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**Aesop and La Fontaine:
The Contemporary Resurgence of the Plagiarism Issue**

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ABSTRACT

This study takes an academic look at the claim of the African origin of La Fontaine's Fables, perceived as pale copies of the fables of Aesop, a black poet of ancient Greece. Without prejudging the fact that this claim, which is part of the rise of Pan-Africanism, is an ideological bias, the authors of the article focus on this accusation of plagiarism which must be placed within the epistemological framework of the vast problem of imitation in literature. Using the philological approach and the methodological tools of literary comparatism, they question La Fontaine's work which pertains both in the notion of transtextuality and in the theory of historical "falsificationism". It follows from the analysis that the plagiarism thesis must be qualified, in light of the historical context of La Fontaine's *Fables*. However, the treatment of La Fontaine's debt to Aesop in Western discourse deserves to be examined in depth, for it opens an important chapter on the process of negation and appropriation of the cultural values of the black world, which we call "cultural plagiarism"

RESUMÉ

Key words : fables, La Fontaine, Aesop, plagiarism, falsification.

La présente étude jette un regard académique sur la revendication de l'origine africaine des Fables de La Fontaine, perçues comme de pâles copies des fables d'Ésope, poète noir de la Grèce antique. Sans préjuger du fait que cette revendication, qui s'inscrit dans mouvance du panafricanisme, est un parti-pris idéologique, les auteurs de l'article se focalisent sur cette accusation de plagiat qu'ils replacent dans le cadre épistémologique de la vaste problématique de l'imitation en littérature. En utilisant l'approche

philologique et les outils méthodologiques du comparatisme littéraire, ils interrogent la démarche de La Fontaine qui relève à la fois de la notion de transtextualité et de la théorie du « falsificationnisme » historique. Il ressort de l'analyse que la thèse du plagiat doit être nuancée, à la lumière du contexte historique des *Fables* de La Fontaine. Cependant, le traitement de la dette de La Fontaine envers Ésope dans le discours occidental mérite d'être examiné en profondeur, car il ouvre un chapitre important sur le processus de négation et d'appropriation des valeurs culturelles du monde noir, que nous appelons « plagiat culturel ».

Introduction

Jean de La Fontaine, who became famous for his *Fables*, is said to have merely adapted the texts of Aesop, a Greek poet of African origin who lived around 700 BC. This is nothing new. But to most of our contemporaries, it might sound like an unfounded assertion. This is because, for a long time, the glory given to La Fontaine has imposed itself on historical memory as doxa. The almost forgotten history of the fables has long been the preserve of a few academic specialists. Perhaps it's time to give back to Aesop what belongs to Aesop. But who really is Aesop?

Lilian Thuram's book (2010, p. 15) sheds light on this subject: "*Ésope, selon les études les plus récentes, aurait été un Nubien emmené comme esclave en Phrygie et ses fables s'inspiraient sans doute des contes de sa région*". Thuram's message has an anti-racist purpose: by claiming that Aesop was an African from Nubia, it aims to help young people of African descent living in the West, where education is guided by the Hegelian view that Africa is a continent without history, and that Africans have contributed nothing to the progress of humanity. Aesop is mentioned in the book as one of the many figures with whom young black people can identify, as the Greek poet brought to Europe the highly prized literary genre of the fable. In view of the references cited in the book, this discourse is in line with the logic of the "African Renaissance", which advocates a deracialization of human history. This discourse is increasingly relayed on social networks by African voices, who denounce La Fontaine's *Fables* as plagiarism, better as a frustration of cultural heritage, and demand recognition of its true origin.

Such a claim may or may not be taken seriously, depending on the ideological point of view adopted, but it is important to examine it from a scientific perspective. This article is the result of interdisciplinary exchanges between a specialist in Philology and a specialist in Comparative Literature. These exchanges have helped to clarify the fundamental concepts of "fable" and "plagiarism". The fable is defined by the *Dictionnaire du littéraire* (Aron et al, 2008, p. 221, 459) as "*mise en scène d'animaux, d'être inanimés ou d'hommes dans un récit généralement bref qui renferme un enseignement moral, appelée encore apologue*". As for plagiarism, it is defined as "*œuvre faite d'emprunts, une reproduction non avouée d'une œuvre originale ou d'une partie de cette dernière*". The authors explain that Plagiarism is not something whose nature is easy to determine, especially as it is an intertextual category and therefore a more or less avowed driving force behind creation. The task becomes even more complex when this concept is applied to the fable which is originally an oral genre and whose traceability is consequently difficult to establish, moreover, in the context of the 17th century, where the status of author and the notion of "reproduction" are not the same as today.

The core question of the analysis is, therefore, to what extent the accusation of plagiarism in the specific case of Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables* can be justified. More significantly, how the scientific perspective could take up this debate without submitting to ideology, but without denying its importance either? As theoretical tools, we have drawn on the thesis of historical falsificationism as elaborated by Cheikh Anta Diop, Martin Bernal and their epigones, as well as on reflections that have

been conducted in recent decades on the polemics surrounding the plagiarism with which certain African writers are accused in relation to Western masterpieces.

The first part of the article places the debate in the broader perspective of the relationship between imitation and plagiarism. It contextualizes La Fontaine's writing project and relativizes the accusation of plagiarism, while noting its historical relevance. The second part examines the process of ideologizing the debate on the origins of the fable, from Aesop's time through La Fontaine's to the present day. It situates this process within the general problem of the "falsification of history", focusing on the concept of "cultural plagiarism".

1 - La Fontaine's fables and the problem of imitation in literature

The accusation of plagiarism levelled against La Fontaine can only be properly examined if we first elucidate the notion of plagiarism, noting its complexity, its implications and the terms associated with it. This clarification will be decisive for the rest of the demonstration. This section will trace the lexical and semantic evolution of the concept, and untangle the often confusing relationship between plagiarism and imitation.

1.1 - Evolution of the concept of plagiarism

In his book, Thuram judiciously avoids using the word "plagiarism". Referring to Aesop, he writes that Aesop "*il laisse cent vingt-sept fables en prose que reprend en partie, au XVIIe siècle, Jean de La Fontaine, fables que nous apprenons tous à l'école et dont les morales en vers surgissent encore à la mémoire*". Thuram goes on to say that "*les fables d'Ésope étaient en prose et concises, La Fontaine les mit en vers*". The terms "*reprise*" and "*mis en vers*" do not imply the same moral judgment as the term "*plagiat*", used, for example, in this video by the group "Afrique Résurrection", which has gone viral on social networks, presenting Jean de la Fontaine as a plagiarist of Aesop. At the start of the video, the columnist asserts: "*On en a tous entendu parler, peut-être même que toi on t'a obligé d'apprendre une de ces soi-disant fables à l'école, mais laisse-moi te dire, il s'agissait d'un gros plagiat. Ce forceur de La Fontaine, il n'a pas seulement pris une fable, trois fables, dix fables qu'il a copiées. C'est des centaines de fables qu'il a carrément recopiées à l'identique, et qu'il a servis comme ça à son public pour se faire un nom dans la littérature*". Echoing Lilian Thuram's book to which she refers her listeners, she goes further to apply the label of plagiarism to La Fontaine's borrowings.

Yet, from a technical point of view, such a judgment is not self-evident. Hélène Maurel-Indart, in her article "*Le plagiat littéraire : une contradiction en soi?*" writes: "*le terme même de plagiat littéraire mérite une explication, voire une justification*" (2008, p. 55). According to the Gaffiot Latin-French dictionary (2000, p.1201), the word "*plagiat*" was first used in the French language in 1697, and derives from "*plagiaire*", another noun derived from the Latin "*plagiarius*". A plagiarist is "*celui qui vole les esclaves d'autrui ou qui achète ou qui vend comme esclave une personne libre*". Christian Vanderdorpe (1992) gives details of the evolution of this word as follows:

Le terme "plagiarius" pouvait désigner, dans la Rome antique, soit un voleur d'esclave soit quelqu'un qui vendait comme esclave une personne libre. Martial est le premier à avoir appliqué le terme dans un sens figuré pour désigner quelqu'un qui s'était approprié ses vers (1, 52, 9). En raison de cette origine substantive, l'action de s'approprier les textes et les idées d'autrui sera longtemps désignée en français par une périphrase construite à l'aide du nom d'agent, plagiaire (attesté dès 1560), et ce n'est que plus tard qu'apparaîtront les mots désignant l'action correspondante sous une forme nominale, plagiat (1697), ou verbale (1801). Par ailleurs, on hésitera longtemps entre plagiarisme et plagiat. Si le premier est encore l'entrée utilisée par L'Encyclopédie de Diderot et d'Alembert (1757), Pierre Larousse opte, dans son Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle (1874), pour le mot plagiat, et contribue à discréditer plagiarisme à la fois par une restriction de son sens et une disqualification formelle: "plagiarisme: un plagiat érigé en procédé littéraire. Barbarisme créé par l'abbé de Richesource, inventeur du procédé". Depuis cette condamnation, le terme a disparu des dictionnaires.

But the word has evolved to mean the person who exploits another's text for his or her own gain. In today's vocabulary, the plagiarist is no longer someone who steals someone else's child or slave, but someone who steals someone else's ideas and texts for their own glory and fame.

The dictionary *Robert* defines plagiarism in relation to the plagiarist: it characterizes plagiarism as “*l'action du plagiaire*”, and specifies that it is “*le vol littéraire*”.

As for *Le dictionnaire du littéraire*, it considers that “*le plagiat est l'emprunt par un auteur d'un fragment significatif du texte ou de la pensée d'un autre auteur [sans signaler la source]*”. As such, plagiarism differs from quotation, pastiche and parody.

Le dictionnaire de l'Académie française provides an equally important clarification: “*Le plagiat est un délit puni par les tribunaux*”. Seen in this light, plagiarism is a legal issue, raising the question of intellectual property and counterfeiting.

Under French law, plagiarism is interpreted as a special case of counterfeiting. The *Code de la propriété intellectuelle* (chapitre V : Dispositions pénales, Article L335-2) defines plagiarism as “*Toute édition d'écrits, de composition musicale, de dessin, de peinture ou de toute autre production, imprimée ou gravée en entier ou en partie, au mépris des lois et règlements relatifs à la propriété des auteurs, est une contrefaçon et toute contrefaçon est un délit*”.

The word that comes up in such a debate is “counterfeiting”, which is synonymous with “plagiarism”. In fact, according to the *Institut National de la Propriété Intellectuelle*, counterfeiting is defined as the total or partial reproduction, imitation or use of an intellectual property right without the authorization of its owner. Such rights may include trademarks, models, patents, copyrights, software, integrated circuits or plant varieties. As such, plagiarism is the theft, in whole or in part, of another's work, and is therefore similar to certain literary practices that have been well known since antiquity, including imitation and its variants.

However, imitation poses a problem when we consider that it is the foundation of literary creation. As Maurel-Indart (*op. cit.*) noted, even if imitation is part of an act of counterfeiting, it seems to be tolerated in literature, since imitation is the foundation of literature. Thus, plagiarism and imitation should be considered as two very distinct phenomena, the limits of which must be clarified.

1.2 - Plagiarism and imitation

According to *Le Dictionnaire du littéraire* (2010, p. 574), plagiarism is the borrowing by one author of a significant fragment of the text or thought of another. This definition has its shortcomings. We speak of plagiarism when the borrower does not indicate his sources and passes off as the original author of the text or thought, the text he has fraudulently copied from another author. In the case of La Fontaine, he indicates at the beginning of each text the source of his inspiration or imitation.

The notion of plagiarism, as we understand it today, is a modern one, since in antiquity and the Middle Ages, plagiarism was not an offence; it was even considered fashionable. Imitating the Ancients and following in their footsteps was an institutionalized virtue. Thus, imitating the Bible and the lives of saints was considered a milestone in literary creation.

Indeed in the Middle Ages, as Aesop's time, oral culture was dominant over scriptural culture, and it was with the advent of the printing press in the 15th century that we witnessed a new era of literary production based on imitative reproduction. Reproduction was encouraged, enabling the dissemination of texts and ideas that were part of the community's heritage. Anonymity was widespread, for the simple reason that what scribes and copyists reproduced did not belong to them. They were helping to safeguard the community's heritage. As a result, everything written was in the public domain, and the perception of knowledge at the time was based on Seneca's (1861, p. 36) idea

that : “ *Tout ce qui a été bien dit par quelque autre est à moi*”. Yet this reproduction was not a pale copy of what existed, but the result of work on the original document.

According to the 13th-century Franciscan St. Bonaventura (n.d., quoted in Eisenstein, 1979, p.121), there were four ways of making a book at the time:

- One person could write down the work of others, changing and adding nothing to it, in which case he was simply called a 'scribe' (scriptor).
- Another writes the work of others, adding things that do not belong to him, and is called a compiler.
- Another writes both his own and others' work, but with others' work first and his own for explanatory purposes; he is called a commentator.
- Another writes his work and that of others, but with his work in the foreground and that of others as confirmatory; such a man was to be called an 'author' (Auctor).

When we analyze these four situations, they were accepted in the Middle Ages as normal literary practices and suffered no moral or penal condemnation. It was advisable to reproduce ancient models and follow in their footsteps.

In the 16th century, Ronsard wanted to write the *Franciade* on the model of the *Aeneid*, an ancient epic novel written by the poet Virgil. Joachim du Bellay devoted part of his *Défense et illustration de langue française* to imitation. He argues that imitation should be a means of enhancing the value of the French language. He proposes that imitation should not be the recopying of any text from the past, but “*l'imitation des meilleurs auteurs grecs et latins*” (1549, p.25). Imitation has a precise role: to use Antiquity to lay the foundations of a new literature that was in its infancy.

In the 17th century, Corneille, Racine and Molière found their inspiration in Greco-Roman mythology. It was precisely in the 17th century that the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns erupted. This controversy lasted almost thirty years, with Charles Perrault arguing that the century of Louis XIV was superior to that of Augustus, and questioning the superiority of the Ancients. It is interesting to note that this controversy was the genesis of the criminalization of imitation, in its modern form of plagiarism. Which side was Jean de la Fontaine on, given that the quarrel was taking place in his own time?

In their evocatively-titled article “*La Fontaine 'Ancien' ou 'Moderne'?*”, Anne Zali and Danièle Thibault (2024) show that Jean de la Fontaine was fundamentally a supporter of the Ancients, as evidenced by his “*Epître à Huet*” (February 5, 1687), in which he reaffirms his doctrine of imitation as the best way to get rid of the excesses of preciosity by returning to “*l'art de la simple nature*”. As the French poet puts it: “*Et, faute d'admirer les Grecs et les Romains, / On s'égaré en voulant tenir d'autres chemins*”. But at the same time, he claims the right to free himself from his models: “*Souvent à marcher seul j'ose nie hasarder. / On me verra toujours pratiquer cet usage : / Mon imitation n'est pas un esclavage*”.

La Fontaine illustrates this claim in his Fables. Rather than slavishly copying the fables of the Ancients, notably Aesop, he worked on both form and content, adapting the texts to the literary requirements of his time and to socio-political realities. As such, he must be classified as « *Auctor* ». As Doucey shows in his preface to the *Fables* (La Fontaine, 2006), Jean de la Fontaine's fables do not depict the realities of Antiquity ; he merely uses Aesop and other's fables as pretext to represent the realities of the 17th century and French society under the reign of Louis XIV. From this point of view, La Fontaine's *Fables* are to be considered as imitations, but not plagiarism, since the author goes beyond plagiarism through thematic appropriation and the aesthetic work he carries out on the borrowed texts. The question of plagiarism will only arise if we situate this process on the ideological terrain of cultural conflicts.

2 - From Aesop to La Fontaine: ideological appropriations of the plagiarism debate

From an ideological point of view, the accusation of plagiarism can be justified to the extent that it is not positioned at an individual but at a social level. African historiography is part of this logic when it claims the African origin of Aesop. Such a claim echoes the rejection or marginalization of the ancient in the European discourse.

2.1 - Aesop and the West: Celebrated Genius, Persecuted Memory

The attitude of European thought towards Aesop is ambiguous. Although the poet is perceived as a genius of speech who brought the fable to European civilization, the images that are given of him are paradoxically demeaning, to say the least. This position applies to three aspects of the life of the ancient fabulist which should be addressed before looking at his work.

The first aspect addressed is about his existence. Many testimonies collected from writers and scholiasts such as Heraclides, Aristophanes, Plutarch or Suidas would tend to make Aesop an imaginary author. Aesop would be to the fable what Homer was to lyric poetry: one of these legendary characters with distant or unknown origins, who crossed the Mediterranean world. But, as Émile Chambry (1927) points out, these testimonies cannot be taken seriously because they have no documentary value compared to the authoritative writings of Herodotus: not only was Herodotus a historian, but also "*il était, par le temps, assez rapproché d'Ésope pour que son information fondée sur la tradition orale ou les écrits d'un devancier [...] puisse nous inspirer confiance, et il était assez scrupuleux sur la vérité historique pour que son témoignage paraisse recevable, même à la critique moderne*". Indeed, Herodotus, who described the inhabitants of ancient Egypt as being black (Diop 1954, p. 35), states in Book II, Chapter 134 of his *Histoires*, that Aesop lived under King Amasis of Egypt and that the fabulist was a fellow slave of the courtesan Rhodopis.

The second aspect is that of Aesop's origin. Herodotus, who was almost contemporary with the poet, did not address this aspect probably because it was obvious to him that he was African. Most authors agree that Aesop is not of Greek origin. However, three origins are postulated: Thracian, Lydian and Phrygian. It is Heraclides of Pontus who first asserts that Aesop was Thracian by birth, but writing two hundred years after Aesop's death, the exegete gives very imprecise explanations. Aristophanes ("Birds", 471) suggests the same origin, but he limited himself to copying Heraclides. On the other hand, those who think Aesop's origin is Lydia explain their viewpoint by the fact that he was supposed to be the slave of a Lydian named Xanthos, before being freed by a certain Iadmon, his second master also mentioned by Herodotus. But it is the hypothesis of the Phrygian origin of Aesop that has been most widely reported in writings. Authors such as Phaedrus, Dio Chrysostom, Lucian, Aulus Gellius, Maximus of Tyre, Aelian, Himerius, Stobaeus, Suidas who have taken it up even dispute Aesop's city of origin: some speak of Kotyaium and others of Amorium. However, neither of them know much about it, as Chambry notes, who concludes that "*en somme toutes ces traditions ne reposant que sur des conjectures, il serait vain de s'arrêter à l'une d'elles : mieux vaut se résigner à ignorer ce qu'on ne peut savoir*".

The life of Aesop, as it would have been told by an authentic source from antiquity, has not reached us. And as Chambry also observes, "*on connaît l'essentiel de cette vie ou plutôt de ce roman par la traduction libre qu'en a fait La Fontaine*". And yet the French poet who writes with a gap of 2000 years does not carry out a critical work on the various existing documentary sources. He only translates an oriental manuscript entitled "*Vie d'Ésope*" which, according to Chambry, is a fake attributed to a certain Planude whose existence is much more recent. This manuscript is made up of superpositions of stories which associate "*à un vieux fond relatif à l'esclavage d'Ésope et à sa mort, l'histoire d'Ahikar, qui serait de la main d'un byzantin*". Thus, at the beginning of his Aesop's biography, La Fontaine acknowledges that "*Nous n'avons rien d'assuré touchant la naissance d'Homère et d'Ésope : à peine même sait-on ce qui leur est arrivé de plus remarquable*". This does not prevent him from titling the text "*La vie d'Ésope le Phrygien*". And although this story is written in a more anecdotal than realistic style, La Fontaine emphatically

asserts the Phrygianⁱ origine of Aesop. This leads one to wonder whether La Fontaine's intention in preceding his *Fables* with this biography was not to impose the phrygian thesis. Anyway, it is clear that La Fontaine's reproduction of this biography, far from being innocuous, is ideologically oriented.

The third aspect adressed in the European discours is about Aesop's physical appearance, his status as a slave, and his death. His status as a slave, as mentioned by Herodotus, is explained by the domination of the Greek empire and the fall of ancient Egypt around the sixth century BCE. It was then that Aesop was allegedly captured and made a slave with the wealthy courtesan Rhodopis.ⁱⁱ Since Egypt was dominated by the Greeks, the ancient Egyptians and other Africans of the Nile Valley were called indistinctly Ethiopians (Aethiops means "blacks" in Greek) or Nubians. It was a shared idea among the Greeks that all those who were not of Greek origin were considered slaves. It is likely that what Aesop himself writes in his Fable No. 11 entitled "Le nègre" (The negro) is an allusion to his own situation:

Un homme avait acheté un nègre, s'imaginant que sa couleur venait de la négligence du précédent propriétaire. L'ayant emmené chez lui, il le soumit à tous les savonnages, il essaya tous les lavages pour le blanchir ; mais il ne put modifier sa couleur, et il le rendit malade à force de soins. La fable fait voir que le naturel persiste tel qu'il s'est montré d'abord.

In his Aesop's biography, Jean de La Fontaine mentions the anger of King Nectanebo (the last pharaoh of Black Egypt) when the latter has been told that King Lycerus, on the basis of a scheme by a certain Ennus, ordered one of his officers named Hermippus to put Aesop to death. The black king's anger can only be understood in light of the poet's origins. La Fontaine even reports that "*Ésope était le plus laid de ses contemporains*ⁱⁱⁱ ; *il avait la tête en pointe, le nez camard, le cou très court, les lèvres saillantes, le teint noir, d'où son nom qui signifie nègre ; ventru, cagneux, voûté, il surpassait en laideur le Thersite d'Homère ; mais, chose pire encore, il était lent à s'exprimer et sa parole était confuse et inarticulée.*" (Chambry, *op. cit.*) This speech disorder attributed to Aesop is rather curious, for he was said to be popular and listened storyteller who seduced peoples and kings alike wherever he went. Likewise, Plutarch's treatise *Le banquet des sept sages*, the Greek author even makes Aesop an ambassador of Croesus and a friend of Solon, who is also portrayed as a brilliant orator intervening in the assembly of the Samians. Thus Aesop is depicted by others as a slave doomed to the vileness of social condition and who would have been saved from anonymity only by the ingenuity and magnanimity of the Greeks. The reconstruction of his story taken up by Thuram (2012, p. 16, 17) resolves these contradisctions :

Or Ésope, selon les études les plus récentes, aurait été un Nubien emmené comme esclave en Phrygie et ses fables s'inspiraient sans doute des contes de sa région. De tout temps, l'esclave a résisté, pas seulement par des actions spectaculaires à la Spartacus, mais par une rébellion quotidienne, culturelle. Il a développé une stratégie intellectuelle raffinée [...] Grâce à ses fables, il trouve sa dignité et se redresse [...] Lorsque son maître meurt, Ésope est affranchi. À peine libre, il retrouve la parole. Il se rend auprès de Crésus pour une mission diplomatique, qu'il réussit en usant d'une fable. Il se met ensuite au service du « roi de Babylone », qui prend grand plaisir à ses énigmes et à ses historiettes.

As the stories of Aesop's heinous^{iv} execution by the inhabitants of Delphi show, the fabulist was victim of visceral hatred from his contemporaries during his lifetime. It is likely that the fallacious arguments

ⁱ The word "Phrygian" appears twenty-one times in the twenty-eight-page text (for the 1678 edition) or thirty-one pages (for the 1874 edition), with three occurrences in the sarcastic form "our Phrygian"

ⁱⁱ As Herodotes (cited by Chambry) writes: "En outre ils ignorent que Rhodopis vivait sous le règne d'Amasis, et non sous celui de Mycéros ; elle vécut en effet nombre d'années après les rois qui ont laissé ces pyramides. Elle était Thrace d'origine, esclave d'Admon, fils du samien Héphaestopolis ; elle fut compagne de servitude d'Ésope le fabuliste".

ⁱⁱⁱ Note here the use of the hyperbolic superlative which shows that we are not facing a portrait but a caricature.

^{iv} Heraclides says that he "was put to death for a sacrilegious theft, a golden cup having been seized in his luggage." Plutarch presents him no longer as a slave but as an ambassador of King Croesus. The latter entrusted him with gold for the Delphians, but Aesop, having arrived in Delphi, mocked them; "he acquitted himself well of the

put forward to justify this ignominious act are intended to hide a racism he endured. The fate reserved for the memory and work of this illustrious man does not escape this identity dimension that must be taken into account in the debate on plagiarism.

2.2 - Fabulist or plagiarist: arguments in favor of the African claim

When Jean de La Fontaine speaks of his vocation as a fabulist, he remains very modest, acknowledging his debt to Aesop. Thus, in the preface to the first edition of 1668 (p. 2), he writes: "*A peine les fables qu'on attribue à Ésope virent le jour, que Socrate trouva à propos de les habiller des livrées des Muses*" La Fontaine considers himself not as a creator but as a simple adapter. Thus, when speaking of the Aesop fables that he chose to adapt, he states: "*J'ai choisi véritablement les meilleures, c'est-à-dire celles qui m'ont semblé telles*" In this approach, the author initially appears uncertain about the quality and relevance of his enterprise: "*Quoi qu'il en arrive, on m'aura toujours obligation, soit que ma témérité ait été heureuse, et que je ne me sois point trop écarté du chemin qu'il fallait tenir, soit que j'aie seulement excité les autres à mieux faire.*" Then he reassures himself that he is following in the footsteps of the ancients such as Socrates, Phaedrus, Avienus or contemporaries who also adopted the practice of imitation. With regard to the latter, he shows a humility that is almost excessive: "*moi, qui n'ai pas les perfections du langage comme ils les ont eues, je ne la puis élever à un si haut point*". The author's prudence is not only expressed in the preliminary texts, but also in the fables, notably in the two concluding verses of the fable entitled "*Le pâtre et le lion*": "*C'est ainsi que l'a dit le principal auteur / Passons à son imitateur*" (La Fontaine 1668, 1, IV).

These paratextual and even textual precautions were common practice at the time of La Fontaine: one of the functions of the preface was precisely to allow the imitator to explain the reasons for the choice of the model, the approach adopted, the modifications made, thus paradoxically affirming his originality. The French fabulist does not just talk about the work he is exploiting; he also talks about his model but in terms that are not complimentary. He depicts Aesop as a foreigner and as a slave (the word appears nineteen times under his pen). Such a description can only impact the perception one will have of Aesop and his work. In this regard, it will be noted that Aesop's talent is scorned with a subtle condescension. La Fontaine even seems to cast doubt on whether Aesop is the true author of the fables "attributed to him" (to use La Fontaine's own words). Moreover, he suggests that Aesop's fables in themselves would have no aesthetic value had it not been for the orientations of Greek predecessors such as Socrates, Phaedrus, Avienus or Quintilian, whom La Fontaine seems to consider as pioneers of the genre and his true models.

By publishing his "biography" of Aesop, La Fontaine reveals to his contemporaries an Author from Antiquity whose fame has been "*longtemps obscurci par l'oubli*" (Chambry, 1927). But, as we suggested above, this is an orchestrated oblivion that is only the consequence of the treatment that the ancient poet suffered during his lifetime, then his memory and his work after him. How can we explain such hostility towards this genius who revealed the fable to Greek civilization, if not that he has been victim of chauvinism and Xenophobia, characteristics of all dominant civilizations, and which were very strong among the Greeks? This ambivalent attitude of Western consciousness towards the memory of the poet and his work explains this "voluntary oblivion" to which he was doomed for centuries.

It was the same in La Fontaine's time as in the Greek era. In the 17th century, when slavery was booming, it could not have been otherwise: presenting a "slave" as a literary model and the paragon of the wisdom of the Greek civilization, which France claimed as one of its references, would have caused

sacrifice, but sent the money back to Sardis, considering that these people did not deserve the king's favors. But they combined against him an accusation of sacrilege and put him to death, throwing him from the famous rock called Hyampaeum." Suidas, for his part, does not retain these facts, but specifies "it was against all justice that the Delphians had killed Aesop." Therefore an oracle condemned them to pay the price of Aesop's blood, a price which was given to a certain Iadmon, a descendant of the third generation of the first master who was also called Iadmon.

a scandal, and even more so if it were a black slave like those who were captured in Africa. As Lilian Thuram (2010, p. 16) rightly notes, "*La leçon que l'on nous a enseignée à l'école est héritée des préjugés des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles. Il n'était alors pas pensable aux yeux de la plupart des hommes des Lumières, dont la société vivait des revenus de l'esclavage, que la Grèce ait pu être métissée d'Européens et de colonisateurs africains*" We can then understand why La Fontaine chose to highlight the Phrygian identity, even though he claims that nothing is certain concerning the origin of Aesop. By using this subterfuge to restore the reputation of the fable for his audience, La Fontaine thus participated in this enterprise of whitewashing the genre, by identity substitution.

This process that we have called "cultural plagiarism" goes beyond the artistic project formulated by Joachim Du Bellay who called for the imitation of the ancients to revive a degenerate French literature. It also goes beyond the conception of plagiarism often denounced by Western critics among African writers such as Sembène Ousmane, Yambo Ouloguem or Calixte Beyala, and which made Richard Serrano (2001) say:

Je me suis demandé si la littérature francophone d'Afrique a utilisé le même type d'emprunt en se fabriquant, un type d'emprunt qui exige la destruction de l'intégrité d'une œuvre de laquelle on extrait ce qu'on désire pour créer quelque chose de nouveau. Malgré cette destruction, on peut reconnaître les éléments de provenance antérieure qui ne sont jamais tout à fait assimilés. C'est bien une espèce de bricolage et pas exactement une synthèse.

Cultural plagiarism as applied to La Fontaine's Fables should not be seen simply through an artistic prism because it involves culture and history. It is therefore relevant to approach it from the concept of "falsification" in the sense of Cheikh Anta Diop (1954, p. 59-140). In this case, it involves exploiting the cultural values of a people, while denying their ability to produce them. The process takes place in three phases: first, the original work is idealized and then mocked, then it is distorted and then forgotten, and finally it is readapted and then replaced. In the case of Aesop's fables, the first phase, that of idealization and derision, dates back to antiquity; it is the one that made Aesop's work famous while rumor was busy mocking the man and vilifying his style. The second phase takes place until the end of the Middle Ages, when the author is relegated to the scrap heap of history, as Chambry observes. The third phase, which takes place in Modern Times, was inaugurated by Jean de La Fontaine and widely relayed by posterity.

If La Fontaine, in choosing to adapt the Aesopian fables, can have the excuse of having simply complied with a literary practice established in his time, and especially of having taken care to reveal his sources, this is not the case for the specialists of his work who have worked over several generations to conceal them. A textual genetics study such as that carried out by Philippe Cornuaille and Alain Riffaud on the original editions of La Fontaine's *Fables* made it possible to observe how the references to Aesop in La Fontaine's *Fables* have been progressively hidden in the successive re-editions, illustrated adaptations intended for young audiences in various media as well as the counterfeits, of this work. This process can nevertheless be identified from two observations we made when considering a number of editions.

Concerning the evolution of La Fontaine's status as an author, two observations deserve to be made.

The first observation is linked to the successive titles given to Jean de La Fontaine's masterpiece. An overview of these titles show the variability of the positions adopted by the author and those that will be attributed to him over the course of the editions. These positions can be articulated in three phases.

- The first phase is where La Fontaine is presented – presents himself – not as an author but as an adapter. This is the case in the original editions. Thus, on the cover page of the first edition (1668) where we can read: "*Fables choisies, mises en vers par M. de La Fontaine, et par lui revues,*

augmentées et corrigées". The title is quite long, but it has the merit of emphasizing the functions of the adaptor, namely: choice of fables, putting into verse, reworking, augmentation and correction.

- In the second phase, La Fontaine is introduced as author, but the title suggests that his work is basing on a pre-existing corpus of texts of which he gives his version. The 1874 edition belongs, which cover page bears the title: "*Fables de J. de La Fontaine*", with the subtitle "*illustrées de 120 gravures*", whereas the title page bears the title: "*Fables de La Fontaine*", followed by the author's name "Jean de La Fontaine".
- The third phase is where La Fontaine is placed in the full status of author, the role of choice being reserved for the publisher. An exemple of this series is the edition of 2006 edition, which bears the title "*Fables*" preceded by the author's name "Jean de La Fontaine", and followed by the subtitle: "*Choix établi et préfacé par Bruno Doucey*".

The second observation concerns the preliminary texts. The choice that Jean de La Fontaine made to place at the head of the collection a "biography" of Aesop and a preface in which he presents himself as an adapter will be gradually abandoned by successive editors. This choice made by the publishers leads them to justify the status of creator attributed to La Fontaine. As much as La Fontaine needed to invoke the authority of his predecessors to legitimize his enterprise, the absence of these authority figures would lead the preface writers to argue about originality the French fabulist. This task will be all the more difficult since certain details of the Fables do not fit in with the author's natural living environment. Doucey links La Fontaine's vocation as fabulist to his administrative position as "maître des eaux et forêts" which supposedly predisposes him to passion and a good knowledge of the animal world. The preface writer nevertheless notes that the French poet did not escape certain errors linked to the lack of knowledge of the animal world that he depicts.

L'excellent peintre animalier qu'est La Fontaine a parfois commis des erreurs. Sans être entomologiste, chacun de nous sait qu'une cigale ne « chante » pas, qu'elle ne se nourrit pas de « grains », de « mouches ou de vermisseaux », mais de la sève des arbres. Mieux encore, qu'elle ne saurait venir « crier famine / Chez la fourmi sa voisine » au cours de l'hiver puisqu'elle meurt à la fin de l'été. Ces erreurs ne sont pas toujours imputables à l'état des connaissances scientifiques du XVIIe siècle.

The question arises as to what causes these errors. Doucey considers that these are literary artifices and deduces that these artifices participate in the very essence of the fable which is the genre of play, trickery and deception (in the etymological sense of fabula = lying story) articulated for educational purpose. La Fontaine aimed not at the accuracy of the information but at the lesson to be learned. It is for this purpose that he manages to bring together in the same fable animals that are geographically distant like the lion, the elephant, the bear, the tiger, etc. (see for example "*La besace*" or "*Les animaux malades de la peste*"). In fact, La Fontaine is neither the writer of the rural France, nor the heir to the European Middle Ages that people want to make of him. He is a free spirit who has chosen to track down in his audacious quest this treasure buried in the catacombs of history that are the fables. Even if Aesop is not his only reference, the Greek poet represents for La Fontaine the original way to the genre, like a lighthouse towards which the sailor heads, convinced that this call from afar indicates a certain path.

Conclusion

La Fontaine cannot be considered a plagiarist in the strict sense of the term. He lived at a time when imitation of the ancients was established as a rule of art. As Tynianov pointed out, the concept of literature is not fixed, but evolving. Accusing La Fontaine of plagiarism without taking this fact into account is like reading past literature from a contemporary viewpoint, and to brush aside the genius of an entire century of literature whose painful beginnings helped to forge the modern conception of literature. Moreover, if there is one person who has forcefully asserted that La Fontaine was inspired

by Aesop, it is La Fontaine himself. It could not be said better than the author, and it would be inappropriate to consider as a plagiarist an author who, in explaining his approach, admits with such clarity (honesty?) his debt.

However, the postulated connection between La Fontaine's work and the traditional African practice of the Fable cannot be taken as a figment of the imagination. Even if the creativity of the author and the diversity of his sources have been put to work to produce undeniably multicultural fables, the African anchoring remains perceptible; It is a challenge to demonstrate this, but this project remains very relevant.

It is not a matter of denying the genius of La Fontaine, but of reframing the Western discourse that attributes to him, often implicitly, the paternity of the genre. African criticism attacks the ideological treatment of the question in the European discourse that seems to appropriate the tradition of the fable, and to glorify the disciple while vilifying the master. Far from being part of the logic of the conflict of cultures, plot theory or the fashionable phenomenon of council culture, African historiography postulates the recognition of the major contribution of Africa in the history of the fable.

This reframing has a double stake. It aims to deconstruct the discourse of the imperialist Europe which, imbued with its power, has relegated to a kind of collective amnesia the intercultural exchanges that have marked the history of peoples on both sides of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. But it is above a research avenue for the African scholars who may be interested in reappropriating this genre and enrich it based on practices that are older than La Fontaine and Aesop and still alive in African traditions, for the benefit of education and creativity.

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