2 Power and the Power to Oppose: Irony and its Ironies

In "Le loup et l'agneau," power is primarily a matter of force, or strength; and legitimizing institutions—or "formes de procès"—are mentioned only as something that is missing (or present as a perverted and cynical practice, such as the Wolf's "trial" of the Lamb). The fable foreshadows in this way worlds not of absolute, but of arbitrary power, such as we shall rediscover in the Hispano-American "dictator" novel. But La Fontaine's world is more characteristically a world of kingship, and it is the relationship of mutual dependency between the exercise of legitimate and acknowledged power and the practice of opposition that his fables tend largely to explore.

Power in this sense—the legitimization of force—depends on a stock-in-trade of laws, rules, and codes, of conventions and customs (in short, of institutions) that in turn produce all sorts of possibilities for oppositional maneuver. There are no laws without loopholes and special cases, no institutions without the possibility of deploying the power of one against the authority of another; and so prisons breed jailhouse lawyers, using the law against the processes of justice, students may sue a professor over a bad grade, workers can negotiate a medical certificate for a few days "off" from the assembly line. In short, power is necessarily a mediated phenomenon; and so it produces in the *means* of its legitimization the very instruments that can be used against it oppositionally—which means that, conversely, the practice of opposition is itself a function of power. Thus, under capitalism, as Paul Willis and Phillip Corrigan point out,[1] it is possible for the working class "to see formal discourses of control as sites of contestation," but equally for such proletarian cultural forms "to bring about the fundamental conditions for the reproduction and continuation of capitalism." The first law of oppositional behavior is, then, that the power to oppose derives from the power that it contests. As a result, one can easily think of the practice of opposition as one of the institutions of power itself. Outside of working class culture, it is clear for example that in modern societies the university functions as an authorized site of opposition; and literature is another socially legitimated institution that has opposition as (part of) its function.

In the France of Louis XIV, when all power was understood to have its

source in and to be guaranteed by the central presence of the King, literature figured very clearly as one of the institutions of kingship; and royal "protection" was extended, not only to artists like Racine—whose work was seen as contributing to the "glory" of the court and the age and who was rewarded ultimately by the position of *historiographe* (i.e., eulogist) *du Roi*—but also to dissidents, or near dissidents, such as Molière. But where Molière's oppositional role was relatively overt and his status as the (necessary) "noise" in the system sometimes embarrassingly clear, it was La Fontaine's privilege to discern and to fulfil a more characteristically oppositional literary role, one that was, and is, discreet, disguised, and elusive—difficult to see and difficult to grasp when seen. The *Fables* can easily pass for entertaining "light" verse, infused perhaps with a disabused acceptance of the ways of the world. But read more suspiciously, as I propose to show, they begin to display oppositional values; and indeed a fable such as "Le milan, le roi et le chasseur" is readable as a disguised reflection on, and simultaneously an enactment of, exactly the institutionalized status of literary opposition and its dependency on kingship under the ancien régime.

For what this phenomenon of the institutionalization of opposition itself demonstrates, and the fable of "Le milan, le roi et le chasseur" confirms, is that, whereas the *establishment* of power may be a relatively straightforward matter of legitimizing and institutionalizing practices, the *practice* of power—its maintenance—is no simple matter at all. It involves some quite tricky manipulations and maneuverings, involving subtle and flexible judgments, together with some tolerance of paradox and the ability to compromise. Thus, power needs opposition, as one of the means by which it maintains itself; but it cannot allow opposition to evolve too far in the direction of resistance, becoming overly conscious of itself and hence tending to delegitimize the power structure. There are limits that have to be judged and set.

This was precisely the problem posed, in the France of Louis XIV, by Molière and his relatively overt challenging of power structures, in contradistinction to La Fontaine's more acceptable, because ironic and duplicitous, practice of oppositional discourse. La Fontaine's most prominent fascination seems rather to be with the *analysis of power*—the relationship of power to force, its means of legitimization, and the ruses and strategies to which it has recourse to maintain itself—so that his *Fables* appear in the first instance as a manual for those who would wield power, not oppose it. That has certainly been a dominant reading of them over the centuries.[2] But it happens that to know the strategies of power serves also the needs of opposition, whose tactics are entirely and exclusively determined by the nature of power and its practices, as the jailhouse lawyer demonstrates; so that La Fontaine's revelation of

the workings of power turns out simultaneously, if less obviously, to have ironic relevance as an education in oppositional behavior. My reading of "Les femmes et le secret" will show how, in analyzing the workings of power, La Fontaine is simultaneously carrying out an oppositional programme—but a covert one only, not an act of open resistance or revolution, since the very conditions of its possibility lie in the power it is opposing.

That the power to oppose derives directly from the power that is being opposed will therefore be the keynote of this chapter, since it is the central feature of the theory of opposition that can be derived from La Fontaine's texts. But since, as we have already seen, their own oppositional status derives from their practice of irony, it follows that irony has ironies of its own; it is not as divorced from the structures of power as one might like to think. In the specific terms of oppositional narrative, the power to oppose is dependent, as I have already mentioned, on the power to narrate, a power far from evenly distributed in a society such as that of Louis XIV's France, in which the right of speech was itself the privilege of a few. But in addition to the power to narrate there is the power that derives from the act of narration itself; so that the *social* theory of oppositional authority is incomplete without the adjunction of a *rhetorical* theory that shows in what way and for what reason discourse is itself available as an agency of oppositional practice. The next fable I shall discuss, "Le pouvoir des fables" has been read, understandably and accurately enough, in terms of the relationship of rhetoric to the exercise of power; but it requires also a complementary reading that demonstrates the availability of discursive duplicity for the practice of opposition. Here, too, however, as in "Le loup et l'agneau," power and the power to oppose prove to share common ground; and in this fable specifically focussed on discourse it becomes inescapably apparent (a) that it is the very *means* whereby power is exercized that offer an opportunity and an agency for oppositional intervention so that (b) the oppositional must acknowledge in turn its own ironical dependency on the means of power.

The better to make its point about the nature of "pure" rhetoricity, "Le pouvoir des fables" presents a poet-figure—an inhabitant of Parnassus—whose relation to the social power structure is artificially, or disingenuously, occluded, as if Parnassus was not a fiefdom of Olympus. Similarly, in "Les femmes et le secret," the fact that the narrative's oppositional thrust derives from the privileges and power of men is implicit, albeit readable, in the fable. Only "Le milan, le roi et le chasseur," as a fable in praise of kingship, explicitly identifies the enabling conditions of opposition in the seat of power itself. Consequently, I shall order my discussion of these fables in a sequence that brings out increasingly the insight that the power to oppose is a function of power *tout court*.

1. The Power of Fable, or the Uses of Narrative

Louis Marin is surely right to describe narrative as a matter of setting traps, and right also to point by way of exemplification to La Fontaine's fable (VIII, iv) on the power of fables.[3] As his discussion shows, the story of an ancient Orator (it seems to be an anecdote about Demosthenes) who uses a fable to trap an indifferent crowd into giving him their attention forms part of the text's own attention-getting apparatus in its appeal to M. de Barrillon, Louis XIV's ambassador to London, to work for European peace. What I want to suggest, however, is that there are traps and traps, and that these two demonstrations of—to retranslate the title—the power of fable (the Orator's and the fabulist's) are not quite the same. In fact the fable suggests that it is worth distinguishing between two ways in which narrative power is available (between two kinds of narrative "traps," if one will, or better still between narrative "traps" and what I shall call oppositional "seduction"), depending on the situation with respect to power—by which I now mean "extra-narrative" power, historical, social, and political—of the storyteller.

LE POUVOIR DES FABLES
A M. De Barrillon

La qualité d'Ambassadeur
Peut-elle s'abaisser à des contes vulgaires?
Vous puis-je offrir mes vers et leurs grâces légères?
S'ils osent quelquefois prendre un air de grandeur,
Seront-ils point traités par vous de téméraires?
Vous avez bien d'autres affaires
A démêler que les débats
Du Lapin et de la Belette:
Lisez-les, ne les lisez pas;
Mais empêchez qu'on ne nous mette
Toute l'Europe sur les bras
Que de mille endroits de la terre
Il nous vienne des ennemis,
J'y consens; mais que l'Angleterre
Veuille que nos deux Rois se lassent d'être amis,
J'ai peine à digérer la chose.
N'est-il point encor temps que Louis se repose?
Quel autre Hercule enfin ne se trouverait las
De combattre cette Hydre? et faut-il qu'elle oppose
Une nouvelle tête aux efforts de son bras?
Si votre esprit plein de souplesse,
Par éloquence, et par adresse,
Peut adoucir les coeurs, et détourner ce coup,

Je vous sacrifierai cent moutons; c'est beaucoup
Pour un habitant du Parnasse.
Cependant faites-moi la grâce
De prendre en don ce peu d'encens.
Prenez en gré mes voeux ardents,
Et le récit en vers qu'ici je vous dédie.
Son sujet vous convient; je n'en dirai pas plus:
Sur les Éloges que l'envie
Doit avouer qui vous sont dus,
Vous ne voulez pas qu'on appuie.

Dans Athène autrefois peuple vain et léger
Un Orateur voyant sa patrie en danger,
Courut à la Tribune; et d'un art tyrannique,
Voulant forcer les coeurs dans une république,
Il parla fortement sur le commun salut.
On ne l'écoutait pas: l'Orateur recourut
A ces figures violentes,
Qui savent exciter les âmes les plus lentes,
Il fit parler les morts; tonna, dit ce qu'il put,
Le vent emporta tout; personne ne s'émut.
L'animal aux têtes frivoles,
Étant fait à ces traits, ne daignait l'écouter.
Tous regardaient ailleurs: il en vit s'arrêter
A des combats d'enfants, et point à ses paroles.
Que fit le harangueur? Il prit un autre tour.
«Cérès, commença-t-il, faisait voyage un jour
Avec l'Anguille et l'Hirondelle.
Un fleuve les arrête; et l'Anguille en nageant,
Comme l'Hirondelle en volant,
Le traversa bientôt.» L'assemblée à l'instant
Cria tout d'une voix: «Cérès, que fit-elle?
—Ce qu'elle fit? un prompt courroux
L'anima d'abord contre vous.
Quoi, de contes d'enfants son peuple s'embarrasse!
Et du péril qui le menace
Lui seul entre les Grecs il néglige l'effet?
Que ne demandez-vous ce que Philippe fait?»
A ce reproche l'assemblée,
Par l'apologue réveillée,
Se donne entière à l'Orateur:
Un trait de Fable en eut l'honneur.
Nous sommes tous d'Athène en ce point; et moi-même,
Au moment que je fais cette moralité,
Si peau d'âne m'était conté,
J'y prendrais un plaisir extrême;

Le monde est vieux, dit on; je le crois, cependant
Il le faut amuser encore comme un enfant.

[THE POWER OF FABLE
To M. de Barrillon

Can Ambassadorial status stoop to hear common storytelling? Am I permitted to offer you my verses with their light-hearted graces? If now and then they dare take on an air of grandeur, will they not be dismissed by you as overweening? You have many other matters to sort out than the debates of the Rabbit and the Weasel: read them, don't read them; but do prevent the whole of Europe from being set about our heels. That from a thousand places on earth enemies should come to us, I can accept; but that England should wish our two Kings to weary of being friends, is a thing I do find hard to digest. Is it not yet time for Louis to take some rest? Is there another Hercules, after all, who would not weary from combatting this Hydra? And must it raise yet another head against the efforts of his arm? If by eloquence and skill your versatile wit can soften hearts and turn away this blow, I shall sacrifice to you a hundred sheep; that's a lot for an inhabitant of Parnassus. But please do graciously receive the gift of this small quantity of incense. Kindly accept my ardent wishes, and the tale in verse I am hereby dedicating to you. Its subject is an apposite one for you; that's all I shall say: you prefer people not to be heavy-handed in the Praise that envy itself must admit is your due.

In Athens of yore, a frivolous and light-hearted people, an Orator seeing his country in danger hastened to the Tribune; and with tyrannical art attempting to force hearts in a republic, he spoke strongly on the common weal. They did not listen: the Orator had recourse to the kind of violent figures of speech that are capable of arousing the slowest souls, he had the dead speak, he thundered, said what he could, but his words were wafted away on the wind; no one was stirred by them. The animal with the many empty heads, being accustomed to these devices, did not deign to listen. They were all looking somewhere else: the attention of some, he saw, was fixed on some street-urchins fighting, and not on his words. What did the tub-thumper do? He tried another tack. "Ceres," he began, "was travelling one day with the Eel and the Swallow. A river stops them; and the Eel soon swam, the Swallow soon flew across." Immediately the gathering cried out in a single voice: "And what did *Ceres* do?"—"What did she do? Her quick anger straightway arouses her ire against you. What, her people bother themselves with children's stories! And they alone of all the Greeks neglect the consequences of the peril that threatens them! Why not ask what Philip is doing?" At this reproach the gathering, brought to its senses by the Fable, now gives itself over completely to the Orator: the honor of this was due to a piece of Fiction. We're all Athenians on that score; and I myself as I write this moral, were I to be told the tale of Donkey Skin, would take extreme pleasure in it; it's an old, old world, they say; and so I believe, but it still has to be amused like a child.][4]

As Louis Marin noticed, trapsetting is certainly being posed here as a model of storytelling. But the prime model, I think, is not so much the Athenian

orator as the unmentioned winner of the story of "les débats / Du Lapin et de la Belette," itself mentioned in a disarmingly offhand way by the fabulist in his dedication to M. de Barrillon ("Gageons," says Marin, "que Son Excellence relit la fable ici nommée" ["Let us wager that His Excellency will reread the fable so mentioned"]). Raminagrobis, in the fable of "Le chat, la belette, et le petit lapin" (VII, 15), uses a rhetorical device (a lie) to get his listeners' close attention:

> "Mes enfants, approchez,
> Approchez, je suis sourd, les ans en sont la cause."

["Come closer, my children, come closer, I am deaf, the years are the cause of it."]

—he feints, then, makes a show of weakness—then pounces, and proceeds to gobble them up. The Athenian narrator, too, after having tried coercive rhetoric ("art tyrannique . . . figures violentes"), resorts to "un autre tour"—another device from his bag of tricks—and feigns a weaker approach, via storytelling. But as soon as *his* hearers are caught (caught up in the tale), as they reveal by the question: "Et Cérès, que fit-elle?", he too suddenly pounces with his reproach and berates the crowd: it has been overmastered ("l'assemblée . . . se donne entière"), conquered by "un trait de Fable." Before they know it, one realizes, the indifferent Athenians will be at war with Philip of Macedon, as the Orator (not they) wanted. Raminagrobis strikes again.

But what of Louis XIV, suing for peace with the European alliance? If these models refer to him, their clear implication is that he is Raminagrobis III, speaking softly (for the moment [1677]) with a view to beguiling not only England, but Holland, Spain, and the Empire as well—but doing so the better to defeat them in the end (doubtless with a sudden pounce at an unexpected moment). As the King's *porte-parole*, the ambassador is a personification of the royal discourse in its current soft-spoken mode; but he is being used as a device in a strategic move. A political trap is indeed being set, or so at least the fable seems to imply.

Louis Marin shows in very convincing detail how the narrator of the fable similarly "traps" his *dédicataire*, M. de Barrillon, into giving attention to his message, the principal device employed being the promise of pleasure in the form of praise, if only the Ambassador will attend to the anecdote. In this reading, the dedication (occupying fully one-half of the text) sets the trap, and the fable proper springs it. The parallel between the narrator and the other trapsetters in the piece is more than plausible, as far as it goes. In particular the initial situations are similar: like the Cat facing the Rabbit and the Weasel, like the Orator facing the multi-headed crowd, "l'animal aux têtes frivoles," like Louis dealing with the Hydra of Europe, the fabulist's major problem is

the number of his "adversaries," the weighty concerns that occupy the Ambassador's mind:

> Vous avez bien d'autres affaires
> A démêler que les débats
> Du Lapin et de la Belette.

The tactics he resorts to, notably his self-denigration ("La qualité d'Ambassadeur / Peut-elle s'abaisser aux contes vulgaires?"), his assertion of weakness concealing, as one realizes, an intention to wield the full "power of fable" when once the adversary has been duly trapped, present clear similarities with the tricks of the Cat, the Orator, and (doubtless) the King. *But* there are at least two major differences between the fabulist and the other trapsetters in the text.

Raminagrobis, the Orator, Louis, and M. de Barrillon himself are all figures who are in possession of a form of power independent of their tale-telling prowess. A magistrate combined with a priest ("saint homme de chat . . . arbitre expert"), the Cat has behind him the strength of two powerful institutions (it is this prestige that draws the two victims to him in the first place). The Athenian's power is that of the *official* orator, whose education in the devices of persuasion actually sets him at odds with the democratic principles of Athens ("voulant forcer les coeurs dans une république"). Louis's power is that of Hercules himself, the power of military might (I shall return to the implications of the mythic reference). M. de Barrillon's power, as the mere *porte-parole* of another and an incarnation of "souplesse . . . éloquence . . . adresse," is the least evident, but that is why the fable insists on his magnificence. And it does so, in a way highly significant for our purposes, by stressing the gulf between the ambassador's greatness and the truly lowly status of the fabulist. All these figures, then, are unlike the narrator in their possession of extra-narrative power: he, by contrast, has only his "contes vulgaires," his "vers et leurs grâces légères" (contrasting clearly with the Orator's "art tyrannique") on which to rely. Indeed, he has no status or identity independent of these—he is just, as he says, "un habitant du Parnasse," a shepherd whose "sheep" (l. 23) are metaphorically equivalent to his verses (l. 3).

The power figures, though, at the moment they have recourse to rhetorical traps, are in positions of *relative* weakness, it is true. The Cat faced with the two litigants, the Orator unable to make headway against the crowd's "frivolity," Louis and his Ambassador faced with the prospect of having "toute l'Europe . . . sur nos bras," all have more to deal with than their sheer strength alone can quite manage. "Quel Hercule enfin ne se trouverait las / De combattre cette Hydre?" asks the fabulist of Louis. But they *all* resemble Hercules in his fight with the proliferating heads of the Hydra of Lerna, for

the myth tells us that it was in such circumstances that the hero was obliged to accept the aid of his humble charioteer (who cauterized the wounds as the heads were struck off, preventing the growth of new ones). So it seems that the trap is being proposed as the model of narrative rhetoric for those who are strong, but whose strength needs temporary and supplementary reinforcement when faced with a difficult and multifarious adversary. This imagery puts rhetorical strategies in the position of a mere subservient auxiliary (something like a charioteer or a royal ambassador, in fact) with respect to the exercise of those forms of power that are associated with (extra-narrative) authority. The "habitant du Parnasse," on the other hand, has no other power whatsoever except that which derives from his (narrative) powers of persuasion.

The second difference between him and the more powerful trapsetters concerns intentions and outcomes. Raminagrobis sets his trap, then pounces and settles the difference between the litigants "en croquant l'un et l'autre" ["by crunching them both up"]. The Orator too lays his trap, then pounces and leads the Athenians into war. Louis and M. de Barrillon may be strongly suspected of having similar intentions, suing for peace as a move in the power politics of Europe. But the fabulist genuinely wants peace, and he wants it as an end in itself. For it is peace, not war, that makes life secure for a shepherd on the slopes of Parnassus, and—excluded as he is from the politics of power—he can have absolutely nothing to gain by duplicity about his motives in this. The appeal to M. de Barrillon to bring about peace—

> Si votre esprit plein de souplesse,
> Par éloquence et par adresse,
> Peut adoucir les coeurs, et détourner ce coup,
> Je vous sacrifierai cent moutons . . .

—is not in itself a device or trick; there is no reason to suspect its sincerity.

The fabulist's motives then, can be described as "oppositional," if by oppositional one understands the preference of an individual for self-preservation and self-interest in circumstances where these are put at risk by the power ploys of the great; he needs peace, they want war. In this respect, he has something in common with the Athenian crowd, a "peuple vain et léger" (cf. the fabulist's self-identification with "grâces légères") uninterested in politics and war and more concerned with entertaining themselves with children's fights and what the Orator scornfully calls "contes d'enfants" than they are with the matters of high concern he has to trick them into attending to. But, unlike the Athenians and the other victims of rhetorical trapsetters, the fabulist is not just a passive victim; he has means at his disposal for achieving his own ends, in spite of those whose goals he does not share.

What he does share, or seems to share, with the powerful is precisely these means, a certain duplicitous control of discourse. Louis Marin is correct; the fabulist lays a trap. But he lays his trap in the interests of peace, and the trap does not work in quite the same way as the other rhetorical traps we have looked at. Indeed, it cannot, for the fabulist has no other power to which to have recourse than the "power of fable." So, unlike the Orator, he does not interrupt his discourse in order to pounce; on the contrary *he pursues his story to its end.* He is not in the business of deceiving rhetorically so as to win on another terrain altogether; he wishes to gain his own (oppositional) ends, certainly, but he does it, not by arousing hopes and desires that are to be cruelly dashed, but through the *satisfaction* of narrative desires. So pleasure is his byword, for it is pleasure which, for him, equates with the power of fable:

> Au moment que je fais cette moralité,
> Si peau d'âne m'était conté,
> J'y prendrais un plaisir extrême.

And he rightly points out that "nous sommes tous d'Athène en ce point," for it is the Ambassador's interest in receiving pleasure from a narrative, just as the Athenians do, that he is exploiting in his own storytelling. However, this pleasure (the Ambassador's) is not the pure, unmixed pleasure the reference at the end of the fable to fairy stories and children would seem to suggest; for—even though narrative-for-pleasure contrasts with narrative-as-trap-setting—the fabulist's storytelling is entirely manipulative and it remains closely and intimately bound up with political aims, motivations, and actions. It is just that the politics are now oppositional.

Oppositional practices, in Michel de Certeau's formulation,[5] are a matter of tactics as opposed to strategies. Strategy, as we have noted, is the privilege of those who are masters of the terrain of action; tactics the resource of those who must take advantage of momentary circumstances and chance opportunities to further their ends. The ground rules are defined by those who have power; the less powerful and the powerless must work within the situation thus defined and develop an art which is the art of inhabiting a space possessed by the other. Thus, the La Fontaine fable works by promising M. de Barrillon pleasure and by delivering that pleasure; and it is in this satisfaction of its own promise that it distinguishes itself from the traps of the powerful, which may promise, but deliver something radically different from what they seemed to promise. And the pleasure the narrative delivers is of a kind determined exclusively by the needs and desires of the great: it is the pleasure of praise ("éloge") which, in the figurative system of the text, constitutes the incense burned by the "habitant du Parnasse" in exchange for peace—an incense fur-

nished by the sacrifice of one hundred sheep which themselves, as we have said, serve as metaphors for "mes vers." All the subtlety consists of hinting in the dedication that the subject of the story will be a form of praise, so that the Ambassador, his desire for incense aroused, will go ahead and read the tale.

For this tale, unlike the Athenian orator's, is *complete*, and it yields a *meaning*. Louis Marin shows in detail why the interrupted Athenian fable is uninterpretable; but the French fable about the interruption of the Athenian tale is readily interpreted, and its message tells M. de Barrillon that rhetorical "souplesse . . . éloquence . . . adresse" such as he is called upon to display at the English court is part of the exercise of noble (power) politics and consequently counts as an *honorable* activity. (The word "honneur" associated with "un trait de Fable" at the end of the anecdote is symmetrical with the word "qualité" associated with "Ambassadeur" at the beginning of the dedication.) The flattery (for that is the name for self-interested praise giving) takes the form of reassurance to an individual whose status, in terms of power, is actually quite dubious (he is playing the charioteer to Louis's Hercules) and whose prestige, in terms of honor (he is called upon to exercise trickery, not heroism) is equally questionable. His "pleasure" in reading of the precedent furnished by the Athenian can readily be imagined. Like the wolfish "actual narratee" I identified in "Le loup et l'agneau," he is being told exactly what he wishes to hear.

The other way in which the fabulist demonstrates the opportunism of oppositional politics is this, that the "lesson" so wrapped up in flattery is a lesson in the (power) politics of traps. As such, it appeals to M. de Barrillon as the agent of Louis XIV's military strategies—but it is offered with a view to bringing about the genuine peace the "habitant du Parnasse" craves. In this, as in the previous case, the trick consists of identifying the desire of the *other* (on the one hand, M. de Barrillon's need for reassurance as to the honorability of his function, and on the other his need for encouragement as a practitioner of rhetorical trap setting), and of satisfying this desire while simultaneously harnessing it to the accomplishment of one's own personal ends. Such a practice is certainly no less duplicitous, no less politically impure, than the trap setting in which power figures indulge—but it is an ironic skill and its name is not trap setting but seduction. Its most prominent feature is that it is through the satisfaction of the other's desire that one simultaneously achieves one's own ends. Like the skilled wrestler, the oppositional narrator *turns* the opponent's strength in his own favor. The situation is one in which the desire of the narratee is satisfied through the selfsame discourse that meets the textual subject's own needs. This, then, is the form of narrative "trap" which is at the disposal of those who do not enjoy extranarrative power; and it can be seen, of course, as a model of *all* storytelling (i.e., all storytelling is oppositional) to the extent that storytelling situations can be described in purely narrative terms. For the desire to narrate must always succeed in accommodating itself, as its prime enabling condition, to the listener's desire to hear.

Louis Marin imagines M. de Barrillon rereading "Le chat, la belette et le petit lapin." One must wonder why he does not, symmetrically, suppose him to go off and reread "Peau d'Ane," a story which after all is recommended in unmistakably more enthusiastic terms than the fable. The oversight in Marin's analysis betrays, I think, an unexamined but accurate intuition: Raminagrobis, the sleek hypocrite ("un chat faisant la chatemitte"), is the Ambassador's rhetorical model, not poor little powerless Donkey Skin, who on the contrary is that of the fabulist himself. It is for the "general reader" of the fable, as opposed to its *dédicataire*, to read and reflect on the fairy story—for the recipient of a dedication is not the sole reader of a published text and should not be mistaken for a figure of textual address. Such a figure functions somewhat like the addressee of what is called an "open letter," whose name and known status "key" the reading of the text by the general public for whom it is intended. Rather than reading this fable as if in M. de Barrillon's shoes, the reader must, on the contrary, view its address to M. de Barrillon, not as the communicational act it is *performing*, but as the communicational act it is *representing* and inviting us to understand.[6] Such a reader cannot fail to ask the question: what, then, does the narrator's recommendation of the Donkey Skin story, at the moment of formulating his general conclusion in a *moralité*, have to tell *us*?

An answer is made difficult by the fact that there are so many widely differing versions, both popular and literary, of the tale. Of the literary versions, Perrault's (the most celebrated today) was unpublished in 1677 (which does not mean it was necessarily unavailable to La Fontaine and his contemporary readership); but the version then attributed to Bonaventure Des Périers was widely known.[7] I will hazard a speculation that the lower-case typography of the words "peau d'âne" in the fable signals a generalized reference to a generic figure, and interpret this, in turn, as a way of stressing the pure, "childish" pleasure of storytelling, a pleasure presented here, so to speak, as the raw material of all narrative traps. But the fable as a whole is about the *uses* of narrative pleasure; and what the "Donkey Skin" stories seem to have in common, across wide differences in their affabulation, is a pervading theme which is that of "opposition" to authority, and more specifically a form of opposition which consists of getting one's own way through apparent submission to the (desire of the) other.

A victim of the incestuous desires of her royal father, Perrault's princess-become-slave finally marries her prince; opposed by her mother, Des Périers's Pernette finally marries the gentleman's son she loves. The submissiveness of

this oppositional character typically takes the form of accepting oppressive conditions and turning them to advantage. Perrault's heroine plays along with her father for a time (but must finally flee), Des Périers's, told by her mother she can marry her beloved only if she uses her tongue to pick up, grain by grain, a bushel of spilled barley—told, that is, that she cannot marry him—proceeds to fulfill the conditions (with the aid of some friendly ants) and to turn the interdiction into the means of her success. In the context of La Fontaine's fable, these performances, and especially that of Pernette (to whom it seems most specifically to refer—those ants are very La Fontainean!) function as metaphors of the no less paradoxical achievements of oppositional narrative, condemned as it is to getting its way through the satisfaction of desires that are actually oppressive to it. Such success, one might think, cannot be achieved without fairy assistance, the narrative equivalent of Perrault's fairy godmother or of those helpful little insects in Des Périers. But what, then, is the "pure" and irresistible pleasure provided by narrative, its appeal to the "child" in everyone, great or small, if it is not this element of unhoped for, miraculous assistance made available to the relatively powerless of the earth in their struggle against the depredations of the powerful?

To a modern reader, dissatisfied perhaps with the idealism or obscurantism of this solution and tempted to look for less "magical" accounts of the conditions of success of oppositional narrative, the idea of an inherent doubleness—due to mediation as the twofold "input" from emitter and receiver—in communicational situations, and of a consequent duplicity of narrative discourse itself, may be helpful. As previously mentioned, the etymology of the Romance verbs for *to speak* is interesting, because it suggests that historically there has been in the linguistic consciousness the sense of a link between speech and figurality or fictiveness, each of which implies (in a "logocentric" framework) a duality between what is said and what is intended. *Hablar* derives from *fabulare*, itself a derivative of *fari*, to speak: *parler* (and *parlare*) come from *parabolare*, ultimately from Greek *parabole*, a comparison (lit. a throwing beside). The descendants of *fabulare* and *parabolare*, at certain times and in certain regions of the Romance domain, must have been close neighbors and in close competition; and the semantic affinity of the "fable" and the "parable"—each teaches a lesson by means of an arrant fiction—is striking to this day (La Fontaine's text throws in another synonym with the word "apologue" in l. 62, which etymologically means "away from the word"). All this suggests that there is some fissure (sometimes imperceptible, sometimes gaping), not exactly between what is said (for the other) and what is meant or intended (for oneself)—for who shall determine "what is said" and "what is meant?"—but resulting from the necessarily dual understanding of human discourse that derives from its status as an agent of mediation. Such a split or fissure is in other words, *constitutive* of communication situations in general.

One is tempted, therefore, to adapt to the *fable* the suggestive account of the biblical *parable* proposed by René Girard, anxious as he is to account for the troubling fact that Christ, in his parables, speaks a language of collective violence (e.g., the casting out of devils), even though—as the supreme scapegoat himself—his intended message, according to Girard, is an oppositional one that demystifies this "mythic" reliance on exclusionary violence:

> Open your Greek dictionary at *paraballo* [sic]. . . . *Paraballo* means to throw a sop to the crowd to appease its appetite for violence, preferably a victim, a man condemned to death; that is the way to extract oneself from a thorny situation, obviously. The reason the orator resorts to parable, that is to say metaphor, is to prevent the mob from turning against him. There is no discourse that is not parabolic. . . . (My translation.)[8]

Girard goes on to add (271) that "it would be inaccurate to conclude from this that parable does not have as its goal the conversion of its audience." His conception, then, is of an "oppositional" discourse designed to protect the speaker by adopting the language of the oppressor while nevertheless converting its hearers to a nonviolent cause. The argument is at best schematic and it takes the form of unsupported affirmations, but it does seem to confirm what has emerged for us from La Fontaine's fable. La Fontaine, I think, is not suggesting the possibility of any true "conversion" of the powerful, and his ambitions are something less than Christ-like; but his text proposes that a fable may speak the language of traps and of power in order to *turn* the strength of its hearers to the advantage of those, such as the poet, who are weaker.

Girard also enables us to see what may be the common function of rhetorical duplicity—the adoption of the language of the other for purposes of one's own—in the discursive practices of both the nonpowerful and (when they are at some disadvantage) the powerful. For Girard's analysis of Christ's "oppositional" situation and of his use of the parable as a sop to Cerberus is strikingly superimposable on the situation of La Fontaine's powerful Athenian, faced with a crowd whose lack of sympathy for his political message is evident in its indifference, and whose language (the language of entertainment and frivolity) he adopts in order, first to save himself from the threat of (rhetorical) extinction, and then to promote his own political aims.

It follows from this that the "power of fables," deriving from the constitutive duplicity of speech, is available to all who enjoy the right to speak. Whether such duplicity functions as a "trap" or as a "seduction" will depend on situational, i.e., extranarrative, circumstances, the situation of the speaker with respect to power and consequently the social, historical, and political motivation that prompts the narrative act. But conversely, whether or not a given narrative is traplike or seductive in its function—an instrument of power or an agent of opposition—should be readable in the narrative itself, as a function

precisely of the degree of *respect* it accords its hearer (this function being understood here as one that can be construed from the narrative discourse as it accommodates itself to the hearer's supposed desires and "pleasure").

Thus, the elaborate precautions with which the fabulist addresses his *dédicataire*, M. de Barrillon, contrast markedly with the Athenian's contempt for his audience, readable in the totally meaningless tale he embarks on as well as in his willingness to interrupt it once his aim of getting attention has been achieved. The oppositional narrative (this is a law) is one that is always aware of the possibility of its own failure because, in the first instance, it must address a more powerful other whose attention or inattention, like M. de Barrillon's, means life or death for the narrative, and who must consequently be accorded full respect. Its rule is to spin out the pleasure (of the other), because that is the condition of its own existence, and the only means available to it of achieving its own purposes. By contrast, the "powerful" narrative can be interrupted *at the pleasure of its narrator*, as the Athenian demonstrates, because it does not depend on satisfying the desires of the other, but only on arousing them.[9]

We can now appreciate the ambiguity, and indeed the irony, in La Fontaine's concluding couplet, which has a message for the powerful but an oppositional implication as well:

> Le monde est vieux, dit-on; je le crois, cependant
> Il le faut amuser encore comme un enfant.

The "infant" is, in a sense, the only appropriate audience for "fables" because the child (*in-fans*, again from *fari*) does not have the power of speech. Successful narration, in exercising its power of fabulation, always reduces its other to silence, and hence to powerlessness, to the extent that it exerts its own "sway" by appealing to the desire of the other. But much depends on whether, here, one lays stress on the verb "amuser" or on the adverbial phrase "comme un enfant." "Comme un enfant" (picking up the Athenian's scorn for the audience he accuses of being childlike) encapsulates the fable's message to the powerful: treat your adversaries like powerless children, trick them with stories (then pounce). But "amuser"—that is what the fabulist does, and what the reader sees him doing, to M. de Barrillon.

For there is a trivial sense in which "amuser" means to occupy someone with trifles (and indeed the Ambassador is assumed to take an interest, in spite of his pressing affairs, in the fabulist's "contes vulgaires," his "vers et leurs grâces légères"). But more appositely, the verb has—and had very prominently in the seventeenth century—a sense implying duplicity. "Amuser" in this sense involves diversionary tactics and the raising of false hopes with a view to achieving some other end; and this sense hints strongly, not only at the duplicities of power, but also at the essence of oppositional practice, as the *turning* of power, the recruitment of the other's desire. For a final, rather

submerged, sense of the verb is its etymological one of "faire muser," where *muser* ("rester le museau en l'air," cf. "rester bouche bée") implies loss of (self-)control, loss of power (in this case to the narrator of the story): musing, in this sense—like the pensiveness of certain characters at the end of Balzac's stories—is a symptom of the duplicitous narrative's ability to convert its hearer to concerns of its own. But, in whatever sense, to amuse a child is an interpersonal act, involving some respect for (and understanding of) a child's taste and interests. Similarly, the great can be *amused* like children—but only on condition they are accorded a full measure of respect and their desires satisfied. Such, spelled out very artificially, is the oppositional message of the final lines.

The ambiguous readability of the moral is, of course, a function of the fable's own duplicity, or what I referred to earlier (see the Introduction) as the skill it employs (its *adresse*) in the manipulation of "address." Through its *dédicataire*, M. de Barrillon, it addresses an audience of the powerful; but through its positioning of the *dédicataire* as the object of its own tactics of amusement, it proposes a message readable, as an enactment of oppositional rhetoric, by the less-than-powerful to whom, by publication, it is available. One of the functions of the lengthy dedication is to serve as a screen for this oppositional function; by defining so blatantly an audience of the powerful, the fable preserves its oppositional status from the eyes of all but a scrupulously alert—and sympathetic—readership.

If this is the case, then Louis Marin, in reading the fable as an exemplification of trap setting while failing to perceive its oppositional relevance, can be counted as one of the victims of the text's duplicity. Oppositional practice, as we know, tends to work in disguise and to enjoy a paradoxical invisibility; and critics who would perceive and understand the oppositional force of narrative must of necessity begin by dissociating themselves from the position of power—in this case, the identification with M. de Barrillon as narratee and object of seduction—into which the text so actively seeks to lead them. A more patient apprenticeship and more sensitive attention are necessary if one wishes to catch some slight glimpse of what the fable works so hard to obscure.

One's reward is then an insight into the significance of this obfuscation itself. Where "Le loup et l'agneau" shows the murkiness of textual irony to derive, as a necessary response, from the duplicitous discourse of the powerful, it is the seductive manipulations of storytelling that become readable here no less ironically as both deriving from and opposing the trap setting of the mighty. That it is necessary to "amuser [le monde] (. . .) comme un enfant" is a lesson useful to the powerful, but usable also *against* them, by those who feel the need to protect themselves from unscrupulous exploiters of *le pouvoir des fables*. This second understanding is available, however, only to those who are unwilling to be tricked, seduced, into paying exclusive attention to the first,

and able as a consequence to penetrate beyond the "narrative function" to a readable "textual function."

Something quite similar, we shall see, is at work in "Les femmes et le secret" (VIII, vi), an "histoire gauloise" that turns out, in its "textual function," to be readable as enacting an uncovering of the oppressive and sexist ideology that underlies the tradition of "broad" humor that is called *gauloiserie*. But where irony, in "Le loup et l'agneau," appears as a response to the duplicities of wolfish discourse; and where narrative seduction, in "Le pouvoir des fables," is ironically revealed as an oppositional counterploy to the trap setting of the powerful, this new fable will permit us to achieve a higher degree of generalization. For it identifies *secrecy* as the fundamental instrument of power and no less fundamentally determines, as its oppositional counterpart, the various forms of "disguise"—textual obscurity, irony, narrative seduction, readability, etc.—we have begun to explore. Power consists not only of using the means of power, but also of concealing power's reliance on means; and oppositionality therefore demonstrates its knowledge of power's secret in its symmetrical recourse to those means—the duplicities of discourse as a mediated phenomenon—for its own purposes. To be oppositional is also to be *in the secret* of power.

Consequently, we will see that "Les femmes et le secret," by its "on-behalf-of" status with respect to the women *for whom* it speaks, betrays very tellingly its own ambiguous position with respect to the discourse of (male) power, which it ironizes, but from which women are excluded. For to be in the secret of that power, if only to the extent of learning from it the *modus operandi* of power so that those modes can be used to oppose power, and even if for the very purposes of revealing the power of secrecy and the secrecy of power, is to demonstrate that opposition itself has its complicities with power, and so is itself an exercise of power. "Les femmes et le secret" would not, could not, exist as an oppositional text, contesting chauvinist ideology, if it were not itself *in the secret* of patriarchal power, as a "trick" played on women. So it is not just that oppositional discourse, as a practice of irony, is dependent on the powerful discourse it mimes and which serves as its "disguise." There is also the irony of such irony, which is that of its condition of possibility: it necessarily participates in the power structure that it can oppose only because it is, precisely, initiated into that structure, and so part of its functioning.

2. The Story of an Egg

LES FEMMES ET LE SECRET

Rien ne pèse tant qu'un secret;
Le porter loin est difficile aux Dames:
Et je sais même sur ce fait
Bon nombre d'hommes qui sont femmes.

Pour éprouver la sienne un mari s'écria
La nuit étant près d'elle: "O dieux! qu'est-ce cela?
Je n'en puis plus; on me déchire;
Quoi! j'accouche d'un oeuf!—D'un oeuf!—Oui, le voilà
Frais et nouveau pondu: gardez bien de le dire:
On m'appellerait poule. Enfin n'en parlez pas."
La femme neuve sur ce cas,
Ainsi que sur mainte autre affaire,
Crut la chose, et promit ses grands dieux de se taire.
Mais ce serment s'évanouit
Avec les ombres de la nuit.
L'épouse indiscrète et peu fine,
Sort du lit quand le jour fut à peine levé:
Et de courir chez sa voisine.
"Ma commère, dit-elle, un cas est arrivé:
N'en dites rien surtout, car vous me feriez battre.
Mon mari vient de pondre un oeuf gros comme quatre.
Au nom de Dieu gardez-vous bien
D'aller publier ce mystère.
—Vous moquez-vous? dit l'autre. Ah, vous ne savez guère
Quelle je suis. Allez, ne craignez rien."
La femme du pondeur s'en retourne chez elle.
L'autre grille déjà de conter la nouvelle:
Elle va la répandre en plus de dix endroits.
Au lieu d'un oeuf elle en dit trois.
Ce n'est pas encor tout, car un autre commère
En dit quatre, et raconte à l'oreille le fait.
Précaution peu nécessaire,
Car ce n'était plus un secret.
Comme le nombre d'oeufs, grâce à la renommée,
De bouche en bouche allait croissant,
Avant la fin de la journée
Ils se montaient à plus d'un cent.

[WOMEN AND SECRECY

Nothing weighs so heavy as a secret; to carry one far is a difficult feat for Ladies; and indeed in this connection I know quite a few men who are women.

To test his wife a husband cried out one night, lying at her side: "Ye Gods! What is this? I cannot endure it; I am being torn apart; What! I am giving birth to an egg!"—"An egg?"—"Yes, here it is, fresh and new laid; take care not to talk of it: I would be called a hen. In short, not a word." The wife, new to this kind of thing, as to many another affair, believed it, and swore to the gods to keep silence. But her oath vanished with the shades of night. The indiscreet and none too bright spouse left her bed when day had scarce dawned: and off she ran to a neighbor's house. "Gossip dear," says she, "a strange thing has happened: whatever you do say nothing about it, or you would get me beaten. My husband has just laid an egg

as big as four eggs put together. In God's name take care not to go publishing this mystery."—"Are you joking?" says the other. "Ah, you have not much of an idea of the kind of person I am. Go, and fear not." The egg-layer's wife returned home. The other was already burning to tell the news: she spreads it in more than ten places. Instead of one egg she said three. And that is not all, for another gossip said four, whispering the tale in people's ears, an unnecessary precaution, for by now it was no secret. As the number of eggs, through the operation of fame, got increasingly larger from mouth to mouth, by the end of the day the total had reached five score and more.]

If one imagines a secret to be that which is *not known*, then there are no real secrets but only secrecy, for it is divulgence—that is, discursive realization—that makes a secret. Obviously, the secret need not be *actually* divulged; but I cannot say "I have a secret, I won't tell it to anyone," unless I have previously thought "I *could* tell it to someone." It is only the shared secret, however, that achieves full reality and performs the true function of secrecy, which is not private and personal, but public and social. I mean that the sharing of a secret defines social groups by the simple criterion of inclusion or exclusion: there are those who are "in" the secret and those who aren't, or to complexify, those who know the secret, those who know there is a secret but are not permitted to share it, and those who are ignorant both of the existence of the secret and of its content. In this way, secrecy has obvious links with the distribution of power, since those who are *in possession* (of the secret, and of power) are in a position to use for their own purposes the desire to know (in those who know they are excluded from the secret) or else (in the case of the ignorant) to perpetrate all kinds of mystifications.

But the secret of secrets, the secret which it is most vital to know, is therefore that there are no secrets but only secrecy. In initiation rites, the candidates frequently discover the triviality of the alleged mysteries they are being inducted into, and sometimes they learn that the mysteries are more accurately a mystification, the point being to *exclude* women and children by secrecy, and hence define the "men," rather than to make available information of a transcendent or even indispensable kind.[10] But initiation is only a special case. Generally speaking, there are no secrets because a secret exists only as discourse, and the discourse which "realizes" the secret is that which destroys it as a "secret" (as something unspoken). In this sense I spoke of secrecy as a language which constitutes and defines, by inclusion, the "in" group while identifying by exclusion those "others" who do not belong. This means that, being a public phenomenon, a secret is the opposite of what one imagines. It is not a blank or a zero (zero information, zero communication) unavailable for investigation; it is an *egg*, a palpable object which can be examined and studied. But it follows, as in La Fontaine's fable, that there are those who are

in the secret about secrecy and who know that there are no secrets that are not eggs, and others for whom the egg is a deceptive object, since they see it as a true secret.

But—still according to La Fontaine—the secret is an egg also because, as speech, it contains within itself a certain power of growth: since it exists only through being communicated to others, it is capable of initiating an infinitely expanding discursive process, and thus of giving rise to a whole community of sharers of the secret, grouped around a nucleus (the "secret") which, as such, has no existence whatsoever. Word spreads "de bouche en bouche" (l. 35) and, independently of truth or falsity, the original egg becomes "plus d'un cent" (l. 37). But falsity, as we know, is of the essence, both for those who, being aware of the nature of secrecy, know that a secret is not a secret but an egg (the opposite of itself), and (more especially) for those who mistake the egg for the true secret. This fact—that falsity is consequently a characteristic of all exchanges of "secret" information—is what the fable indicates by the process of exaggeration which accompanies the spread of the story: the original egg is soon "gros comme quatre" (l. 21), then it is three (l. 29), then four eggs (l. 31) before becoming "plus d'un cent." In short, the multiplication of the number of people who are in on the secret produces a corresponding degree of falsity in the information involved, so that the people are less and less the sharers of the "same" secret; and the egg thus comes to figure the galloping fictionality of all language.

For this reason there is a close kinship between secrecy on the one hand and, on the other, that discursive and social phenomenon *par excellence*, that feast of fictionality which is called gossip. I am not sure that the functionality of gossip, as a means of testing circuits of communication and maintaining group structures, has been fully recognized. Its informational unreliability being commonly acknowledged, it serves of course as a scapegoating mechanism (the object of gossip being by definition excluded from the discourse group, and such an object of scandal being necessary, as René Girard has abundantly demonstrated, to the health of social groups),[11] but it serves also to activate and employ—*à vide*, so to speak, or at least in a nontragic way—the channels of circulation which ensure the cohesion and identity of a given group. Through gossip, the scapegoat is expelled, not only in an eminently symbolic way but in a way which is frequently recognized as such; however the unity of the group is nevertheless confirmed and strengthened. Is there a social group in which gossip does not occur, and in which the practice is not at the same time condemned? This universality suggests the usefulness of the phenomenon, but our uneasiness over the uncontrolled propagation of false information is a sign that we are vaguely aware of the symbolic function it performs. Why would one promise to keep a supposed scandal to oneself,

unless one was aware that in spreading it one was committing an injustice? But why should one spread it, then, unless it be that such an act of injustice is required by some social necessity? In La Fontaine's village, it is clear in any case that the group of "commères" is formed, not simply around the shared secret of the egg, but also, per medium of gossip, around the scandalous object that is the husband as monster, half man and half hen, excluded as the referent of female speech from their community.

At this point, however, it becomes necessary to ask who is the real victim of the practice of gossip. Reading the fable as an exemplification of the shared secret as discourse, we entered the text via its conclusion (informational falsity as the means whereby gossip constitutes a community through inclusion and exclusion). If one enters via the beginning, as the hen-man invites us to (as a manifestation of the theme stated in the moral of "hommes qui sont femmes," l. 4), then it is not so much the secret as discourse which engages our attention as the performative aspects of secrecy as a social "pact." A secret is a performative in the sense that only the act of telling it turns the content of the words into a "mystère" (l. 24), and this by virtue of a set of shared conventions between teller and tellee which produce a relationship of complicity. La Fontaine's narrative twice shifts into the mode of the "scene" so as to show the characters specifying the conventions of secrecy:

> ". . . Enfin n'en parlez pas."
> La femme . . .
> Crut la chose, et promit ses grands dieux de se taire;

and

> "N'en dites rien surtout, car vous me feriez battre.
> . . .
> —Vous moquez-vous? dit l'autre. Ah! vous ne savez guère
> Quelle je suis. Allez, ne craignez rien."

However, what gives point to these exchanges is one's contextual knowledge that the vows of silence *will* be broken: these people are women, and the rules of gossip determine their treatment of secrets. This implies that although a promise is made to keep the secret, it is nevertheless understood that the secret is unlikely to be kept. In short there is second-degree complicity resulting from the fact that in addition to the promise to keep the secret there is a convention concerning the probability of its being divulged. This rule is known to the husband, who otherwise would have no reason to test ("éprouver," l. 5) his wife; and it is formulated at the outset by the fabulist:

> Rien ne pèse tant qu'un secret;
> Le porter loin est difficile aux Dames.

As for the women, who do not acknowledge the rule explicitly in their speech, they put it into practice by their actions.

However, there is a third and final convention which the fable does not formulate as a moral (like the second) or illustrate in specific dialogue (like the first); one just sees the women applying it automatically. This convention, which brings us to the deepest level of convention (since it goes completely unspoken), is embodied in the rule that, whereas a secret may well be repeated, it is not repeated indiscriminately. The news of the egg travels "de bouche en bouche," each woman as she hears it "grille déjà" (l. 27) to spread it; but the story travels only from woman to woman, "commère" to "commère," and no woman repeats it, for example, to her son or her husband. Among the conventions governing secrecy as a performative, there is a rule of repeatability, then (necessary, as stated, for the social functioning of the secret), but also a rule limiting this repeatability to appropriate hearers. This is of course an exclusion rule, defining *a contrario* the group which is positively defined by application of the repeatability rule. But this observation does not exhaust the social consequences of the discretion rule.

For, although in the fable men are excluded from the women's secret, the secret in question is a harmless one, and indeed it is a pure mystification invented by a man to test out ("éprouver"), or verify, a social phenomenon. And the moral makes it clear that in general terms discretion with respect to secrets is not a quality of women but an aspect of male superiority. For women, it is "difficult" to carry a secret far without divulging it (that is, there is no woman who does not experience this difficulty, even though some women are able to surmount it), whereas

> . . . je sais même sur ce fait
> Bon nombre d'hommes qui sont femmes

(some men, a majority perhaps, have no trouble in keeping secrets, even though exceptions exist in the shape of men-who-are-women). The text is ironic, of course, and the euphemistic humor functions to imply that, in fact, telling secrets is a universal phenomenon—which, as we have seen, is the prime lesson of the fable. But a further implication is that, within the context of universal divulgence, the concept of "keeping a secret" does not lose its meaning—it is synonymous with the practice of a certain discretion. In short, there are no secrets but there *is* secrecy—and it is in the art of discretion (of knowing when to speak and when not to speak) that "les Dames" are said to be deficient.

This means that the fact that the women in the fable do not tell the secret of the egg to their husbands or children does not count as discretion on their part, even though for us it may illustrate the rule limiting the repeatability of

secrets. Their treatment of the story of the egg is accountable for in other terms and by virtue of another phenomenon: I mean the fact that in society dominated groups may well have, and keep, certain secrets—but secrets which are of derisory significance, since they have no impact on the distribution of power. The women are the victims of a mystification perpetrated by a man who *does* know how to keep a secret (the secret of the mystification)—or who, at least, keeps it for a time (since it is evident that at some point he must have gotten around to telling it to someone—but to whom?). This suggests clearly that the question of discretion, of discernment in the divulging of secrets, has to do with the larger question of the way power is exercised in society; and it requires us to take a closer look at the curious tripartite division—indiscreet women versus "hommes qui sont femmes" versus men capable of exercising discretion—indicated in the moral. For, following the logic of our analysis, male discretion in the end can only consist of that form of discernment which involves identifying those dangerous men who are women so as not to entrust secrets to them, thus ensuring that these secrets are not improperly divulged. And the fault attributed to women is not that they only tell secrets among themselves, but that they tell one another their secrets without restraint.

But the fable implies that the alleged character weakness of women, who cannot "carry far" a secret, is in fact the consequence of ignorance and the sign of their dominated position within society. For the wife of the fable is not just naïve,

> . . . neuve sur ce cas,
> Ainsi que sur mainte autre affaire,

she is kept in a state of naïveté by a husband who, far from wishing to enlighten her, is more concerned to *test* his "épouse indiscrète et peu fine" (l. 16), that is, to confirm her simplemindedness and thus guarantee his own superiority. To this end, he stoops to a quite grotesque deception. The text stresses the spontaneity of women's behavior: the wife

> . . . promit ses grands dieux de se taire.
> Mais ce serment s'évanouit
> Avec les ombres de la nuit;

and:

> L'autre grille déjà de raconter la nouvelle:
> Elle va la répandre en plus de dix endroits.
> Au lieu d'un oeuf elle en dit trois.

The unmotivated way these women run about telling secrets contrasts with the husband whose behavior is directed by precise intentions ("pour éprouver

la sienne"). Perhaps this proves that it is difficult for them to carry a secret far without telling it; but it also suggests that if they were better informed they would be more cautious in their actions. For the secret which is carefully kept from them is precisely this, that secrecy, in the sense of being able to "keep a secret," is closely bound up with the maintenance of power.

What then of the husband? Is he a man or a man-woman? His abrupt, peremptory style of speech in addressing his wife (ll. 8–10) suggests a man who is not in the habit of communicating with his spouse other than by assertions and orders (and one might conclude that it is because the wife is not encouraged to communicate with her husband that she is so ready to hasten, when she has something to share, "chez la voisine," l. 18). The strange experiment he mounts does not simply reveal his contempt for the spouse whom he so coldly deceives; it reposes on the telling of a false secret, to be sure, but also on the maintenance of a true secret—the secret of the falsity of the first secret. In all this, it is easy to recognize the reserved behavior of a man concerned to maintain his position of mastery. And yet, to do this, he runs the risk of being thought a "poule" (l. 10), a "pondeur" (l. 26); and this is precisely the reputation ("renommée," l. 34) he does finally acquire. Reputation, however, does not make him *genuinely* a man-woman; rather what one sees here is the importance of the stakes, and the extent of the husband's cleverness. Ready as he is to risk his manly reputation and become a man-woman in public repute so as to confirm and maintain his conjugal superiority, he does not hesitate, as a means to that end, to play the role of an egg-layer ("pondeur") by indiscriminately revealing his male secret to his wife, who will proceed (as he knows and intends) to spread it throughout the village. In this sense, the content of his secret (the laying of an egg) is redundant with its performative effect.

However, let us not lose track of the vital point: the secret is false, the egg laying a simulation, and this falsity and simulation is the object of the husband's genuine secrecy. He can run the risk of acquiring the reputation of a man-woman among the women because (1) they are only women; (2) he himself knows the "renommée" to be false; and (3) he can always, if need be, tell the true secret to those who will appreciate it, that is, the men of the village. Indeed it seems that this latter course is actually the one he has taken since *we* know the secret from reading the fable: like the story of the egg, it can be said of the secret of the mystification that "ce n['est] plus un secret" (l. 33). And of course it *was* necessary for this secret to come to light, not only to protect the husband's reputation but also so that the naïveté of the women, their lack of discretion, their inability to carry a secret far, in short all the female faults that the mystification was supposed to confirm, could be brought to general notice. As an "histoire gauloise," the fable has a clear

function: to tell the husband's male secret so as to enhance the prestige of men by confirming the poor reputation of women and exposing them to mockery.

But storytelling, as Louis Marin points out,[12] sometimes sets traps into which the trapsetters themselves fall. It seems that in this case, by pretending to be a hen-man, the husband has set off a mechanism of divulgence which, as its end result, turns him retrospectively into a real man-woman. "De bouche en bouche," the story told with a view to preserving male prestige (by countering the reputation of hen-man the husband has acquired among women) appears to have reached the ear, then the mouth (or pen) of a storyteller—the author of the fable—who spreads it *indiscriminately*, in violation of the rules of male discretion. "Publishing the mystery" (cf. l. 23) so that it now reaches an unrestricted audience, the fable makes its information available, not only to "appropriate" hearers, but also to those men and women who have the greatest stake in knowing it, the victims of male discretion. For there is no way to tell the story of "Les femmes et le secret" without laying bare the inner workings of the trick played on the wife, that is, the true secret which ought to have remained the property of men alone; and when these inner workings are revealed to those who ought not to be "in the secret," then the "histoire gauloise" ceases to play its traditional role and becomes something else again, let us say a "fable"—a form of discourse from which a lesson can be learned. In terms of our earlier analysis of oppositional duplicity, the "histoire gauloise," embodying the discourse of the powerful, thus comes to serve as narrative disguise for the "fable"'s oppositional function as an ironic text.

Storytelling is indeed traditionally conceived as a means of communicating knowledge, and the etymology of the word "narrator" (one who knows) links it to the family of the verb *cognoscere*. If a secret is necessarily a secret divulged, then narrative is the reverse of the coin, the necessary corollary of the notion of "secret." Hence the great interest displayed by La Fontaine's text in the act of narration, which it twice displays in a narrative "scene," and each time in paradigmatic form. The husband relates to his wife his fictional misadventure as it is supposed to be occurring, and he gives it the canonical tripartite structure recognized by narrative grammar: (1) "O dieux! qu'est-ce cela?" (2) "Quoi! J'accouche d'un oeuf!" (3) "D'un oeuf?—Oui, le voilà / Frais et nouveau pondu. . . ." The wife in turn uses the phrase now standard for describing narrative as a performative:[13] "Ma commère, dit-elle, un cas est arrivé. . . ." And twice more narration becomes the object of the narrative in the fable: one woman "grille déjà de raconter la nouvelle: / Elle va la répandre en plus de dix endroits" (ll. 28–29); and another "raconte à l'oreille le fait,"

> Précaution peu nécessaire,
> Car ce n'était plus un secret.

In all these cases, the act of narration constituted by the fable itself is being mirrored (or embedded, *mis en abyme*) within the narration: and one notes that the fact of storytelling itself is *common* to both the man and the women characters, independently of the different value attached to male and female divulgence of secrets. In Lucien Dällenbach's terms, "Les femmes et le secret" is a quite spectacularly "specular" text.[14]

If so, then the fact that its subject matter concerns the manner in which a secret comes to be "no longer a secret" (cf. l. 33) is significant. The subject matter reproduces the process of transformation, from secrecy to nonsecrecy, by which the text itself has come into being, since it repeats the characters' secrets and divulges their knowledge, but in such a way as to radically alter the rules. For whereas the repeatability of male secrets is determined by the rule of discretion, and that of female secrets conforms to the conventions of gossip, narrative is subject to a quite different repeatability rule. The addressee of a story is neither committed to repeat a story nor not to repeat it, since it is understood that a narrative not governed by the rules of secrecy is repeatable at will. But one does not repeat just any story to just any person; what determines the "tellability" of a story, and hence its repeatability, is the "interest" it has in the illocutionary circumstance of the moment, an interest which is determined by the relationship between teller and tellee in their own particular historical context. William Labov has pointed out that every narrator takes great care to establish the interest of what is being recounted, the reason behind the narration—in short, its "point."[15] As a literary text, the fable must presuppose this type of repeatability (as a function of interest), and that is why it can be said that, although it repeats secrets, it is no longer subject to the rules of secrecy.

This means, of course, that the narrator of "Les femmes et le secret," judged from the male point of view, is behaving like a woman, that is without discretion—but the secret he is divulging is *not* a female secret (which would have little importance); it is, quite to the contrary, the major male secret, the secret of secrecy itself. This is what makes him the true man-woman, or egg-layer of the fable. The husband is only apparently a man-woman, as a result of his lie; and he becomes a real man-woman more or less accidentally, having been sufficiently indiscreet as to reveal his secret to an informer who passed it on to the narrator. But the narrator, who is in on the male secret yet feels free to tell it like a woman, in such a way that it ceases to be a secret, is the genuine man-woman. The egg he lays, in the form of the fable, shares with the husband's egg its fictionality; but the difference lies in the fact that whereas the husband's egg is a mystification, the narrator's egg laying is a *demystifying*—and hence, oppositional—act.

For the great male secret, the secret of secrets which ought not to have been divulged, is a double secret. It is first of all the secret of the mystification

perpetrated by men on women; but it is also the secret of the reasons behind this mystification. Men exercise power, in mediated fashion, and by means of deception, because their power has no natural basis: men are not a separate, radically different species, and the power they claim is consequently obtained only by virtue of a deception concerning this very fact, a deception calculated to prove, and perpetuate, women's "difference." But what the fabulist does is to tear aside the veil and reveal the essential secret, the secret which in fact comprises all the "knowledge" he lays claim to as narrator:

> Et *je sais* même sur ce fait
> Bon nombre d'hommes qui sont femmes. (My emphasis.)

If "quite a number" of men are women, the social division on which male power reposes is a false division, which is maintained only through the operation of male secrecy. And to declare, as the fabulist does, that there are "men who are women" is *automatically* to claim for oneself the status of man-woman, a status that, by definition, demystifies the male means of government, and makes the man-woman, also by definition, the ally of women.

So the "interest" of the fable—its point—is of an educational kind; but its pedagogy is liberationist. The text addresses itself to all those whose interest it is to learn what is being kept from them (what the fabulist "knows" and communicates). "To lay an egg," in English, suggests error and miscalculation; and in this English sense the true "pondeur" is the husband. For the fable makes no error and displays no deficiency in discernment (but only in male "discretion"). And the egg it lays is a truly fertile one, since the secret brought to light so long ago is still being learned and its consequences realized today: one of the functions of my critical discourse is to spread it.

But here is the final point: in the terms of the text, *only a man can become a man-woman.* To the extent that only a man is in a position to know the secrets of power and to reveal them like a woman, the power to lay the oppositional egg of the fable is restricted to a male fabulist, one who is both *in the know* and empowered to *publish*, reaching an audience at large through the practice of literature. In these two ways, he is distinguished from women, who are not in the know and whose power to speak is limited to the restricted coterie of gossips (other women). The fabulist's performance, then, is finally uncomfortably reminiscent of the husband's in that it is an example of what the anthropological literature refers to as *couvade*, the appropriation by males of the female mysteries of birth.[16] Consequently it reposes on the very structure of power that ostensibly it is opposing, so that its oppositional value (great as it may be) is relativized by the circumstance that it is, simultaneously, a manifestation of power. Such an oppositional act is not available to women; it can only be performed on their behalf; and this "on-behalf-of" gesture is one

that exactly captures the ambivalence of oppositional narrative, manifesting power while it opposes it. That is the irony of its irony.[17]

3. The Wild Man and the Buffoon

What, then, are the conditions of the oppositional? What are the circumstances in which one may get away with clawing a King's nose? This is the question to which La Fontaine addresses himself in "Le milan, le roi, et le chasseur" (XII, xii); and in the world of Louis XIV's France, it is perhaps the very fact of raising such a question almost explicitly that makes the fable itself an act of opposition, for where most of the "Fables" are enactments of oppositionality, this one goes close to theorizing it as well. There is really no *content* here that might be judged subversive, no "critique" of royalty, for instance; just (it seems) an edifying and amusing story told on the occasion of a princely wedding. The characters—the Huntsman and his Kite—certainly behave indecorously, not to say scandalously, with respect to the King; but they are not oppositional figures, since the one is entirely well meaning and the other an innocent wild thing. Yet the tale—so I want to suggest—does act as the narrative equivalent of a tweak on the royal nose to the extent that it dares to inquire into the *conditions of possibility* of behavior that demeans royalty and even to hint, in its moral, that if kings were to display more clemency their noses would be in more danger.

LE MILAN, LE ROI, ET LE CHASSEUR
A Son Altesse Sérénissime Monseigneur le Prince de Conti

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:
Prince c'est votre avis. On sait que le courroux
S'éteint en votre coeur 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.
Apollon Citoyen de ces augustes lieux
Prétend y célébrer votre nom sur sa Lyre.
Je sais qu'on vous attend dans le Palais des Dieux:

Un siècle de séjour doit ici vous suffire,
Hymen veut séjourner tout un siècle chez vous.
Puissent ses plaisirs les plus doux
Vous composer des destinées
Par ce temps à peine bornées!
Et la Princesse et vous n'en méritez pas moins;
J'en prends ses charmes pour témoins:
Pour témoins j'en prends les merveilles
Par qui le Ciel pour vous prodigue en ses présents,
De qualités qui n'ont qu'en vous seuls leurs pareilles,
Voulut orner vos jeunes ans.
Bourbon de son esprit ces grâces assaisonne.
Le Ciel joignit, en sa personne,
Ce qui sait se faire estimer
A ce qui sait se faire aimer.
Il ne m'appartient pas d'étaler votre joie.
Je me tais donc, et vais rimer
Ce que fit un Oiseau de proie.

Un Milan, de son nid antique possesseur,
Étant pris vif par un Chasseur,
D'en faire au Prince un don cet homme se propose.
La rareté du fait donnait prix à la chose.
L'Oiseau, par le Chasseur humblement présenté,
Si ce conte n'est apocryphe,
Va tout droit imprimer sa griffe
Sur le nez de sa Majesté.
—Quoi! sur le nez du Roi?—Du Roi même en personne.
—Il n'avait donc alors ni Sceptre ni Couronne?
—Quand il en aurait eu, ç'aurait été tout un.
Le nez royal fut pris comme un nez du commun.
Dire des Courtisans les clameurs et la peine
Serait se consumer en efforts impuissants.
Le Roi n'éclata point; les cris sont indécents
A la Majesté Souveraine.
L'Oiseau garda son poste. On ne put seulement
Hâter son départ d'un moment.
Son Maître le rappelle, et crie, et se tourmente,
Lui présente le leurre, et le poing; mais en vain.
On crut que jusqu'au lendemain
Le maudit animal à la serre insolente
Nicherait là malgré le bruit,
Et sur le nez sacré voudrait passer la nuit.
Tâcher de l'en tirer irritait son caprice.
Il quitte enfin le Roi, qui dit: «Laissez aller

Ce Milan, et celui qui m'a cru régaler.
Ils se sont acquittés tous deux de leur office,
L'un en Milan, et l'autre en Citoyen des bois.
Pour moi, qui sais comment doivent agir les Rois,
Je les affranchis du supplice.»
Et la Cour d'admirer. Les Courtisans ravis
Élèvent 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.
Ils n'avaient appris à connaître
Que les hôtes des bois: était-ce un si grand mal?

Pilpay fait près du Gange arriver l'Aventure.
Là nulle humaine Créature
Ne touche aux Animaux pour leur sang épancher.
Le roi même ferait scrupule d'y toucher.
«Savons-nous, disent-ils, si cet Oiseau de proie
N'était point au siège de Troie?
Peut-être y tint-il lieu d'un Prince ou d'un Héros
Des plus huppés et des plus hauts.
Ce qu'il fut autrefois il pourra l'être encore.
Nous croyons après Pythagore,
Qu'avec les Animaux de forme nous changeons,
Tantôt Milans, tantôt Pigeons,
Tantôt Humains, puis Volatilles
Ayant dans les airs leurs familles.»

Comme l'on conte en deux façons
L'accident du Chasseur, voici l'autre manière.
Un certain Fauconnier, ayant pris, ce dit-on,
A la Chasse un Milan (ce qui n'arrive guère),
En voulut au Roi faire un don,
Comme de chose singulière.
Ce cas n'arrive pas quelquefois en cent ans.
C'est le *Non plus ultra* de la Fauconnerie.
Ce Chasseur perce donc un gros de Courtisans,
Plein de zèle, échauffé, s'il le fut de sa vie.
Par ce parangon des présents
Il croyait sa fortune faite,
Quand l'Animal porte-sonnette,
Sauvage encore et tout grossier,
Avec ses ongles tout d'acier
Prend le nez du Chasseur, happe le pauvre sire:
Lui de crier, chacun de rire,

Monarque et Courtisans. Qui n'eût ri? Quant à moi,
Je n'en eusse quitté ma part pour un empire.
Qu'un Pape rie, en bonne foi,
Je ne l'ose assurer; mais je tiendrais un Roi
Bien malheureux s'il n'osait rire.
C'est le plaisir des Dieux. Malgré son noir sourci,
Jupiter, et le Peuple Immortel rit aussi.
Il en fit des éclats, à ce qui dit l'Histoire
Quand Vulcain clopinant lui vint donner à boire.
Que le Peuple Immortel se montrât sage ou non,
J'ai changé mon sujet avec juste raison;
Car, puisqu'il s'agit de morale,
Que nous eût du Chasseur l'aventure fatale
Enseigné de nouveau? l'on a vu de tout temps
Plus de sots Fauconniers que de Rois indulgents.

[THE KITE, THE KING, AND THE HUNTSMAN

To His Most Serene Highness, Mylord the Prince of Conti

As the Gods are kind, they wish Kings to be kind also: indulgence, not the sweetness of revenge, is the fairest of their rights: Prince, such is your opinion. Anger, we know, is extinguished in your heart as soon as it arises there. Achilles, who was unable to master his own anger, was in that respect less a Hero than you. Such a title belongs only to those among men who as in the golden age perform a hundredfold goodnesses here below. Few of the Great in our present age are by nature so. The Universe is grateful to them for the harm they do not do. Far from your following their example, a thousand noble acts promise you Temples. Apollo, a Citizen of those august places, lays claim to celebrating your name on his lyre. I know you are awaited in the palace of the Gods: a century of living here must suffice you. Hymen wishes to sojourn one whole century with you. May his sweetest pleasures compose destinies for you that are scarcely limited by the time-span! Both the Princess and you merit nothing less: I appeal, as evidence, to her charms, I appeal to the wonders by which Heaven, showering its presents on you both, wished to adorn your young years with qualities that have an equal in your own selves alone. Bourbon seasons these graces with wit. Heaven joined in her person that which merits esteem with that which requires to be loved. It is not for me to make a show of your joy. I shall be silent, then, and will rhyme what a Bird of prey did.

A Kite, the ancient possessor of his nest, having been taken alive by a Huntsman, this fellow proposes to make a gift of it to the Prince. The rarity of the happening gave the object its price. The Bird, humbly presented by the Huntsman, unless this tale is apocryphal, goes straight and plants its claws on his Majesty's nose.—What, on the nose of the King?—The King himself in person.—Then he was without Scepter or Crown at that moment?—Had he had them, it were all one. The royal nose was clasped like any commoner's. To tell how the Courtiers clamored and lamented would be to waste oneself in impotent efforts. The King did not exclaim; cries do not befit Sovereign Majesty. The Bird stuck to its post. It was impossible even to hasten its departure by a moment. Its Master calls to it, and shouts, and fusses, offers it the lure and holds out his wrist; all to no avail. They thought the accursed animal with its insolent talons would perch there until the next day, despite the noise, and would wish to spend the night on the sacred nose. To attempt to remove it only stirred up its capriciousness. Finally, it leaves the King, who says: "Let the Kite and him who thought to make me a present go. They have both acquitted their appointed role, the one as a Kite, and the other as a Citizen of the woods. For my part, I who know how Kings must act, I exempt them from punishment." The Court falls to admiring. The delighted Courtiers sing the praises of such deeds, so little imitated by them: very few, even among Kings, would adopt such a model; and the Hunter had a narrow escape, guilty as he was, he and his animal too, only of ignorance of the dangers of approaching too closely the Master. Their only acquaintance was with the denizens of the woods: was that so very culpable?

Pilpay has the adventure occur near the Ganges. There no human creature touches Animals to spill their blood. The King himself would scruple to do so. "Can we tell," they say, "whether this Bird of prey was not at the seige of Troy? Perhaps he was there in the stead of some Prince or Hero among the most crested and the most elevated? What he once was he can become again. We believe, after Pythagoras, that we exchange forms with Animals, being now Kites, now Pigeons, now Humans and again Fowls, having their families in the air."

As the Huntsman's accident is told in two manners, here is the other way. A certain Falconer, having taken, as they say, a Kite in the hunt (an unusual occurrence), wished to make a gift of it to the King, as a singular thing. Sometimes such a thing does not happen in one hundred years. It is the *Non plus ultra* of falconry. So this Huntsman pushes through a throng of Courtiers, full of zeal and excited if ever he was in his life. He thought his fortune made by the paragon of presents, when the bell-carrying Animal, still wild and quite untamed, takes the Huntsman's nose in its steely claw, and grabs the poor wretch: *he* sets to shouting, and everyone else to laughing, the Monarch and the Courtiers both. Who would not have laughed? For my part I would not have foregone my own share for an empire. That a Pope should laugh is something that in good faith I do not affirm; but I should consider a King most unfortunate if he did not dare to laugh. It is the pleasure of the Gods. Despite his dark troubles, Jupiter and the population of Immortals laughed also. They laughed uproariously, as History tells, when Vulcan came limping to serve their wine. Whether or not the Immortals were correct in their behavior, I have changed my subject with excellent reason; for, since it's time for a moral, what would the Huntsman's fatal adventure have taught us that we did not know? At all times there have been more stupid Falconers than indulgent Kings.]

How, then, is the fable like, yet unlike, the Huntsman and his Kite? How does it convert the story of their gaucherie into an oppositional narrative? And

how does it hope to get away, as they do, with its own *lèse-majesté*? My way of demonstrating that the fable *is* an oppositional act will be to suggest answers to these questions. In light of what the narrative shows to be the conditions of possibility of an act that challenges royal dignity—conditions relevant to and valid for the France of Louis XIV—I want to examine its own exploitation of such conditions, the rhetorical defenses and strategems it deploys as oppositional discourse. As it happens, the first of these, if my hunch is right, has been identified already: it is, of course, disguise. Presenting a piece of nose tweaking as an epithalamium, stating one thing (that royal clemency is desired by the Gods) while implying another (that royal clemency would be good for humans), the fable presents to a would-be censorious audience a certain appearance of bland innocence, which is reinforced by the absence of critical "content." Once more, the oppositionality of narrative, thanks to rhetorical duplicity, is "invisible."

Not the least subtle, and certainly the most important manifestation of this oppositional "invisibility" is the textual exploration of the conditions of oppositional success through the narrative deployment of figures and actions—the story of the Kite and the Huntsman—that can scarcely be suspected of having oppositional significance. If the Kite attacks the monarch's nose, it is because wild animals behave wildly; if the Huntsman makes an inappropriate gift to the King in offering the Kite, it is because he is an untutored man of the woods who means well but knows no better. But, precisely—as Michel de Certeau pointed out—the "oppositional practices of daily life" share with the behavior of the Kite and the Huntsman their spontaneity and naïveté: unpremeditated, unself-conscious, untheorized, oppositional behavior quite characteristically is unaware of itself as oppositional. It is "just behavior." If it opposes the power structure, it is not from having made any political analysis, but because opportunities arise for behavior that is unknowingly contestatory. Oppositional behavior, as we know, is behavior that does not challenge the way things are, and indeed strengthens the status quo by its acknowledgment of the structures that are in place—and we may note already that, quite similarly, the unintended attack on the King's dignity by the Kite and the Huntsman proves to be an occasion for monarchical power to reaffirm and strengthen itself, an occasion for a display of magnanimity and "indulgence."

But oppositional as the behavior of the Huntsman and the Kite may be in its *effect* (the attack on the King's dignity and its upshot of reinforcement of royal power), there is clearly a crucial, if elusive, nuance that distinguishes the pair's at best "accidental" opposition from what might be thought to be more thoughtful and even self-conscious oppositional action. It is on this nuance that the text depends in using them, on the one hand, as "cover" and, on the other, as a "model" for its own oppositional behavior. But a second distinction

is relevant here as well: that between supposedly nonverbal oppositional "behavior," with the unexamined spontaneity described by Michel de Certeau (and its consequent failure to produce change), and oppositional discourse, which—as I am attempting to suggest—deploys the textual characteristic of "readability." If the wild pair *can* be shown to be a "model" for textual oppositional practice in the fable, then the characteristic of readability will be seen to derive precisely from the recursivity characteristic of the "textual function"—the "fold" by which the text differs from itself and that enables it to produce its characters and events as *mise en abyme* of its own situation with respect to power.

And to the extent that such recursivity constitutes something like self-theorization on the text's part, it will then be seen as the crucial difference that distinguishes *textual* practice from the naïve *behavior* of its "models," constituting the former as in some sense "self-conscious" or "self-aware" and, hence, unable to claim quite the same innocence, spontaneity, and wildness that disculpates the Huntsman and his Kite. My task, then, in what follows, will be to show that the rhetorical gestures of the text "imitate" the behavior of its protagonists, but on the understanding that, precisely because it is "imitation," such discursive behavior belongs in a different category—the category of the oppositional and of the ironically "knowing"—than the "wild" and spontaneous behavior the text describes.

The fable's understanding of the category of wildness is consequently of central importance. The wildness of nature, represented by the bird; the "wildness" of the man of the woods, who nevertheless belongs sufficiently to society that he can decide to offer the Kite to the King; the *sauvagerie* that I propose to demonstrate characterizes the textual performance—these differing degrees and kinds of wildness correspond to increasing proportions of social responsibility and self-consciousness. The question posed by the fable is *at what point the oppositional begins to appear*, given that all these forms of wildness, including the "natural" category itself, are subject to royal authority. It is Cocteau's memorable question of *jusqu'où on peut aller trop loin*: how far one can take "going too far" and still "get away with it." The fable is discreet: the closest it comes to an oppositional *proposition* is in the moral's implied wish that there be more royal clemency (since that is the condition of possibility for oppositional behavior). But it can be seen to enact something like a theorization of the oppositional act, not through any criticism of royalty, but by demonstrating an "art" that is the art of getting away with it—an art that takes for its model the completely unself-conscious behavior of the Huntsman and the Kite but that should not be confused with this behavior. And my contention, then, is that it is here that a decisive threshold is crossed, and that it is on this discursive and textual level that the oppositional begins.

The claim for me to support, then, is that the fable is readable, simultaneously, as a self-described oppositional act and as an exploration of the problematics of the oppositional with respect to power, the problematics, that is, of the authority that permits it to be oppositional, of the power to oppose in its relation to the power that is "in power." And since authority is the key to the success of narrative, whether oppositional or not, it will be useful to look at this text in the light of the simple(-seeming) questions one might ask about any narrative. What claim to authority does the text make? By what appeal to its addressee (by what seductive strategies) does it seek to maintain its authority? And finally, what sense does it display of its ultimate dependence on a power that may or may not respond favorably to the seductive devices that characterize its mode or modes of address? These questions are simply an expansion of my initial question (how does the oppositional narrative "get away with" its nose tweaking?), which in fact asks not only what devices the text employs but also what limitations it sets on their success.

Perhaps one should attach special importance to this latter point because acknowledgment of the possibility of failure is central to the text's (self-described) oppositional status. Since the possibility of failing is what guarantees a narrative act's oppositional status (those that have "power" behind them do not need to worry about failing), the acknowledgment of such a possibility is a vital means, for a text, of identifying itself as oppositional. So, in "Le milan, le roi, et le chasseur," all the rhetorical devices I am about to explore are framed by the textual appeal to royal "indulgence" (or is it *for* royal indulgence?). For it is of the nature of clemency to be arbitrary, or at least unpredictable; and the praise of "indulgence" thus constitutes a recognition that the royal power to punish surpasses any countervailing authority the text may attempt to set up for itself.

By a piece of good fortune, a manuscript version of the fable has survived which contains some explicit commentary on its own rhetorical moves. In the printed version this commentary is gone, although the moves are essentially unchanged—*except*, of course, for this crucial suppression of self-commentary itself. As far as scholarship knows, the story of the fable was invented by La Fontaine, a fact which the MS goes close to admitting openly:

> Je change un peu la chose. Un peu? J'y change tout.
>
> [I'm changing things a bit. A bit? I'm changing everything.]

The fabulist's responsibility for his fiction is thereby laid bare. And, what is more, this freedom to fictionalize is explicitly related, in the MS, to the privilege whereby the fabulist is permitted to correct kings:

> . . . c'est à cette licence
> Que je dois l'acte de clémence
> Par qui je donne aux rois des leçons de bonté.

[. . . to this licence I owe the clemency that permits me to give lessons in goodness to kings.]

Thus, the text freely acknowledges that "clemency," as the authorization to perform oppositional acts ("donner aux rois des leçons") is obtainable by rhetorical means—for, although changing the fable is in fact *not* what the narrator has done (he has invented it), it *is* exactly what he will do when he gives two versions of the "same" story.

A little later, there is a similar giveaway of the devices of authority. The published version has an ascription to Pilpay of a version of the story; but the MS admits that such an ascription would only be a cover for the narrator's own responsibility:

> Si je craignais quelque censure
> Je citerais Pilpay touchant cette aventure.
> Ses récits en ont l'air: il me serait aisé
> De la tirer d'un lieu par le Gange arrosé.

[Were I afraid of censure I would cite Pilpay with respect to this adventure. His stories are like it: it would be an easy matter for me to derive it from a spot watered by the Ganges.]

In light of this, we may be sensitive to the stance adopted by the narrator of the published version, who in a number of ways disclaims personal responsibility and appeals for authority to a narrative tradition. For now, not only is there suddenly a Pilpay version which he describes (without narrating it), but also, with respect to the two versions he does give, he is content, as he says, to "rhyme" (l. 34) a narrative that "l'on conte en deux façons" (l. 89). This looks like a defensive tactic, by contrast with the self-assurance of the MS narrator who denies his fear of "censure" by so ostensibly disdaining to bring Pilpay into it and who does not hesitate to give away the (rhetorical) secret of his success in obtaining indulgence. This is a "successful" narrator, secure in the knowledge that he is supported by power, and who does not doubt his own authority—whereas, in the published version, we see a narrator looking for support to a narrative tradition (which we happen to know is entirely fictional) and attempting to derive authority from that.

But there *are* a number of rhetorical advantages in this latter stance. First, the "existence" of narrative predecessors supports the fabulist's claim to the authority of truth, i.e., the supreme authority claim (stronger even than the

claim to royal favor). Unlike the MS narrator, who admits to changing things around, "je . . . vais rimer," says he (tactically limiting his intervention), "ce que fit un Oiseau de proie" (as if there was no question of the event's factual character). And the same limiting of personal responsibility permits him to adopt the scholarly pose of one who merely sorts out the different versions of what is later referred to, no less comfortably, as "l'accident du Chasseur," commenting on them objectively ("Pilpay fait près du Gange arriver l'aventure") and transmitting them, indiscriminately, as being all equally interesting.

On the other hand, narrative rhetoric (Louis Marin's point again) is a tricky business. Does not the self-assured narrator of the MS betray a certain *nervousness* in admitting his reliance on rhetoric and his awareness of the possibility of "censure?" And similarly, in the published version, does not the fabulist finally undercut his own effect of authority and end up—like the MS narrator, but involuntarily, it seems—revealing rather than concealing his narrative ploys? The claim to know from tradition "ce que fit un Oiseau de proie" is subverted by the very profusion of versions he produces in evidence. *Did* it happen "près du Gange," or where? Did the Kite attack the *King*? Or did it attack the *Huntsman*? "Ce que fit un Oiseau de proie" is in point of fact what the narrative does not permit us to know with any certainty; the most we learn is that, somewhere, sometime, a Huntsman suffered an "accident" in presenting a Kite to a King, and survived. . . . In similar fashion, the very deployment of authorizing references (I have not even discussed the roles of Pythagoras and Homer) functions to defeat its own purpose—it does not *support* the fabulist's authority, but rather *shows up his strategy* for producing it. In deleting the rhetorical self-commentary, the narrator of the published version has both strengthened his rhetorical hand (by not admitting to the tricks of the trade) and weakened it (by the attempt to conceal tricks which are nonetheless readable, i.e., discoverable). His authority ploy is also a way of courting failure.

There is another instance of an authorizing ploy that proves self-defeating in the dedication to the Prince de Conti, which functions as "cover," but in a way rather different from the dedication to M. de Barrillon of "Le pouvoir des fables." On the face of it, the evocation of Conti is an attempt to strengthen the fabulist's authority by associating him with a powerful personage under whose protection the text is placed. Thus the Prince's opinion of royal indulgence is adduced in support of the fable's own, and his practice of self-control and generosity is cited as a model, in an age when "peu de Grands sont nés tels." These are, of course precisely those virtues in the great on which the fable depends to bring off its oppositional act. Similarly, in the occasion of the Prince's marriage, the text seems to see a particularly opportune moment (it

is, in a sense, "carnival time") in which to overstep the bounds of decorum. It offers itself, not so much *as* an epithalamium, as *in lieu of* the traditional hymn—a gesture which manages to place it under the traditional umbrella of "indulgence" associated with weddings while accomplishing the very kind of action (an overstepping of the bounds of decorum) that needs to benefit from such indulgence.

> Il ne m'appartient pas d'étaler votre joie.
> Je me tais donc, et vais rimer
> Ce que fit un Oiseau de proie.

Indeed, in offering the story of the Kite and the Huntsman instead of the conventional poem of praise and joy, the fable is doing to the Prince what the Huntsman did to the King: it is making a displaced and inappropriate gift, quite out of keeping with the rules that prevail in princely palaces and royal Courts. And the "outsider" status the fabulist claims in disclaiming the right to produce court poetry ("Il ne m'appartient pas . . .") quite naturally associates him with the Huntsman whose gift was so dangerously likely to be a self-defeating one.

But that is not all. One might think that the fable is using the princely power, in the "political" realm, as a source of authorization comparable to that which it attempts to derive, in the "discursive" sphere, from its alleged narrative sources. But the Prince is himself one who derives power from the power and protection—and indeed the "indulgence"—of the monarch. The MS balances (or tops) its appeal to the Prince with an even more hyperbolic piece of flattery addressed to the King:

> Louis seul est incomparable.
> Je ne lui donne point quelque éloge affecté:
> L'on sait que j'ai toujours entremêlé la fable
> De quelque trait de vérité.

[Louis alone is incomparable, I do not bestow on him some affected encomium: it is well known that I have always mingled fable with some element of truth.]

In tandem with its openness about its own "rhetoricity," the MS's flattering truth-claim here functions, understandably enough, as part of its reliance on the backing of ultimate political power. By contrast, the published version—with its rhetorically self-defeating truth-claim about "ce que fit un Oiseau" and its suppression of this praise of the King—is putting itself in a much more exposed position, also, by relying on the power of the Prince. For contemporary readers of the fable could not fail to be aware of the well-deserved reputation the Prince de Conti enjoyed at Versailles for unruliness: he had indeed himself been the beneficiary of royal "indulgence" (if *de facto* exile

from the Court be considered an indulgence) and eventually of a grudging pardon, for his "oppositional" behavior.[18] He was a figure, then, to whom "l'accident du Chasseur" was uncomfortably relevant and whose own praise of royal clemency—like that of the fabulist—must have seemed to have a self-serving tinge. Rather than being in a position to strengthen the fabulist's authority, he rather epitomizes the exposed situation of one who, having committed an oppositional "gaffe," is himself in need of indulgence. And to dedicate a fable to him is, of course to commit just such a "gaffe."

Self-defeating, then, in its double claim to authority (whether it be from narrative predecessors or from a princely protector), this text is either an extraordinarily incompetent rhetorical performance or an extraordinary performance of rhetorical incompetence. Where the MS makes explicit claims to rhetorical know-how, what the published version knows how to do is to commit rhetorical (and political) mistakes. Its truth-claim reveals itself as an authority ploy, and thus self-destructs; it offers itself to the Prince as an inappropriate substitute for an epithalamium; and it inappropriately offers itself to the Prince instead of to the King. In all this, it is uncannily similar to the Huntsman's clumsy and self-defeating gift to the King.

But the Huntsman, it will be recalled, *got away with* making his singularly inappropriate gift. This suggests to me that the fable is basing itself, rhetorically, on the proposition that the kind of rhetorical know-how advertised in the MS version is, ultimately, less oppositionally "successful"—that is, less likely to draw indulgence from its powerful audience—than is (a display of) narrative incompetence. The narrative's maladroit and ineffective claims to *authority* are, in this reading, the means, subtle and carefully calculated, by which it produces (or hopes to produce)—in the form of "indulgence"—the *authorization* that it needs. Incompetence gets away with things for which competence would rightly be punished: that is what can be learned from the example of the Huntsman and his "accident."

I pretended just now not to decide whether this text is rhetorically incompetent or whether it is giving a successful performance of rhetorical incompetence. There are, of course, good reasons for thinking the latter: a text which produces its own model, as this fable produces the Huntsman, is certainly not naïve; and its "self-consciousness" becomes evident in the clear parallel it produces between the fabulist's displaced gift to the Prince (of the story of the Huntsman) and the Huntsman's displaced gift to the King (of a Kite). But, strangely, the model the text produces, in the Huntsman, of its own rhetorical operation, is a *double* one; and "l'accident du chasseur," although in each case it represents a (momentary) threat to royal dignity, is not the same in version one (ll. 36–74)—where the Kite attacks the King—as in version two (ll. 91–114), where the Kite attacks the Huntsman. This model (these models)

clearly demand(s) closer attention: it (they) will lead me to suggest that, as oppositional act, the fable is describing itself neither as involuntary incompetence nor as deliberate performance, but as a paradoxical combination of both. Involuntary performance? Deliberate incompetence? An involuntary performance of deliberate incompetence? We do not have a word for behavior that lies somewhere between an act and an "act," that is neither self-conscious skill nor brute deed, but a skilled doing—a demonstration of *savoir-faire*.[19]

The difference is not simply that there is damage to the royal person in version one and to his dignity alone in version two, for the fable's reassuring insistence that kings *may* laugh suggests strongly that a royal fit of laughter can be as demeaning to a monarch as a kite physically attached to the royal nose. The essential point of difference appears to be rather that the actual attack on the royal person is attributed to a Huntsman and his Kite who are assimilated to each other as inhabitants of the woods (they are figures, I want to suggest, of the "wild man"), while the fit of laughter is attributed to self-defeating behavior—the gift-kite's attack on the donor—which is related to the paradigm of the court entertainer. If, indeed, the identification of Kite and Huntsman as manifestations of "wildness" is carried over from version one to version two (where they *combine* to produce a kind of droll act that amuses the King), then the description of the Kite as "l'Animal porte-sonnettes" in that version implies an interpretation of the Huntsman as an (involuntary) buffoon, or "homme porte-grelots." The bells in each case can be taken to signify the taming of wild power, its domestication or enculturation into an agent of divertissement, *used* by the King and his Court in one case for the entertainment of hunting, in the other as a butt of laughter. This is not to deny that the Kite of the fable is described as "Sauvage encor et tout grossier" and that the Huntsman, arriving straight from his native woods, is at best an "accidental" buffoon, whose clowning is quite unrehearsed and unintended. The element of wildness is still there, but it produces, in the Kite's case, behavior which, in the Huntsman's case, turns his overly pretentious gift giving into a risible spectacle for the King and the Court.

The fable suggests, then, that native wildness is at the heart of buffoonery, which therefore has the characteristics, at Court, of inappropriate spontaneity. It suggests also, however, that buffoonery is always, in some sense and at the same time, a performance of buffoonery, an "act." For the model adduced to justify the King's laughter is the Homeric example of Zeus and the gods breaking into a fit of helpless laughter at sight of a limping "Vulcain," or Hephaestus, serving them their wine. Hephaestus, of course is better known as an opponent of Zeus and as the artificer of the gods than as the butt of their laughter; and in the passage referred to (at the end of Book I of the *Iliad*),[20]

Homer is careful to recall both of these aspects of the personage. Hephaestus's buffoonery is involuntary, like the Huntsman's, but it is the buffoonery of one to whom the gods owe their luxurious culture (Hephaestus built their houses "with skillful hands") and whose grotesque limp seems to be the sign of an oppositional stance still remembered although currently renounced. In the quarrel between Hera, the queen, and Zeus whose abatement the gods' laughter celebrates, Hephaestus, "in his anxiety to be of service to his mother," has advised—this time—humble submission and a request for pardon.

"The Olympian is a hard god to pit oneself against. Why, once before when I was trying hard to save you, he seized me by the foot and hurled me from the threshold of Heaven."

A possible inference is that, if the buffoon's role is played involuntarily by the Court's "artificer" and if it gives him a place, albeit in a humble way, in the Heaven of Court, such a role nevertheless bears the trace—the limp—of oppositional practice, and indeed that its submissiveness may be more tactical than genuine. The Hephaestus model has bearing on the Prince de Conti (the royal indulgence obtained, after exile, through submission and a humble request for pardon), on the Huntsman (who comes from "exile" in the woods to amuse the Court, as Hephaestus from Lemnos) and on the fabulist's own practice as the author of a clownish rhetorical performance (it "limps" like Hephaestus, and is self-defeating like the Huntsman's gift) which can now be interpreted as both involuntary and even naïve, and yet, like both the Huntsman's "act" and Hephaestus's own involuntary buffoonery, as something of a *spectacle*, a "performance" that is produced, as such, by the very existence of a royal audience, i.e., by the circumstances of power in which it occurs.[21]

I doubt that the metaphor of "loss of face" was available to La Fontaine (whose extra-European reference is Indian, not Chinese), but it is a convenient way of pointing up the difference between version two, where the King's loss of face is confined to the symbolic domain, and version one, where the Kite's grip on his nose bids fair to produce some real loss of "face." This, it seems, is in keeping with the presentation of the Kite and the Huntsman, here, not as buffoons, but as genuine savages; and it is notable that, despite the damage to the "nez sacré," royal indulgence seems to come more easily and to be less problematic, in this case, than in the case of laughter (which, curiously, constitutes at once the Huntsman's offense and the grounds of his pardon). In spite of the temerity of the "maudit animal" and the lengthy indignity suffered by the King, the latter's indulgence is spontaneous, for it seems that the culprits have acted according to the order of things.

"Ils se sont acquittés tous deux de leur office,
L'un en Milan, et l'autre en Citoyen des bois."

And this is a point the fable itself hastens to confirm:

Ils n'avaient appris à connaître
Que les hôtes des bois: était-ce un si grand mal?

So the model, here, is not that of the court buffoon (a "wild man" enculturated) but of the "wild man" himself, perceived on the one hand as more dangerous to the king's actual person, but on the other as more easily forgiven—or, more accurately, as performing an actual duty, acquitting a responsibility, or "office" (an appointed function), in thus attacking the visage of power.

As "wild men," the Kite and the Huntsman reverse the situation of Hephaestus (whose model consequently remains relevant), in that, where he was hurled from the court of the gods into exile for his insolence, they *come out of exile into the Court*, where their insolence is treated as functional. Not that it is not a dangerous form of behavior:

Bien peu, même des Rois, prendraient un tel modèle;
Et le Veneur l'échappa belle,

but it seems that their power to attack, and their chances of attracting indulgence, are proportional to the humbleness, and I would say the "naturalness" of their behavior. In version two, the Huntsman is full of his own importance ("Plein de zèle, échauffé, s'il le fut de sa vie"), whereas in the first he is a much more modest figure ("L'oiseau, par le chasseur humblement présenté"), as befits his station as representative of nature ("Citoyen des bois") transplanted—if that is the word—into the world of the Court. He represents that which, having been excluded from "culture," acquires *as a consequence*, both very considerable critical power and remarkable immunity from punishment. An immunity that he earns, however, at the price of an institutionalization of that selfsame critical power—it becomes an "office"—through which it is appropriated by the dominant power structure that thereby lays implicit claim to having actually produced it. Here, too, as in the case of the buffoon, then, oppositional wildness is tamed by the culture to which, even while it is opposing it, it belongs.[22]

These, then—the wild man, the buffoon—are the two models of its own oppositional practice that the text produces. They are simultaneously very similar (each is a "wildness" appropriated and tamed by the power that produced it in the first place), and yet somewhat different. The buffoon is culturally accepted, yet allowed only *symbolic* access to power (the royal "face"); whereas the wild man is excluded from culture, but, as a consequence, allowed *real* access to power (the royal visage). That is why exile from the court functions for the former as a punishment (the punishment of exclusion from culture) and for the other as disculpation (exclusion from culture is what grounds the royal clemency). In view of this difference, it is hard to see how—

logically—both of these models can function at once as models of the text's own practice.

Yet, the text attempts precisely to reconcile these two models and make them one in the passage concerning Pilpay that mediates between and joins the two versions of the Huntsman's "accident." If, in allowing my categories to slip between "power" and "opposition" on the one hand, and "culture" and "nature" on the other, I have committed some logical laxity, I do so in response to the text's own transformation of its categories ("wild man" and "buffoon") into the "animal" and the "human" in these crucial lines (75–88). Their thrust is that Pythagoreanism (the doctrine of metempsychosis), in treating animals and humans as interchangeable ("avec les Animaux de forme nous changeons")—a treatment, incidentally, that characterizes the fable as a genre—argues both for the cultural inclusion of animals (like the buffoon) and for their genuine access to power (like the wild man). The rhetorical trick lies, of course, in the lines that treat the category of "animal" as meaning "excluded from culture" but the category of "human" as meaning "belonging to the great of the earth":

> "Savons-nous, disent-ils, si cet Oiseau de proie
> N'était point au siège de Troie?
> Peut-être y tint-il lieu d'un Prince ou d'un Héros
> Des plus huppés et des plus hauts."

The puns in "huppés" and "hauts" nicely catch what birds and aristocrats have in common, and thus bring the animal onto the same plane as court society. But here's the rub. The argument in favor of combining cultural inclusion with access to power also turns out to deprive the King's clemency of its justification, which rests precisely, in version one, on the cultural exclusion of the Kite and the Huntsman, and, in version two, on their exclusion as buffoons from the domain of actual power. So this is a point of aporia where the text deconstructs itself: either the King is justified in his indulgence, or "Pilpay" is wrong—if "Pilpay" is right, then the King's clemency makes no sense. The text cannot argue, on the one hand, for the inclusion of literature (the fable as generic site of the identification of "animal" and "human") into culture combined with genuine access to power—for literature's "humanity"—and on the other for royal indulgence towards its wildness and oppositional stance—that is, its "animality."

Yet, that is what it does. For there *is*, paradoxically, an existing model of this impossible combination, and that is the Prince de Conti—a Prince or Hero "des plus huppés et des plus hauts." His exile functions, like that of Hephaestus, as a punishment for opposition, and so it is a sign of his social and cultural inclusion—his buffoon-like status—in the Court; yet it functions, too, as the

condition of royal indulgence, and thus implies his continued access to the seat of power, the actual, physical access for which the "wild man" is forgiven. If the Prince can exist—and get away with it—so too can literature, as buffoon and wild man combined, be admitted into culture like the former and given access, simultaneously, to power, like the latter.

But the condition that makes this possible, both in the case of the Prince and in the case of literature, is the *absolute arbitrariness* of royal clemency or "indulgence." The attempt to *justify* such clemency forces literature into becoming either the buffoon (with power only in the symbolic domain) or the wild man (with real power, but culturally excluded). The two models can combine and demonstrate their compatibility, and indeed complementarity, only if the King, quite arbitrarily, permits it, just as he, quite arbitrarily, permits the Prince to exist as Hero and Kite combined. What the wild man and the buffoon have in common is, precisely, that they exemplify a power, on the part of society, to produce, and to control, its own opposition. And the text defines itself, logically, as an "impossible" combination of these two oppositional forces—both act and "act"—which becomes possible only because, and to the extent that, it is—groundlessly—permitted. The limitation of its power, which makes it always possible for it to fail, is exactly that which gives its oppositional thrust some chance of success.

It is not contradictory then that the fable I have been reading in terms of its theory of opposition presents itself more openly as a theory of kingship. The power of the monarch appears as the power to determine the social significance of behavior, a power he exercises in and through his own behavior. The King's response, indicating his decipherment of the behavior of the Huntsman and the Kite, determines what that behavior *is*. In one case, it is his formulations ("Citoyen des bois," etc.) that determine the Huntsman's status as "wild man"; in the other, his laughter turns the Kite's wild attack on the Huntsman's nose into a spectacle, a performance—an act which becomes an "act."

But in order to do this, he must combine in his person a pair of attributes no less mutually exclusive than, although symmetrical with, those of the oppositional figures. These last are at once human (included in culture) and subhuman (animal, identified with nature): the King is simultaneously superhuman and human. Superhuman in the heroic exercise of restraint by which, under the Kite's attack, he preserves his dignity and, in showing indulgence, displays his affinity with the gods (an affinity implied in the fable's opening lines), he has also the courage to be human, and to display it, in the case of the Kite's attack on the Huntsman, by laughing (a response which distinguishes him, it seems, from a Pope).[23]

It is power, then, as the combination of the superhuman and the human in

kingship, that produces its opposition, necessarily, as a combination of humanity and wildness. But although I have been reading the Huntsman and his Kite (in response to the fable's pairing of them) as a couple one must also see that eventually the title's triplicity is significant, as is its syntactic distribution of the Kite and the King, on the one hand, against the Hunter on the other. Between the wild unpredictability of the contingent world of nature, and the no less unpredictable transcendence of royal clemency, as a figure of the divine, it is oppositionality as the human that defines itself in the Hunter as a "Citoyen des bois" admitted into Court where its dealings are with those whose own model is the world of the gods.

Thus La Fontaine. The harmoniousness and symmetry of this wonderfully ordered relationship is so appealing that, now that it has been lost—now that "power" and "opposition" describe only relations of mutuality between humans—it is perhaps not so surprising that a strong nostalgia for it remains. This can be seen very clearly in situations of extreme social violence, pogroms or torture, for instance, whose victims tend to perceive power as a *transcendency*, out of reach of ordinary intervention, and where, inversely, the perpetrators show a compulsion to transform their opponents into creatures *less than human*, a situation we shall see figured in Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* (chapter 4). But what has been evacuated here, precisely, is the human and with it the oppositional, and it is among humans that we have, in less extreme circumstances, to sort out the tangled forces of power and opposition to power.

The chastisement of kings, in Bossuet's view of things (see his *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'Écriture Sainte*), was the sole privilege of divinity. It is a sure mark of La Fontaine's modernity that he perceived the oppositional possibility of a mere subject's giving kings "des leçons de bonté," while remaining aware that royal absolutism, by virtue of its divine right, was both the ultimate source of oppositional authority and the clear marker of its limits. But what happens when there is no more divine right of kings and the site of power is no longer so easy to identify? It is to the consequences for opposition of that loss of centrality and visibility in the site of power and of that loss of transcendent guarantee in its functioning that I shall now be turning.

But two important and intimately related conclusions are worth drawing from La Fontaine's practice and retaining as pertinent in what follows. The one has by now been abundantly demonstrated: the power to oppose derives from power—a maxim no less true, although its ramifications (as we shall see) are even more intricate, when power has become decentralized, relative, diffuse, shifting, and shared. The other is that, *as a consequence*, irony as an oppositional mode must always end up ironizing itself. Like the Huntsman's gift, it has a certain knack of backfiring, because its power to oppose always turns out to be a function of the power it opposes.

As I have attempted to show, the educational value of the *Fables*, as oppositional discourse, lies in the readability they derive from their ironic structure, in which their apparent address on the narrative plane to the positions of power—incorporated, for example, in dedications to the great or in conformity to the phallocentric conventions of *gauloiserie*—is textually subverted. That is important. But in each case, we have seen a further irony, a further self-distancing of the text, arise from the realization that such ironies can work only in the context of power they are ironizing: irony's own murky discourse has more than accidental kinship with the narrative trap setting, the mystifications of secrecy and other discursive duplicities of the powerful, and its oppositional "wildness" is not easily distinguishable from the buffoonery that amuses courts and kings.

So if irony turns the tables on the discourse of power, those tables can always be turned again and ironic distance shown to be in complicity with what it opposes; with the result that there is an *infinite regress of irony* (for which Roland Barthes, in another context, has given a suggestive analysis)[24]. Thus, in "Les femmes et le secret," the ironic revelation of male secrecy as the means by which women are oppressed turns out to be itself dependent on participation in male power. Oppositional narrative's ability to turn to its own account the power it is opposing is unremittingly balanced—but never cancelled out—by a concomitant awareness that it borrows its strength from, and so is used by, the power it cannot avoid subserving as it opposes it. *That* is the irony of the oppositional.

But we have yet to see the possibility of another turn of the tables. In spite of its subservience and in spite of the vicious circle of "discourse" and "counter-discourse" in which it is caught, the readability on which oppositional irony rests can still open up a certain "room for maneuver" out of which forms of change can emerge, thereby disturbing (in the long term) the structures of power. In short, if there is an irony of oppositionality (the irony of oppositional irony), there is also an irony of power, which for the moment, can be formulated as follows: its control of oppositionality does not extend, fully, to control of the effects of oppositionality. That is why I give greater emphasis, in what is to follow, to the pole of *reading* that is implied by the readability of ironically oppositional discourse that this chapter has demonstrated.