler demeurez au désert....  
 Cette leçon sera la fin de ces ouvrages:  
 Puisse-t-elle être utile aux siècles à venir!  
 Je la présente aux rois, je la propose aux sages. 165

The "Juge arbitre" and the "Hospitalier" deceive themselves by failing to be aware of their own needs and to understand themselves, that is, their own nature as men.<sup>166</sup> The "Solitaire" invites them not to die in the desert nor to repent of their sins nor to mortify themselves, as is the case in Arnauld d'Andilly's work, but he invites them to solitude so that they may the more easily understand themselves through quiet contemplation.<sup>167</sup> Thus the idea of holiness is made subservient to that of wisdom, while d'Andilly's religious objective is diverted towards philosophical deism. Under its apparent submission to the established christian orthodoxy of self-mortification, the fable sings La Fontaine's last credo of epicurean voluptuousness, that is, his belief that if one is to live well and happily, one must have moments of inner tranquillity and self-recollection away from the din and bustle, from the rivalries and tumults of public life. Since religion seems to do no more than philosophy to make man better and happier, let man look within himself for a human code that can work. Let him give his mind a chance to settle in itself. Rather than waste time and effort in trying to define or limit God, man would do better to define his own limitations first, if only to learn how difficult it is

---

165. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p.173, Fables, XII, 24, ll. 50 - 53.

Cf. ll. 54 - 69.

166. Ibid., l.38.

167. Ibid., ll. 39, 50.

to know oneself. The only knowledge that teaches man how to live happily and well is self-knowledge.

Here again, the influence of Seneca is evident. In the hundred and tenth letter to Lucilius, the Latin moralist defines the conditions for a peaceful and happy life.

Si tu es sage, mesure plutôt toute chose à ta condition d'homme: contracte en même temps tes joies et tes craintes. Cela vaut bien d'écourter nos joies que d'écourter nos craintes.<sup>168</sup>

Earlier in the sixty-eighth epistle he admonishes his friend saying:

Cache-toi dans la retraite, mais commence par cacher ta retraite elle-même: agir ainsi, c'est suivre, sinon les conseils, du moins les exemples des stoiciens: et pourtant, tels sont aussi leurs conseils; tu en auras la preuve dès que tu le voudras. Nous n'autorisons pas le sage à s'occuper des affaires publiques de toute façon, en tout temps et sans arrêt...<sup>169</sup>

This recalls the epistle which La Fontaine addressed to Fouquet, advising him to give himself a little respite from involvement with public duties and to taste a little of the pleasures of solitude:

Bon Dieu! que l'on est malheureux  
 Quand on est si grand personnage!  
 Seigneur, vous êtes bon et sage,  
 Et je serais trop familier  
 Si je faisais le conseiller.  
 A jouir pourtant de vous-même  
 Vous auriez un plaisir extrême:  
 Renvoyez donc en certains temps  
 Tous les traités, tous les traitants,  
 Les requêtes, les ordonnances,  
 Le Parlement, et les finances,  
 Le vain murmure des frondeurs,  
 Mais plus que tout, les demandeurs,  
 La cour, la paix, le mariage,  
 Et la dépense du voyage,  
 Qui rend nos coffres épuisés,  
 Et nos guerriers les bras croisés.  
 Renvoyez, dis-je, cette troupe,  
 Qu'on ne vit jamais sur la croupe  
 Du mont où les savantes Sœurs  
 Tiennent boutique de douceurs.

168. Sénèque, L.A., Op.Cit., t.III, p.201, (Lettre CX).

169. Ibid., p.33: (Lettre LXVIII).

170. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., pp.461-462: "A M. le Surintendant".

Here La Fontaine is not asking his patron to abandon public life altogether; he is simply inviting him to know himself. Knowledge of self reveals one's true nature, the limitation of one's power and resources, but it takes the retirement and calmness of solitude to arrive at this knowledge. We thus come to the poet's last word on the cherished theme of solitude, initiated in Le Songe de Vaux, elaborated in Le Songe d'un Habitant du Mogol, and demonstrated in the Comparaison d'Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince.

The last Book of fables, as a work of La Fontaine's declining years, seems uneven and, as a whole, not as good as the second collection of fables. But if the last fables have little approaching the artistic beauty and charm of Les Animaux malades de la peste (VII, 1) or Le Lion (XI, 1), for example, they still retain something of the poet's exquisite art of story-telling. While being less artistic, the last fables gain from the poet's greater maturity. They can thus be regarded as the crystallization and synthesis of his philosophy. They are the ultimate end of his long meditative journey from infancy to intellectual maturity. The critical early stages of uncertainty and apprehension have now led through a series of experiences and trials to an unflinching confidence in the knowledge of self as the beginning of wisdom. The poet could hardly have concluded his long and winding career on a better note and we wholly agree with him when he asks:

Par où saurais-je mieux finir?<sup>171</sup>

---

171. La Fontaine, Op.Cit., p. 174, Fables, XII, 24, l. 69.

## CONCLUSION

The process of intellectual evolution which brought La Fontaine from the lowly position of a provincial lad in search of excitement and a career, to the enviable position of an epicurean intellectual and one of France's immortal poets, was the product of a multiplicity of forces and influences which were at one and the same time literary, social, religious, political, moral, æsthetic, scientific and philosophical. The earliest of these influences was the poet's family background and childhood experiences, notably, his literary training at the "College de Château-Thierry" and at the Oratory.

La Fontaine's family belonged to the prosperous middle-class. His father, a cultured public functionary had an instinctive love of poetry which he passed on to his son. The latter was also surrounded by numerous relatives, including Pierre Pintrel, who aroused and encouraged his interest in literature. Thus La Fontaine had the initial advantage of a childhood spent in a cultured environment, and his position as the first son of an enlightened, middle-class civil servant afforded him the chance of having a good liberal education in one of the best schools of the time, namely, the "Collège de Château-Thierry."

Here, young La Fontaine was introduced to the study of the humanities and rhetoric which afforded him some useful training in correctness of speech, elegance and eloquence as well as inculcated in him sufficient discernment and ability to unite purity of taste with delicacy. This training was continued at the Oratory where the budding poet's knowledge of rhetoric was enlarged and where he was taught the theory of fables as illustrative devices. His contact with the erudite priests of the Oratory, notably, Desmares, stimulated his interest in learning, developed his imaginative powers and inspired him with a taste for good poetry. In addition, the seminary experience gave him a deeper insight into the working of the Catholic church thus enabling him to acquire a volume of knowledge about the Church, the Orders and religion in general which he sometimes uses satirically and even lasciviously in his Contes and other writings.

The success of La Fontaine's early education and subsequent intellectual growth owes something to his natural disposition. Apart from his humility, amiable nature, nonchalance and frankness, all of which contributed to endear him to his contemporaries and would-be helpers, the poet was richly endowed with three precious natural faculties among others which are indispensable to his career, namely, imagination, sensitivity and observation. These linked him with the world of plants, animals and mythology from where he constantly drew inspiration for his poetic works. The time spent dreaming was never lost. His intellectual development is a continual interplay of these natural faculties in reaction to the facts and problems of life. Thus the realism, the satire, the captivating humour of the Contes and Fables are the product of a patient observation of life, crystallized in the mind of a naturally gifted poet.

The pattern of La Fontaine's early training and the direction of his interest reveal that before he plunged into the mainstream of the seventeenth-century intellectual current, he had first of all to acquire the skill of expression, i.e. evolve a literary style or an effective medium of communication that would suit his ever changing mood and personality. His intellectual evolution therefore began with his literary formation. To this end, the aspiring young writer spared himself no effort to explore ancient and modern literature in search of literary models; he diligently tried out several authors and genres to determine those that would be suitable for his temperament and the taste of his epoch. His earliest literary inspiration came from Latin authors. A man of erudition, a seeker of poetic excellence and an eclectic, La Fontaine sampled all sorts of authors and genres and, guided by a sure sense of artistic values or an awareness of his own needs, he chose some of the greatest of these authors for careful study and deliberate imitation. Ovid's myths, Terence's comedies, Virgil's musical verse, Horace's practical wisdom and Lucretius' delight in nature, all these stimulated in the poet a response which he was quick to recognize and eager to cultivate. Horace's witty epigrams offered La Fontaine the means for meditating and expatiating upon basic moral problems. He found it easy to translate his model's literary

and philosophical attitude into the facile life-style of his own epoch, noted for its aristocratic mentality that was complaisant, more worldly wise than serious, superficial rather than profound. Above all, he cultivated Horace's discriminating taste, eternally modern spirit, delicacy of style and refinement of the intellect. Aristocratic elegance, perfection of style and form, high-level prosody and rhetoric, these are the distinguishing features of the Latin literary art which contributed immensely in moulding La Fontaine's own style. Added to the appreciation of the purely literary skill and excellence of the Latin models were the judgement of their values and culture and the acquisition of their ideas which influenced our poet's moral conclusions. Thus his extensive reading of the Latin philosophers, such as Lucretius, initiated him into the ideas of Epicurus before he ever came in contact with the actual works of the great Greek philosopher.

It was in Plato that La Fontaine discovered the philosopher-poet whose easy-flowing dialogue and questioning style charmed him, while the delightful verses of Pindar and Homer, most of which he read in Latin translations, constituted a constant source of inspiration to his effort to write musical poetry. The vision of ancient Athens and Rome as the meeting grounds of gods and heroes of antiquity and mythology offered a rich and unfailing stimulus to his poetic imagination. Homer, in particular, and nearer home, Malherbe, contributed to bring about the polished eloquence and ornateness of the Contes and Fables in the same way that these two works owe something of their more familiar accents to Marot and their precious ones to Voiture. The cultivation of the narrative techniques of Ovid, Boccaccio, Ariosto and Rabelais, and to a lesser extent, Marguerite de Navarre and Bonaventure des Périers, resulted in La Fontaine's mastery of the art of fiction and aided his handling of such problems as plotting, plausibility, suspense and surprise. The comedies of Terence and Molière helped to develop his comic style and his skilful use of dialogue, while his moral attitude, particularly in the first collection of fables, owes a lot of its pessimism and scepticism to his reading of Plutarch and Montaigne.

Fascinated by the style and ideas of these writers, La Fontaine aimed at a conciseness and purity of style unequalled in French literature; he aspired to give his work through a logical and well-designed finish, the concentrated force and picturesque precision which distinguish his poetry. His evolution gives an impression of a wandering star, of a hesitant, conscientious and sometimes felicitous exploring of side-tracks, techniques and genres. His search for literary models was a life-long activity and during this period prose and poetry, light and serious, and sometimes mixed genres, followed each other with cyclical regularity. The poet's complex style, his complete freedom of expression, his personal confidence and drastic revision of his models were attained after long years of practice, apprenticeship and experimentation. Thus his successes and failures produced a cumulative effect culminating in his intellectual maturity.

The earliest visible product of La Fontaine's search for literary models is L'Eunuque, adapted from Terence's comedy, the Eunuchus, and published in 1654. This marked the conclusion of the first ten years of apprenticeship and initiated the poet into various artistic problems: the difficulties of intelligent adaptation, the creation of interesting scenes and dialogue, and the technique of characterization. The effort to resolve these peculiar problems not only afforded La Fontaine training in adaptation but also initiated him into the art of love poetry. Thus, although L'Eunuque, this trial shot, passed almost unnoticed, it was already a good start, for it contained the germs of the poet's future literary creations. All that he needed at this time was greater stimulation and self-confidence. These came in the wake of his epic poem, Adonis.

The latter gave him valuable practice in the cultivation of the heroic genre. If the poet tried his hand in this pattern of writing, it was mainly because the great literary triumvirate, formed by Conrart, Gombauld and Patru, esteemed epic poetry more highly than the other genres. The classical doctrine, elaborated about this time, had a great impact on the early pattern followed by the development of La Fontaine's career, to the extent that even when the poet <sup>became</sup> emancipated from the rigidity of the doctrine, traits of it still remained with him.



It was at the time of Adonis that he acquired the art of controlling the speed of the movement of his story, of subordinating the subsidiary to the essential theme within the strictest economy of his resources, and of portraying characters according to their true nature. It was also at this stage that he familiarized himself with those figures and ornaments of rhetoric upon which the great rhetoricians of the age based their judgement of the excellence of the poetic language. Consequently, the La Fontaine that one meets in Adonis is a more confident poet than the author of L'Eunuque. Although he is still feeling his way in search of a pattern, he is now comparatively more experienced, more familiar with ancient and modern literature, and better able to manipulate his poetic devices. The most significant contribution of Adonis to the professional development of La Fontaine is the training it gave the poet in the art of story-telling, involving the humanization of animals, plants and inanimate objects. The calm and intimate intercourse with nature which he displays in this work owes something to his experiences as a forest officer in the duchy of Château-Thierry. With the mastery of his literary instruments, the poet was now able to infuse more serious ideas about human nature into his poetry. Thus in Adonis, the miraculous element is made subservient to philosophical meditation. The inflexible laws of nature are made to follow their natural course, and we are confronted for the first time with the reality of the fragile nature of human beauty and the brevity of mortal life, thus initiating the theme of death and suffering on which the poet is to philosophize at length in his later works.

The presentation of Adonis to Fouquet and the consequent securing of the poetic contract marked a turning point in the history of La Fontaine's literary and intellectual development. The poet now turned towards romantic literature, following the taste of the milieu in which he now found himself. The splendour and elegance of Vaux opened his eyes to the demands of an aristocratic public whose contact and influence enlarged his social and intellectual horizon. He cast off all pretensions to pedantism; the poetic contract enabled him to make his verse more flexible, thus furnishing him with the poetic style which he needed for the Contes and Fables. At the same time, Le Songe de Vaux, in particular, ushered him into the world of imagina-

tion. The trip to Limousin in search of fallen Fouquet, though of short duration, afforded our poet the opportunity of observing at a very close range the moving picture of men and things thus giving him the experience of that reality whose blending with fiction helped create the delightful charm of the fables. La Fontaine's social outlook has undergone a change; his experience of the world is now greatly enriched; and his literary devices have been well rehearsed.

But he still needed the stimulation, the personal challenge from the competitive milieu of Paris to discover his full potentialities. As the cultural and intellectual centre of Europe, Paris opened up to the aspiring poet a wonderful new horizon. Here he met and made friends with well-known playwrights, artists and intellectuals whose influence inspired him. The facilities provided by the Parisian milieu ushered the curious poet into the world of books and ideas. Thus it took the elegance, the art, the splendid flowering of the French culture of that great epoch as well as the naivety, malice and ironic wit, native to the French, to form La Fontaine's intellect. His departure from Vaux and his subsequent exposure to the open world of Paris mark the end of the second period of apprenticeship. The time has now come to create something new with the ideas and experience he has so far accumulated.

Simultaneously, La Fontaine launched the twin genres of Contes and Nouvelles. As a prelude to this, he had to establish the theory, the guiding principles of the new creations, explain his techniques and illustrate them in order to justify his claim to having actually created a new pattern out of the models provided by Ariosto, Boccaccio, Marguerite de Navarre, Bonaventure des Périers and other sources. This he did in the quasi-dramatic piece of Clymène. Here the poet, by an ingenious variation of the same subject, effected through a subtle manipulation of stylistic patterns, demonstrated that originality is possible within imitation, thus defending his handling of his various models in the tales and fables. La Fontaine now stood on the threshold of the tales in verse. Here he paused for reflection to determine between two patterns of tales, consider various theories, defend the literary and moral values of the new creation, and test

the reaction of his public. With the prefaces of 1665 and 1666, establishing the aesthetic and ethical theory of Contes, and stressing the importance of poetic liberty, subordination of form to content, and originality in imitation, La Fontaine virtually concluded the formulation of the theory of his new genre, begun in Clymène. The brilliant manner in which he presents his points, the overall merit and huge success of the finished product, the extent of his research into the works of his relevant models, the weight of his argument and the logic of his reason, all bear testimony of his intellectual advancement.

Besides, encouraged by the improvement in his medium of communication, the poet now took the audacious step of converting the bare, sensual tales of his models into instruments of philosophical meditation on love, marriage and human relationships. Thus beneath the appearances of licentiousness and frivolity hide some universal truths which La Fontaine wishes to communicate to his readers. The urge to love and to have sexual relations is a legitimate natural impulse which should neither be misinterpreted nor stifled, for the more this desire is suppressed the greater grows the urge to obey nature. In this sense, the tales constitute an objective appraisal of the facts of nature and a plea that its legitimate impulses should be obeyed, provided that moderation and discretion are observed. All sexual relationships are based on conflict, on an interplay of double-edged intrigues, cunning, hypocrisy, plots and counterplots which, when miscarried, turn into a boomerang. The increasing debate which the tales stimulated in literary and intellectual circles established La Fontaine's literary fame, and the skill, developed thus far, was deployed in the composition of the Fables.

The latter too had their own evolution, beginning with short anecdotes drawn from the folklore and the satire or imitated from Phaedrus, AEsop and other sources, and then becoming richer, more varied, independent and personal in conception. Although the Fables remain seemingly parallel to the Contes in the course of their evolution, they are really complementary to each other, forming one systematic art of story-telling. But while the tales illustrate mainly the theory and technique of pure narrative, the fables transcend beyond this ob-

jective to satisfy deeper intellectual and æsthetic needs. After draining the resources of La Fontaine's accumulated wisdom and experience, the fables enlarged their scope and developed from the traditional apologue to intellectual poetry, thus affording the poet a safer and more effective medium for meditating upon social, political, moral, philosophical and other aspects of life.

The sophisticated realist that is La Fontaine is quite conspicuous in the first collection of fables. The poet depicts the world as it is, and in doing so, renders more service to humanity than if he had flattered man's imagination, hopes and aspirations. Rather than do that, he tells the reader frankly that not all human effort is recompensed with success; that society consists of two broad classes of people: the "wolves" or the wicked and powerful egoists on one hand and the weak and miserable on the other. La Fontaine has no illusions about the nature of man which he finds permeated with evil. He views human history as a catalogue of continuous crimes, with suffering, persecution, ignorance and prejudices as its constant features. These are attributed to man's abuse of the natural law of egoism, leading to the oppression of the weak by the strong and the frequent triumph of iniquity over justice. Thus the fact of being duped, tyrannized and enslaved is the lot of those who, lacking the necessary physical force to defend themselves, do not possess sufficient wisdom and cunning to escape the dangers that threaten their liberty.

The intellectual growth of La Fontaine in the fables of 1668 is better revealed in the ingenious use he makes of the apologues as political and philosophical instruments. From the political point of view, the poet believes in liberty, particularly the specific kinds of liberty, interpreted as rights: the right to happiness, property, free expression and justice. Hence he threw his lot on the side of Fouquet and against the tyrannical machinations of Colbert and his supporters during the Fouquet affair. While accepting responsible monarchy as a suitable form of government, he views vindictive despotism as an abuse of monarchy just as anarchy is a betrayal of republicanism. Whatever the form of government, it cannot survive unless the laws are just and equality before the law firmly established. To this end, the judiciary should be neither venal nor arbitrary. La Fontaine ad-

vocates obedience to the law and the established authority from every member of the body politic, since the survival of the whole body depends on the existence of the head. Accordingly, failure to obey the established laws and institutions should be punished not sporadically or arbitrarily but reasonably and in proportion to the gravity of the offence.

Although La Fontaine cannot be classified as a philosopher in the popular sense of the word, he does have some general philosophical traits at each stage of his intellectual development. These traits are centred around his epicurean and humanist tendencies. He is interested in the activities of the mind, curious about things, highly critical of the ideas of others and sometimes sceptical about his own views. Accordingly, he spares no effort to become acquainted with the long line of ancient and contemporary philosophers, moralists and free-thinkers, ranging from Epicurus, Lucretius and Montaigne to Gassendi, Théophile de Viau, Malebranche, Saint-Evremond, Spinoza and Leibniz, whose influence was felt in seventeenth-century France. La Fontaine constantly consulted their works and discussed what he considered to be their philosophy, balancing the thoughts of one against those of another and treating great intellectual questions with sincerity, even if often superficially. Thus in the Descartes-Gassendi controversy over reason and the senses, the poet, inspired by the ideas of his friend, Saint-Evremond, and true to his own temperament, adopted the atomistic theory of knowledge formulated by Epicurus and developed by the Gassendists, even before he came in contact with the works of Gassendi. He stresses the limitation of human reason, while accepting sense experience as the gateway of knowledge, but he does not develop the idea fully until in the fables of 1678.

La Fontaine imbibed through his association with Saint-Evremond and other pleasure-loving intellectuals of his time the epicurean taste for pleasure which permeates his life and literary works. As would be expected, the most obvious message of his writings is the exhortation to adopt the principle of "volupté". This is a way of life, not so much expounded in writing as it is illustrated and embodied in the deeds and character of the poet himself. The simple injunctions to good cheer evolve virtually into a philosophy whose main features are

plainly epicurean, stressing the virtues of self-mastery, indifference to fortuitous events and generosity to others. To these are added the cultivation of gaiety and, above all, peace of mind. Drawing further inspiration from the Plutarchian and Rabelaisian humanism, La Fontaine integrates all human activity, base and lofty alike, into a positive and balanced harmony. His doctrine of "volupté" represents a joyful sanity of body, mind and spirit.

Equally controversial and prominent in the poet's reflections in the first collection of fables, is the hypothesis according to which man's actions, successes and failures, his will and entire destiny are determined by the influence of the stars and other celestial bodies. La Fontaine, while justifying natural astrology and genuine scientific research, casts anathema on judicial astrology and all useless metaphysical speculations. He regards the latter as mere ignorance and superstition which undermines the human effort to improve the lot of man.

The first collection of fables and the transitional composition, Psyché, mark the culmination of over thirty years' work and intellectual growth on the part of a versatile poet who devoted most of his life to experimentation in literary styles and ideas. Intellectual development is a cumulative process; thus without La Fontaine's studies in Latin poetry, his contact with the cultures of ancient Greece, the Church and the Parisian milieu of the seventeenth century, without his hopes and disappointments at Vaux, his stylistic experiments in Clymène and his tales in verse, the fables of 1668 could not have been possible.

The publication of Psyché was followed by an interlude of stoic idealism during which the poet surprised his public with the appearance in 1673 of Le Poème de la captivité de Saint-Malc, a pious poem, inspired by the Jansenist, Arnauld d'Andilly, and based upon the Christian theme of marital chastity. Here the influence of La Fontaine's study at the Oratory reveals itself once more in the poet's brilliant demonstration of his deep knowledge of doctrinal theology. By celebrating the triumph of Christian heroism over the power of sin, he reverses the situation in Adonis where pagan

heroism is conquered by death, thus showing the positive character of his intellectual evolution. At the same time, he pays what is obviously a lip service to Christian idealism, an act whose highly superficial nature was shortly betrayed by the publication in 1674 of the most licentious of the Contes, attacking the clergy and other church dignitaries and institutions. With the publication of the first collection of fables, Psyché and the poem of Saint-Malc, La Fontaine was now heading towards intellectual maturity. But he still needed the stimulation, the encouragement and sympathetic understanding of Mme. de La Sablière's Gassendist-orientated circle to reach his goal.

The poet's initiation into this circle could be regarded as the beginning of his second worldly life, the first being that of Vaux. Mme. de La Sablière received him into her domain, provided him with shelter, protection and other essential needs for the next twenty years of his career. Here, La Fontaine found himself at the very heart of gassendism for which he had been intellectually prepared through his association with Saint-Evremond. Gathered around Mme. de La Sablière were kindred spirits, such as Bernier, Chaulieu, Menjot, le marquis de La Fare, prominent intellectuals, members of the French nobility and learned aristocracy. Our poet had the opportunity of hearing these people first hand. This was for him a great source of intellectual stimulation. The impact of the new milieu on the philosophical and general development of La Fontaine is evident from the richness and maturity not only of the fables of 1678 but of the poet's subsequent works, particularly Le Poème du Quinquina. The discussions with Bernier and other gassendist intellectuals, their reflections on the problem of animal soul, the cartesian system, the theories of Epicurus, Lucretius and Gassendi on the subjects of knowledge, pleasure, death and life in general, enlarged our poet's intellectual perspective thus ensuring for the second collection of fables a wider horizon and fresh sources of inspiration.

When the fables of 1678 appeared, a great change had taken place in La Fontaine's style and stock of ideas. Complete master of his art, the poet now had no rivals worthy of the name in his particular genre. Sure of himself and modestly triumphant, he was acknowledged everywhere as a major poet. His subject matter became more

divergent, giving greater variety to the whole collection. The familiar features and simple characteristics of the traditional apologue were replaced with other embellishments which were more suitable for the circumstances of the new fables.

The philosopher-poet having peeped out in the first collection of fables, now took courage, asserting himself as he proceeded, and reaching the high-water mark in the metaphysical and philosophical discussions of the second collection. At this stage, La Fontaine's political thinking is still monarchical but has become more nationalistic in outlook. In reaction to the tense military and diplomatic situation in contemporary Europe, to the national emergency and the danger of isolation that threatened the French nation, the poet once more plunged into political poetry, advocated tactful diplomacy, relaxation of tension and support for the national symbol. All these combine to make the author of the fables of 1678 a politically conscientious intellectual whose reflections, vigilance and maturity are manifest in the scintillating wit and erudition of his works and whose main objective is peace and "détente".

To this end, La Fontaine enlarged his ideas on egoism, stressing its more negative aspects, its dominance over men and the threat it poses to peace and "détente" when it is grossly abused.

In contact with the gassendist intellectuals in Mme. de La Sablière's circle, the poet's initial metaphysical doubt or intellectual scepticism found a new source of inspiration. He understood more clearly the issues involved in the Descartes-Gassendi controversy over the theory of reason and the senses and over the problem of animal intelligence. An apostle of gassendism, La Fontaine takes sides with the anti-cartesians, contradicts Descartes and affirms the complementary roles of reason and the senses to each other. He wants ideas to be confined within the limits of experience. What human experience and mind can demonstrate as existing should be accepted as a fact. The poet grants it validity because it conforms to common sense. Other things which cannot meet this demand he treats with nonchalance or false modesty. These tendencies combine to make an intellectually mature La Fontaine a free-thinking poet.



Like Saint-Evremond, he cultivated the gassendist attitude of being discreet in his pronouncements, modest in aspirations but sceptical, ironic and almost genuinely indifferent to the problems of life, particularly those that seem to transcend human understanding. It is true that human development can be realized only after intensive intellectual effort, but man should also take note of what the human mind can and cannot do. It cannot, for instance, know the origins or the first principles of things nor can it penetrate the infinite and comprehend the ultimate nature of reality. But it can recognize the values of experience and learn to weigh these values through the use of reason.

It was not just the epicurean-gassendist theory of knowledge that La Fontaine adopted from the circle of Mme. de La Sablière. He also imbibed the group's scientific curiosity, its humanism and, above all, its providentialist tendencies. Inspired by the attitude of the new milieu and by his reading of Malebranche, Spinoza and, to a lesser extent, Leibniz, the poet blames man's inordinate ambition, his ignorance and abuse of egoism for most of the suffering and misery in the world, and affirms the goodness of nature, guided by Providence. Nature and the Providence that governs her are well-intentioned, but man, because of the limitations of his intellect, is incapable of perceiving fully either the details of his relationship with this Providence or the eternal order and interdependence of nature as a whole. Thus for La Fontaine, it is the limitations in man's intelligence that give the impression of disequilibrium in nature, for his ignorance prevents him from recognizing the essentially restrictive character of every gift and every situation. What the limited human intelligence views as evil or as an error in a given piece of nature's work is but a part of the eternal perfection of that particular work in relation to the general design which is beyond man's comprehension. Finally, our failure to understand all is no justification for surrendering oneself to intellectual libertinism or to futile metaphysical speculations. With this confidence in the goodwill of Providence towards nature, La Fontaine's initial apprehension of death now gives way to a more epicurean conception of the phenomenon. Death now becomes a moral necessity, since man commences dying from the very moment of

birth. Thus death is seen by our poet at this stage as an eventuality to be always anticipated and accepted with fortitude and serenity when it occurs. Life too becomes a wonderful opportunity whose worth and dignity consist not in how long but how well one lives. As to what follows after mortal life, La Fontaine's attitude is not quite clear, but his instinctive dread of deception makes him keep an open and flexible mind on the question of immortality.

In the great intellectual controversy which opposed the theory of animal souls to cartesian automatism, the poet once more shows himself as a convinced gassendist. Like Gassendi, he affirms that there are three grades of soul: the *sensitive* soul of plants, the sensitive & *intelligent* soul of ~~the~~ animals and the rational soul which man possesses alone in addition to the lower corporeal souls. The faculties of a given grade of soul are attributes which reveal themselves in the conduct of the creatures possessing that soul. Thus animals, judged from their behaviour, are more than mere automata. The hierarchy which La Fontaine visualizes in nature leads to three conclusions: the affirmation of man's superiority over all other earthly creatures, the correspondence between man and the lower animals and the fraternity of all human beings from which result the encouragement of all effort which seeks to unite them as children of one family, and the repudiation of the forces that divide and antagonize them against each other. Gassendi's hypothesis, as adopted by La Fontaine, is an attempt to escape the dilemma created by the cartesian dualism. Its merit lies in its proposition of a solution which does justice to all creatures in nature without encroaching on human prerogatives. In this sense, the poet's defence of the doctrine of animal souls is one of the outstanding proofs of his intellectual maturity.

Further proofs of the maturity and indeed the versatility of his genius are seen in the following up of the effort to write a philosophical poetry, made in the Discours à Mme. de La Sablière with an attempt at scientific meditation in Le Poème du Quinquina. Thanks to inspiration drawn mainly from the writings of François de Monginot, and the moral encouragement from the duchesse de Bouillon, La Fontaine demonstrated the great heights which his intellectual development had attained by composing a long poem on a scientific subject, discussing the related themes of

fever, blood circulation and the drug of "quinquina". As a scientific exposition, this work lacks empirical exactitude and leaves many gaps. But its merit lies in the poet's audacious adaptation of exciting new developments in science and medicine to poetry. The poem is the product of a more serene wisdom; a wisdom which the experience of years has conditioned to appreciate courage, effort and generosity. It also shows the reaction of a disillusioned but alert old age in the face of the inexhaustible wonders of nature. Its audacious modernity and cautious optimism in the future of medical science make it the most forward-looking, even if the most speculative, of La Fontaine's poems. The poet has now, thanks to his eclectic temperament, grown to be, in turn, a literary artist, philosopher, scientist and amateur physician. Thus the three broad aspects of intellectual growth, namely, the literary, the philosophical and the scientific, have now crystallized and fertilized each other in the same personality, a fact which was recognized and confirmed by La Fontaine's election to the French Academy, thus bringing to a most successful climax some forty years of literary and intellectual aspiration.

The poet's election to the Academy marks not only the climax of his career but the beginning of its decline as well due mainly to old age. He dwindled from poetry to prose in the Comparaison d' Alexandre, de César et de Monsieur le Prince, published shortly after his election to the Academy in 1684. A parallel decline from diversity to medley is equally discernible in Les Ouvrages de prose et de poésie des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine which appeared the following year. The new poems in this collection lack something of the beauty and elegance of style which characterize the earlier compositions. There is now a tendency to be too academic in the use of figures of speech, coupled with an artificial and cold elegance of style, loss of force in poetic diction and a certain air of obscurity in expression. These indicate that, while being more mature in thought, the poet has lost much of the poetic imagination and expressive force which distinguish his best literary compositions. But the decline in the quality and quantity of his literary output did not affect his active participation in the purely intellectual business of the Academy. Thus in the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, he takes sides with the former

and affirms the superiority of the ancient arts and culture, and acknowledges his debt to antiquity for the formation of his mind and art. It is no wonder, therefore, that the poet returned to Ovid in the last years of his career to draw inspiration for the twin poems of Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée in which he stresses the importance of love and friendship as eternal virtues and the true essence of "volupté", and re-emphasizes the need to obey legitimate natural impulses, particularly the urge to love. Above all, these twin poems reveal La Fontaine's conventional use and ironical attitude to the gods of antiquity and the mythological figures he uses in his literary creation. He uses them as decorative devices, while hiding his epicurean irreverence and contempt for the so-called divinities under a superficial show of respect. Philémon et Baucis and Les Filles de Minée complete the cycle defined by La Fontaine's literary world. His intellectual powers have grown along with his literary skill as he moved slowly but steadily from pure literature to philosophy, philosophy to science, science to history and from history back to literature. As a fitting conclusion to this long and winding career, the poet launched the twelfth and last Book of fables in 1693. This is a synthesis of his epicurean wisdom and intellectual maturity.

As a work of La Fontaine's more mature years, the last collection of fables tend to be more philosophical than artistic. Here, the poet makes a final definition of the fable as a realistic appraisal of the human condition and confirms the role of animals as an example to men. Mature and disillusioned, La Fontaine has come to the bitter but valid conclusion that man, on account of his short-comings, will always be a wolf to his fellow man. At the same time, he concludes his reflection on the subject of egoism and condemns the tendency to see only the relation of self-esteem to the need for security but not that of self-respect to moral conscience. Old age and maturity also brought with them political disillusionment for the poet, resulting in the cooling off of his initial enthusiasm for the monarchy. The excesses of the latter, the avidity, hypocrisy, selfishness and corruption of the royal Court have shaken his confidence in the efficiency and integrity of absolute monarchy as a form of government.

But the poet neither revolts openly nor advocates violent revolutions, since this merely replaces one set of wolves with another. Against the tumult, intrigues and uneasiness of public glory he opposes the peace, serenity and comfort of solitude, thus giving in Le Juge arbitre, l'Hospitalier, et le Solitaire<sup>1</sup> his last word on the question of solitude and the need to understand oneself and one's capabilities. After showing man the true nature of the world, the poet now shows him how best to adapt himself to the situation.

A number of questions arise as to the directing motive of La Fontaine's thought. Was it scientific, æsthetic, ethical, political or economic? Did he have a deep interest in the development of natural science? Did he attempt to interpret the universe in the light of new scientific discoveries, hoping to achieve metaphysical insight into truths hitherto unknown? And did he apply this fresh knowledge of nature and humanity to the interpretation of man? Or, on the contrary, did he reduce all his thinking to the dual objectives of "plaire et instruire les hommes"?<sup>2</sup> Or, with his reducing of his scientific, ethical and metaphysical thinking to simple moralizing, did he transform the political, economic and social order and offer mankind a new incentive? In short, what is the character of La Fontaine's intellectualism?

What emerges from the consideration of these questions is that, in spite of his interest in ideas, La Fontaine is neither a scientist nor a political demagogue nor a philosopher in the strict sense of the term. Although the poet has many interesting things to say about almost everything, he cannot be said to have developed a coherent body of thought and his ideas cannot be arranged systematically under a single philosophy as such. His work is one of renovation and embellishment, a constant effort to improve upon rather crude subject matter, giving it elegance, charm and respectability. His writings constitute a relatively long list of loosely constructed thoughts which spring from a mind marvellously alert and receptive. His ideas are neither trenchant nor dogmatic: take nature as it is; endeavour to be neither cheat nor dupe, not to expect a reformation of the basic human nature,

---

1. La Fontaine, Op. Cit., p. 173, Fables, XII, 24.

2. Ibid., p. 110, VI, 1, 1.5. Cf. p. 66, "A Monseigneur le Dauphin"

*exercise* moderation in the enjoyment of the pleasures of life and fortitude in the face of death. In this sense, <sup>the</sup> intellectually mature La Fontaine is more of a moralist, an epicurean poet than a professional scientist, politician or philosopher. His career represents the reaction of his particular genius to the problems posed by his century. This explains his eclecticism and diversity of interests. But diversity in La Fontaine's work is not synonymous with a disorganised dispersal of literary genres and themes. It means a systematic and organic evolution of a career which developed according to its own laws.

The initial apprehension which characterizes this evolution is rooted in pessimism about the human condition and man's ability to grapple with it, just as his consolation in the face of this reality is motivated by his confidence in human resources, guided by the benevolent hands of nature. The growth of this confidence in himself is seen readily enough from the contrast between his early apprehension of death and evil and his final self-assurance, providentialist faith and mature resignation. Finally, it is important to note that La Fontaine's literary and intellectual growth is centred around his favourite moralists, books and systems. But what he takes from them is what he chooses. Even in his beloved Epicurus, Lucretius, Horace, Gassendi and Malherbe in whose schools of thought he is formed, there is much that he rejects. This study has attempted to show his needs, his quest and his discovery of confidence in nature and in the arts as central to his evolution.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Except where otherwise stated the place of publication of the works listed in this bibliography is Paris. The letters "n.d." describe works whose date of publication is not indicated. More than one edition of La Fontaine has been consulted but the page references to his works given in this thesis refer to J. Marmier's edition of the poet's complete works.

EDITIONS OF LA FONTAINE CONSULTED

- BUSSON, Henri, et GOHIN, Ferdinand : Discours à Madame de La Sablière, (Droz), 1938.
- CHAMFORT, N-S., et GAIL, J.B. : Les trois fabulistes : Esope, Phèdre La Fontaine, (Delance), 1796.
- CLARAC, Pierre : Œuvres choisies, (Delalain), 1926.
- Contes et Nouvelles en vers, Collection des Universités de France, (Les Belles Lettres), 1934, (2 vols).
- Œuvres diverses, (Pléiade), 1948.
- Fables choisies mises en vers par M. de La Fontaine (Hachette), 1946.
- COUTON, Georges : Fables choisies mises en vers, (Garnier), 1962.
- DELBIAUSSE, Roger : Fables, Psyché, Œuvres diverses, Contes et Nouvelles, Théâtre, Œuvres posthumes, (Les Classiques verts), 1948, (2 vols).
- LONGNON, Jean : Œuvres de La Fontaine publiées d'après les textes originaux avec des notices, (La Cité des Livres), 1929.
- MARMIER, Jean : Œuvres complètes de La Fontaine, (Seuil), 1965.
- MARTY-LAVEAUX, Charles : Œuvres complètes, Bibliothèque elzévirienne, P. Janet et P. Daffis, 1857 - 1877, (5 vols).
- MICHAUT, Gustave : Fables, (Bossard), 1927, (2 vols).
- MICHEL, Pierre et MARTIN, Maurice : Fables, (Classiques Bordas) 1964, (2 vols).
- MOLAND, Louis : Œuvres complètes, (Garnier), 1872-76, (7 vols).
- NAIGEON : Fables, (Didot aîné), 1787.
- NODIER, Charles : Fables, (Alexis Eymery), 1818, (2 vols).
- PAULY, Alphonse : Œuvres, (Alphonse Lemerre), 1875 - 1891, (7 vols).

- PERCEAU, Louis : Œuvres complètes, (édit. G. Briffaut), 1928-33  
(11 vols.).
- PILON, Edmond, et DAUPHIN, Fernand : Œuvres, Collection  
"Selecta", (Garnier), 1922 - 27.
- PINTARD, René et FLUTRE, Ferdinand : Fables, Collection "Le  
Flambeau", (Hachette), 1949.
- RADOUANT, René : La Fontaine Fables, (Hachette, 1929.
- REGNIER, Henri : Œuvres, Collection Les Grand Ecrivains de La  
France, (Hachette), 1883 - 92 (11 vols).
- SAULNIER, Verdun-L : Fables mises en vers, (édition de Cluny),  
1950 (2 vols).
- WALCKENAER, Charles-Athanase : Œuvres complètes de Jean de La  
Fontaine, (Nepveu), 1819 - 21, (8 vols); Cf. Nouvelle  
édition, revue, mise en ordre et accompagnée de notes,  
(Lefèvre), 1822 - 23, (6 vols).
- Fables, (Hachette), 1848.

## OTHER WORKS AND ARTICLES USED

- ADAM, Antoine : Histoire de la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle  
(Domat), 1954, (5 vols).
- Le Sentiment de la nature au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, en France  
dans la littérature et dans les arts, article published in  
Cahier de l'Association International des Etudes Françaises  
No. 6, juillet, 1954.
- Les Libertins au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Collection "Le vrai savoir",  
1964.
- Littérature française, Collection dirigée par Claude  
Pichois, (Arthaud), (L'Age classique, I, 1624 - 1660), 1968.
- ALBERT, Babeau : Les Voyageurs en France depuis la Renaissance  
Jusqu'à la Révolution (F. Didot), 1885.
- ALBERT, Dauzat : Le Sentiment de la nature et son expression artis-  
tique, 1914.
- ALLEM, Maurice : Anthologie poétique française XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, (Garnier-  
Flammarion), 1966, (2 vols).



- ALMERAS, Henri de : A pied, à cheval, en carrosse. Voyages et moyens de transport du bon vieux temps, (A. Michel), 1929.
- APPLETON, C: Les idées politiques de La Fontaine d'après ses fables article published in Réforme sociale, 84 (9th serial 4), 1924.
- APULEE : Les Métamorphoses, Texte établi par D. S. Robertson et traduit par Paul Vallette, (Les Belles Lettres), 1940, (2 tomes in one volume).
- ARIOSTE, L. Roland Furieux, Traduction nouvelle et en prose par M.V. Philippon de La Madelaine, (Morizot), 1864.
- ARISTOTLE : De Anima, (transl. by R. D. Hicks, Cambridge, 1907) ——— Rhétorique, Texte établi et traduit par Médéric Dufour, (Les Belles Lettres), 1960, (3 vols).
- ARNAULD D'ANDILLY : Les Vies des saints Pères des déserts et de quelques Saints, écrites par des Pères de l'Eglise et autres anciens Auteurs ecclésiastiques grecs et latins, traduites en français, 1647 - 53, (4 vols), Cf. Nouvelle édition, 1658, (2 vols).
- ARNOULD, L : La Femme française dans La Fontaine, article published in Correspondant, 1925 - 28.  
——— La Terre de France chez La Fontaine. Bêtes et gens, Tours, Collection "pour tous", 1924.
- AUDIC, Abry, et CROUZET, P: Histoire illustrée de la littérature française, (H. Didier), 1942 .
- AUGER, L.S.: La Fontaine, article published in Mélanges philosophiques et littéraires, 1828, vol.II.
- AUGUSTIN (Saint) : La Cité de Dieu, Texte traduit en français par Pierre de Labriolle, (Garnier), 1941, (2 vols).  
BABEAU, Albert: Cf. p. 483
- BACHELARD, Gaston : La Formation de l'esprit scientifique. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective, 1947.
- BAIF, Jean-Antoine de : Œuvres, (édit. Marty-Laveaux), 1568, (5 vols).
- BAILLY, Auguste : La Fontaine, (Arthème Fayard), 1937.

- BALZAC, Jean-Louis Guez (sieur de) : Œuvres, (édit. Moreau),  
1654, (2 vols).
- Les premières Lettres (1618 - 1627), (Droz), 1933-34 (2 vols)
- BARBER, W. H. : Leibniz in France from Arnauld to Voltaire. A study in French reactions to Leibnizianism (1670 - 1760),  
Oxford, (Clarendon), 1955.
- BARBILLION, (Dr. -Med.) : La Fontaine et le quinquina, article in  
Bulletin de la Société médicale, 1929, vol. XXIII.
- BARCHILON, Jacques : Wit and Humor in La Fontaine's Psyché  
article in French Review, October, 1962, vol. XXXVI, No. I.
- BARTHELEMY, CH. de : La Religion de La Fontaine, article in  
Erreurs et mensonges historiques, 1878, vol. IX.
- BATTEREL, (Père Louis) : Mémoires domestiques pour servir à l'histoire de l'Oratoire, 1903, (2 vols).
- BAUDIN, Emile : La Philosophie morale des fables de La Fontaine,  
(édit. La Baconnière), Genève, 1950.
- BAUDOT, Nicolas Juilly de : Dialogues entre MM. Patru et d'Ablancourt sur les plaisirs, (G. de Luynes et J.B. Langlois),  
1701, (2 vols).
- BAYLE, Pierre : Dictionnaire historique et critique, (3<sup>e</sup> édition),  
Rotterdam (M. Böhme), 1720, (4 vols).
- Œuvres diverses, La Haye, 1737, (4 vols).
- La République des Lettres, avril 1685, (3 vols)
- Pensées diverses sur la comète, 1911, (2 vols).
- BELIN, Jean-Albert : Traité des Talismans ou figures astrales,  
(P. de Bresche), 1671.
- La Poudre de sympathie justifiée, (3<sup>e</sup> édition),  
(P. de Bresche), 1671.
- BELLESORT, A : Sur les grands chemins de la poésie classique,  
(Perrin), 1914.
- BERNIER, François : Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi (édition  
Lyon), 1678, (8 vols).
- BIARD, Jean-Dominique : The Style of La Fontaine's Fables, Oxford,  
(Basil Blackwell), 1966.
- BIBLE THE HOLY: Cf. p. 505.
- BIBLIOTHEQUE de l'Arsenal : MS. 5420, XI, 1<sup>er</sup> partie

- BLEGNY, Nicolas de : La Connoissance certaine et la prompte et facile guérison des fièvres, avec des particularités curieuses et utiles sur le remède anglois, 1680.
- BOCCACE, G. : Le Decameron, nouvellement traduit d'Italien en François par Maistre Antoine le Maçon, 1545.
- BOILEAU, Despréaux, N. : Œuvres complètes, (édit. Antoine Adam), (Pléaïde), 1966.
- BOILLOT, Félix : Les Impressions sensorielles chez La Fontaine, (PUF), 1926.
- La Fontaine coloriste, article in Revue d'Histoire littéraire de France, 1921.
- BONNET, Jean : Traité de la circulation des esprits animaux, 1682.
- BORDELON, Laurent : De l'Astrologie judiciaire, (Barbin et Musier) 1689.
- Théâtre philosophique, (Barbin et Musier), 1692.
- BORNECQUE, Pierre : Thème et organisation des Fables, article in Europe, March, 1972.
- La Fontaine Fabuliste, (éditions d'Enseignement supérieur), 1973.
- BOSSUET, Jacques Bénigne : Traité de la Concupiscence, (Petit-Montrouge), 1694.
- Introduction à la philosophie, ou De la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même, (Cailleau), 1722.
- Œuvres philosophiques, (Lens), 1843
- Œuvres oratoires complètes, (Petit-Montrouge), 1845-46, (2 vols).
- Correspondance, (édit. Urbain-Levesque), (Hachette), 1909 - 1925, (15 vols).
- Oraisons funèbres, Nouvelle édition (Garnier), 1961.
- Œuvres, Tours, (Gallimard), 1961.
- BOUHOURS, (le P.) : Recueil de vers choisis, 1693.
- BOUILLIER : Essai philosophique sur l'âme des bêtes, (2<sup>e</sup> édition), Amsterdam, 1737 (2 vols).
- BRAUNSVIG, M : Le Sentiment du beau et le sentiment poétique, (Hachette), 1904.

- BREMOND, Henri : Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours  
1928-1936, (12 vols).  
BREARON, Geoffrey: Cf. p. 493.
- BROC, (Vte. de) : La Fontaine moraliste, (Pion), 1896.
- BROTTIER, Gabriel, : Les Fables de Phèdre, (Neuve Durand), 1647,  
(re-edited 1661).
- BRUNET, G : L'Art de vivre en l'œuvre de La Fontaine, article in  
Mercure de France, 1921.
- BUSSON, Henri : La Fontaine et l'âme des bêtes, article in Revue de l'histoire littéraire de France, 1935, vol.XLII, 1936, vol.XLIII.  
----- La Religion des Classiques, (PUF), 1949.  
----- Etude sur la religion de La Fontaine, Cf. Review by R. Bray in Revue de l'histoire littéraire de France, 1951, vol.I.  
----- Littérature et Théologie : Montaigne, Bossuet, La Fontaine Prevost, (PUF), 1962.
- CABANES, (Dr.A) : Médecins amateurs, 1932.
- CALVET, J : Sur La Fontaine, article in Cahiers catholiques, 15 août, 1921.
- CALVET, Pierre : Recueil de quelques pièces nouvelles et galantes,  
Cologne, 1667.
- CASTAIGNE, E.J : Le Sentiment de la nature dans La Fontaine,  
article in Petites études littéraires, 1858.  
----- Trois fabulistes : Èsope, Phèdre et La Fontaine, article  
in Etude bibliographique et littéraire, 1839.
- CATULLUS : Poems, transl. by Horace Gregory, London, (Thames  
and Hudson), 1956.
- CAUDAL, Abbé : La Religion et l'Eglise dans les Fables de la Fontaine,  
article in Recherches et Travaux, 1946, vol.I.  
----- La Fontaine : Le problème religieux de sa vie et son  
œuvre, 1955.
- CHAMARAT, Georges: Cf. p. 493.
- CHAMFORT, Nicolas-Sébastien Roch : Eloge de La Fontaine,  
Marseille, 1774.  
----- Œuvres choisies, (édit. De Lescure), 1879, (2 vols).

- CHAPELAIN, Jean : Correspondance, 1669, (2 vols).
- Lettres, (édition Tamizey de Larroque), 1880 - 1883,  
(2 vols).
- Opuscules critiques, (édit. Hunter), 1936.
- CHARBONNEL, J.R. : La Pensée italienne et le courant libertin,  
1917.
- CHATELAIN, V : La Fontaine et la légende de Psyché, Collection  
"Cahiers des Etudes littéraires françaises", 1931.
- CHAULIEU, l'abbé de : Ouvres de Chaulieu, d'après les Manuscrits  
de l'Auteur, La Haye, 1777, (2 vols).
- CHEREL, (Alb.) : La Fontaine lecteur de saint François de Sales,  
article in Revue de l'histoire littéraire de France,  
1912, vol. XIX.
- CHERUEL, M : Mémoires sur la vie publique et privée de Foucquet,  
t.I, 1794.
- CHEVALLIER, Simone : La Fontaine, les singes et nous, article in  
Les Pharaons, 1971, No. 41.
- CICERON, M.T. : De l'Orateur, I, Texte établi et traduit par  
Edmund Courbaud, (Les Belles Lettres), 1922.
- CIORANESCU, Alexandre : L'Arioste en France, (Les Presses  
Modernes), 1939.
- CLARAC, Pierre : La Fontaine et Port-Royal, article in Revue de  
l'histoire philosophique, 1943, vol. XI.
- Variations de la Fontaine dans les six derniers livres des  
Fables, article in Information littéraire, 1951, vol.III.
- La Fontaine, l'homme et l'œuvre, Nouvelle  
édition revue et corrigée, (Hatier), 1959.
- Littérature française, Collection dirigée par Claude  
Pichois, t.II, 1969.
- La Fontaine par lui-même, (Seuil), 1961.
- CLEMENT, J.B. : Lettre à M... sur un écrit intitulé Eloge de  
La Fontaine, Amsterdam, 1775.

- COLLINET, Jean-Pierre : L'art de lire selon La Fontaine, article in Europe, mars, 1972.
- Le Monde littéraire de La Fontaine, (PUF), 1970.
- COLMANT, S.J. : Jean de La Fontaine moraliste et observateur, article in Les Etudes classiques, avril, 1959, vol. XXVII, No.2.
- COPPIN, J. : La Fontaine, article in Histoire de la Littérature française, (sous la direction de J. Calvet), 1934, vol. IV : Les Ecrivains classiques.
- CORNEILLE, Pierre : Œuvres, (édit. C.H.Marty-Laveaux), (Hachette), 1862, (8 vols).
- COURTNEY, J.W. : The multiple personality of Dr. Gui Patin, article in Annals of Medical History, London, 1924, vol. VI.
- COUTANCE, A : La Fontaine et la philosophie naturelle, Brest, 1882.
- COUTON, Georges : La Vieillesse de Corneille, (Maloine), 1949.
- La Poétique de La Fontaine, (PUF), 1957.
- La Fontaine Contes et Nouvelles en vers, (Garnier), 1961.
- CRASSET, Jean : La douce et sainte Mort, (E.Michallet), 1681.
- CRESSON, André : Epicure sa vie, son œuvre avec un exposé de sa philosophie, (PUF), 1947.
- CUREAU de La Chambre, Marin : Le Système de l'Ame, (J.d'Allin), 1664.
- DANIEL, G : Voyage du monde de Descartes, nouvelle édition, revue et augmentée aux quatre précédents, par le Père Daniel, de la Compagnie de Jésus, (Nicolas Pepie), 1702.
- Nouvelles difficultez proposées à l'auteur du Voyage du monde de Descartes, 1790.
- DAUZAT, Albert : Cf. p. 483.
- DEHENAULT, Jean : Œuvres, (édition Lachèvre), 1922.
- DELAFARGE, D : Remarques sur les fables de Desmay et celles de La Fontaine, article in Mélanges de philosophie et d'histoire littéraire, offerts à Edmund Huguet, Boivin, 1940.

- DELAUNAY, Paul : Etude sur la philosophie des fables de La Fontaine, (Conférences du Rez-de-Chaussée), 1863.
- La Fontaine et les médecins. La querelle du quinquina de Dieuxivoie à Blégný, article in Bulletin de la société de l'histoire médicale, 1904, vol.III
- DELUMEAU, J : Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire, (PUF), 1971.
- DEMOS, R : The Philosophy of Plato, New York, 1939.
- DESCARTES, René : Œuvres choisies, (nouvelle édition), (Garnier) 1755.
- DESCOUTURES, Jacques-Parrain, B : La Morale d'Epicure, (T. Guillain), 1685.
- La Morale universelle, (M. Villery), 1687.
- DESGRANGES, CH.-M : Histoire illustrée de la littérature française, (Hatier), 1916.
- DESHOULIERES, Antoinette du Ligier de La Garde : Poésies de Madame Deshoulières, nouvelle édition, Amsterdam, 1694.
- DESNOIRESTERRES, G : Epicuriens et Lettrés XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles, 1879.
- DES PERIERS, Bonaventure : Œuvres, (Librairie Jannet), 1856, (2 vols).
- Nouvelles Récréations et joyeux devis, (édit. Louis Lacour), 1874, (2 tomes in one volume).
- Cymbalum Mundi, Texte établi et présenté par P. H. Nurse, (édition de l'Université de Manchester), Manchester, 1958.
- DILLY, Dillyiel : Traité de l'âme et de la connoissance des bêtes, Lyon, 1678, (nouvelle édition, Amsterdam, 1691.)
- DONLEY, J : Riolan and Harvey, article in Annals of Medical History, London, 1923, vol. V.
- DOUTREPONT, CH : La Fontaine naturaliste, article in Revue de Deux Mondes, 1869, vol. 6.

- DREVILLE, H. de : La Fontaine et les Animaux, article in Vie des peuples, 25 juillet, 1921.
- DU BELLAY, Joachim : Œuvres, (édit. CH. Marty-Laveaux), 1857, (2 vols).
- DUBOIS : Pantchatantra, 1676.
- DUCHESNE, Julien : Un premier maître de La Fontaine découvert à la bibliothèque de Rennes. Etude littéraire et historique article in Annales Bretagnes, (1887 - 1888), vol.III.
- DU HAMEL, J.B. : De corpore animato..., 1673.
- EMILE, Henriot : Courrier littéraire, XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, nouvelle édition augmentée, (A. Michel), 1958, (2 vols).
- ENCYCLOPEDIE ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, 1751 - 1780, (35 vols).
- ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA, London and Chicago, 1968, (24 vols).
- EPICURUS : The philosophy of Epicurus (transl. by George K. Strodach), Easton, Pennsylvania, (Northwestern University Press), 1963.
- ESOPE : Fables, Texte établi et traduit par Emile Chambry, (Les Belles Lettres), 1927., Cf. Edition Handford, London, (Penguin), 1974.
- FAGUET, Emile : Dix-septième siècle, études littéraires, (Boivin), (n.d.)  
 ———— La Fontaine, (Oudin et Cie.), 1913.  
 ———— En lisant Molière, l'homme et son temps, l'écrivain et son œuvre, (Hachette), 1914.
- FAIVRE : La Fontaine paysagiste, article in Union des Arts, Metz, avril, 1852.
- FARGUE, Léon-Paul and Others : Tableau de la littérature française XVII<sup>e</sup> - XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles, (Gallimard), 1939.
- FAUVEL, H : La médecine et les médecins dans les Fables de La Fontaine, article in Chronicle médical, 1910, vol. I.



- FENELON, François de Salignac de La Mothe : Œuvres, Versailles, (Lebel), 1820 - 1830, (35 vols); nouvelle édition (Didot Frères), 1843, (3 vols).
- Lettres sur divers sujet concernant la religion et la métaphysique, (Estienne), 1718.
- Traité de l'existence et des attributs de Dieu, (n.d.).
- Dialogues sur l'Eloquence, Mémoire sur les occupations de l'Académie Française. De l'Education des filles, Recueil des fables - Opuscules divers. Dialogues des morts (édit. Bausset), (Garnier), (n.d.)
- FISCHER, Walter P : The Literary relations between La Fontaine and the Astrée of H. d'Urfé, (Thesis), Philadelphia, 1913.
- FONTAINE, Charles : Les Poètes françois depuis le XII<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à Malherbe, (Crapelet), 1824, (6 vols).
- FONTENELLE, Bernard le Bovier de : Œuvres, (Salmon), 1825, (5 vols).
- FOUCHER, Simon : Dissertation sur la Recherche de la Vérité contenant l'Apologie des Académiciens, (E. Michallet), 1687.
- FRANC-MOHAIN : La vie amoureuse de Jean de La Fontaine, (Flammarion), 1928.
- FRANCK, Adolphe M : Dictionnaire des sciences philosophiques, (2<sup>e</sup>me édition), (Hachette), 1875.
- FURETIERE, Antoine : Dictionnaire universel, Rotterdam, (A et R. Leers), 1701, (3 vols).
- GAILLARD : Eloge de La Fontaine, Marseille, 1774.
- GANDON, Y : La Fontaine et la poésie d'Extrême-Orient, article in Franc-Asie, 1957, vol. XIV.
- GARNIER, Léon : Notes d'histoire sur la maison natale et le pays de La Fontaine, 1937.

- GASSENDI, Pierre : Syntagma philosophicum, 1658, (2 vols).
- Dissertations en forme de paradoxes contres les Aristotéliciens, Livres I et II, traduit et annoté par Bernard Rochot, (Librairie philosophique J. Vrin), 1959.
- Disquisitio Metaphysica seu dubitationes et instantiae adversus Renati Cartesii metaphysicam et responsa, texte établi, traduit et annoté par Bernard Rochot, (Librairie philosophique), 1962.
- GAUCHERON, J : Visage de La Fontaine à 350 ans, article in Europe, mars, 1972.
- GENEST, Charles-Claude : Principes de philosophie ou Preuves naturelles de l'existence de Dieu et de l'immortalité de l'Âme, (J. Estienne), 1716.
- GEOFFREY, Brereton : An Introduction to the French poets from Villon to the present day, London, (Methuen & Co.), 1956.
- GEORGES, Chamarat : Les Fables de La Fontaine bréviaire du comédien, article in Les Annales, mai, 1968.
- GERARD-GAILLY : Le Sentiment de la nature au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, article in Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes françaises, juillet, 1954, vol. 6.
- GILSON, E : La Liberté chez Descartes et la théologie, 1913.
- GIRAUDOUX, Jean : Les Cinq tentations de La Fontaine, (B. Grasset), 1938.
- GODCHOT, Cl : La Fontaine et Saint Augustin, (Albin Michel), 1919.
- La Fontaine et Sénèque, (Saint-Cloud), 1930.
- GOHIN, Ferdinand : L'art de La Fontaine dans ses Fables, (Garnier) 1929.
- La Fontaine et Montaigne, (Garnier), 1934.
- A propos du Discours à Mme. de La Sablière, article in Revue universitaire, 1936, vol. II.
- La Fontaine Etude et Recherches, Bibliothèque d'Histoire littéraire et de critique, (Garnier), 1937.

- GOURMONT, Rémy de : La vie des Animaux et la Morale dans les Fables de La Fontaine, article in Mercure de France, juillet, 1905, vol. LVII.
- Les Caractères de La Fontaine, article in Promenades littéraires, 1913, vol. V.
- GUDIN, Paul-Philippe : Contes, précédés de recherches sur l'origine des contes, (Dabin), 1804.
- GUER : Histoire critique de l'âme des bêtes, contenant les sentiments des philosophes anciens, et ceux des modernes sur cette matière, Amsterdam, (Changuion), 1749.  
(2 tomes in one volume).
- GUILLAUME, J. Fr-M : Recherches sur les auteurs dans lesquels La Fontaine a pu trouver les sujets de ses fables, Besançon, 1822.
- GUI PATIN : Lettres, 1661, (3 vols).
- GUIPON, M : La Fontaine : Poet and counterpoet, New Jersey, (Rutgers University Press), 1961.
- HAGGIS, A. W. : Fundamental errors in the early history of Cinchona, article in Bulletin of the History of Medicine, London, 1941, vol.X.
- HALLAYS, A : Une promenade au pays de La Fontaine, article in L'Illustration, 9 juillet, 1921.
- HANLET, C : Deux poètes de la Province : La Fontaine et Lamartine, article in Etudes classiques, 1939, vol. VIII.
- HARVEY, William : Anatomical exercises concerning the motion of the Heart and Blood in living creatures, London, 1653.
- HAZARD, Paul : La Crise de la conscience européenne, 1630 - 1715, 1935.
- Actualité de La Fontaine, Buenos Aires, 1942.

HENRIET, Fréd. : Un chapitre de l'histoire de Château-Thierry. La rue J. de La Fontaine, 1916.

HEPP, Noémi : Homère en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, (Klincksieck), 1968.

HERODOTE : Histoires, (I, 34-45), Texte établi et traduit par PH. LEGRAND, Collection des Universités de France, (Les Belles Lettres), 1932.

HÉROLD, Mariane : Cf. p. 499.

HIPPOCRATE : Œuvres complètes, Traduction de Littré parue pour la première fois chez Baillièrre et Fils de 1839 à 1861, (4 vols).

HISTOIRE ET MEMOIRES de l'Academie Royale des Sciences, 1666-1790.

HOMER : The Iliad and Odyssey, (transl. into English verse by William Cowper), London, 1847, (4 vols).

-----  
Odysée, Texte établi et traduit par Victor Bérard, (Les Belles Lettres), 1933.

HORACE, F : Works (transl. by Sir Theodore Martin), London, 1881, (2 vols).

-----  
Les Odes d'Horace, Texte établi et traduit en vers français par Edouard Bourette, (Quantin), 1895.

-----  
Epîtres, Texte établi et traduit par François de Villeneuve, (Les Belles Lettres), 1934.

HUET, P.D. : Demonstratio evangelica, 1690.

HUTTON, J : The Classics in sixteenth-century France, article in The Classical Weekly, January, 1950, vol. 43, No. 9.

JACQUES, J : Le Faut-mourir et les excuses inutiles que l'on apporte à cette nécessité, Lyon, (Michel Duhan), 1661.

JANET, Paul : Les passions et les caractères dans la littérature du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, 1888.

- JASINSKI, René : Sur la philosophie de La Fontaine dans les livres VII à XII des Fables, article in Revue d'Histoire de la philosophie, 15 décembre, 1933, 15 juillet, 1934.
- Encore La Fontaine et Bernier, article in Revue de l'histoire littéraire, 1935, vol. XLII.
- La Fontaine et le premier recueil des Fables, (Nizet), 1966, (2 vols).
- De quelques contresens sur les Fables, article in Europe, mars, 1972.
- JOURDA, Pierre : Conteurs français du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, (Pléiade), 1965.
- JOURNAL DES SAVANTS, janvier, 1665.
- KING, Paul : Montaigne as a source of La Fontaine's fable : La Mort et le Mourant, article in Publications of the Modern Languages Association, (PMLA), 1937, vol. LIII.
- KOHN, René : Refléxions sur l'Adonis de La Fontaine, article in Romanic Review, avril, 1956.
- Le Goût de La Fontaine, 1962.
- LABBE, Ernest : Les Fables de La Fontaine. Classification d'après leur portée morale, Besançon, 1900.
- LA BRUYERE, Jean de : Les Caractères ou les Mœurs de ce siècle, (Garnier), 1962.
- LACHEVRE, F : Le Libertinage au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, 1904 - 1924.
- LAFENESTRE, G : La Fontaine, (Hachette), 1922.
- LAGARDE, André, et MICHARD, Laurent : Collection Textes et littérature, III, (XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle), (Bordas), 1964, (6 vols).
- LA HARPE : Eloge de La Fontaine, article in Recueil de l'Académie de Marseille, Marseille, 1774.
- LAMANDE, A : Une journée de La Fontaine, article in Temps, 7 octobre, 1931.
- LAMARTINE, Alphonse de : Méditations, (Garnier), 1968.

- LAMY, Guillaume : Discours anatomiques, Rouen, 1675, (2<sup>e</sup> édition, 1685).
- LANGÉVIN, E : La Fontaine, poète philosophique, article in Revue Française, 10 juillet, 1921.
- LANSON, Gustave : Origines et premières manifestations de l'esprit philosophique dans la littérature française de 1675 à 1748, 1907 - 1910.
- LAPP, John C : The Esthetics of negligence. La Fontaine's Contes Cambridge, (C. U. P.), 1971.
- LA ROCHEFOUCAULD, (duc de) : Maximes et Réflexions, (Garnier), 1967.
- LAUMONIER, P : Tableau chronologique des œuvres de Ronsard, 1911.
- LEBOIS, André : Sources négligées des Fables de La Fontaine, 1959.
- LEFEBRE, Hyacinthe : Traité du jugement dernier, (Thierry), 1671.
- LEIBNIZ, Gottfried Wilhelm von : Extraits de la Théodicée, 1878.  
 ----- The Monadology and other philosophical writings, (transl. by R. Latta), Oxford, 1898. Cf. also édition Amsterdam, 1714.
- LE MAITRE, H : Essai sur le mythe de Psyché dans la littérature française, (Pergan Beaumont), 1939.
- LEON PETIT : La Fontaine et Saint-Evremond, ou La Tentation de l'Angleterre, Toulouse, 1953.  
 ----- La Fontaine à la rencontre de Dieu, (Nizet), 1970.
- LERBER, Walther de : L'Influence de Clément Marot aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles, Lausanne, 1920.
- LEVESQUE DE POUILLY, Louis-Jean : Théorie des sentiments agréables, Genève, (Barrillot et Fils), 1747.
- LEWIS, C. S. : The Allegory of Love, Oxford, (Clarendon), 1936.

- LONGHAYE, G : La Fontaine, moraliste et poète, article in Etudes 1870 - 1871, vol. XXV.
- LOUIS Guignot : L'Esprit juridique dans les Fables de La Fontaine, article in Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France, 1925, vol. XXXII.
- LUCRETIUS, Carus T : On the Nature of Things, (transl. from the Latin original by William Ellery Leonard), London, (Dent & Sons), 1916, Cf. also edition Munro, London, (Bell), 1908, and Penguin edition by R.E. Latham, London, 1951.
- De la Nature des Choses, Avec des remarques sur les endroits les plus difficiles, Traduction nouvelle, 1708, (2 vols).; Cf. Edition Edouard Miélet, 1889.
- LUGLI, V : La Fontaine poète de la nature, article in Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises, juillet, 1954, No.6.
- MACKAY, Agnes Ethel : La Fontaine and his friends. A biography, London (Garntstone Press), 1972.
- MACLEOD, J.R : Harvey's experiments on circulation, article in Annals of Medical History, London, 1928, vol. X.
- MACY, l'abbé : Traité de l'âme des bêtes, avec des réflexions physiques et morales, par M. l'abbé M., (P.G. Le Mercier) 1737.
- MALEBRANCHE, Nicolas (le Père) : De la recherche de la vérité, 6<sup>e</sup> édition revue et augmentée de plusieurs éclaircissements (M. David), 1712. (Cf. édition de 1675).
- MALHERBE, François : Poésies, (édition Philippe Martinon), (Garnier), 1926.
- Œuvres, (édit. Antoine Adam), 1971.
- MARAIS, M : Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de M. de La Fontaine, (Parison et Chardon), 1811.
- Contes et Nouvelles de La Fontaine, (Delahays), 1858)

- MARGUERITE d'Angoulême : L'Heptaméron, Des Nouvelles de très-haute et très-illustre princesse Marguerite d'Angoulême, Royne de Navarre, Nouvelle édition, publiée d'après le texte des Manuscrits avec des notes et une notice par P. L. Jacob, (Adolphe Delahays), 1876.
- MARIANE, Hérold : La Fontaine et l'hygiène, article in Mercure de France, 1<sup>er</sup> juin, 1934.
- MARMIER, Jean : Horace en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, (PUF), 1962.  
 ———— Les Livres VII à XII des Fables de La Fontaine et leurs problèmes, article in L'Information littéraire, novembre-décembre, 1972.
- MAROT, Clément : Œuvres complètes, (édit. Abel Grenier), (Garnier), 1920, (2 vols).  
 ———— Œuvres satiriques, (édition critique par C.A. Mayer), London, (Athlone Press), 1962.
- MAUCROIX, F, et LA FONTAINE J. de : Ouvrages de prose et de poésies des sieurs de Maucroix et de La Fontaine, (édit. de 1685).
- MAUCROIX, François de : Œuvres diverses, (édit Louis Paris), Reims, 1854, (2 vols).
- MENJOT, Antoine (Dr.-Med.) : Lettre à M. Puerari sur les opinions de M. Descartes- Opuscules posthumes de M. Menjot, conseiller et médecin ordinaire du roi à Paris, Amsterdam, 1697.
- MENJOT, Elbenne (V<sup>te</sup>. de) : Mme. de La Sablière ses pensées chrétiennes et ses lettres à l'abbé de Rancé, (Plon), 1923.
- MICHAUT, G : La Fontaine, (Hachette), 1914, (2 vols).
- MILHAUD, Gérard : La Fontaine à l'avant-garde des sciences et de la philosophie, article in Europe, mars, 1972.



- MOLIERE, Jean-Baptiste, Poquelin : Œuvres complètes, (édit. Régnier), (Hachette), 1883, (11 vols).
- Amphitryon, 1668.
- Le Misanthrope, (édit. Ronald Wilson), London, (Harrap), 1973.
- MONGINOT, François de (Fils) : De la guérison des fièvres par le quinquina, 1679.
- MONTAIGNE, Michel Eyquem : Œuvres complètes, (édit. Pléiade), 1962.
- MORNET, Daniel : Histoire de la littérature française classique (1660-1700), ses caractères véritables, ses aspects inconnus, (A. Colin), 1947.
- MORRISON, M : Ronsard and Catullus : The Influence of the teaching of Marc-Antoine de Muret, article in Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance, 1956, vol. XVIII.
- MOURGUES, Odette (Mme. de) : O Muse, fuyante proie, essai sur la poésie de La Fontaine, (José Corti), 1962.
- An Anthology of French seventeenth-century lyric poetry, London (O. U. P.), 1966.
- MURAT, A : Gens et bêtes de La Fontaine sont issus de la terre de France, article in Vie catholique en France et à l'étranger, 9 mai, 1925.
- NAYRAC, J. P. La Fontaine, ses facultés psychiques, sa philosophie, sa mentalité, son caractère, (H. Parlin et Cie), 1908.
- NEVELET, Isaac Nicolas : Mythologica Æsopica, (édit. 1610).
- NICOLE, Pierre : Essais de morale contenus en divers Traitez sur plusieurs devoirs importants, 1678, (4 vols).
- Système de M. Nicole touchant la grâce universelle, Cologne, 1699.

- NOUVELLES de la République des Lettres, avril, 1685, 'article VIII
- OVID, N.P. : Metamorphoses, (transl. by G. Sewell), London, 1733.
- Amores, (transl. by Guy Lee), London, (O.U.P.), 1961.
- Les Métamorphoses, Traduites en vers avec des remarques et des notes, par M. Desaintange, Nouvelle édition, revue et corrigée, 1808, (4 vols). Cf. édition Georges La Faye, (Les Belles Lettres), 1934, (3 vols).
- PACKARD, F. R. : Gui Patin and the medical profession in Paris in the seventeenth century, article in Annals of Medical History, London, 1922, vol.IV.
- PASCAL, Blaise : Pensées, (Garnier), 1964.
- PATIN, Gui : Cf. p. 494
- PAVILLON, Etienne : Œuvres, (édit. H. Du Sauzet), La Haye, 1715.
- PELLISSON, F.P., et OLIVET, (l'abbé de) : Histoire de l'Académie Française avec une introduction par Ch.-L. Livet, (Didier), 1858), (2 vols).
- PERRAULT, Charles : Les Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle, 1696 - 1700), 2 vols.
- PERRENS, F.T. : Les libertins en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, (Léon Chailley), 1896.
- PETIT, Léon : Cf. p. 497.
- PEYRE, A : Du Prestige de la Pensée, (René Debresse), 1936.
- PHILIPPE, M.D. : Initiation à la philosophie d'Aristote, 1956.
- PICARD, Raymond : La Carrière de Jean Racine, (Gallimard), 1956.
- PILON, Edmund, et FERNAND, D : La Fontaine Théâtre, (Garnier), 1929.
- PINCHESNE, Etienne Martin de : Poésies meslées du sieur de Pinchesne, (A. Gramois), 1672.
- PINTARD, R : Le Libertinage érudit dans la première moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, 1943.

- PLATO : Dialogues, (trans. by B. Jowett, Oxford), (Clarendon), 1888, (3 vols)., (3rd edition, 5 vols). Cf. also edition A. D. Lindsay, London, (Dent & Sons), 1936.
- 
- Le Dialogue de Plato, philosophe divin, intitulé Io...., Texte établi et traduit en français par Richard le Blanc, (Chrestien Wechel), 1546.
- 
- Phédon, Texte établi et traduit par Léon Robin, (Les Belles Lettres), 1934.
- PLINE (l'Ancien) : Histoire Naturelle, VIII, Texte établi, traduit et commenté par A. Ernout, (Les Belles Lettres), 1952.
- PLUTARCH : Le Vite parallèle, (transl. by A. H. Clough), London, (Macmillan), 1902, (5 vols).
- PREL, J.L. et GUILLAUME, J.F.M. : Fables anciennes et modernes françaises et étrangères dont J. de La Fontaine a traité le sujet, 1829.
- PYTHAGORE : Voyage de Pythagore en Egypte, dans la Chaldée, dans l'Inde, en Crète, à Sparte, en Sicile, à Rome, à Carthage, à Marseille et dans les Gaules, suivis de ses lois politiques et morales, (Deterville), 1799, (6 vols).
- RABELAIS, François : Œuvres complètes, texte établi et annoté par Jacques Boulenger, revu et complété par Lucien Scheler, (Pléiade), 1941, Cf. édition Louis Moland, (n.d.), 2 vols.
- RACINE, Jean : Œuvres de J. Racine, (édit. Mesnard), (Hachette), 1865 - 1870, (8 vols).
- REGIS, Pierre-Sylvain : Système de philosophie, (D. Thierry), 1690, (3 vols).
- REGNIER, M : Satires, 1658.
- REMOND de Saint-Mard, Toussaint : Nouveaux dialogues des dieux, ou réflexions sur les passions, (E. Roger), Amsterdam, 1711; réimprimés dans L'Eloge des Plaisirs, (Fritsch et Böhm), Rotterdam, 1714. Cf. also édition Pierre Marteau, Cologne, 1713.

- REMUSAT, P. de : La Fontaine naturaliste, article in Revue des Deux Mondes, 1<sup>er</sup> décembre, 1869.
- RIDGELY, Beverly : Disciple de Lucrèce une seconde fois : A study of La Fontaine's Poème du Quinquina, article in L'Esprit créateur, summer, 1971.
- RIVIERE, L : Institutions médicales, 1655, (5 vols).
- ROCHE, Antoine : Histoire des principaux écrivains français de l'origine jusqu'à nos jours, 4<sup>e</sup> édition, (Delagrave), 1868, (8 vols).
- ROCHE, Louis : La Vie de Jean de La Fontaine, (Garnier), 1913.
- ROHAULT, Jacques : Entretiens sur la philosophie, (M. Le Petit), 1671.
- ROLLESTON, H : Harvey's predecessors and contemporaries, article in Annals of Medical History, London, 1928, vol. X.
- RONCARD, Pierre : Œuvres, (édit. P. Laumonier), (Collection Lemerre), 1914 - 19.
- ROSENFELD, L.C : From Beast-Machine to Man-Machine, New York, 1941.
- ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jacques : Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes, Collection Idées nrf, (Gallimard), 1965.
- Emile ou de l'Education, (Larousse), 1938.
- SADI : Guliston ou l'Empire des Roses, Texte traduit par André du Ryer, sieur de Malezair, 1634.
- SAINTE-BEUVE : Critiques et portraits littéraires, 1836.
- Port-Royal, (Hachette), 1878, (7 vols).
- Causeries de lundi, 3<sup>e</sup> édition, (Garnier), (n.d.), (16 vols).
- Les Grands Ecrivains français, (Garnier), 1927 (3 vols).
- SAINT-EVREMOND, Charles de Marguetel de Saint-Denis : Œuvres mêlées de Saint-Evremond, (Barbin), 1670 - 1688 (12 vols), nouvelle édition (Charles Giraud), 1865 (3 vols).

SAINT-EVREMOND : Œuvres choisies, (Gidel), 1866.

————— Œuvres en prose, (édit. R. Ternois), (Didier), 1966,  
(4 vols).

————— Conversations et autres écrits philosophiques, (édit.  
Claude Aveline), 1926.

SAINT-GELAIS, M. de : Œuvres, (édit. Blanchemain), 1873, (3 vols).  
Cf. also édition de 1628, (3 vols).

SAINT-MARC, Girardin : La Fontaine et les fabulistes, (nouvelle  
édition), (Michel Levy Frères), 1867, (2 vols).

SALIER, Jacques : Pensées sur le Paradis et sur l'Ame raisonnable,  
1689.

SCHMIDT, Albert-Marie : Saint-Evremond ou l'humaniste impu,  
(Cavalier), 1932.

SCUDERY, Madeleine, Mlle. de : Clélie, Histoire romaine, (Augustin  
Courbé), 1660, (10 vols).

————— Conversations Morales de l'Espérance, l'Envie, la Paresse,  
la Tyrannie, de l'Usage, la Colère, l'Incertitude, 1685,  
(2 tomes in one volume).

SENECA, L.A. : Morals, (Transl. by Sir Roger l'Estrange), London,  
1739.

————— Quaestiones Naturales, (transl. by J. Clarke), London,  
1910.

————— (French edition by Paul Oltramare), (Les Belles Lettres)  
1929, (2 tomes in one volume).

————— Letters to Lucilius, (transl. by Phillips Barker), Oxford,  
(Clarendon Press), 1932, (2 vols). (French edition by  
François et Pierre Richard, (Garnier), 1932) (3 vols).

SEVIGNE, Mme. de : Lettres, Texte établi et annoté par Gérard-Gailly,  
(Gallimard), 1953 - 1957, (3 vols). Cf. also édition  
Hector Bossange, 1826, (2 vols).

SOPHOCLES : Plays, (transl. by George Young), Cambridge, 1888.  
 SPINK, J. S. : French Free-thought from Gassendi to Voltaire, London, (Athlone Press), 1960.  
 SPINOZA, Benedict de : Tractatus theologico-politicus, Amsterdam,  
 1670.

SUTHERLAND, Monica : La Fontaine, the man and his work, London,  
 1953.

TAINÉ, Hippolyte : Essai sur les Fables de La Fontaine, 1853.

————— La Fontaine et ses Fables, 1860.

TALLEMANT DES REAUX, Gédéon : Historiettes, Texte intégral  
 établi et annoté par Antoine Adam, (Pléiade), 1960 - 1961,  
 (2 vols).

TASSO, Torquato : La Gerusalemme liberata, (edit. L. Caretti),  
 Milan, 1971.

TAVERNIER : Voyages, 1676, (6 vols).

TERENCE : The Comedies of Terence, (transl. by John Sargeant)  
 London (Macmillan & Co ) 1912, (2 vols).

————— Plays (transl. by William Ritchie), London, (G. Bell &  
 Sons), 1927.

THEOCRITUS : Idyll, (transl. by C. S. Calverley), London, 1883.

————— Idylles de Théocrite, traduites en français par J. B. Gail,  
 Nouvelle édition, 1796, (2 vols).

THE HOLY BIBLE, with the Books called Apocrypha, (Revised ver-  
 sion), Cambridge and London, (n. d).

THEOPHILE DE VIAU : Les Amours tragiques de Pyrame et Thisbé,  
 mis en vers françois, (Martin), 1626.

————— Œuvres poétiques, (édition Streicher), 1951, (2 vols).

TOLDO, P. : La Fontaine et Molière, article in Revue de l'Histoire  
 littéraire de France, 1911, vol. XVIII.

VALÉRY, Paul : Œuvres, (édit. Pléiade), 1959, (2 vols).

- VAUVENARGUES, Luc de Clapiers, Marquis de : Introduction à la  
Connaissance de l'esprit humain, suivie de réflexions et  
de maximes, (Briasson), 1747.
- Œuvres, (édit. D. L. Gilbert), 1857.
- VIRGIL, M : Works, (transl. by John Dryden), London, 1709, (2 vols).
- Œuvres complètes traduites en vers par Hippolyte Cournot.  
(Didot Frères), 1859, (2 vols).
- VOITURE, Vincent : Les Œuvres de M. de Voiture, Amsterdam,  
(Daniel Elzevir), 1679, (2 vols).
- WADE, Ira, O: The Intellectual Development of Voltaire, Princeton, N.J., (P.U.P.), 1969.
- WADSWORTH, P.A. : La Fontaine as critic and student of Malherbe  
article in Symposium, 1949, vol. III.
- Young La Fontaine : A study of his artistic growth in  
his early poetry and first fables, Evanston (Northwestern  
University Press), 1952.
- La Fontaine and La Rochefoucauld, article in Romanic  
Review, 1955, vol. XLVI.
- WALCKENAER, Charles-Athanase : Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages  
de Jean de La Fontaine, (A. Nepveu), 1820.