CHAPTER I

Introduction

> We emphasize . . . that we are not interested in the influence of
> separate individual authors, individual works, individual themes,
> ideas, images – what interests us is precisely the influence of the
> generic tradition itself which was transmitted through the individ-
> ual authors . . . A genre is always the same and yet not the same, old
> and new simultaneously.
>
> (Bakhtin 1984: 159, 106)
>
> Examples are best Precepts . . .
>
> (Ogilby 1651: title-page)

This study will explore relationships between different aspects and
manifestations of the term 'fable', in particular in the period between
the English Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century and the start of
the French revolutionary wars near the end of the eighteenth century.
Its strategy is double. On the one hand, it puts forward a body of
evidence which suggests that literary fable exhibits interesting stable,
epochal, or transhistorical qualities as a genre – hence the first quotation
above. On the other, it hopes to show that many of the individual
writers of fable in English in this period were aware of these qualities,
and employed them to develop a coherent but idiosyncratic literary
mode, always highly responsive to its historical and cultural moment,
which is as *considerable*, as dynamic, as witty, and capable of as much
mischief as any other form of literary art in the period – hence the
second quotation. The intention is, then, to present something between
a history and a poetics of fable.

These are unusual contentions and procedures. Academic readers at
large have not yet, despite several recent attempts, been provoked into
admitting that fable in English is a viable literary mode. No current
work on fable has enough confidence in its subject to venture more than
a toe into the murky waters that lie post-1740: most stop with Gay, in
either 1727 (his first series) or 1738 (his second). And the notion that the

study of fable must involve interrelationships, which is the basic conten-
tion – indeed the crux – here, is a nut almost wholly resistant to critical
teeth. Ask literary historians who deal with this culture what 'fable' is,
and an informed reply will come in three quite separate parts.

There is firstly the verse fable, widespread, diverse, popular, and
well-respected in its time, but now felt to be essentially minor. The two
best general studies of the period's poetry, Eric Rothstein's *Restoration and
Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (1981) and Margaret Doody's *The Daring Muse*
(1985) virtually ignore verse fable, with very brief discussion of examples.
Despite Vinton Dearing's description of a 'resurgence of scholarly
interest' (Gay 1974: 2, 620) in Gay's *Fables*, a specialist volume of essays
on Gay (Lewis and Wood 1988) could manage a total of only thirty-four
lines on his two collections. When other major writers use verse fables,
these are usually seen (to quote Rachel Trickett on Cowper) as 'insignifi-
cant in relation to their major works' (Trickett 1983: 480). But the idea
that there could be any relation between Cowper's animal fables and his
other modes, and that these relations might have been legible to readers
even as late as the 1790s, is not canvassed.

The second element of the answer is that a fable, or moral fable, is a
prose fiction; in particular, a non-realistic fiction with philosophical
qualities, such as *Rasselas* or Voltaire's *Candide* – a *conte philosophique* or
'ouvrage qui dit plus qu'il ne semble dire' ('work which says more than it
seems to say': Voltaire 1972: 61), as Voltaire has it in the dedicatory letter
in *Zadig* (1748). Connections with verse fable are not felt to exist, beyond
the broad point that each form works by using the representation of a
specific action or set of events to convey a general 'truth' of some kind.
Jayne Lewis's recent survey of many of the Aesopian aspects of fable in
this period, *The English Fable*, mentions that there are such things as
'Aesopically inflected novels' in the 1740s, but chooses not to pursue this,
perhaps restrained by Lewis's post-Watt view of the novel as subject to
'realist literary imperatives [which] robbed fictions as conspicuous and
self-ironizing as Aesop's of much of their authority' (Lewis 1996: 19,
186). But even 'realistic' novels of the 1770s could use fable in a self-
ironizing mode.

The third element is the meaning which might provide connections
but apparently cannot. 'Fable' is the distressingly vague, notoriously
hydra-headed technical term which, via a Latin translation of Aristotle's
word *muthos* (henceforward: *mythos)* in the *Poetics*, can indicate the plot or
narrative action of a tragedy or epic poem, and, by extension, plot in
any form of narrative. Other meanings abound. Cicero divided narra-

tive into three classes, Fabula, Historia, Argumentum, and defined
Fabula as a non-realistic story. This usage and the previous one gave
fable a life both as a genre in itself – non-realistic story – and a
constituent part of many genres, plot. Sadly, this did not make for clarity
of thought; and the problem was made worse by *fabula* being used more
loosely in Latin to mean both 'story' and 'fable'. Another problem is that
the English do not appear to *think*, or to have thought, about fable: the
only book dealing exclusively with the theory of fable in the eighteenth
century is Thomas Noel's *Theories of the Fable in the Eighteenth Century*,
which demonstrates that to declare a bias towards the theory of fable in
this period is to declare a strong bias towards the French and German
manifestations of the topic. The English have virtually no native tradi-
tion of formal fable-theory. As late as 1761 Dodsley's 'Essay on Fable',
'the first and only attempt at a thorough study of the genre in England',
(Noel 1975: 115) is still content to echo La Motte from forty years earlier,
and La Motte has his roots in Le Bossu's work in the 1670s. As in other
periods, the English like to make do with attitude and inventive practice
rather than theory: examples over precepts.

Sometimes 'fable' has moral/narrative overtones – a 'moral fable' or
apologue – but sometimes it is used to indicate specifically the part of a
narrative which does not include the end-moral, the epimythium. In
eighteenth-century models of literary probability, the fable (the story)
should *conduce to* the moral, draw the reading mind towards it, but does
not fully embody it. Or the fable – in a figure derived from La Fontaine's
clever revision of the Aristotelian dictum that 'the *Fable* or *Plot* [is] the
Soul of a *Tragedy*' (Rymer 1678: 4) – is the body of the story; the moral is
the soul, as it is (ideally) invisible and immaterial. Fable, as Jayne Lewis
points out before retreating to Aesopian ground, is 'polyvalent. It could
signify a lie, any "feign'd or devis'd discourse", a plot, a hieroglyph, a
parable, a myth' (Lewis 1996: 10). In the eighteenth century the word
could also be used loosely to cover all of the period's fiction: in 1783
James Beattie managed to discuss virtually every canonical novel of the
past eighty years under his siamese-twin headings of 'Fable' and 'Ro-
mance,' transferring himself quite unselfconsciously from discussion of
Aesopian fables, via 'a more extensive field of fable', to the 'MODERN
ROMANCE, or POETICAL PROSE FABLE' which is the fully-fledged novel
(Beattie 1783: 511, 518). The period's technical literary terms lag behind
its increasingly diverse practice, and the apparently naïve polytropism of
'fable' embarrasses and puzzles modern critics.

Such multifariousness can make browsing in 'fable' frustrating. Read-

ing the Garland Press's *Fable Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography* (ed.
Pack Carnes 1985) conveys the moral that 'fable' is the province of
folklorists: the secondary literature on modern literary fable is simply
not present. Mythographers use 'fable' or 'classical fable' to mean
something different again, the narrative mode of Greek, Latin, Scandi-
navian, and other myths about gods and supernatural heroes. Jane
Chance can use the phrase *Classical Fable* in the subtitle of her collection
of essays entitled *The Mythographic Art* (1990) but there is no indication in
the volume that 'fable' might mean anything but 'myth'. And then, as
Michel de Certeau points out in *The Mystic Fable*, the history of the
'spoken word [*parole*] . . . so closely bound to religious traditions' is often
spoken of by 'its scientific "examiners" and "observers"' as 'fable' (de
Certeau 1992: 12). French examiners, that is: the only English word to
retain the proper sense of the verb *to fable* – from *fari* and *fabulari*, to talk,
to hold discourse – into the modern period is *to confabulate.* Hence
Cowper's charming subtranslational joke at the start of his fable 'Pairing
Time Anticipated' (1792):

> I shall not ask Jean Jacques Rousseau
> If Birds confabulate or no:
> 'Tis clear that they were always able
> To hold discourse at least in fable.   (Cowper 1980–95: 3, 51)

'This term [fable] originally referred to the stories whose task it was to
symbolize a society' says de Certeau (1992: 12) with an airy inclusiveness,
and apparently reverting to the written word. Epic (the other term for
such stories), myth, fable, discourse as dialogue, all revolve together. But
technically, to fable may mean to hold discourse, and hence may
indicate the conversations of the 'two actors' themselves: what the Ant
says to the Grasshopper, and *vice versa.*

   Other studies quite properly become fascinated by the literary
fable's closeness to and illumination of its social, historical, and politi-
cal contexts. Annabel Patterson stresses the combative nature of seven-
teenth-century political fables in her *Fables of Power* (1991); Jayne
Lewis's book is partly designed as a riposte, widening the area of
interest to highlight fable's interests in the politics of representation,
and focusing on fable's capacity for 'reactive mediation' (Lewis 1996:
3, 5, 12, etc.) between different political and representational positions.
This kind of breadth is certainly necessary if the central grounds and
functions of fable are to be properly understood, but there are as many
problems inherent in arguments about the mediative powers of fable

as there are in limiting fable's interests in power to the narrowly
political.

Such multiple contexts and perspectives, taken together with the
difficulties of definition and the large number of forms to which literary
fable turns out to be related, make it difficult to study literary fable for its
own sake. And although the fondness of English fable for attitude over
theory, reactive example over precept, effectively constitutes a consist-
ent character in itself, it also places a limitation on the aim of demon-
strating that English fable is a coherent mode, in that it often necessitates
inductive arguments from individual reaction in example and practice,
or in a pattern of examples which adds up to a practice. It is best to
retreat for the moment to noting that James Beattie does not seem to be
puzzled by the term 'fable', and to revert to the main problem raised so
far.

The two linked critical charges that can be made against fable have to
do with status and coherence: the term cannot be interesting and
valuable if it indicates merely a series of inchoate, discrete elements. A
preliminary defence against such charges should firstly suggest that
verse fable may have a coherent history of change through the period,
and secondly should show that writers understood the various manifes-
tations of fable – poetry, fiction, theory – to have some natural links and
connections. This in turn might introduce the possibility that fable is not
merely 'polyvalent', but is also a composite mode or strategy evolving
from a common rootstock across different genres, and that this may be
how Beattie apprehends it as late as 1783.

Verse fable in particular exhibits a peculiar flexibility, an ability to
blend with and adapt to changing cultural surroundings. Rothstein and
Doody both stress the movement of eighteenth-century poetry away
from 'the idea of the poem as closed formal unit' (Doody 1985: 61) and
towards more open forms and attitudes. When Rothstein attempts a
'diagrammatic statement' about the shifting focus of poetry, he defines it
in terms of a drift away from 'a central theme – power – in the
Restoration, to a central operating principle, that of interaction, corpor-
ateness, treatment of all themes in terms of social, intellectual, or moral
composites' in the middle part of the period. After about 1735 this yields
in turn to 'a controlling attitude . . . of sympathy, a call for fellow-feeling'
(Rothstein 1981: 120).

The verse fable is well placed to reflect each of these shifts in
emphasis, and hence to emerge as an aspect of the most adaptable of the
period's literary modes. Power is its most fundamental interest or theme.

Aesop was traditionally a slave who spoke to his masters using the licence of indirection, and Aesopian fables often develop the Wolf-eat-Lamb morality of animal appetite, dominance, and natural hierarchy, in order to figure the worlds of social and political relationship. Seventeenth-century English fabulists employ the form as a way of expressing political tensions, and of exploring ideas about the limits of the heroic.

But its basic method or 'operating principle' is transformational and metaphorical: beasts, men, gods, inanimate objects, personifications of abstract qualities, all revolve together in a kaleidoscopic, sub-Ovidian universe, as do distinct political and philosophical positions. Intellectual and moral composites are entirely appropriate to the composite form of the fable-collection. And when the sympathetic mode is favoured, fabulists will develop the fable's innate stress on the kinship between human, animal, and lower and higher forms of life, and can shade the tone towards sympathetic humour and the self-mocking wit of fables which feature poets, oysters, and sensitive plants. This emphasizes the fable's more lyrical side, resulting in the greening of the form – *Fables of Flora, Fables of Flowers* – and also in the fable used as a mode for expressing post-pastoral alienation and discomfort in Cowper and others. sympathy denied.

But this does not mean that the fable simply followed fashions. Fabulists in the period are quite aware that in itself a fable is *si peu que rien*, and that *any* creative literary fable thus has to be conditioned or occasioned by, and adapted to, its context of use. Literary fable is always 'an active discursive intervention conditioned by precise social and historical circumstances' (Hirschkop 1986: 93), as Ken Hirschkop says of the Bakhtinian 'dialogical' condition.

The principle that a fable is intrinsically nothing is inherent in its history, the origins of which lie in Latin and Greek prose compilations of the orally transmitted Aesopian material. The materials of these collections were simple and neutral, but were designed to be available for use in giving flavour and zest to another medium, rhetorical discourse. Such collections acted as repositories of metaphorical, illustrative narrative devices: the 'morals' were originally attached to the fables as a means of codifying or indexing this inert 'raw material' (Perry 1965: xii). Prose fables were also used as a neutral educational medium for the teaching of language through late antiquity, and, in England and France, from the early Renaissance onwards. This provided a continuing reminder of the tradition of non-literary usage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and political fable as Patterson describes it continues the

classical rhetorical tradition, appropriating fables *pro* and *con* particular positions. So any literary fabulist will be aware of fable as a 'genre' in the Bakhtinian sense – as an abstract or ideal construction, codified and centralized, somewhat akin to the '*langue*' in Saussurean models of linguistics – and aware of his or her own use of it as in tension between this fundamental aspect of fable and the availability of a potentially infinite number of revisions, adaptations, and original stresses – '*paroles*', individual voices. Here the fact that fable was the only modern literary genre to be invented in, or just after – one could almost say *by* – the English Civil Wars, at a point when the use of different styles of language was a central feature of religious and political division, must raise the intriguing possibility that English fable is one of the best examples of a fully dialogical form of literature. But as always with fable, it is wise to be cautious: if fable can (as we shall see) bear or carry any application, it can certainly bear or carry any *theory*, and eighteenth-century fable in particular often generates its own self-supporting and self-descriptive terminology, in figures of speech and phrasing. Again, we should retreat to examples.

If fable were a live and coherent subject through this period, very different writers should be capable of making idiosyncratic uses of their perception of such a basic and widely available principle as the tension between fable as a neutral, pre-literary mode and the embroiled nature of fabulist discourse as it is used and 'applied'. They might also then work to provide the second element of a preliminary defence of fable, demonstrable kinship between the various literary manifestations or aspects of the form. The two following examples, one from a dramatic prose satire of an extended verse fable of the 1680s and the other from a novel of the 1750s, show that the writers were in each case quite clear about the differences between the fable-in-itself and the energized literary fable. Crucially, they also show that they readily credited some of their readers with an equivalent capacity.

In 1687 Matthew Prior and Charles Montague travestied what they saw as the recent misuse of fable in Dryden's extraordinary Catholic-and-Protestant debate-fable *The Hind and the Panther*. They did this by picturing Dryden as Bayes, the 'author' of *The Hind and the Panther, Transvers'd to the Story of the* Country-Mouse *and the* City Mouse, and by throwing Bayes into conversation with Smith and Johnson (the pair of characters created by Buckingham to act as the sceptical audience in his earlier anti-Dryden dramatic travesty *The Rehearsal*). Near the start, Bayes is made to show off his grotesque misunderstanding of the

relationship between pre-aesthetic and activated fable, by fulminating to Smith and Johnson about Horace's use of the story of The Country-Mouse and The City-Mouse in his Satire II, 6:

You remember in him the *Story* of the *Country-Mouse*, and the *City-Mouse*, what a plain simple thing it is, it has no more life and spirit in it, I'gad, than a Hobby-horse; and his *Mice* talk so meanly, such common stuff, so like *meer Mice*, that I wonder it has pleas'd the world so long. But I will now undeceive *Mankind*, and teach 'em to *heighten*, and *elevate a Fable* . . . whereas *Horace* keeps to the dry naked story, I have more copiousness than to do that, I'gad. (Prior 1959: 1, 39)

The 'dry naked story' of the original neutral prose fable was in fact considerably elevated by Horace, in what was the fullest and most extended poeticization of an Aesopian fable prior to Babrius and Phaedrus. Horace's City-Mouse's appeal to his country friend to come home with him and enjoy the manifold fruits of the city manages to combine the awareness of being part of the animal creation with the full resonance of the humane *carpe diem* theme:

> Since all must dye, and must resign their Breath,
> Nor great, nor little is secure from Death;
> Then spend thy days in Pleasure, Mirth and Sport,
> And live like One, that Minds his Life is short. (Creech 1684: 477)

Bayes's misreading of Horace's fable acts as a tacit sign that his own fable would be doubly elevated, hyperbolical and absurd – '*Fable* upon *Fable*', as Bayes says later (Prior 1959: 1, 53) – which was the charge generally levelled at Dryden's poem: constitutional 'absurdity' (Johnson 1905: 1, 380). Neither Prior nor his bemused double-act of Smith-and-Johnson need say as much at this early point, though. The criticism, the 'moral', is unspoken, immaterial, as it should be in a genuine fable. Prior has already discharged it in general terms, in the discursive mode of the Preface:

Is it not as easie to imagine two Mice *bilking Coachmen, and supping at the* Devil; *as to suppose a* Hind *entertaining the* Panther *at a* Hermits Cell, *discussing the greatest Mysteries of Religion . . . What can be more improbable and contradictory to the Rules and Examples of all Fables . . . ?* (Prior 1959: 1, 39)

But the dramatic display from Bayes carries the particular technical reason for the absurdity. Prior sociably assumes that his audience is conversant enough with this point about the proper levels of fable to be able to apply it for themselves, and then demonstrates the result.

Because Dryden's fable is absurd, Bayes's is too: Dryden's noble beasts become mice, though at first Prior retains the (falsely noble) sonority of Dryden's lines. Indeed, some of the lines of the travesty of the first Part are identical to those in the original, as for instance line three:

> *A milk-white* Mouse *immortal and unchang'd*
> *Fed on soft Cheese, and o're the* Dairy *rang'd;*
> *Without, unspotted; innocent within,*
> *She fear'd no danger, for she knew no Ginn.* (*ibid.*, 40)

Dryden might reply that to him 'fable' now meant something different. His preliminary address at the start of Part Three refers to 'two *Episodes*, or *Fables*' (Dryden 1956–92: 3, 122) inside the poem, bird-fables which the beasts rehearse to each other, as if a 'fable' were an illustrative sub-unit of narrative, as in Horace. Dryden observes decorum – beasts can make free with birds because they are (metaphorically) above them, as Volpone the Fox is above Corvino the Crow – but in terms of the purists' definition of fable implicit in Prior's Preface, his defence of fable as episode would merely admit the charge: fable within fable, '*Fable* upon *Fable*', is weirdly pleonastic. Dryden is well versed in the history of fable: it seems that he consciously chose to give the poem that marked his own conversion to Catholicism the quality of a monster, a 'creature of a double kind' (*ibid.*, 480), like the Anglican Panther rather than the Catholic Hind.

The second example of a writer making use of the distinction between the fable-in-itself and fable-in-action is from the long penultimate chapter of Charlotte Lennox's satirical novel *The Female Quixote* (1752), a chapter now convincingly attributed to Samuel Johnson rather than to Lennox (Margaret Doody sets out the evidence fully in Lennox 1989: 414–15). Arabella, the distracted heroine, is in conversation with a learned divine who plays the traditional literary 'moral doctor' or physician of the mind. This figure goes back as far as Lady Macbeth's doctor and, in Marlowe, Faustus's Old Man (though they have less promising material to work with), and may derive partly from fable's conceit of the philosopher-fabulist as 'Physitian . . . to the Frenzy-Times' (*Aesop* 1698[j]: 2). The doctor promises to cure Arabella of her naughty belief that the world of prose romance is real and actual. Arabella engages in a lucid discussion about other kinds of fiction, and fiction in general, demonstrating that apart from her foible about romance her mind is perfectly sound.

The argument then turns to the theme of absurdity *versus* truth, as the valiant Doctor tries to prove that romances are intrinsically absurd. He sets up two examples of kinds of literature in which, by contrast, 'Truth is not . . . injured by Fiction.' The first is Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747–8), which is said to convey 'the most solid Instructions, the noblest Sentiments, and the most exalted Piety', and the second is 'The Fables of Aesop', which 'though never I suppose believed, have been long considered as Lectures of moral and domestic Wisdom' (Lennox 1989: 377). This transition or conflation may seem curious – how is *Clarissa* like Aesop's fables? – but Richardson published his own *Aesop's Fables* in 1739 just before bringing out *Pamela* in 1740, and was fond of allowing his characters to use allusions to fables, sometimes to his own edition. *Pamela*'s usual habit, especially early in the narrative, is to refer glancingly to Aesopian fables to illustrate her points or her own position.

Arabella is allowed to develop and refine the Doctor's point with such magisterial concision and elegance of expression as to suggest that she considers her opinion axiomatic – or that Johnson does:

The Fables of *Aesop*, said *Arabella*, are among those of which the Absurdity discovers itself, and the Truth is comprised in the Application; but what can be said of those Tales which are told with the solemn Air of historical Truth, and if false convey no Instruction? (*ibid*.: 377)

This is not quite Prior's kind of absurdity, but a description which derives from stressing or recalling fable's transparently unrealistic nature and its lack of innate rhetorical colouring. The fable is felt to reveal, or 'discover', its own nature by not demanding the suspension of disbelief. It is 'never I suppose believed' that wolves and lambs talk; nor (if one then consciously doubles the absurdity, as fable often does) that if they could, Lambs would be quite so silly as to try to hold rational discourse with Wolves.

So pre-literary Aesopian fables are felt to be morally honest in themselves, rather than simply expressing 'morals'. Insofar as they disclaim or disavow the power to move the emotions, they disclaim 'those Arts of Deceiving wherein Men find Pleasure to be deceived' (Locke 1975: 508), in a pre-emptive deconstructive turn. This approach chooses to ignore their use in rhetorical practice, or to see fables as unwilling, innocent conscripts to arts of persuasion.

Romances, in contrast, deceive, ensnare the emotions, cover their tracks with a false but delightful patina of plausibly conjured truth. In