

# Animal Thinking in La Fontaine's *Fables*

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## I. Thinking the Animal Point of View in Literature and Philosophy

In his 1997 essay "L'Animal que donc je suis" that has become an important reference for current theoretical debates on the animal/human relation,<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida asserts that western philosophy, unlike poetry and literature, has been marked by a constitutive inability to think the animal: "la pensée de l'animal, s'il y en a, revient à la poésie, voilà une thèse, et c'est ce dont la philosophie, par essence, a dû se priver" (23).<sup>2</sup> Derrida tentatively suggests that we turn from philosophy to our traditions of poetry and literature to find a "pensée de l'animal" that testifies to the qualities of diversity, responsiveness, and awareness that have habitually been denied animals in the western philosophical tradition. Derrida's essay includes several allusions to the work of sympathetic poets and literary authors, including Montaigne, Baudelaire, Rilke, and Lewis Carroll. However, it is notable that one of the best-known representations of animals in the French literary canon, Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*, obtains no more than the briefest reference in the essay (26).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Derrida marks out an exception for the fable in the otherwise hospitable space of literature, claiming that it is an irremediably anthropocentric and allegorical genre, an "apprivoisement anthropomor-

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent study of animality in Derrida, see Leonard Lawlor's *This is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida*.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida's essay originated in his presentation at the conference on his work held 11 to 21 July 1997 at the Centre culturel international de Cerisy-la-Salle, and was first published in 1999 in the edition of the conference proceedings by Marie-Louise Mallet. The essay is also reprinted in Derrida's 2006 work of the same name, from which the quotations in this article have been taken.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida observes, in order to differentiate it from the "irremplaçable singularité" encountered in an early-morning encounter with his cat, "l'immense responsabilité symbolique dont notre culture a depuis toujours chargé la gent féline, de La Fontaine à Tieck" (26).

pique, un assujettissement moralisateur, une domestication” (60). For Derrida, like the animal figures it employs the fable remains subservient to conceptual discourse, to a philosophical anthropology, and to a traditional and domesticating representation of animality: “[t]oujours un discours de l’homme; sur l’homme; voire sur l’animalité de l’homme, mais pour l’homme, et en l’homme” (60). This essay evaluates the applicability of Derrida’s conception to La Fontaine’s *Fables*, and concludes that although most do employ anthropomorphic animals for allegorical purposes, something like a “pensée poétique de l’animal” in Derrida’s sense can be identified in the later fables.

Derrida’s critique of the fable genre is underpinned in “L’Animal que donc je suis” by his broader critique of western representations of animality. Derrida claims that despite their divergent methodological orientations, philosophers have consistently subsumed the vast diversity of animal species under a single totalizing concept of animality, in order to define human specificity through its opposition to an animal Other. Yet Derrida rejects the alternative view that the animal/human relation can be understood in terms of a biological continuism. In fact, he insists emphatically on the discontinuity, rupture or abyss that separates human and animal species. Nonetheless, he distinguishes this discontinuity from the traditional metaphysical opposition in which the animal is conceived in terms of an isolatable and fully representable property or set of properties.<sup>4</sup> Derrida argues that the multiplicity and heterogeneity of animal species pluralize relations of identity and difference and complicate without fully erasing the human/animal boundary.

This critique of essentializing representations of animality is coupled in the essay with a critique of the refusal of ethical philosophers to conceive of animals as bearers of the singular perspective, look or address that Derrida views as the condition of ethical relations. Derrida associates this refusal above all with the legacy of Descartes, as evinced by Descartes’s claim in the *Discours de la méthode* that although it is possible to conceive that an animal might “proférer des paroles”, it is not possible to imagine that it might arrange them “pour répondre au sens de tout ce qui se dira en sa présence, ainsi que les hommes les plus hébétés peuvent faire” (57). The prejudices of the philosophical tradition are encapsulated in this Cartesian distinction between an animal *reaction* that remains automatic and deter-

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<sup>4</sup> “Au-delà du bord *soi-disant* humain, au-delà de lui mais nullement sur un seul bord opposé, au lieu de ‘L’Animal’ ou de ‘La-Vie-Animale’, il y a, déjà là, une multiplicité hétérogène de vivants [...] Il suit de là que jamais on n’aura le droit de tenir les animaux pour les espèces d’un genre qu’on nommerait L’Animal, l’animal en général” (53).

mined even when it feigns the use of linguistic signs, and a human *response* recognized as a manifestation of the freedom that constitutes the ethical subject.<sup>5</sup> Against this dogma, Derrida sets an apparently insignificant morning encounter with his cat, in which his experience of seeing himself being seen naked by the animal elicits a sense of shame that gives rise to a meditation on the singularity of its point of view: “il peut se laisser regarder, sans doute, mais aussi, la philosophie l’oublie peut-être, elle serait même cet oubli calculé, il peut, lui, me regarder. Il a son point de vue sur moi. Le point de vue de l’autre absolu” (28). In this anecdote, the Cartesian problem of the animal’s capacity to respond has been displaced. Derrida’s experience of the singularity of an animal Other recognized as a perceiving subject with a unique point of view is an experience of passivity and also of a passion, the emotion of shame, and thus of the theorist’s own response to a form of animal initiative.<sup>6</sup> Yet in this very displacement Derrida signals the extent to which the question of animal responsiveness has been bound to a philosophical problematic in which animals have been constituted as little more than simple objects of knowledge.

Numerous recent studies in fields as diverse as ethology, zoology, genetics, and cognitive psychology support Derrida’s criticisms of the traditional ontological and ethical presuppositions concerning the animal/human distinction.<sup>7</sup> Yet just as Derrida’s argument that philosophy suffers from a constitutive inability to think the animal discounts a counter-tradition of marginal and alternative voices within philosophy since antiquity<sup>8</sup>, his claim that the fable is a narrowly anthropocentric literary genre and a vehicle for philosophical prejudices passes too quickly over the complexity of the fable tradition. Derrida’s distinction between philosophical discourse and “poetry” or literature can be mapped onto an *internal* distinction in the *Fables* between La Fontaine’s discursive, expository writings (prefaces and

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<sup>5</sup> The point is made forcibly in Derrida’s subsequent seminar: “De Descartes à Lacan inclus, de Kant et Hegel à Heidegger inclus [...] le préjugé le plus puissant, le plus impassible, le plus dogmatique au sujet de l’animal ne consistait pas à dire qu’il ne communique pas, qu’il ne signifie pas et n’a pas de signe à sa disposition, mais qu’il ne répond pas. Il réagit mais il ne répond pas” (*Séminaire: La bête et le souverain*, Volume I, 90).

<sup>6</sup> For a sympathetic but critical reading of Derrida’s essay, see Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, pp. 19-23.

<sup>7</sup> Some selected examples from a bibliography too vast to list here: Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites* (40); Florence Burgat, *Animal, mon prochain*; Dominique Lestel, *Les Origines animales de la culture*; Franciscus B. M. Waal, *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections by a Primatologist*.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Elizabeth de Fontenay, *Le Silence des bêtes*, pp. 49-195.

*Discours*<sup>9</sup>) and his fictional fables, and within the fables themselves between the discursive morals and the fictional apologues that illustrate them. It is true that the prefaces that outline La Fontaine's plan for the *Fables* largely support an anthropocentric interpretation of the work,<sup>10</sup> while La Fontaine's often fêted *Discours à Madame de La Sablière* only superficially breaks with Cartesian doctrines and ultimately preserves a conventional hierarchy between man and animal grounded in a concept of ontological difference. Moreover, within the fables themselves La Fontaine's morals usually emphasize the allegorical function of their apologues. Nonetheless, in several of the later fables the apologues bear witness to an animal responsiveness and point of view on human affairs that resemble Derrida's plea for a "pensée de l'animal," and that raise difficult questions concerning the ethics of the human exploitation of animal species.

## II. Discourse and the Limits of Animal Reasoning

Despite appearances, Derrida's principal charges against the fable—its anthropocentrism, its "domestication" and anthropomorphic erasure of animal difference, and its complicity with a traditional metaphysics—find echoes throughout La Fontaine's paratexts and discursive writings. In the *Préface* to his first 1668 collection of fables,<sup>11</sup> La Fontaine initially claims that the fables offer a naturalistic representation of animal diversity in addition to instruction in moral reasoning: "[Les Fables] ne sont pas seulement Morales, elles donnent encore d'autres connaissances. Les propriétés des Animaux et leurs divers caractères y sont exprimés" (49). However, the poet almost immediately subordinates this supplementary knowledge to an anthropological focus; the study of the characters of animals will reveal "par conséquent les nôtres aussi, puisque nous sommes l'abrégé de ce qu'il y a de

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of La Fontaine's use of the term *discours* see Russell Ganim, "Scientific Verses," pp. 102-104.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Pierre Collinet insists on the importance of La Fontaine's prefatory texts: "La Fontaine n'a jamais publié d'œuvre importante sans l'accompagner de son commentaire, sous forme d'avertissement ou de préface, de prologue ou d'épilogue, de remarque incidente ou de note. Ces réflexions de l'auteur sur son art constituent un ensemble critique considérable et d'une remarquable cohésion, une poétique où, d'un ouvrage à l'autre l'écrivain expose ses vues, les approfondit" (7). See also his chapter on the *Fables*, pp. 147-162.

<sup>11</sup> According to the editors of the Flammarion edition consulted in this study, the 1668 edition includes what are now numbered as the first six books of fables. The 1678-79 edition includes books 7-11, while the final 12th volume is included in La Fontaine's 1694 edition (505-506).

bon et de mauvais dans les créatures irraisonnables" (49). The poet clarifies this reference to the "abrégé"—the notion that human character is a condensation or synopsis of animal traits—by an invocation of the figure of the microcosm: "Quand Prométhée voulut former l'homme, il prit la qualité dominante de chaque bête: de ces pièces si différentes il composa notre espèce; il fit cet ouvrage qu'on appelle *le petit Monde*" (49). The study of animal characters provides a solution to a problem of representation insofar as it affords an amplified, panoramic view of what is abbreviated and consequently potentially difficult to discern in humans. Furthermore, La Fontaine concedes here that the purpose of this amplification is, after all, to provide the moral instruction "qui confirme les personnes d'âge avancé dans les connaissances que l'usage leur a données, et apprend aux enfants ce qu'il faut qu'ils sachent" (49). Although the analogy between human and animal species presupposed by this didactic function means that its conception of animality remains at odds with the most reductive Cartesian discourses on the animal in the seventeenth Century, the *Préface* nonetheless proposes an anthropocentric erasure of animal difference in the name of a conventional pedagogical end.

La Fontaine's insistence on the fabulous qualities of his animals also initially appears at odds with Derrida's accusation that the genre domesticates animal species. In his authorial comment at the beginning of *Le Lion et le chasseur*, La Fontaine refers to the power of the fables as "un enchantement" (13), and in the dedication to his second collection he claims that the fictional apologue fascinates and captivates attention, permitting a poet to overcome the resistance of an audience and sweeten an otherwise bitter moral truth: "proprement un charme: il rend l'âme attentive, / Ou plutôt il la tient captive" (*A Madame de Montespan*, 7-8).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, this seductive power is based on a form of deception in which animals assume marvelous qualities: "Les Fables ne sont pas ce qu'elles semblent être / Le plus simple animal nous y tient lieu de Maître" (*Le Lion et le chasseur*, 1-2). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of the enchantment derives from a paradoxical combination of the fabulous with the familiar. In pagan times, "la Vérité a parlé aux hommes par paraboles; et la parabole est-elle autre chose que l'Apologue, c'est-à-dire un exemple fabuleux, et qui s'insinue avec d'autant plus de facilité et d'effet, qu'il est plus commun et plus familier?" (*Préface*, 48). Animals possess the very qualities of ordinariness and ubiquity, through both their barnyard presence and their real or codified resemblances to humans, that allow them to take on fabulous attributes in the apologue while remaining transparent symbols. In short, it is their

<sup>12</sup> See also *Le Pouvoir des fables*: "Le monde est vieux, dit-on: je le crois, cependant / Il le faut amuser encor comme un enfant" (69-70).

domesticated familiarity that permits the reader's assimilation of the fable's moral message.<sup>13</sup>

In a sign of the bad faith of anthropomorphic discourse, La Fontaine also reaffirms the differences between animals and humans at points at which the animal/human distinction risks disappearing altogether. The real or supposed resemblances that make animals vehicles for the figuration of human traits risk unsettling traditional human prerogatives and privileges. Moreover, the allegorical function of animal figures requires no more than a simulacrum of human qualities, in which both proximity and distance are essential components for successful representation. In the prefatory verse dedication *A Monseigneur le Dauphin* La Fontaine initially plays with overtly continuist arguments: "Tout parle en mon Ouvrage, et même les Poissons / Ce qu'ils disent s'adresse à tous tant que nous sommes" (4-5). Although these verses imply that the attribution of a power of speech to all creatures is perhaps no more than a poetic artifice ("en mon Ouvrage"), the attribution is coupled with the provocative suggestion that the moral message the talking creatures convey is potentially suitable for all living beings ("à tous tant que nous sommes"). Nonetheless, the hint that both humans and animals participate in a shared sphere of moral concern is contradicted in the following verse, where the poet reveals his animal speakers to be simple masks for a ventriloquist: "Je me sers d'Animaux pour instruire les Hommes" (6).

A similar view appears in two suggestive and well-known fables that explore the theme of metamorphosis but in which the insistence on difference appears discursively in La Fontaine's authorial voice in the morals. In *La Chatte métamorphosée en femme*, the man who falls in love with his cat and transforms her into a woman is disconcerted to see his new wife compelled instinctively to hunt mice, and La Fontaine concludes: "Tant le naturel a de force [...] Qu'on lui ferme la porte au nez / Il reviendra par les fenêtres" (42). Similarly, *La Souris métamorphosée en fille*, the fable of the mouse transformed into a girl who will only accept a rat for a suitor, concludes with a moral whose verdict is that "Tout débattu, tout bien pesé, / Les âmes des souris et les âmes des belles / Sont très différentes entre elles" (73-75). Fictional likenesses give way to a discourse that reestablishes species boundaries, and that insists on the profound differences underlying apparent identities.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a reading that emphasizes the significance of this ordinariness or familiarity in La Fontaine's animal parables, see Andrew Calder, *The Fables of La Fontaine: Wisdom Brought Down to Earth*, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> Fables like *La Chatte métamorphosée en femme* might in fact be read as meta-textual commentaries on typical examples of the fable genre, in which the search for an

As Derrida suggests, an insistence on the differences between animal species and humans does not necessarily entail an essentializing conception of animality. Nonetheless, what is usually read as La Fontaine's most substantive and generous discourse on animals and animal reasoning, the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*, confirms La Fontaine's commitment to such a metaphysics. Elizabeth de Fontenay notes that the content of the *Discours* is usually attributed to the author's discovery of the philosophical thought of Gassendi in Madame de La Sablière's salon,<sup>15</sup> although its ostensible critique of Cartesian assumptions about animals is also colored by the general dependence of the *Fables* on relations of analogy between animals and humans. La Fontaine concludes an initial summary of Descartes's concept of the animal-machine with a farcical remark that, as in *Monsieur le Dauphin*, postulates a form of continuism:

Voici de la façon que Descartes l'expose;  
 Descartes, ce mortel dont on eût 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. (53-57)

Although the gradations of reason between oyster, man and spirit respect a traditional hierarchy of beings, La Fontaine's satirical positioning both of Descartes and his own domestic servant at positions between these gradations—as luminary genius or beast of burden—opens a vista onto intermediate forms and a flux or unexpected passages between identities. This continuism reappears stripped of its satire in subsequent lines, in a series of examples intended to adduce the range, the subtlety and even the human-like quality of animal thought. Against the partisans of the animal-machine doctrine, La Fontaine finds evidence of animal reasoning in the old stag who distracts the dogs of the hunt with “cent stratagèmes / Dignes des plus grands chefs” (78-79); in the partridge who distracts the hunter and his dogs, “détourne le danger, sauve ainsi sa famille” (88); in the family of

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equilibrium between identity and difference is inscribed textually in the traditional structure of the fable itself. The fictional apologue establishes a proximity between human and animal that is partly undone in the discursive moral that explains its allegorical significance. For a discussion of the generic features of the fable, see David Lee Rubin's *A Pact with Silence: Art and Thought in the Fables of La Fontaine*, pp. 1-50. Note, however, that sometimes La Fontaine's fables dispense with an explicit moral. See the *Préface*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>15</sup> For a good, brief overview of the relationship between La Fontaine, Madame de La Sablière and Gassendi see Elisabeth de Fontenay, *Le Silence des bêtes* (366-374). For a reading of the *Discours* that also emphasizes the influence of Gassendi, see Russell Ganim's “Scientific Verses,” especially pp. 101-102 and 117-119.

Beavers skilled in arts of construction and of whom “La république de Platon / Ne serait rien que l’apprentie” (105-106); or finally of the variety of foxes who make war such that “Jamais la guerre avec tant d’art / Ne s’est faite parmi les hommes” (127-128).

This critique of Descartes and his assertion of the capacity of animals to reason is nonetheless qualified by La Fontaine’s belief that strict limits, a specific and essential difference, separate animal from human thinking. Animal thought lacks the capacity for reflexivity characteristic of human thought and remains essentially captivated by its object: “Or vous savez, Iris, de certaine science / Que, quand la bête penserait / La bête ne réfléchirait / Sur l’objet ni sur sa pensée” (61-64). This distinction between a specifically human faculty of reflection and a general if often quite sophisticated capacity for thought shared by both animals and humans is pursued in the *Discours* in a subsequent analogy between animal thought and that of children. The story of two rats who devise a means to escape from “maître Renard” (292) while making off with an egg illustrates both the scope and the limits of animal cleverness:

Qu’on m’aïlle soutenir après un tel récit,  
Que les bêtes n’ont point d’esprit.  
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. (198-201)

Here, the similarity between the reasoning power of animals and children rests on a distinction between thought and self-understanding or self-consciousness. Both children and animals think, but “ne se pouvant connaître” lack the capacity to posit themselves as the object of their reflection.

La Fontaine probably senses the risks and consequences of the proximity that this argument establishes between animals and children. It is questionable, for instance, whether this non-reflexive thought or thought without self-consciousness would permit children to be recognized as ethical subjects, unless the moral status of animals were to be entirely reevaluated. An appreciation for this difficulty plausibly accounts for the more definitive differentiation between human, child and animal introduced at the end of the *Discours*:

J’attribuerais à l’animal  
Non point une raison selon notre manière,  
Mais beaucoup plus aussi qu’un aveugle ressort:  
Je subtiliserais un morceau de la 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... (204-213)

Gassendian fire imagery cannot disguise the fact that this animal reason, although represented as intermediate between human reason and Descartes's "aveugle ressort," is fundamentally dissimilar to the former in nature. The brightness of the flame cannot disguise the materiality of its origins in wood; there is not just a difference but a qualitative opposition between the two reasons, between that of the animal "Capable de sentir, juger, rien davantage, / Et juger imparfaitement" (215-216) and between that of the human soul with its "double trésor" (220), including both the material soul shared with animals and "une autre âme, entre nous et les Anges / Commune en un certain degré" (224-225). From this perspective, the previously posited similarity between the animal and the child proves to be no more than an appearance:

Tant que l'enfance durerait,  
 Cette fille du Ciel en nous ne paraîtrait  
 Qu'une tendre et faible lumière;  
 L'organe étant plus fort, la raison percerait  
 Les ténèbres de la matière,  
 Qui toujours envelopperait  
 L'autre âme, imparfaite et grossière. (231-237)

The logic of this apparition in the maturing child of the second, immaterial soul that La Fontaine identifies like the Cartesian tradition with the reason is contorted, if not opaque. The physical maturation of the material body or "organe" paradoxically permits reason's penetration and thus the disclosure in the child of the spirit. Nonetheless, the distinction affirms a radical difference between child and animal, insofar as the child follows a developmental trajectory firmly denied to the latter.

These passages suggest that a metaphysical division between the spiritual, human and the material, animal souls, and consequently a conception of ontological difference defined by the possession or lack of an essential property, underpin La Fontaine's conception of the animal/human relation in the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*. It is certainly reasonable to question the extent to which the poet truly subscribes to this dualism. Elizabeth de Fontenay suggests that it is motivated by the desire to avoid charges of impiety: "[c]ette continuité et cette rupture sauvent la différence zoo-anthropologique requise par la religion, en même temps qu'elle assure la continuité psychique des vivants" (366). Such an interpretation is supported by another discursive text, the *Discours à Monsieur le Duc de la*

*Rochefoucauld*, in appearance more radical. The *Discours* begins with the poet's observation that "L'homme agit et [...] se comporte / En mille occasions, comme les animaux" (2-3), an observation that gives rise to the speculation that nature "A mis dans chaque créature / Quelque grain d'une masse où puisent les esprits: / J'entends les esprits corps, et pétris de matière" (6-8). Despite the insinuation that man shares with the animals their faults as much as their reason, there is potentially a flirtation with a generalized materialism here, where the notion of "esprits corps... pétris de matière" anticipates the materialist positions of later thinkers such as La Mettrie. Nonetheless, La Fontaine's attribution of a material soul to each living creature is not incompatible with the thesis of the "double trésor" from the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière*. The more plausible interpretation is that La Fontaine's thought remains bound to the philosophical and religious tradition here, as elsewhere in his discursive writings.

### III. "C'est de l'homme qu'il faut se plaindre": Animal Ethics in the Later Fables

This review of La Fontaine's reflections on his art largely supports Derrida's view that the fable is an anthropocentric literary genre subordinated to the authority of a traditional philosophical anthropology. However, the examples we have considered have been drawn from texts that are explicitly discursive if not theoretical or philosophical in their orientation, such as La Fontaine's para-texts and his two *Discours*, or from the discursive segments with the fables themselves, namely the morals. Before forming a definitive conclusion on La Fontaine's representation of animality and animal thinking in the *Fables*, it is necessary to consider whether a distinction might be drawn between his discursive writings and the representations of animals within the fables' fictional apologues. Is there some support there, perhaps, for Derrida's tentative hypothesis that it is possible to find traces in poetic and literary texts of a "pensée de l'animal" habitually excluded from philosophical discourse?

Although in the first edition of the *Fables* La Fontaine's apologues serve a traditional function of allegorical representation, critics have sometimes noted a movement towards a greater naturalism between the first book and the later poems, beginning with the *second recueil* published in 1678-1679. In a recent article, Sarah Cohen notes that the *Fables* themselves "play with the association between humans and animals, not just by anthropomorphizing animals, but by animalizing humans as well. The case for animals as natural subjects emerges more subtly in the comportment of La Fontaine's creatures, who sometimes display a prosaic realism within their anthropo-

morphic actions" (54-55).<sup>16</sup> This perspective can be enriched by an interpretation proposed by Patrick Dandrey, who suggests that the analysis of the naturalistic aspects of the *Fables* cannot be limited to the context of the intellectual debates that shape the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière* but must also be related to the development of the natural sciences in the seventeenth Century. Dandrey identifies two perspectives on animals in La Fontaine: a traditional, erudite perspective that draws on the Aesopian legacy, and a new naturalistic and empirical one that is not, however, incompatible with La Fontaine's desire to employ animals to symbolize human weaknesses.<sup>17</sup> The publication of the second collection of fables marks a turning point in La Fontaine toward naturalistic representations of the animal world, and, as Dandrey notes, in the second *recueil* a number of La Fontaine's fables are novel and without an antecedent in the Aesopian and classical traditions.

Probably the most convincing evidence for an increasing naturalism is the last fable in the final book XI of the second *recueil*, titled *Les Souris et le Chat-huant*. The story of the owl who creates a feed store of live mice in the trunk of a pine tree by dismembering them to prevent their escape is presented by La Fontaine as "prodige, et tel qu'une fable / Il a l'air et les traits, encor que véritable" (6-7), and the author insists on the apologue's veracity in a prose note at the end of the text: "Ceci n'est point une fable; et la chose, quoique merveilleuse et presque incroyable, est véritablement arrivée" (331). Naturalistic observation ostensibly substitutes here for the fabular dimension of the tale itself, disrupting the conventional relation between fictional apologue and discursive moral and promising a new discourse on the animal liberated from the imprint of the Cartesian and theological traditions. Nonetheless, the novelty of *Les Souris et le Chat-huant* should not be overstated. Despite its naturalistic dressing and the intelligence attributed to the owl in the apologue, the conception of the animal/human relation espoused in the moral and prose note is not significantly different from those of earlier fables or texts like the *Discours à Madame de la Sablière*, which in fact also appears in the second *recueil* (Book

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<sup>16</sup> Russell Ganim also notes that "[w]hile La Fontaine's *Discours [à Madame de La Sablière]* constitutes the poet's firmest rejection of Descartes's propositions, other texts echo the same sentiment. Along with the *Discours à Monsieur le Duc de la Rochefoucauld*, fables such as *L'Homme et la couleuvre* and *La perdrix et les coqs* discuss the qualities of animals in their own right" (109).

<sup>17</sup> "Au lieu donc de sacrifier l'animal à sa fonction de représentation d'un travers humain, il convient pour mieux illustrer celui-ci, de peindre la nature animale avec le plus de vérité possible. Et par conséquent de trouver des espèces qui permettent des évocations réalistes" (151).

IX, 19). Although in the apologue the poet writes that the *prévoyance* of the owl who brings food and grain to her captive mice “allait aussi loin que la nôtre” (25), in the prose conclusion he adds the qualification: “J’ai peut-être porté trop loin la prévoyance de ce Hibou; car je ne prétends pas établir dans les bêtes un progrès de raisonnement tel que celui-ci” (331). The poet’s own reason intervenes to account the attribution of a human-like reasoning power to the owl not to naturalistic observation but to the hyperbole of fable and fiction: “ces exagérations sont permises à la poésie, surtout dans la manière d’écrire dont je me sers” (331).

On the evidence of *Les Souris et le Chat-huant*, a naturalistic shift in La Fontaine does not *per se* equate to a substantive change in the theoretical and ethical status of animals in the *Fables*. Yet it is possible to find other signs of a recognition of animal singularity and difference in the later poems, anticipating a “pensée poétique de l’animal” in Jacques Derrida’s sense. This difference is defined not as a metaphysical lack or a reasoning power that approaches but remains qualitatively inferior to that of humans, but instead as an otherness both strange and intimate and whose implications are above all ethical in nature. Unlike earlier poems that are clearly allegories of human power relations but that include only animal characters, such as *Le Lion*, *Le Loup et le renard*, *Le Loup et le chien*, *Les Animaux malades de la peste*<sup>18</sup> or even *Le Loup et l’agneau*, the apologues in these later fables often include dialogues between humans and animals in which La Fontaine speaks from the position or point of view of the animal as such, imagining the judgments of animals on the human world.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, unlike some earlier fables that also imagine animal judgments on human affairs but that take aim at human narcissism,<sup>20</sup> these later fables thematize the injustice of the human treatment of animals, and make judgments on human inconstancy and cruelty and the kind of unthinking species-ism that reflexively

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<sup>18</sup> Note, however, that in *Les Animaux malades de la peste*, which in fact appears at the beginning of the second *recueil* after the dedication to Madame de Montespan, La Fontaine’s fox refers to the shepherd “digne de tous maux, / Etant de ces gens-là qui sur les animaux / Se font un chimérique empire” (39-42).

<sup>19</sup> In the *Préface*, La Fontaine notes that “Aristote n’admet dans la fable que les animaux; il en exclut les Hommes et les Plantes” (50). The presence of humans alongside animals interferes with the traditional fable logic of figuration, and obliges the reader to consider the possibility that the fable is an allegory for relations between animals and humans.

<sup>20</sup> See for example *Le Lion abattu par l’homme*, in which a passing lion remarks to the human spectators of the painting “Avec plus de raison nous aurions le dessus, / Si mes confrères savaient peindre” (III, x).

prioritizes human concerns.<sup>21</sup> This work of sympathetic imagination contributes to the *Fables* not just the idea that humans might pity animal suffering or that animals fall within the sphere of human moral concern, but also the idea that humans betray their own humanity in their relations with animals.<sup>22</sup>

While the fable in Book X *L'Homme et la couleuvre* is in some respects a reprise of *Le Loup et l'agneau*, this time the power relation analyzed in the apologue is framed in terms of relations between human and animal species. At the outset, the poet himself insinuates that the common attributions of perversity and ingratitude to the snake are anthropocentric projections: "l'animal pervers / (C'est le serpent que je veux dire / Et non l'homme: on pourrait aisément s'y tromper)" (4-6). However, it is above all the snake's judgment on human affairs in its address to its human captor that pinpoints the self-interestedness and cruelty informing human conceptions of justice as far as animals are concerned: "ta justice, / C'est ton utilité, ton plaisir, ton caprice" (20-21). As in *Le Loup et l'agneau* the fable shows man to be a wolf, but this time with respect to other animals. At the conclusion of the fable, after enduring the adverse judgments of the cow, the ox and the tree, the human figure in the poem resorts to violence to settle a dispute with his animal interlocutors that he can no longer win in the court of reason: "L'Homme trouvant mauvais que l'on l'eût convaincu / Voulut à toute force avoir cause gagnée." (79-80). It is true that the fable's moral suggests that it may be taken as a symbolic reflection on hierarchy and power relations between humans: "On en use ainsi chez les grands. / La raison les offense; ils se mettent en tête / Que tout est né pour eux, quadrupèdes, et gens, / Et serpents." (84-87). Once again, the author's discursive voice seems to intervene in order to control and limit the implications of the fiction. Nonetheless, unlike those in which both exploiter and exploited appear in animal

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<sup>21</sup> Maya Slater notes that such texts portray a La Fontaine "champion of his animal creations, and critic of man" (109), although Slater usually emphasizes the anthropocentric qualities of the *Fables*: "The poet stresses the fact that his numerous animal characters exist primarily to make points about human beings, not about their own species" (97).

<sup>22</sup> Such a testimony is arguably even present in the text of the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière* itself, in which the internal passage from discursive reasoning to poetic examples of animal thought and behavior, rather than the usually celebrated Gassendianism, might point to where the work is most provocative and original. Although La Fontaine's characterization of the ruses of the stag as "dignes des plus grands chefs, dignes d'un meilleur sort!" indicates that the poet's plea for compassion is based on its resemblance to a human figure, the subsequent verse "On le déchire après sa mort" (80) clearly links the spectacle of animal suffering to an awareness of human injustice.

form the presence of a human figure in the fable as well as the inclusion of quadrupeds and serpents in the ranks of the exploited mean that the text's allegorical sense cannot be limited to exclusively human relations. The critique of the injustice of the human treatment of animals remains, along with the suggestion, perhaps, that the privileged defend their exploitation and domination of their fellow humans by means of their figurative animalization.

*La Perdrix et les coqs* is another fable from Book X whose text resists a purely allegorical or anthropocentric reading. Although the fable's naturalistic quality has often been noted,<sup>23</sup> La Fontaine also links its observation of the relations between animal species to the theme of human cruelty. The female partridge pecked mercilessly by the roosters excuses the behavior of the latter—"Ce sont leurs mœurs, dit-elle, / Ne les accusons point"—since this aggressivity is ingrained in their nature, and "Il est des naturels de Coqs et de Perdrix" (14-18). Instead, she assigns responsibility to the human master who insists on housing both species in the same enclosure:

Le maître de ces lieux en ordonne autrement  
 Il nous prend avec des tonnelles,  
 Nous loge avec des Coqs, et nous coupe les ailes:  
 C'est de l'homme qu'il faut se plaindre seulement (21-24).

A similar reflexion on human cruelty and animal natures appears in another fable in the same collection, *Le Loup et les bergers* (X, 5). The fable begins with the *mise en scène* of another animal reasoner, here a "loup rempli d'humanité" (1), although unlike the thinking beast in the *Discours à Madame de La Sablière* who "ne réfléchirait / Sur l'objet ni sur sa pensée" this wolf notably proves capable of self-awareness via a "réflexion profonde" on his own cruelty "[q]uoi qu'il ne l'exerçat que par nécessité" (4-5). Moreover, La Fontaine's ironic attribution of "humanity" to the wolf should not be allowed to mask the serious point that the fable constitutes a critique not only of the bad faith of human judgments on animals but also of what the poet describes in his own voice at the end of the fable as a war of species:

Est-il dit qu'on nous voie  
 Faire festin de toute proie,  
 Manger les animaux, et nous les réduirons  
 Aux mets de l'âge d'or autant que nous pourrons  
 Ils n'auront ni croc ni marmite? (34-38)

<sup>23</sup> See for example Russell Ganim, "Scientific Verses," p. 109.

The rhetorical “est-il dit” points to what has in fact, here and now, become a “dire,” a discursive statement on a form of human ethical blindness which in this example condemns the necessary predations of the carnivorous wolf but is unable to recognize and avow its own aggressive and gluttonous meat-eating. The sympathetic identification with an animal point of view we have noted in the apologues in late fables such as *L'Homme et la couleuvre* is now fully assumed in the moral. As La Fontaine concludes, in a statement that repeats the themes of *Le Loup et l'agneau* but that this time allows for no ambiguity in its targeting of human attitudes towards non-human creatures: “le loup n'a tort / Que quand il n'est pas le plus fort” (39-40).<sup>24</sup>

In these late texts, a space opens up in the *Fables*, in the apologues and then increasingly in the morals, as a consequence of an apparently growing curiosity about animals in their diversity as non-human others. Beyond any new naturalism, this curiosity is reflected in an increasing recognition of the possibility of an animal point of view on the world of human affairs. In these poems, La Fontaine's animals are neither simply figures for humans, humanized animals or animalized men, but instead elements in a literary discourse that however fleetingly entertains the possibility of a “point de vue des bêtes.” Certainly, this discourse is a “speaking-for,” a discourse that positions itself in the place of the animal, just as the speaking animals who condemn human hypocrisies and cruelty clearly retain anthropomorphic traits. Yet to speak, however clumsily, for an other who is inarticulate does not necessarily entail the betrayal of its interests. Furthermore, to imagine the value of such a gesture presupposes the realization that that other has an ethical claim, predicated on its possession of awareness and sensibility. There is a sense in which the animal is no longer simply instrumentalized here, or, in the terms of the snake in *L'Homme et la couleuvre*, a servant for human utility, pleasure, or caprice. In producing a “dire,” in giving voice to an animal point of view on the human, La Fontaine in his later fables both begins to elaborate a reflection on human rights and duties with respect to animals, and recognizes and records a literary response to an elusive but insistent animal subjectivity.

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<sup>24</sup> See also *Le Chien a qui on a coupé les oreilles* (X, 8), in which the mutilated dog apostrophizes man: “O rois des animaux, ou plutôt leurs tyrans, / Qui vous ferait choses pareilles?” (5-6). It is true that similar themes appear occasionally in the earlier fables, although without the same emphasis on human cruelty. See *Le Cheval s'étant voulu venger du cerf* (IV, 13): “De tout temps les Chevaux ne sont nés pour les hommes. / Lorsque le genre humain de gland se contentait, / Ane, Cheval, et Mule, aux forêts habitait” (1-3).

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