

INTRODUCTION



LET ME BEGIN WITH A FABLE about fable. In his second/third-century CE biography of the sage Apollonius of Tyana, Philostratus stages a miniature philosophical debate about the relative merits of mythological poetry and Aesopic fable. Philostratus's protagonist has just expounded his reasons for preferring humble Aesopic beast fable to the grandiloquent mythic lies of the poets, and then adds a fable by way of coda:¹

My own mother, Menippus, taught me a tale about Aesop's wisdom, when I was very young. Aesop, so she said, was once a shepherd, and was tending his flock near a sanctuary of Hermes, and being a passionate lover of wisdom, he prayed the god to be given it. Many others visited Hermes with the same request, and dedicated gold, silver, an ivory herald's baton, or something equally dazzling. Aesop, however, was not in a position to possess anything like that, and was thrifty with what he did have. So he used to pour out for the god as much milk as a sheep yields at a milking, and to bring to the altar a honeycomb large enough to fit his hand, and he would think himself to be regaling the god with myrtle when he offered just a few roses or violets. 'Why should I weave crowns, Hermes,' he used to say, 'and neglect my sheep?'

But when the worshipers came on a day appointed for the distribution of wisdom, Hermes as a lover of wisdom and of profit said 'You may have philosophy' to the one whose offering was no doubt the largest. 'You may join the ranks of the orators,' he said to the one next in generosity, 'while *your* place is astronomy, *yours* is music, *yours* is epic poetry, *yours* is iambic poetry.' But despite all his great shrewdness he used up all the branches of wisdom without noticing, and forgot Aesop by mistake. But then he recalled the Seasons (*Hōrai*) who had raised him on the peaks of Olympus, and how, once when he was in his cradle, they had told him about a cow, and how this cow had conversed with a human about itself and the world. In this way they had set him to lusting after Apollo's cows. Accordingly he gave storytelling to Aesop, the last thing left in the house of wisdom, saying 'You may have what I learned first.' (Phil. *Apoll.* 5.15; trans. Jones 2005; translation slightly modified)

I begin with this late text because, in its rich, overdetermined alignment of different hierarchical systems, it adumbrates a whole set of themes connected with Aesop, Aesopic fable, and ancient Aesopica with which I will concern myself here. Aesop's biography and his fables are squarely located within a competition or hierarchical system of wisdom (*sophia*), wherein Aesop represents the lowly

¹ This story of the forgetful Hermes seems deliberately to echo Protagoras's fable of Prometheus, Epimetheus, and Hermes dividing up the gifts to animals and men in Plato's *Protagoras*. For discussion of Protagoras's fable, see chapters 7 and 8 below.

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and common versus the wealth of ranked valuables (gold, silver, ivory); animals versus human wisdom; tales told by females versus authoritative male speech genres; and traditions that belong to childhood (both Apollonius's and Hermes') versus grown-up poetry and philosophy. Apollonius's fable also implies the opposition of Apollo and Hermes, gift and theft, and problematic sacrifice in its final coy suggestion that it was a beast fable that "set [the baby Hermes] to lusting after Apollo's cows."² Finally, although Apollonius paradoxically valorizes fable, his tale constitutes a clear hierarchy of literary genres as subspecies of *sophia*: in ranked order (aligned with the value of precious gifts offered) philosophy, oratory, heroic poetry, iambic, and (below them all) beast fable.

And by virtue of its multiple, overdetermined ranked systems, Apollonius's aetiological fable also makes clear that this hierarchy of literary genre and decorum is inseparable from (at least a notional) sociopolitical hierarchy. Aesopic fables are humble in content and style, just as Aesop himself is poor, lowly, and marginal. My concern throughout this book will be precisely that linked literary and sociopolitical hierarchy for what it can reveal to us about the interaction of popular and high cultural forms in Greek antiquity, and ultimately about the complex and problematic origins of ancient Greek prose writing.

I. AN ELUSIVE QUARRY: IN SEARCH OF ANCIENT GREEK POPULAR CULTURE

With that preamble, I would like to sketch out the stakes, goals, and methods of my argument in a way that is accessible to a nonspecialist audience.³ To that end, I start with a broad and concise summary, while deferring to section II below the complicated philological detail and survey of previous scholarship that justify and ground my procedures. These latter elements are absolutely essential as a road map for classicist readers, since the material related to Aesop (unusually within the field of classics) is not already familiar to most professionals. A colleague in English once observed to me that his experience at classics lectures always reminded him of the joke about the joke-writers convention. That is, since classicists by and large take for granted a common canon with which we are all familiar (we've all read the *Aeneid*), we conduct much more of our discussion in a kind of shared code, at once more elliptical and more intimate. In the case of the Aesop materials, I confront the situation of an ancient tradition whose parameters and transmission are fiendishly compli-

² This seems to be a reference to the tradition preserved in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, that the newborn Hermes stole cattle belonging to his brother Apollo and used them to perform what is usually taken to be an unconventional sacrifice (see *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 94–175).

³ I borrow the phrase "An Elusive Quarry" applied to the popular culture of an earlier historical period from Burke 1978.65.

cated and difficult, and simultaneously largely unfamiliar to most professional classicists. So it's not just that the joke has to be told in full, but that the whole backstory and what makes it funny has to be laid out first. (Needless to say, this ponderous amount of necessary detail is very likely to kill the humor.) At the same time (as I am painfully aware) this kind of technical discussion can be particularly bewildering and off-putting to nonspecialist readers who might otherwise be interested in an argument about the figure of Aesop, the conversation of high and low traditions, and the invention of mimetic or narrative prose in Greek antiquity. Such readers are encouraged to skip directly from section I to section III of this introduction. For classicist readers, this will necessarily entail some repetition between sections I and II, as the same points of argument recur with the deepening or ballast of ancient references and modern philological and scholarly argument.

I started out looking for ancient Greek popular culture, or at least for difference and diversity within the tradition. It is a sad fact of the study of antiquity that we have preserved less than 5 percent of the literary production of any period—and that entirely the work of an elite of birth, wealth, and education. And while we may catch rare glimpses of the conditions of life for the nonelite through the finds of archaeology, nonliterary texts like papyrus documents, lead curse tablets, and funerary inscriptions, our reconstructions of antiquity are still overwhelmingly based on the literary self-representations of the elite. How to escape the apparent tyranny of this single hegemonic view? How to get access to a fuller range of voices or positions from the ancient past? A separate but related impetus for this project was my desire to extend downward to prose and to the beginnings of Greek prose writing the sociopolitical analysis of the ancient literary hierarchy of genre and decorum to which I had already devoted many years of my research life.⁴ Thus this project was conceived and animated by a dual interest in issues of sociological context and of literary form—indeed, by a conviction of their necessary interimplication in the ancient world.

This cluster of interests led me originally to Aesop and to fable. For from his first appearances in Greek literature and art of the fifth century BCE, Aesop is marked as low—a slave, non-Greek, hideously ugly, and already in trouble (unjustly killed by the angry Delphians).⁵ Likewise fable as a form is also markedly low in its pattern of occurrence within the hierarchical system of genre and decorum of archaic Greek poetry. Thus beast fable never occurs in the heroic epic of Homer, but does figure in the middling, didactic epic of Hesiod. And fable proliferates particularly in archaic iambic, the genre that ranks at the bottom of the hierarchy of poetic forms in style, content, and tone, while it is much more sparingly used or only alluded to in the higher poetic forms of elegy and

⁴ See (e.g.) Kurke 1991, 1992, 1994, 1999, 2000.

⁵ Cf. Hdt. 2.134–35, Aristoph. *Wasps* 1446–48, and tondo of cup in the Vatican Museum (on which, see Lissarrague 2000 and discussion in chapter 5, section II below).

choral lyric (and entirely absent from monodic lyric).⁶ Throughout the classical and Hellenistic periods and later within the Greek tradition, this cordoning-off of Aesop and fable continues: both are represented as sociologically low, low-class, and base, and therefore properly distinct from the genres of high Greek poetry and prose, once it develops.⁷ Thus the figure of Aesop and the form of fable are at least represented by the Greeks themselves as “popular,” low, and abject, and so potentially a good starting point for my inquiry.

The figure of Aesop led me in turn to the anonymous tradition of the *Life of Aesop*, preserved in several different manuscript versions and fragments of papyri ranging from (perhaps?) the first to the thirteenth century of our era, but based on much older oral lore that circulated in the Greek world.⁸ Among the versions of the *Life* is the remarkable text of “*Vita G*” (as it was called by one of its modern discoverers, Ben Edwin Perry). In 1929, Elinor Husselman and Ben Edwin Perry discovered among the manuscripts of the Pierpont Morgan Library a unique exemplar of the prose *Life of Aesop*. On careful examination, they identified the codex as a tenth- or eleventh-century manuscript that was known once to have existed in the Basilian monastery of Grottaferrata (“known to have existed” because it had been described by a scholar in a letter of 1789, but had then disappeared from the monastery’s holdings during the Napoleonic occupation).⁹ After this exciting philological detective story of a manuscript lost and (after 150 years) found, Ben Edwin Perry made available this unique longer, fuller exemplar of the *Life* (which he called “*G*” after its original monastery home) for the first time in his monumental *Aesopica* in 1952. *Vita G* is a fascinating document, which is likely to represent an older, fuller *Life of Aesop* than any other manuscript version (its composition tentatively dated by Perry to the first century CE).

Let me pause at this point to summarize briefly the late and little-known *Life of Aesop*, since some knowledge of its contents is essential for my argument. The fullest preserved version of the *Life of Aesop* (Perry’s *Vita G*) begins in medias res, with a detailed description of the protagonist as hideously ugly, a slave, and—most significantly—mute. After the slave Aesop, toiling in the countryside, assists a lost priestess of Isis, he is rewarded by Isis and the Muses with the restoration of his voice and skill “in the invention, weaving, and making of

⁶ On Homer/Hesiod: Crusius 1920, Lasserre 1984; for Hesiod’s didactic as accommodating a much wider range of material, see Martin 1992. On the stylistic and generic hierarchy of iambic, elegy, and melic, see West 1974; Bowie 1986; Kurke 1991, 1992, 1999, 2000; on the distribution of fable within these forms, Nøjgaard 1964.446–49, Lasserre 1984, Rothwell 1995.

⁷ Cf. Rothwell 1995, building on Crusius 1920, Meuli 1975b. I will elaborate on this system of genre and decorum and the place of fable within it in chapters 3, 6, 9, and 10 below.

⁸ I defer to section II below a full discussion of the different manuscripts and papyrus versions and their relations to one another.

⁹ For the narrative of this (re)discovery of what is now Morgan *Codex* 397, see Perry 1952. xiv–xvi.

Greek fables” (ch. 7). He is thereupon sold to a slave-trader, who eventually transports him to Samos, where he is purchased by the pompous philosopher Xanthus (chs. 22–27). The bulk of the *Life*—the Samian portion (chs. 21–100)—then details Aesop’s comic, picaresque, and occasionally obscene adventures, mainly showing up the stupidity and incompetence of his philosopher master and the malice and lust of the master’s wife. The long Samian portion of the text culminates in a sequence in which Aesop secures his freedom as the precondition for interpreting an ominous bird omen before the entire Samian people. Aesop interprets the omen as portending an imminent threat of conquest by a king or potentate and—lo and behold—his sign reading is immediately confirmed by the arrival of ambassadors from Croesus, king of Lydia, demanding that the Samians become his tribute-paying subjects. Aesop, just freed, goes willingly as an emissary/hostage to the court of Croesus; wins the king over with his apt use of fables and his skillful rhetoric; and thereby saves Samos from Croesus’s domination. The grateful Samians dedicate a monument to Aesop, and Aesop departs to travel the world. Eventually, he arrives in Babylon, where he becomes adviser and vizier to Lycurgus, the king of Babylon, and assists him in a high-stakes contest of wisdom with Nectanebo, pharaoh of Egypt. Finally, after defeating Nectanebo, Aesop wishes again to travel the world, giving displays of his wisdom. This he does until he ends up in Delphi, where he abuses the Delphians for their worthlessness and servile origins. In response, the Delphians plant a golden bowl in Aesop’s luggage as he’s leaving town, arrest him, and condemn him to death. Eventually, Aesop, unable to persuade the Delphians of his innocence, curses them and hurls himself off a cliff. As a result of their impious treatment of Aesop, the Delphians are then visited with plague, as well as punishment by a military coalition of “Greece, Babylon, and the Samians,” mobilized to avenge “the doom of Aesop” (chs. 124–142). There *Vita G* ends, although other traditions tell us that the Delphians “dedicate a temple and stele to Aesop” (*Vita W*) or “build an altar where he fell and offer sacrifices to him as a hero” (*P.Oxy.* 1800).

This relatively new, old version of the *Life of Aesop* is a text that is very difficult to pin down, since everything about it is a mystery—author, date, place of composition, intention, audience. Within the discipline of classical scholarship, this text (and the broader tradition it represents) were initially diseased with all this uncertainty, and so still kept in quarantine—either they were not read at all, or, if read, rarely allowed to interact with canonical texts. Even today, the *Life of Aesop* almost never figures in undergraduate or graduate classics curricula in the United States, and even professional classicists rarely read it (although, happily, this is beginning to change).¹⁰ When they are read, the *Life* and the fables are still often set apart in scholarship and treated as a world unto

¹⁰ For a selective account of scholarship on the *Life of Aesop* tradition and the text of *Vita G*, see section II below.

themselves.¹¹ But I would contend that precisely because of its almost unique and mysterious status, the weird, marginal text (and tradition) of the *Life of Aesop* urgently needs to be read with and against other ancient texts and cultural products of all kinds. For contestations of meaning and cultural resonances emerge from the reading together or juxtaposition that cannot emerge from reading the individual texts or artifacts separately. The project of this book is such a reading together, in which I will be concerned with all the various traditions of Aesopica, but with the *Life of Aesop* as the core or centerpiece of analysis.

But I must acknowledge at the outset that the text of *Vita G* is itself a mystery or a paradox that presents a problem for any simplistic reading as popular literature. Insofar as it offers us a protopicaresque narrative of the comic adventures of an ugly, low-class, non-Greek “hero” in an apparently colloquial and limited style of *koinē* Greek, it has all the hallmarks of what we would identify as “popular literature.”¹² And yet the very fact that it is committed to writing at any point in the ancient world precludes its being genuinely “popular” or “non-elite,” given the extreme limitations on literacy and the expense of writing materials and book production throughout the ancient world.¹³ Further, the situation with *Vita G* is even more extreme than with other versions of the *Life* that survive from antiquity. For *Vita G* represents a version of the text that is by and large lower and more colloquial in style than other recensions, but also (not infrequently) higher, incorporating more poetic words, literary allusions to authors like Homer and Menander, and artful descriptions or *ekphraseis*.¹⁴ All these factors make it impossible to postulate an author who is not a member of an elite of wealth and education.

And yet two factors encourage an approach to the texts of the *Life of Aesop* (*Vita G* and others) as late fixations or instantiations that may include or embed long-lived popular oral traditions. First, there is the fact that our earliest extant references to Aesop in fifth-century BCE literary texts imply a familiar narrative of the *Life of Aesop* already in circulation that conforms in certain lineaments *and* details to the much later written versions. Thus Herodotus (2.134)

¹¹ Thus for most of the twentieth century, the *Life* and fables of Aesop have suffered the same kind of segregation and marginalization within the field of classics that duBois 2003.3–31 describes for the topic of ancient slavery and specialized studies thereon by those she characterizes as “slave-ologists.” Nor is this parallel accidental, since Aesop and fable share the same low, degraded status as slavery and (I would suggest) the same simultaneous ubiquity and invisibility that duBois describes for ancient slaves.

¹² For *Vita G*’s initial reception in the scholarship as a *Volksbuch* or “popular literature,” see section II below. For the arguments in this paragraph and accompanying bibliography, I am indebted to the excellent discussion of Avlamiis 2010a.

¹³ See Harris 1989, Bowie 1994, Stephens 1994.

¹⁴ For low, colloquial stylistic elements in *Vita G*, see Perry 1936.16, 22–24; Tallmadge 1938; Birch 1955; Hostetter 1955; Shipp 1983; Haslam 1992; for high elements, see Perry 1936.13–14, Mignogna 1992, Hunter 2007; for both, see the excellent concise summary in Karla 2001.53–57.

already knows of Aesop as the slave of a Samian master, victimized and impiously executed by the Delphians. And Aristophanes (*Wasps* 1446–48) shows that certain fables already had a fixed place in the tradition of the *Life*, since he cites the fable of the “eagle and the dung beetle” in the context of Aesop’s fatal adventures at Delphi (where it still appears in the much later texts of the *Life*, dated at the earliest to the first or second century CE).¹⁵ Second, all the manuscript *Lives* and papyri versions together read like nothing so much as various transcriptions of popular jokes or anecdotes: the versions differ substantially in diction and in the expansion and contraction of speeches, use of direct versus indirect speech, description, and other circumstantial detail. Whole episodes cycle in and out of the texts, and sometimes occupy different positions within the structure of the work. This striking feature suggests that the traditions about Aesop were perceived by their ancient readers/authors (who were in this case one and the same) to have a different status from high, canonical literary texts, which had to be treated with greater care and respect and transmitted in pristine form. It would be a mistake to correlate this different status of text with a distinct sociological class/status of readers/authors, and yet it does justify a different kind of reading of this tradition from the approach to reading a single known author who composes a closed written work at a precise historical moment.¹⁶

The first of these features suggests a long-lived and robust oral tradition (or better, traditions) about Aesop; the second implies that even once some version of these traditions was committed to writing, the ongoing work of fashioning and refashioning tales about Aesop continued, probably through a lively interaction between oral traditions and highly permeable written versions. And here we should probably posit for the ancient world conditions akin to those described by Peter Burke in his account of popular culture in early modern Europe (1500–1800), where “popular culture” is itself a misnomer. Adapting the anthropologist Robert Redfield’s model of “great and little traditions,” Burke suggests that in the early modern period, the “little tradition” was simply the common culture in which all—elite and nonelite alike—participated, while “elite culture” or the “great tradition” was an exclusive minority culture of the privileged, the literate, and the educated:

There were two cultural traditions in early modern Europe, but they did not correspond symmetrically to the two main social groups, the elite and the common people.

¹⁵ For the fixation of the tradition of the *Life* with embedded fables already by the fifth century, see Wiechers 1961.13, Nagy 1979.282–83; this is true whether or not we accept the idea of a written *Life of Aesop* already in the fifth century. In favor of a written *Life*: Perry 1936.24n. 35, 25n. 1; West 1984.122–24; against: La Penna 1962.282–84, Jedrkiewicz 1989.67n. 108. See detailed discussion below, section II.

¹⁶ For the open, unstable status of the tradition, cf. Haslam 1980.54, 1986.152; Winkler 1985.279; Hansen 1998.xxi–xxii. For the fallacy of correlating a low-style text and an open tradition with a specific class or status of author/readers, cf. Jedrkiewicz 1989.171–82, 208–12; Hopkins 1993.11–12n. 15; Avlamiš 2006, 2010a, 2010b.

The elite participated in the little tradition, but the common people did not participate in the great tradition. This asymmetry came about because the two traditions were transmitted in different ways. The great tradition was transmitted formally at grammar schools and at universities. It was a closed tradition in the sense that people who had not attended these institutions, which were not open to all, were excluded. In a quite literal sense, they did not speak the language. The little tradition, on the other hand, was transmitted informally. It was open to all, like the church, the tavern, and the market-place, where so many performances occurred. Thus the crucial cultural difference in early modern Europe . . . was that between the majority, for whom popular culture was the only culture, and the minority, who had access to the great tradition but participated in the little tradition as a second culture.¹⁷

Under analogous circumstances in the ancient world, the individual authors/readers/redactors of the written *Lives* (themselves necessarily “elite”) could serve as mediators or middlemen for elements of a broader “popular culture,” even while (as we must always bear in mind) they had their own specific local interests and purposes in the incorporation of free-floating, ambient oral material.¹⁸

The result of all this: we must conceptualize a text like the *Life of Aesop*, as one late moment—or several—of textual fixation within an ongoing oral tradition spanning centuries of time and a wide geographic area.¹⁹ This process eventually generated a strange kind of text—a narrative whose written surface is stratified, fissured, and uneven. This is a text that does not represent a single “symbolic act” by a single (postulated) agent or author, but the accretion of multiple acts and agents, in a written work that itself already contains a centuries-long conversation of “great” and “little” traditions.²⁰

¹⁷ Burke 1978.28, modifying Redfield 1956.67–104.

¹⁸ As Burke 1978.28 characterizes these elite participants in the common culture, “They were amphibious, bi-cultural, and also bilingual. Where the majority of people spoke their regional dialect and nothing else, the elite spoke or wrote Latin or a literary form of the vernacular, while remaining able to speak in dialect as a second or third language. For the elite, but for them only, the two traditions had two different psychological functions; the great tradition was serious, the little tradition was play.” It is an interesting question whether there was a development within the ancient world akin to that which Burke charts for the end of the early modern period in Europe, as elites pulled away from the common culture and then nostalgically invented “the *Volk*” and “popular culture” as a separate romanticized sphere (see Burke 1978.3–22, 244–86). While I would contend that elites throughout the ancient world maintained their connections to the common informal culture of the tavern and the marketplace, there were certain times and places like (e.g.) Hellenistic Alexandria where the educated elite seems to have taken a special interest in documenting and imitating the “little tradition” in artful written texts (e.g., Theocritus 15, Herondas, Machon). Avlamiš 2010a, 2010b suggests a similar phenomenon for Greek elites within the high Roman empire.

¹⁹ Cf. Hopkins 1993.3, 11 with n. 14.

²⁰ I draw from Jameson 1981 the concept of narrative as a socially consequential “symbolic act” within the ongoing contest of culture; and from Nehamas 1981, 1987 the fundamental insight that

Robert Darnton offers an early modern parallel that may help us imagine this process. Darnton describes the complex interaction of written and oral versions of what were originally peasant folktales in prerevolutionary France that eventually got set down in writing as fairy tales or tales of “Mother Goose.” Thus Charles Perrault, a powerful figure at the court of Louis XIV, published the first printed edition of his *Contes de ma mère l’oye* in 1697, tales probably originally derived from his son’s nurse, but touched up for his audience of “salon sophisticates.”²¹ But even after Perrault’s publication of these tales, traditional oral versions continued to circulate, told by peasants among themselves and carried by servants and wet nurses as mediators from the “little tradition” of the village to the kitchens and nurseries of the houses of the elite, to be imbibed by them “with their milk.” In addition, the popular *Bibliothèque bleue*, a series of primitive and inexpensive paperbacks, recirculated a simplified form of Perrault’s written version, which itself might in turn be read aloud at peasant gatherings. Darnton’s conclusion:

It would be a mistake to identify [Perrault’s] meager Mother Goose with the vast folklore of early modern France. But a comparison of the two points up the inadequacy of envisaging cultural change in linear fashion, as the downward seepage of great ideas. Cultural currents intermingled, moving up as well as down, while passing through different media and connecting groups as far apart as peasants and salon sophisticates.²²

We cannot simply transpose this model to the ancient world, since we have no print culture and no *Bibliothèque bleue*; nonetheless one could posit similar ongoing interactions between written versions of the *Life of Aesop* as transcriptions and transformations of (some) popular tales and oral versions. Thus we might imagine stories about Aesop continuing to circulate orally as “old wives’ tales” or popular tales told at festivals, while the written text in turn might even be read aloud in other public contexts where different social strata mixed (like Burke’s “tavern” or “marketplace”).²³

Of course, postmodernist literary theory would assert that all texts are seamed and riven with other voices, resistances, and inconsistencies, and that the notion of a pure, unproblematized “hegemonic voice” is itself a fantasy. And while I subscribe to that position, such critical orthodoxy should not blind us to the very real differences among different kinds of texts based on the materiality and ideology of their production, circulation, and reception. In their permeability

the “author” is always an agent and source of meaning postulated and back-formed from the interpretative processes of reading.

²¹ Darnton 1984.11–13.

²² Darnton 1984.62–63; quotations taken from p. 63. For discussion of the various middlemen or mediators between great and little traditions in early modern Europe, see also Burke 1978.65–77.

²³ Cf. Avlami 2006, 2010a on ancient “barbershop reading.”

and openness to this kind of ongoing conversation, the texts of the *Life of Aesop* are nearly unique among the material we have preserved from the ancient world.²⁴ Even if this is not about the status of author/audience, it is about the status of the text, which is perceived as open, fluid, anybody's property—authored by no one and so authored by each one who writes it down. Finally, I would link this openness and fluidity of the tradition to the *purpose* of the text, rather than to a particular socioeconomic status of author/audience.

For in another way, the *Life of Aesop* is entirely unique. As Keith Hopkins observes, it is the only extended “biography of a slave to survive from the ancient world,” and as such is a mystery or paradox of another kind. We must assume that this comic or satirical text was read and enjoyed by slave owners in a slave society, who were solicited thereby to sympathize and identify with Aesop, the clever slave who consistently outwits and shows up his master until he ultimately wins his freedom.²⁵ How are we to make sense of this paradox? Or more simply, why Aesop? What is the motivation for and enduring appeal of these narratives about Aesop? We might attempt to answer these questions by comparison with the clever slaves of Roman comedy, repeatedly portrayed at the center of public, state-supported dramatic festivals in Republican Rome. Kathleen McCarthy has recently offered a brilliant account of the psychological appeal of a fantasized identification with the clever slave of comedy by an audience constituted largely of masters.²⁶ On McCarthy's reading, within the elaborate and complex hierarchies of Roman culture, almost every member of the audience is superior to some, but subordinate to others. And insofar as they are subordinate, audience members derive pleasure from the identification with the clever slave as comic hero and with the peculiar kind of fantasized freedom he enjoys because he does not acknowledge or acquiesce in the master's worldview and values. McCarthy also observes that the clever slave is most prominent in Roman comedy's “farcical mode,” which, in contrast to its “naturalistic mode,” engages in slapstick and play for its own sake, while its artificiality and world-turned-upside-down antics expose the arbitrariness of the existing order. The narrative of the *Life of Aesop* is certainly closer to the “farcical

²⁴ Cf. Hansen 1998.xxi–xxiii on “textual fluidity” as a “common trait of Greek popular literature.” Other examples of this kind of text from antiquity: *The Alexander Romance* and fluid collections like *Philogelos* and the late fable collections attributed to Aesop. For discussions of the complex ms history and interrelations of the fable collections, see Perry 1936.71–230, Jedrkiewicz 1989.15–34, Adrados 1999.48–138, Holzberg 2002.84–104, and see section IIC below.

²⁵ Hopkins 1993 (quotation taken from p. 10). This is not to deny the possibility of different readers' complex, multiple, and shifting identifications—for which, see the excellent remarks of Hopkins 1993.10n. 13.

²⁶ McCarthy 2000. By this comparison of themes and ideology, I do not mean to imply a specific intertextual relationship between the *Life of Aesop* and Greek or Roman New Comedy. Holzberg 1992b argues for such a relationship, but his arguments often seem to me to attribute too narrowly to the influence of New Comedy what are in fact general characteristics of narrative in the *Life*. For connections between the *Life* and New Comedy, see also Jouanno 2005, 2006.38–43.

mode” in McCarthy’s account, and we might posit the same pleasures and gratifications for an audience of slave owners who feel themselves oppressed or subordinated in other ways within the social hierarchy.²⁷

Thus McCarthy’s notion of the possibility of cross-status identification is important and useful for our reading of Aesop. But there is one notable difference from the pattern of New Comic plots that should impact our reading of the Aesop tradition’s fantasized pleasures and gratifications. As McCarthy astutely notes, the clever slave at play in the farcical mode of Roman comedy never works in his own interest and never achieves freedom (indeed, he does not even seem to aspire to manumission). At the end of the play, the clever slave has perhaps won a day’s pass from punishment, but nothing has changed and the status quo ante is reinstated.²⁸ In contrast, Aesop in the *Life of Aesop* works persistently and methodically to gain his freedom and ultimately succeeds, even against his master’s intention, by complex public manipulation.²⁹ He then goes on to serve as valued adviser to peoples and potentates, before losing his life on an ill-fated trip to Delphi. I think it matters that Aesop’s struggle for freedom is a mainspring of the plot, and that he dramatically ascends the social scale and wins fantastic honors in exotic locales, for this suggests a different structure of identificatory effects and ideological work the character serves.

We might say that Aesop, like folktale tricksters in many different cultures, enables the articulation in public of elements of what the political theorist James Scott calls the “hidden transcript,” the counterideology and worldview developed by the oppressed when they are “offstage”—that is, free from the public world whose performances are largely scripted by the dominant. For the Aesop tradition exhibits simultaneously two characteristic forms of “political disguise” Scott identifies as enabling the speaking of opposition or resistance from the hidden transcript in the public world: anonymity of the messenger and indirection or obliquity of the message.³⁰ For the former: it is clear that many anecdotes about Aesop and fables circulated anonymously, and we might explain the anonymity of the written *Life* itself as a form of political disguise (rather than merely the accident of transmission). For the latter: the *Life of Aesop* itself articulates a theory of fable as an indirect or disguised message to the powerful, a theory we find paralleled in many other ancient characterizations of Aesopic discourse and known already, I will argue, to Herodotus in the fifth century BCE.³¹ The combination of these two characteristic forms of “political disguise” endows the *Life* and other Aesop traditions with a trademark duality: simultaneously parodic and ambiguous, verbally aggressive and flattering to the powerful. But

²⁷ McCarthy 2000.3–31.

²⁸ See esp. McCarthy 2000.12–15, 212–13.

²⁹ For the detailed argument laying out this pattern, see chapter 4, section IV below.

³⁰ Scott 1990.136–66.

³¹ For explicit articulation of the theory, see *Vitae* G + W, ch. 93, Phaedrus Bk 3.*Prolog.* 33–37, Julian *Orations* 7.207. Full discussion (including Hdt) in chapters 3 and 11 below.

this also accounts for Aesop as a kind of culture hero of the oppressed, and the *Life* as a how-to handbook for the successful manipulation of superiors.

I am not thereby claiming that Aesop represents the veiled fantasies of actual slaves in the ancient world (like Brer Rabbit for slaves in the antebellum South)—although it is possible that the figure did serve this function in strands of the oral tradition largely unrecoverable to us. I would suggest rather that already by the fifth century BCE the figure of Aesop had floated free from any particular context and passed into the common discursive resources of the culture, available as a mask or alibi for critique, parody, or cunning resistance by any who felt themselves disempowered in the face of some kind of unjust or inequitable institutional authority. That is to say, starting in the fifth century and for centuries thereafter, “Aesop” was a readily available cipher or “ideologeme” for all kinds of parody or critique from below.³² Thus already in the classical period, as I will argue in the first chapter, Aesop serves as a handy vehicle for a civic critique of Delphic control of oracular access and the extortionate sacrificial exactions that attended it, while in the first or second century CE, another shaping strand of the written *Life* seems to be parody of those at the apex of the educational rhetorical and philosophical hierarchy by their underlings within the system (what we might call “graduate-student literature”).³³ It is my contention that many of these different appropriations have left their traces in the written *Lives* of Aesop, as the layered bricolage of multiple symbolic actions and agents within the dialectical formation of culture over centuries and a wide geographic area.

The serviceability of this figure for all kinds of resistances within the tradition generated in turn repeated attempts to disarm and domesticate “Aesop,” especially within elite philosophical, rhetorical, and educational structures

³² I borrow the concept of “ideologeme” from Jameson (1981.87): “The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudoidea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the ‘collective characters’ which are the classes in opposition.” In these terms, we might think of the figure of Aesop as itself an ideologeme—or perhaps, better, as a bundle of ideologemes, which can exist in narrative form or as explicit critique. Thus Aesop enables the narrativization of political critiques of local sacrificial practices; of mantic authority; of authority claimed through the wisdom tradition; as well as the narrativization of issues of slavery and freedom, at both the individual and collective levels.

³³ For a reading of *Vita G* along these lines, see section II below. We may find support for this model of the presumptive context of the writing of *Vita G* in the comparatively gentle, farcical humor of the Samian portion of the *Vita*, in contrast with the life-and-death struggles of Aesop at Delphi (in the Samian portion, Aesop occasionally torments his master, but nobody is ever in any real danger). We might read this contrast in relation to Scott’s argument that an institutionalized system of violent domination and inequality tends to foster a commensurately violent fantasized response from the oppressed (Scott 1990.36–44, 108–35); the absence of such aggression from the Samian portion of the *Vita* perhaps confirms this reading of it as “student literature.” To suggest a modern analogy: our graduate students might want to replace us, but they generally don’t want to kill us—one hopes.

ranging from the fifth-century BCE Sophists to Plutarch and the late *Progymnasmata*.³⁴ We can detect the same pressure of domestication within some strands of the Aesop tradition itself, where (for example) different late, shortened versions of the *Life* mute Aesop's concerted campaign to win his freedom or entirely reconfigure him as the ideal loyal slave.³⁵ Indeed, we might see these same efforts at domestication informing modern moralizing readings of the narrative arc of the *Life* as a tragic plot wherein Aesop is punished for his hubris, or the justice of his death underwritten by the divine sanction of Apollo.³⁶

These ongoing conversations in the Aesop tradition that have seamed and marked the texts of the *Lives* will be my topic. For the purpose of recovering such cultural dialogue, we must clearly acknowledge that by and large the object of reading and interpretation is not the *text* of the *Life of Aesop*, but the *traditions* that lie behind it—traditions variously instantiated in the manuscript versions, papyrus fragments, brief references in high literary texts, and other Aesopica.³⁷ This reading at one remove—for a penumbra of traditions through a patchwork of textual fragments—means that my interpretations will always be speculative and often sketchy or schematic. Still, it bears emphasizing that, insofar as I am reconstructing agents or sources from ideological positions or values deduced from our texts, I am engaging in precisely the same process that all historicizing readings do.³⁸

Thus my topic is “Aesop” as a mobile, free-floating figure in ancient culture, the narrative of whose life, discourses, and death remained endlessly available and adaptable for all kinds of resistance, parody, and critique from below. Whether Aesop “really existed” as a non-Greek slave on sixth-century Samos or not, we will probably never know. Indeed, I am agnostic on this point, and I would contend that it is irrelevant for the purposes of my argument.³⁹ All we can

³⁴ For a general account of such a repeated process of domestication or recuperation, see Jameson 1981.85–87; for its specific application to Aesop, see Jedrkiewicz 1989.82, 157–82, 208–15; Patterson 1991.31–42; and see chapters 5 and 7 below.

³⁵ For the former, see *Vita W*, chs. 83–85, which attributes Aesop's preventing his master's suicide to his being *philodespotos* (thereby effacing his careful manipulation of Xanthus to win his freedom, on which see chapter 4, section IV below). For the latter, see Perry 1952.211, *Vitae Minores* 1 (the brief *Life* that serves as proem to the fable recension Ia). I am indebted to the discussion of Avlamis 2010a for this point about the latter *Life*—see his further discussion of its transformations of the legend and its presumptive milieu. And cf. Gasparov 1967, Jouanno 2006.50–52. (I am indebted to Boris Maslov for providing me with an English summary of Gasparov's Russian article.)

³⁶ For the former reading, see Jedrkiewicz 1989.94–107, 157–60, 182; Holzberg 1992b, 1993, 1996, 2002.78–84; for the latter reading, see Hopkins 1993.25–26. For extended arguments against such moralizing readings of the end of the *Life*, see chapters 1 and 4 below.

³⁷ In this sense, everything in Perry's *Aesopica* (Perry 1952) is relevant source material for this project; Perry includes the Greek and Latin *Lives* of Aesop, testimonia culled from literary texts, *sententiae*, proverbs, and the Greek and Latin fables.

³⁸ Cf. Hägg 1997.184.

³⁹ Debate on the real existence of Aesop still rages in the scholarship: see (e.g.) Perry 1962b, Luzatto 1988, Jedrkiewicz 1989.41–48.

say is that by the mid-fifth century BCE, to judge from visual evidence as well as literary references, Aesop and many of the traditions about him were already familiar in Athens (and probably elsewhere in the Greek world as well).⁴⁰

And I emphasize that my topic is Aesop also in order to clarify what my topic is *not*. For fable is not coextensive with Aesop, nor the figure of Aesop with fable. As for fable: as the ancients themselves recognized, fables existed in the Greek tradition long before the lifetime of Aesop, occasionally narrated in Hesiod's *Works & Days* and proliferating in archaic iambic, especially in the poetry of Archilochus. As M. L. West has observed, it is in fact only in the course of the fifth century that we can chart the gradual attachment of fables to Aesop.⁴¹ Thus I will not be concerned with the prehistory of fable—whether fable migrated to Greece from the ancient Near East and/or India, and whether the Greeks themselves were aware of that genealogy—although at times later, individual intercultural exchanges of fable and narrative will impinge on my topic.⁴² Nor will I be directly concerned with the early history of fable in Greek poetry, especially its proliferation in archaic iambic, although early instantiations of fable and allusions to fable in archaic Greek poetry will occasionally figure in my argument as significant comparanda.⁴³ But mainly I will be concerned with fables only insofar as they figure in the traditions of the *Life* or are otherwise associated with Aesop.

As for the second half of my formulation (“Aesop” is not coextensive with fable): careful consideration of the *Life of Aesop* and other Aesop traditions will suggest that fable is only a piece of a characteristically Aesopic discursive system or weaponry that is better understood through something like James Scott's notion of veiled or disguised forms of political critique. That is to say, Aesop in the tradition is identified with signature ways of speaking that include different strategic uses of fable but also extend beyond them. I am interested in describ-

⁴⁰ Scholars generally assume that traditions and stories about Aesop developed first in Ionia/East Greece (specifically Samos): thus Aly 1921.159–60; Zeitz 1936.239–42; Nøjgaard 1964.449–58; Momiigliano 1971.35; West 1984.117–19, 123–24, 128; Jedrkiewicz 1989.42–47; Adrados 1999.271–74.

⁴¹ For ancient acknowledgments of the chronological priority of Hesiod and Archilochus to Aesop, see Quint. 5.11.19, Theon II.73 Spengel (= Perry *Test.* 65). For the attachment of fables to Aesop as a fifth-century phenomenon, see West 1984; cf. Nøjgaard 1964.454–63, although Nøjgaard's theory of Ionian versus Athenian fable traditions seems somewhat too rigid and complicated.

⁴² For discussion of Greek fables deriving from Near Eastern models and the degree of Greek consciousness thereof, see Nøjgaard 1964.431–41; West 1978.23–25; 1984.109–11, 1997.319–20, 502–5; Adrados 1999.287–366. I will consider the Ahiqar narrative embedded in the *Life of Aesop* in chapter 4 below; and the migration to Greece of an Indian fable (“The Dancing Peacock”) in chapter 11 below.

⁴³ For narrative of and allusion to fable in early Greek poetry, see Lasserre 1984, van Dijk 1997.124–269; for particular focus on the uses of fable in early iambic, see also Steiner 2008. For discussion of certain fables and allusions to fable in the poetry of Solon, see chapter 3, section II below.

ing and catching the multifarious deployments of this broader Aesopic “voice-print” in a range of ancient texts.

And this inquiry in turn will lead me in the second half of the book to an alternative or supplemental genealogy of the beginnings of mimetic narrative prose in the Greek tradition. This historical narrative is still generally framed in terms of the triumphal march “from *muthos* to *logos*,” where written prose emerges together with the slow dawning of rationality from the fancies of the poets, assisted by the invention of writing that helps liberate the Greeks from the mnemonic constraints of rhythm and song. This is, of course, a very old-fashioned teleological narrative that takes prose for granted as the logical and inevitable end point of development (since that is what prose is for us)—a default transparent medium for the communication of rational thought and argument. And yet studies of the beginnings of prose in other eras and traditions have effectively questioned and estranged these assumptions, demonstrating that the emergence of prose is hardly inevitable or unproblematic.⁴⁴ Within the Greek tradition, I will argue for a significant Aesopic strand twisting through the beginnings of narrative or mimetic prose—both prose philosophy (the Sophists, Plato, Xenophon) and prose history (Herodotus). And, insofar as Aesop and fable are consistently marked throughout the ancient literary tradition as generically and sociologically low (as I noted above), this affiliation vexes the traditional triumphalist account of the beginnings of Greek prose, suggesting a more complicated story of genre trouble, potential status taint, and ruptures of decorum behind the birth of mimetic prose.

This reading of Aesopic elements lurking behind our earliest mimetic narrative prose in the Greek tradition starts from the fact that both Herodotus and Plato, our first extant authors of extended narrative prose in the historical and philosophical traditions, respectively, acknowledge Aesop as a precursor for their prose forms, even while both go to some trouble to disavow or distance themselves from the low fable-maker. Thus this second half of my argument will focus more narrowly on a single historical moment (ca. 450–350 BCE) when fables were getting attached to Aesop; Aesopic fable was strongly identified with prose (in Herodotus and Plato); and mimetic or narrative prose was first crystallizing as a written form. It is my claim that this is a significant conjuncture of elements that merits our close attention, and that should impinge on our narrative of the invention of Greek prose.

But before I can turn to an account of my methodology and the sequencing of the argument chapter by chapter, I must pause for some basic exposition and definitions of the Aesop tradition, ancient fables, and other Aesopica (the “road map” for classicists I promised at the outset). That will constitute the substance of the next section before I resume this introductory account of my argument in section III.

⁴⁴ See (e.g.) Godzich and Kittay 1987, Spiegel 1993.

II. EXPLAINING THE JOKE: A ROAD MAP FOR CLASSICISTS

At this point, I want to offer a more detailed account of the different traditions and instantiations of the *Life* and fables of Aesop we have preserved, their interrelations, the theoretical presuppositions of my readings, and the main scholarly approaches to the *Life* since the discovery and publication of *Vita G* in the mid-twentieth century.

IIA. *Background on the Life of Aesop*

As I've already mentioned, *Vita G* was first identified in 1929 as a unique exemplar of an older, fuller *Life of Aesop* than any then known. Two other traditions of the *Life* were already known at that point: one that in comparison to the newly found version reads like an epitome (although divergences between the two preclude taking it merely as an abridgment of the newly discovered version), first published in modern times by Anton Westermann in 1845. A second version, attributed in several medieval manuscripts to the Byzantine scholar Maximus Planudes (ca. 1255–1305 CE) as editor, was first printed by Bonus Accursianus in 1479. Whether or not it was actually composed by Planudes, this version is adapted fairly closely from one strand of the epitome version but written in a more elegant, classicizing Greek style. Ben Edwin Perry made available the complete text of *Vita G* in his *Aesopica* of 1952, together with the more substantial *Life* represented by the two other traditions, which he called *Vita W* (after Westermann, its first modern editor).⁴⁵ The third version, the Byzantine revision attributed to Planudes, is not included in Perry's *Aesopica*; the standard text of the Accursiana or Planudean *Life* remains that of Alfred Eberhard, published in 1872.⁴⁶

Since Perry's time, further work on the manuscripts of what he called *Vita W* has revealed two separate recensions (with some contamination between them).

⁴⁵ For the relation of the older *Life of Aesop* (Perry's *Vita G*) to Westermann's text of the *Life* and the Accursiana or Planudean version, see Perry 1936.4–24, 217–28, 1952.1–2, 10–16; for useful summaries of the mss traditions, see Holzberg 2002.72–76 and the summary statement of Hansen 1998.106–7: “Two early recensions of the novel survive, called by scholars *Vita G* and *Vita W*. Although additions, deletions, and other modifications characterize both branches of the tradition, *Vita G* generally remains closer to the original. It is much the longer of the two (*G* runs to forty-three pages and *W* to twenty-seven pages in Perry's edition of the Greek text) and is written in a more popular language. The two recensions fortunately have a complementary relationship to some extent in that matter missing from one can sometimes be supplied from the other, but ultimately they are not reconcilable and, like different performances of a folktale or of an oral epic, must each be accepted as valid expressions of the story in their own right.” All of these remain useful formulations, even though it is now generally recognized that what Perry called *Vita W* in fact represents two separate, slightly different Byzantine recensions; see discussion below.

⁴⁶ Eberhard 1872. Scholars still debate the Planudean authorship of this *Life* (Hausrath 1901, 1937 versus Perry 1936.217–28), but that is irrelevant for my argument.

Thus Manolis Papathomopoulos in his 1999 reedition of *Vita W* grouped the manuscripts as MRNLo and SBPTh, while Grammatiki Karla in 2001 refined that grouping as MORN and BPTSA, concluding that these represented two different early Byzantine recensions, the former somewhat longer and fuller than the latter.⁴⁷

In addition, both before and after the discovery and publication of the manuscript text of *Vita G*, finds of papyri ranging in date from the late second to the seventh century CE have supplemented the manuscript tradition and confirmed the continuing circulation of the ancient *Life*.⁴⁸ In 1936, Perry meticulously reedited the four papyri then known (*P.Berol.* inv. 11628, *PSI* II 156, *P.Oxy.* XVIII 2083, *P.Ross.Georg.* I 18) and compared them to the texts of *Vita G* and *Vita W*; two more papyrus fragments derived from a single text (*P.Oxy.* 3331 and 3720) were published by Michael Haslam in 1980 and 1986, respectively.⁴⁹ Some of the papyri, when compared with the manuscript texts, are closer to *G*, others closer to *W*; still others (like *P.Oxy.* 3720) appear to offer a fuller version of which both *G* and *W* read like abridgments.⁵⁰ But even those papyri that pattern with one or the other manuscript tradition differ substantially in diction and in the expansion and contraction of speeches, description, and other circumstantial detail. The papyri thus confirm the fluidity and permeability of the tradition of the *Life*, wherein, within a fairly stable framework of narrative episodes, each copyist/redactor feels free to paraphrase and adapt his own version.

Traditional classical scholarship had neither the tools nor the inclination to engage very deeply with this kind of anonymous, morphing, fluid tradition.

⁴⁷ See Papathomopoulos 1999.31–35, Karla 2001.19–67, and, for the ms sigla, Perry 1952.29–32. In fact, Perry had already anticipated these findings, noting two subbranches within the mss of *Vita W* (see esp. Perry 1966.285–90).

⁴⁸ Scholars often point to the papyri as evidence of the enduring “popularity” of the *Life* (e.g., Haslam 1986.151, Hopkins 1993.11, Hägg 1997.178), but in fact this is somewhat misleading. Given that there are only six papyri fragments representing five separate texts currently known, the *Life of Aesop* is distinctly less “popular” than Homer, Demosthenes, Thucydides, Herodotus, and a whole host of other high literary Greek texts between the first and sixth centuries CE in Egypt; for discussion of the distribution and relative popularity of different texts and authors as represented by the papyri evidence (including the *Life of Aesop*), see Stephens 1994.

⁴⁹ For the papyri texts, see Perry 1936.37–70 with references to earlier editions; Haslam 1980, 1986. The various papyri are dated by their respective editors as follows: *P.Berol.*—late second or early third c. CE; *P.Oxy.* 3331 and 3720 (fragments from the same papyrus text, according to Haslam)—third c. CE; *PSI* 156—fourth c. CE; *P.Oxy.* 2083—late fourth or early fifth c. CE; *P.Ross.Georg.*—seventh c. CE.

⁵⁰ Thus, as Haslam 1986.152 notes, the text represented by *P.Oxy.* 3720 actually seems fuller than that of *Vita G*, although not padded with extraneous material. This may mean (as Holzberg 1992.38 contends) that this papyrus text is then closer to the “archetype” of the *Life* than *Vita G*; or perhaps it is better with this kind of tradition not to attempt to reconstruct a single “source” or “origin,” but to treat each text as an equally legitimate, independent version, to be read on its own terms (thus Hansen 1998.106–7, quoted in n. 45 above).

Earlier generations of scholars had judged the version of the *Life* then known a shapeless, incoherent patchwork, of no literary merit, so it was little read.⁵¹ Even with Perry's publication of the longer, fuller *Vita G*, almost everything remains uncertain about this text: date, authorship, even the Greek text itself at many points. For the first: different scholars have suggested dates ranging from the first century BCE to the second century CE for the text of *Vita G* (in fact, the only thing that provides a secure terminus ante quem is the oldest of the papyri, *P.Berol.* inv. 11628, dating to the late second or early third century CE).⁵² The text is, of course, anonymous, but Perry himself had suggested, based on the prominence of Egyptian elements and Latin loanwords, that *Vita G* was written (or rewritten) in Roman Egypt, perhaps by an Egyptian, nonnative speaker of Greek.⁵³ Alternatively, Antonio La Penna contended that the text as we have it was composed in second-century CE Syria.⁵⁴ More recently, Francisco Rodríguez Adrados and Thomas Hägg have argued that the substance of *Vita G*, or at least significant portions thereof, took shape in the Hellenistic period.⁵⁵ As for the Greek text itself, it is massively corrupt, apparently written originally in late bad *koinē* and then subject to all the ravages of survival in a single manuscript.⁵⁶ As edited by Perry, *Vita G* has several episodes missing, several doublets and intrusive elements, with textual emendations that in Perry's continuous numeration run to 679 over forty-three large pages. In the 1990s, Manolis Papatomopoulos undertook the reediting of *Vita G* and *Vita W*, and in 1997, Franco Ferrari produced a new edition of *Vita G* with facing

⁵¹ For a sampling of the extremely negative assessments of earlier scholars, see Holzberg 2002.76–77.

⁵² Perry 1936.24–26 offers the range 100 BCE to 200 CE; Perry 1952.5 inclines more to the first century CE because of the large number of Latin loanwords in *Vita G*. But as Hopkins 1993.11n. 14 and Hägg 1997.180–81 note, all these dates are guesses; only the earliest papyrus provides a firm terminus ante quem for the text fixation of the *Life*.

⁵³ Perry 1952.2–5; Perry's conjecture as to the text's Egyptian provenance is endorsed by Haslam 1986.150, Dillery 1999. Note also the important observation of Hopkins 1993.15n. 22, 25 that the use of the term *stratēgos* for a local district magistrate is confined to "Egypt under Greek and Roman rule"; the term occurs in both G and W, ch. 65.

⁵⁴ La Penna 1962.272–73; La Penna's argument is based on the different geographical references in G and W's differing versions of the final fable Aesop tells in ch. 142 (what the girl within the fable says to her father who has just raped her). On the basis of these references, he posits G as a Syrian/Eastern recension and W as a Sicilian/Western recension of the story. I'm not sure, however, that La Penna's arguments make sense: in both instances, the point of the girl's geographical comparison is that she would rather wander the distant ends of the earth than be subjected to her father's violence; we cannot therefore take the places she names as specifications of where the respective text versions were themselves composed.

⁵⁵ Adrados 1979, 1999.647–83; Hägg 1997, esp. 182–83. The former's argument is based largely on what he takes to be the pervasiveness of Cynic elements in *Vita G*, whereas the latter argues for the Samian portion of the *Life* as largely Hellenistic (but probably not earlier).

⁵⁶ On the Greek of *Vita G*, see Tallmadge 1938, Birch 1955, Hostetter 1955, Shipp 1983, Haslam 1992.

Italian translation. And while these editions offer many improvements on Perry's editio princeps, many passages remain hopelessly corrupt.⁵⁷

But perhaps the greatest mystery of all is the status of the *Life* itself: how did it come to be a written text? And can we treat it as genuinely “popular”? Before *Vita G* appeared on the scene, much older scholarship on the *Life of Aesop* (especially German) regularly conceived the text as deriving from an anonymous Ionian *Volksbuch* of the sixth or fifth century BCE. This was anachronistically to borrow a term from the European early modern period, when printing and inexpensive chapbooks and broadsheets enabled much wider dissemination of popular images and texts.⁵⁸ The fantasy of a sixth- or fifth-century *Volksbuch* was already decisively critiqued by Perry, who noted how unlikely it was that a text on such a topic aimed at a popular audience could have been composed at this time:

So far as we know, books written in early Greek prose dealt always with serious matters of an historical, scientific or philosophical nature, which were committed to writing rather as a record to be consulted by other thinkers and by posterity, than as literature meant to be read by Everyman for his edification or entertainment. Histories were written about nations and the world at large, and we know of no personal biography except what was narrated incidentally within the framework of a national or a universal history. In that age no individual, however important he might be historically, was likely to be made the subject of an entire book written in prose, and least of all a comic individual like Aesop. Prose literature was not so trivial, nor its orientation so particularized.⁵⁹

And yet when *Vita G* was first discovered, Perry himself heralded it as “one of the few genuinely popular books that have come down from ancient

⁵⁷ See Papathomopoulos 1989, 1990, 1999 (with reviews by Haslam 1992, van Dijk 1994) and Ferrari 1995 (textual notes) and 1997 (bilingual Greek-Italian edition). Like many scholars writing on the *Life of Aesop*, I will in general cite the text of Perry 1952 for G and W. Occasionally, where there are lacunae in G, I supplement these from W, and on other occasions, I diverge from Perry's text, following instead Papathomopoulos and/or Ferrari; in all these cases, I will note my divergences from Perry's text in the individual discussions.

⁵⁸ For the *Life of Aesop* conceived as an ancient *Volksbuch*, see (e.g.) Hausrath 1909 coll. 1711–14; Crusius 1920.XVI–XVIII; Schmid and Stählin 1929.672–76; Zeitz 1936.242–45; Wiechers 1961.1, 29. For changed conditions of printing and production that enabled the circulation of *Volksbücher* in the early modern period in Europe, see Burke 1978.250–59; for discussion of the problems and inaccuracy of the term *Volksbuch* even for the later period, see Classen 1995.

⁵⁹ Perry 1959.31; cf. Perry 1952.5. Perry concludes: “The publication in the fifth or sixth century of a book about the doings of Aesop was as unlikely and as contrary to literary propriety as would have been the publication of a collection of novellae in the style of Boccaccio; although abundant material for either kind of book was ready at hand. Novellae, fables, and short stories unconnected with saga could appear in the literature of that time only as something incidental and subordinate in the context of a larger work dealing with some significant subject, as in Herodotus.” Very important here—though rarely acknowledged—is the issue of “literary propriety” and Perry's insightful juxtaposition of that issue with Herodotus; for more on all this, see chapters 10 and 11 below.

times.”⁶⁰ Perry noted that, in contrast to such written, learned appropriations of popular traditions as *The Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, the *Lives* of Homer, or Plutarch’s *Banquet of the Seven Sages*, the *Life of Aesop* “is more naïve and romantic. It gives us the portrait of a wise man as seen through the eyes of the poor in spirit, at the same time enlivened by a spontaneous and vigorous, if somewhat homely, wit.”⁶¹ Here Perry himself seems to succumb to the same anachronistic, romantic model he was later to critique in arguing against the theory of the *Volksbuch*, simply transposing it to a later period of antiquity. For, as I have noted, the very fact that we have written texts at all would seem to preclude their being genuinely “popular” or low, given everything we know about the limited literacy and cost of book production at any period in the ancient world. And yet Perry is responding to something significant in the written form and style of the *Life of Aesop*. It simply does not read like any of the comparison texts he names: it is looser, more colloquial, and more vulgar. It is a fallacy, however, to assume that we can simply and unproblematically correlate style and form with the socioeconomic status of author and/or audience. As recent work on the ancient novel has demonstrated, even texts whose style seems “popular” and whose form and content align them with modern trashy or popular novels must be understood as the province of an elite of wealth and education.⁶²

Together with the general rejection of the *Volksbuch* model, a few scholars have proposed theories for a different kind of textual fixation of the *Life of Aesop* fairly early on. Thus M. L. West suggests that there may already have existed in the fifth century BCE a written narrative of the “life and death . . . wit and wisdom” of Aesop, with fables and parables embedded in it. West regards the existence of a fifth-century book as a necessary conclusion based on a single passage of Aristophanes. In the *Birds*, Pisthetaerus, before launching into the fable of the lark who buried her father in her own head, reproaches the chorus of birds for their ignorance of the story:

ἀμαθῆς γὰρ ἔφυς κού πολυπράγμων, οὐδ’ Αἴσωπον πεπάτηκας,
ὅς ἔφρασκε λέγων κορυδὸν πάντων πρώτην ὄρνιθα γενέσθαι,
(*Birds* 471–72)

For you are naturally ignorant and incurious, nor have you spent a lot of time on Aesop, who was always saying, when he told the story, that the crested lark was the first of all the birds . . .

⁶⁰ Perry 1936.2; still treated as popular by (e.g.) Winkler 1985.279–91; cf. Haslam 1980.54: “The *Life of Aesop* resembles other quasi-biographical specimens of folk-literature such as the *Alexander Romance* in that its text had no fixed constitution.”

⁶¹ Perry 1936.1–2.

⁶² See Bowie 1994, Stephens 1994 on the readership and status of the ancient novel; see also Jedrkiewicz 1989.171–82, 208–12 and Avlamis 2006, 2010a on the fallacy of correlating the peculiar style and status of the *Life of Aesop* with a specific socioeconomic group in antiquity.

Everything depends on how we understand the verb *πεπάτηκας* here. West, following Morten Nøjgaard, insists that the verb must signify something more active than mere “listening to stories,” and cites the parallel use of the same verb in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (273a), where it clearly refers to careful study of a written text.⁶³ But I am not so sure that we can confidently invoke Plato’s later usage to establish the meaning of this verb in Aristophanes. It is equally possible that it means simply “you have spent a lot of time on Aesop” (as an Aristophanic scholiast glosses it), referring to careful attention to oral tales.⁶⁴ However that may be, for West this written text circulating before 415 BCE is not a *Volksbuch*, but perhaps a Sophistic composition comparable to the later *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* by Alcidas and the pseudo-Herodotean *Life of Homer*.⁶⁵ A different theory of early textual fixation is offered by Ben Edwin Perry. Perry insists that there is no good evidence for a fifth-century written text, but suggests that Demetrius of Phaleron in the volume of *Αἰσωπειῶν λόγων συναγωγαί* attributed to him by Diogenes Laertius (D.L. 5.80), might have prefaced a collection of prose fables with a short *Life*, based like the fables on popular anecdotes circulating orally at the time.⁶⁶

Either of these scenarios is possible; I am frankly agnostic. For even if we posit such early textual fixation in one or another form, it cannot adequately account for the texts of the *Life of Aesop* we have. For as Perry already noted (and as I noted above), the *Lives of Aesop* are not really comparable in form, verbal texture, and level of style to such Sophistic texts as the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, the pseudo-Herodotean *Life of Homer*, or what we might imagine for a composition by Demetrius of Phaleron. Whether or not we posit early textual fixation, the only way to account for these factors is to assume ongoing, robust oral traditions about Aesop that regularly interact with and impinge on

⁶³ West 1984.121–22, following Nøjgaard 1964.474. Cf. LSJ s.v. *πατέω* II.2, “hast not thumbed Aesop.”

⁶⁴ Cf. Dunbar 1995.325–26, who quotes the scholiast (τὸ πατήσαι ἴσον ἐστὶ τῷ ἐνδιατρίψαι) and finds the literary references to Aesop in Aristophanes and Plato “inconclusive” on the question of whether or not any Aesopica already existed in written form in the fifth century. Indeed, I would argue that Aristophanes’ use of *πολυπράγμων* and the iterative *ἔφρασκε* are more likely to point to the *oral* circulation of tales.

⁶⁵ West 1984.122–28, following Jacoby 1933.10. While I am skeptical about the existence of a fifth-century written text of something that looks more or less like the *Life*, I find West’s notion of a “sophistic composition” useful and suggestive for a later period; see below, chapter 4. Note that it is West’s speculation that Aristophanes refers not just to a written text, but to a text that looks more like the *Life of Aesop* (a connected narrative of Aesop’s life and death, with embedded fables) rather than simply a collection of disconnected fables. Other scholars use Aristophanes’ reference as evidence for a written collection of prose fables with no narrative frame: thus (e.g.) Nøjgaard 1964.473–75.

⁶⁶ Thus Perry 1959.31–36, 1962a.332–34, 1966.286–87n. 2. As Perry notes, Demetrius of Phaleron’s one-volume work is the earliest written collection of prose fables known to us from antiquity; see section IIC below.

various textual instantiations over centuries.⁶⁷ Thus we may say that as written texts, the *Lives* of Aesop cannot be “popular” in any authentic and unmediated way; but that as elite instantiations, they carry elements of the popular within them, mediated and transformed.

Indeed, in contrast to older approaches to the *Life* that assumed that it was genuinely and unproblematically “popular,” more recent scholarly treatments have come to more or less the opposite conclusion, recognizing in *Vita G* (or parts thereof) a unitary literary work whose sole author or adapter must have been a member of the educated elite.⁶⁸ These readings, then, are more generally focused on what is distinctive in *Vita G* as the intervention of an educated individual in the tradition at a particular moment in time. But what tends to get lost in this more recent approach is an acknowledgment of the unique status of a text like the *Life*, which seems to emerge from and remain in continuing interaction with popular oral traditions over centuries. It is this strange permeable, unstable quality of the text that the earlier scholarly models of *Volksbuch* or “folk-literature” aimed to come to grips with.

IIB. Theoretical Assumptions and Critique of Previous Scholarship

So if we must read the written *Lives* as elite mediations and transformations of popular oral traditions, how do we sort out popular from elite elements—figure from ground (as it were)? Is this simply hopeless? The methods of cultural historians like Peter Burke and Robert Darnton, who work on the interaction of popular and elite cultures in later periods of European history, suggest that this is not a hopeless endeavor.⁶⁹ This is so, first, because still in these periods (as throughout the ancient world), the “little tradition” exists as a common culture in which both nonelites and elites participate. For a period in which we can posit such a common culture, Burke offers a set of indirect or oblique methods for accessing the popular through fragmentary cultural remains and the mediation of elite texts and appropriations, consisting of three elements: reading for “iconology”; the regressive method; and the comparative method.⁷⁰ First, fol-

⁶⁷ This is thus akin to the argument offered by La Penna 1962.282–84 against the theory of the *Volksbuch*, that early textual fixation is unlikely given the sheer number of divergent and different traditions about Aesop proliferating from an early date. That is to say, this proliferation of different traditions suggests either that there was no written text, or that the written text simply made no difference and oral traditions continued to proliferate and develop on their own, informing and feeding back into written sources. Notice that this is precisely the same pattern of dual (oral and written) circulation most scholars postulate for the fables (see section IIC below).

⁶⁸ Thus Holzberg 1992, 1993, 1996, 2002.76–84; Ferrari 1997.5–39; Hägg 1997; Jouanno 2006.27–32; Hunter 2007; Avlami 2010a.

⁶⁹ Burke 1978, Darnton 1984.

⁷⁰ Burke 1978.77–87. Of course, as Burke 1978.77–79 notes, these three indirect or oblique methods supplement the historian’s basic tool kit of reading sources critically to screen for distortion.

lowing Erwin Panofsky, Burke defines “iconology” as “the diagnosis of the attitudes and values of which works of art are the symptoms”; what contemporaries “did not know about themselves—or at any rate, did not know they knew.”⁷¹ Burke contends that this style of reading can be applied to popular imagery and artifacts as well as to high works of art. Second, Burke borrows from the great *Annaliste* historian Marc Bloch “the regressive method,” used to reconstruct historical phenomena by working backward from periods when our evidence is fuller to earlier periods when it is more fragmentary. This is essentially a structuralist model of constituting connections among a constellation of elements, rather than applying a positivist model of reading that treats each detail separately and assumes that we can date each detail only by its earliest appearance in a text. Finally, the comparative method seeks to supplement a fragmentary record by comparison with a more fully preserved structural or typological system in another culture.

I will throughout be applying *structuralist* methods of reading that are analogous to aspects of Burke’s approaches, although I will also be drawing on more literary methodologies for the nuanced reading and interpretation of texts. To be adequate to the material we have and the goal envisioned, we must craft a methodology that starts from cultural history, anthropology, and structuralist and poststructuralist literary and cultural theory. As such, our approach will read for *dialectics*—dialectics within culture, dialectics between texts and culture, between texts and traditions, and within texts—and for *ideology*. In order to elucidate what I mean by these three key terms (structuralism, dialectic, ideology), I begin with a set of axioms and definitions:

1. I take it as axiomatic that culture is not homogeneous, but is instead a domain of contest. All cultures are comprised of many disparate subgroups or subcultures, whose identity and existence are constantly shifting and realigning, whose rituals, beliefs, and practices alternately compete and collaborate. Culture is articulated at several levels—reflected in language, embodied in customs and traditions—and is constantly under negotiation. It will contain both residual strains of its earlier iterations and emergent seeds of change and potential resistance. Following important reconceptualizations of culture by Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel de Certeau, scholars in various disciplines have shifted their emphasis from culture as a (single, coherent) system to culture as (multiple, diffuse) practices—or, better, to culture as the *dialectic* of

Thus he acknowledges the even more basic approach of studying the attitudes of the nonelite through the witness of the elites who shared their common culture. To some extent, this applies to the whole of the text of the *Life of Aesop*, which mobilizes an abject outsider’s perspective to critique various institutions and cultural practices.

⁷¹ Burke 1978.79. Similar to Burke’s reading for “iconology” is Darnton’s analysis of the implicit values encoded in French peasant tales (see esp. Darnton 1984.29–62).

system and practice.⁷² Thus I am following the lead of recent theoretical work in cultural studies—work that understands cultural formations as complex, disparate, improvisatory, and diverse—very much in contrast to the monolithic “Greek culture” traditionally imagined by the field of classics.⁷³

2. Texts stand in a complex relation to culture as a domain of contest or negotiation. A text does not merely reflect some reified, preexistent culture, but is instead a part of culture—is culture—a “symbolic act” that responds to determinate historical conditions, but also in its turn affects the broader social and cultural landscape.⁷⁴ That is to say, texts and culture stand in a dialectical relation to each other. And as a symbolic act, each text participates in the contestation of culture through which power and status are negotiated. Thus texts of all kinds offer us the sedimented residue of moments in a dynamic process of struggle or contestation.

3. Issues of power or contestation entail ideology as an essential part of culture. Following Althusser, I define ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence”; as such, as Althusser also notes, “there is no outside to ideology.”⁷⁵ But, as more recent poststructuralist theorists have argued, ideology is itself not monolithic—it is incoherent, layered, and inconsistent. There are at any given time competing ideologies, and there are historical residues of older ideologies.⁷⁶ And insofar as ideology is itself a symbolic system—a kind of language—the symbolic systems of texts, especially narratives, are a privileged site for the inscription of ideologies, and therefore also for the inscription of the incoherences, rifts, and blind spots of ideology. Such rifts or seams in a text enable a “symptomatic” reading for the pressures and equivocations of ideology and between coexisting ideologies—the tensions and stresses that the culture can express to itself only in the form of narrative; its “political unconscious.”⁷⁷ This symptomatic reading for ideology and for competing ideologies within a text is akin to Burke’s “iconological method.”

4. A structuralist approach to texts and culture reads individual elements relationally as parts of a system; within the system, each element must be motivated. Where weird or anomalous elements occur that cannot be accounted for within the synchronic system postulated, we need another account of motivation. Thus these elements may be parts of a different synchronic system, or they

⁷² Thus (e.g.) Sahlins 1985, Sewell 1999.

⁷³ In addition to Bourdieu and de Certeau, I have found the following most useful for my project: Stallybrass and White 1986; Scott 1990; Bell 1992.

⁷⁴ Jameson 1981.

⁷⁵ Althusser 2001; quotations from pp. 109 and 107, respectively.

⁷⁶ For the incoherence of all ideologies, see Macherey 1978.75–101, Belsey 1980.101–24; for the synchronic coexistence of multiple, competing ideologies, see Smith 1988; for the layered residue of different historical ideologies, see Jameson 1981, esp. 93–102.

⁷⁷ For such symptomatic reading, see esp. Macherey 1978, Jameson 1981; for the concept of the “political unconscious” of texts, Jameson 1981.

may justify diachronic explanation, as remnants or residue of an older system that has otherwise been erased or overwritten within a cultural formation or within a text.

These are all general axioms about culture, texts, and ideology, but given a text like the *Life of Aesop* that contains within its boundaries a complex dialectic of oral traditions and multiple textual fixations, all these axioms apply a fortiori. For this text is not a single “symbolic act” by an individual postulated author or agent; it is instead the layered bricolage of multiple acts and agents in conversation or contest over hundreds of years. Thus the reading for ideological conflicts within culture that would normally require the aggregation of several texts over an extended period here finds its analogue in the analysis of the all-too-visible seams and rifts of this single strange text. Or put the other way round, narrative incoherences that reveal different interests and emphases may allow us to access different diachronic layers of cultural and ideological contestation.

Insofar as my goal is to read the *Lives* of Aesop and other Aesopica sympathetically for ideologies and for cultural contestation, I am following the lead of two excellent recent discussions of the *Life of Aesop* influenced by cultural studies—those of Jack Winkler and Keith Hopkins. Both Winkler and Hopkins read for ideology—for the tensions and ambiguities articulated and negotiated in such an open text in dialogue with a long-lived oral tradition.⁷⁸ For Winkler, the *Life of Aesop* participates in a popular critique of the pretensions of Roman imperial philosophers, scholastici, and rhetors, while Hopkins finds in this narrative a complex engagement with the issues and contradictory ideologies of slavery, for the delectation of slave owners. And while these two provide rich and suggestive readings of how such a narrative works within culture, they do so by mainly limiting their analyses synchronically to the end of a long process: for both Winkler and Hopkins, the *Life of Aesop* is only a Roman imperial text and nothing more. I would like to try a different kind of historicizing approach, reading the *Life* (or at least certain strands in the *Life*) in a way that is simultaneously diachronic and focused on ideology. I start from the assumption that stories about Aesop circulated for centuries, with different elements doing complex ideological work at different points. Thus, in what resembles a three-dimensional chess game, I want to try to take different synchronic slices or snapshots, and, at each point, put the elements in dynamic relation to their cultural and historical context.

⁷⁸ Winkler 1985.279–91, Hopkins 1993. For the text of the *Life* deriving from a long-lived, ongoing tradition, see esp. Winkler 1985.288–89 (“The *Life of Aesop* can thus be interpreted as a witness to a submerged, largely unwritten and unlettered cultural tradition in which the Deformed Man speaks both comically and seriously against the tyranny of conventional wisdom”) and Hopkins 1993.3, 11n. 14 (characterizing the *Life* as “an anonymous accretive novella, composed and revised, as I suspect, over centuries, as a vehicle for comedy and manners”; different elements in the text “suggest multiple sites, origins, and fantasies”).

But it should be acknowledged that the readings of Winkler and Hopkins are very much the exception within the scholarly literature on the *Life of Aesop*. To date, most scholarly approaches to the *Life* have been informed by traditional literary and philological methods; this is equally true of older diachronic or *Quellenforschung* approaches and of the more synchronic formal readings that have recently replaced them. As such, these approaches are susceptible to critique based on their (often unexamined) nineteenth-century foundations and assumptions. I will therefore survey the main trends in scholarship on the *Life* since Perry's publication of *Vita G* in 1952, and critique each method in turn. My discussion of the scholarship will be selective rather than comprehensive, attempting to lay out broad trends and focusing on those arguments with which I will most engage (whether to agree or disagree) in the chapters that follow.⁷⁹ I will then summarize what I take to be general usable findings before proceeding to lay out my own methodology briefly in positive form in section III.

One might have expected more interest in the text when Perry first published *Vita G*, but after an initial flurry of studies (mainly by Perry's students) on the manuscript, language, and syntax of the *Life*, attention largely subsided.⁸⁰ *Vita G* was translated into English for the first time by Lloyd Daly in 1961, published together with English translations of all the fables contained in Perry's *Aesopica* in a volume entitled *Aesop without Morals*.⁸¹ The late 1980s and 1990s saw a marked increase in critical interest in the *Life* and fables of Aesop, as oral and popular cultures, cultural contact, and ancient multiculturalism emerged as significant issues within the field of classics.⁸² It is symptomatic of this new interest that Daly's 1961 English translation of the *Life* was republished and made more readily available in William Hansen's *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature* (1998). And yet this newer surge of interest in the noncanonical and the marginal was often paradoxically shackled to traditional disciplinary subdivisions or as yet unexamined nineteenth-century methodologies and reading strategies. Thus one approach tended to segregate the *Life* and fables from other ancient literature, setting them apart as low forms or "folklore."⁸³ Alternatively,

⁷⁹ For a comprehensive analytic bibliography on the *Life of Aesop*, see Beschorner and Holzberg 1992, updated in Holzberg 2002.93–95.

⁸⁰ Tallmadge 1938, Birch 1955, Hostetter 1955.

⁸¹ Daly 1961 (republished in Hansen 1998). To my knowledge, there is only one other English translation of *Vita G* available—done by Lawrence M. Wills and published as the appendix to Wills 1997. Daly's translation is generally excellent, but on occasion, I disagree with his interpretation; I will therefore provide my own translations for the passages of *Vita G* quoted and discussed throughout. See also the recent French translation of Jouanno 2006.

⁸² E.g., Adrados 1979, 1999; Winkler 1985; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 1997; Papatomopoulos 1989, 1990, 1999; Holzberg 1992, 1993, 1996, 2002; Hopkins 1993; Ferrari 1997; Hägg 1997; Papademetriou 1997; van Dijk 1997; Dillery 1999; duBois 2003; Finkelppearl 2003.

⁸³ E.g., Karadagli 1981, Zafiroopoulos 2001. For more cross-cultural, comparative folklore approaches to the *Life of Aesop* since the publication of *Vita G*, see Papademetriou 1997; Hansen 1998.108, 2002.49–54, 234–40; Konstantakos 2006, 2008.

when the *Life of Aesop* was set in relation to other forms of literary and cultural production from antiquity, this reading together was still largely predicated on methods derived from nineteenth-century *Quellenforschung* or “source criticism,” originally developed to analyze the interrelations of fixed texts.

Traditional *Quellenforschung* often assumed that the *Life* was an incoherent patchwork with no synchronic unity, and proceeded to analyze it piecemeal. It attempted to excavate the “sources” that flowed into the *Life of Aesop* tradition and to isolate the oldest core or “original” substrate. According to this line of scholarship, what we have is a core of dim reminiscences of the First Sacred War (dating from ca. 590 BCE) and aetiological myths linked to scapegoat ritual, overlaid with Socratic influences, Cynic influences, the poorly integrated Eastern *Story of Ahiqar*, and Egyptian accretions of the Roman imperial period.⁸⁴

In general, such traditional “source criticism” is open to critique at several levels. First, it focuses on individual details, not system, and once it has identified the “original” detail, all the rest are dismissed or ignored. That is to say, most versions of *Quellenforschung* are prestructuralist. Second, it is a method originally designed to analyze written texts; as a result, the process of interaction of texts with other texts or with their context is here imagined on a bookish or written model as a onetime operation of “influence” or “borrowing” at a fixed moment in time. This model of the static interaction of book with book was partly enabled by the old-fashioned theory of a sixth- or fifth-century BCE *Volksbuch*. Indeed, the *Quellenforschung* approach was at its height together with the heyday of the *Volksbuch* theory, but, oddly, it has endured in the scholarship on the *Life* long after the *Volksbuch* model was rejected and abandoned. In this model, there is no time-depth or history, and often no concept of culture surrounding and interacting with texts. Third, this kind of traditional *Quellenforschung* assumes that influence or borrowing only ever goes one way—from the top down; from the products of elite culture to the popular. This assumption is partly justified by the presumed lateness of the text of the *Life of Aesop*, but even those scholars who imagine a sixth- or fifth-century written text usually adhere to this one-way model. Why is this? I suspect it derives from a subliminal conviction that the “popular” can only be derivative and parasitic on high culture, not creative in its own right. That is to say, this model recognizes no dialectic between the common culture and elite culture, or between oral traditions and textual instantiations. But given such a long-lived, ongoing oral tradition, we must reconceptualize the process of text fixation and, with it, the relation to other texts and contexts. We must imagine the Aesop texts we have as emerging from a constant, ongoing set of exchanges—a dialogue or conversation between

⁸⁴ For these different layers analyzed diachronically, see (e.g.) Zeitz 1936; Wiechers 1961; La Penna 1962; Adrados 1979, 1999.647–85; Nagy 1979.125–26, 279–91, 302–8; Luzzato 1988; Jedrkiewicz 1989.41–215; Dillery 1999. Among these treatments, Zeitz 1936 still offers many useful insights, and Jedrkiewicz 1989 provides a thoughtful and judicious synthesis of much earlier scholarship.

different traditions taking place over a long period of time, of which our texts represent the sedimented residue.

Finally, when such *Quellenforschung* approaches connect texts with a determinate social or historical context, they tend to posit a world without ideology and no gap between texts and world. By “a world without ideology,” I mean a static and monolithic model of culture, with no rifts or power struggles within. “No gap between texts and world” represents a model of textual reflectionism in extreme form, in which all that exists in the world is presumed to be reflected accurately and without distortion in our preserved texts. Given such assumptions, how can one motivate the presence and persistence of particular features in texts and traditions? This model never even raises the question of motivation; instead it posits a bizarrely Parmenidean order in which all that is spoken in texts must exist (there is no room for fantasy or biased, interested reporting), while all that is not explicitly mentioned in texts is presumed not to exist. Such an approach cannot adequately account for the workings of oral traditions or the fixation of written texts. For the former: studies of oral tradition suggest that a tale or account is very much the collaborative product of teller and audience together, so that we must imagine an oral tale as the work of a whole group or community.⁸⁵ Coordinate with this, we must account for why oral traditions and tales get preserved—why they continue to be told at all. Jan Vansina, a great pioneer in the practice and methodology of oral history, observes that oral tradition is always a selective process, which adapts narratives of the past to the needs of the present: without some kind of present anchor to locality, religious practice, political hierarchy, or group identity, tales cease being told and retold and simply disappear.⁸⁶ For the latter: we might suppose that fixation in writing could preserve details of much older material, even when it became disconnected from the needs and interests of a particular community and entirely irrelevant. And this might be the case for a written tradition that was fixed and closed from its inception, but can hardly be presumed for the kind of fluid, open tradition the *Lives* represent. While we must postulate some pressure in

⁸⁵ For the general model for oral traditions, see Vansina 1985.12, 34, 54–56, 108–9; for different applications to classical material, see Nagy 1996 (poetic/epic traditions), Maurizio 1997 (verse oracles as oral traditions). Note that for Vansina this collaborative process of teller and audience applies particularly to nonpoetic tales that require no special expertise in composition (vs Nagy/Maurizio): “From the point of view of the historian the form is important, as some categories such as poetry require a composition by a single author. . . . Improvisation on an existing stock of images and forms is the hallmark of fictional narrative of all sorts. Such tales develop during performance. They never are invented from scratch, but develop as various bits of older tales are combined, sequences altered or improvised, descriptions of characters shifted, and settings placed in other locales. Unlike poetry and its sisters there is no moment at which a tale is composed” (Vansina 1985.11–12).

⁸⁶ Still, Vansina rejects a model of perfect and complete homeostasis between every element in a tale and the present social order, noting that “the presence of archaisms in various traditions gives homeostasis the lie” (1985.121). I would suggest that the presence of archaisms, fixed in writing at different points, makes it possible to read for more than one layer or stratum within the Aesop tradition.

the tradition to respect and preserve the general lineaments of a story about Aesop (as we shall see below), it is clear that individual authors/redactors felt a great deal of freedom in reshaping the details they inherited.

This is a bare-bones schematic critique of traditional *Quellenforschung*. Let me offer a few specific examples to concretize this critique. In a short monograph published in 1961, Anton Wiechers focused on the Delphic episode at the end of the *Life*, generally acknowledged to be the oldest core of the tradition (since specific elements of it figure already in the texts of Herodotus and Aristophanes). Reading the Delphic portion of the *Life* against many other dispersed and fragmentary sources on Delphic history and ritual aetiologies, Wiechers offered a three-part argument:

1. Elements of the condemnation and death of Aesop at Delphi parallel elements in preserved accounts of the causes and results of the First Sacred War (early sixth century BCE), when (supposedly) a league of cities allied to Delphi conquered and destroyed the neighboring city of Cirrha or Crisa; therefore the narrative of the death of Aesop functions as an aetiology for the First Sacred War.
2. Elements of the condemnation and death of Aesop closely parallel elements of the Thargelia *pharmakos* ritual as we know them from other parts of Greece (especially Ionia); therefore the narrative of the death of Aesop is actually the aetiology for a Delphic *pharmakos* ritual (otherwise entirely unattested).
3. Elements of the condemnation and death of Aesop parallel traditions of the death of Neoptolemus at Delphi; therefore Neoptolemus, like Aesop, is a mythological version of a *pharmakos* and his story again provides an aetiology for a Delphic *pharmakos* ritual (otherwise entirely unattested).

Wiechers's argument is closely followed by Gregory Nagy, who accepts all three parts and adds to it the notion that both Neoptolemus and Aesop are also recipients of hero cult (the former as a warrior, the latter as a "poet"), locked in the same relationship of "ritual antagonism" with the god of Delphi. As Nagy explains, "antagonism between hero and god in myth corresponds to the ritual requirements of symbiosis between hero and god in cult."⁸⁷

Both Wiechers's original argument and Nagy's additions to it are still frequently cited with approval by other scholars writing on traditions about Aesop and the *Life*.⁸⁸ But Wiechers's account exhibits several of the methodological problems I've identified for traditional *Quellenforschung*. Thus, for example, focus on details rather than system: Wiechers collects a fascinating dossier of sources that comment on and critique Delphic sacrificial practices, some dating back to the archaic and classical periods.⁸⁹ But in the end, Wiechers derives his

⁸⁷ Nagy 1979.121.

⁸⁸ Thus (e.g.) Adrados 1979, 1999.277, 280–81; West 1984.117, 124; Winkler 1985.286–88; Ogden 1997.38–40; duBois 2003.174; Finkelpearl 2003; Compton 2006.19–40. For scholars who do not simply accept Wiechers's argument, see Jedrkiewicz 1989.99–107, Rothwell 1995, Rosen 2007.98–104.

⁸⁹ Wiechers 1961.16–17.

entire argument about reminiscences of the First Sacred War in the Aesop story from a single report in a scholion to Aristophanes' *Wasps* that Aesop "mocked the Delphians because they did not have land from which to support themselves by agricultural labor." Since the First Sacred War was supposedly fought over possession of the fertile plain of Crisa below Delphi, this account is therefore privileged as the genuine "original" story, and all the references to problematic Delphic sacrifice are simply ignored. But a structuralist method would insist that this pattern of references, too, must signify *something*; as I will argue in chapter 1 below, these references may in fact give us a better purchase on the story of Aesop at Delphi as ideological critique.

More problematic still is Wiechers's assumption that memories of the early sixth-century First Sacred War would have endured in the Aesop tradition centuries after the utter destruction of Cirrha/Crisa and throughout a much broader geographic territory. Of course, what makes this assumption credible for Wiechers is his belief in a sixth- or fifth-century *Volksbuch* of the *Life of Aesop*, which, once committed to writing, preserved the most archaic material inert and unchanged. But once we have laid the ghost of the *Volksbuch* model, how are we to imagine the workings of such preservation? Both for an oral tradition and for a fluid or permeable written tradition, there must be some motivation for stories to be told and retold—and this gets us to the level of ideology and contestations within culture. Why should the Aesop story preserve memories of the causes of the First Sacred War? Whose interests are served thereby? Wiechers's account never even attempts to answer these questions, since his positivist history sees only material causes and material effects in the world and in the texts that passively reflect it. The First Sacred War happened, and so it must have been remembered. In fact, we should note that some scholars question the very existence of the First Sacred War. Thus Noel Robertson argues that it was simply an invented tradition of the fourth century BCE, in response to Philip of Macedon's manipulations of the Delphic Amphictyony. It may be that Robertson's skepticism is too extreme, but at least he recognizes the fact that stories about the First Sacred War would only be told and preserved when it was in someone's interest to do so in a context of competing ethnic and political claims to territory.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Robertson 1978. For a balanced and judicious evaluation of Robertson's argument from the archaic perspective, see Morgan 1990.135–36; Morgan thinks something like the First Sacred War must have occurred at some point in the archaic period, even if traditions about it, who participated, and what the causes were, were much elaborated in the fourth century BCE because of analogous contemporary conditions.

Similar criticisms can be leveled against Wiechers's theory that the Aesop legend preserves a deeply archaic aetiology for *pharmakos* ritual at Delphi. As Wiechers himself acknowledges in a footnote (1961.42n. 24), we have absolutely no evidence for a Thargelia festival at Delphi, although we are very well provided with information on the Delphic cult of Apollo in the historical period. Wiechers's response is that the Delphians abandoned and suppressed the festival "on the threshold

In like manner, religious models dependent on Wiechers presuppose religion—and culture—as entirely static, monolithic, unified systems without any possibility for historical change or human agency. In these models, a reified “religion” or “tradition” often takes over the “author function,” thereby suppressing any serious consideration of human motivation or contestation. So, for example, Gregory Nagy, discussing the death of Neoptolemus at Delphi (to which he then assimilates the death of Aesop at Delphi) asserts: “For we see here a striking illustration of a fundamental principle in Hellenic religion: antagonism between hero and god in myth corresponds to the ritual requirements of symbiosis between hero and god in cult.” But what is the status of this “fundamental principle”? What are these “ritual requirements”? Does the principle apply to all gods and heroes, or only to certain gods (e.g., Hera, Apollo) at certain times and places in relation to certain heroes (e.g., Heracles, Achilles, Neoptolemus)? More importantly, whose principle is it; whose interests does it serve; and why does such a model develop and subsist (if it does)? That is to say, what social work is this religious structure performing? By establishing this “principle” as axiomatic, Nagy makes of “Hellenic religion” a closed system that is somehow not motivated by or answerable to the domain of social work and social effects. More particularly: Nagy’s assimilation of conflict to “symbiosis” in a two-tiered system preempts in advance any attempt to correlate conflict or tension within a narrative tradition with forms of real conflict or contestation within society at large.⁹¹

Let me offer one final example of the enduring imprint of *Quellenforschung* arguments on the way we read the ancient Aesop tradition. In 1962, Ben Edwin Perry argued that, because Herodotus never explicitly connects Aesop with the Seven Sages or with Croesus, these elements of the tradition simply did not exist in the fifth century BCE, but only got invented in the fourth. Indeed, Perry credits the invention of these traditions to Demetrius of Phaleron, in the brief

of the historical period,” when the ritual killing of a human scapegoat became offensive to their more highly evolved sensibilities. But by what logic would the aetiology for scapegoat ritual be preserved in oral tradition long after the ritual itself was renounced and abandoned? Again, whose interest is served by the story’s continuing to be told? This is partly also a problem of taking our sources too literally or too much at face value, rather than reading them through the mediation of structuralist system. Thus it might be better to imagine that the Aesop tradition mobilizes elements of *pharmakos* ritual as part of a shared religious code through which competing ideological claims are contested. For such modified use of Wiechers’s argument, cf. Parker 1983.260–61, Jedrkiewicz 1989.99–107, Rothwell 1995.234, and chapter 1 below.

⁹¹ Quotation from Nagy 1979.121. That is to say, Nagy’s model is preeminently structuralist, but lacks any notion of ideology or contestation within culture or religion. Similarly Robertson 2003 argues that Aesop aligns with the primordial Titan Mnemosyne and her daughter Muses against Olympian Apollo, but never offers any explanation for why this should be so; that is, there is no acknowledgment that *people* make religion and myth. The same arguments apply to Compton 2006, who follows Nagy closely.

account he contends Demetrius prefaced to his collection of fables.⁹² Perry's argument has proven influential for several more recent treatments of early and late elements in the *Life of Aesop*, but in fact its premises are dubious.⁹³ There is a fair amount of scattered fourth-century evidence (some even prior to Demetrius) for Aesop as a political sage publicly advising the Samian demos, and for Aesop associated with Solon or the Seven Sages in general.⁹⁴ In addition, I would contend, at least one fifth-century visual representation of Aesop by its iconography locates him squarely within the domain of *sophia*.⁹⁵ Given such a scattershot pattern of evidence within what I take to be a connected "semantic field" of archaic wisdom traditions, it would perhaps be better to employ something akin to Burke's "regressive method," positing a connection among Aesop, the Seven Sages, and Croesus already in popular traditions of the fifth century BCE, based on isolated earlier evidence and a more complete later pattern.⁹⁶ In contrast to this method, Perry's model fragments and reads piecemeal the little evidence we have, while it imagines that only an elite individual author can innovate within the tradition.

Finally, of course, it is a fallacy to suppose that Herodotus must set down in writing every single thing he knows, so that if he does not explicitly articulate some tradition or connection, it must be assumed not to exist. Even leaving aside the fact that Herodotus's text is not endless and therefore cannot be assumed to be coextensive with the world (for every text entails a process of selection), such an argument *ex silentio* fails to acknowledge the pressures of literary decorum and of ideology on the formation of texts. In contrast, I will argue that there is in fact an anomalous constellation of features in Herodotus's text that suggests that he knew of traditions of Aesop interacting with the Seven Sages at

⁹² Perry 1962a.313n. 27, 332–34; cf. Perry 1959.31n. 52. In fact, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1890.218 had already asserted that it was Ephorus in the fourth century who first linked Aesop and Solon together on the basis of Plut. *Sol.* 28 (which in fact never mentions Ephorus, but bears some resemblance to an anecdote told in D.S. Book 9, generally thought to derive from Ephorus).

⁹³ For scholars who follow Perry's argument that there is no link between Aesop and the Seven Sages or Croesus before the fourth century, see Hägg 1997.183; Adrados 1999.273–75, 652–54. Holzberg 1992b.63–69, 2002.81 takes an even more extreme position (on which, see discussion below).

⁹⁴ For Aesop addressing the Samian demos, see Arist. *Rhet.* 2.20 (= Perry *Test.* 41 and fable no. 427); for Aesop and Solon, Alexis fr. 9 KA (= Perry *Test.* 33); for Aesop and the Seven Sages, there is a report of a statue group of Aesop and the Sages by the fourth-century sculptor Lysippus in an epigram by Agathias (*Palatine Anthology* 16.332 = Perry *Test.* 50). For fuller discussion of these sources, see chapters 3, 4, 5, and 9 below.

⁹⁵ See discussion of this image in chapter 5 below.

⁹⁶ Martin 1998 offers a similar structuralist argument for the antiquity of Greek traditions about the Seven Sages, countering thereby the extreme positivist skepticism of Fehling 1985, who contends that because Plato is the first extant Greek author to mention the Seven Sages, he actually invented the tradition. Martin's argument is an important foundation for my own—in both its substance and its methodology.

the court of Croesus, but deliberately suppressed them for his own reasons. In this reading, I will be drawing on the methods of structuralism and various versions of poststructuralist literary theory to describe a distinctive shape of absence and an ideologically motivated dialectic of presence and absence within our preserved texts.⁹⁷

More recently, scholars have taken a different approach to the *Life*, explicitly or implicitly assuming an elite author and a unitary text. Much has been gained by the careful attention to the text and texture of *Vita G* of these more charitable literary readings; nonetheless, many of the problematic assumptions of the older *Quellenforschung* approaches endure unexamined. Thus paradoxically, these newer unitary readings often invert the particular findings of *Quellenforschung*—for example, what is taken to be early and late, high and low in the tradition—without ever challenging the problematic grounds and assumptions on which the older method was built. Or in other terms, we might say that each method overvalues one element in the dialectic of text and tradition, but that the two approaches tend thereby to produce readings that look very similar because of their common assumptions (and especially because the older method of source criticism treated fluid traditions as static, monolithic, and inert *texts* all along).

The pioneer and leading proponent of this synchronic style of reading is Niklas Holzberg, who in 1992 published with a group of other scholars a collection of literary essays on *Vita G*, whose centerpiece was an extended formal analysis of the text by Holzberg himself. Based on certain aspects of formal patterning (“three-step action sequences” and “strategic variation” in the kinds of *logoi* Aesop deploys in different parts of the narrative), Holzberg argues for the conscious, artful construction of the entire text by the G author/redactor.⁹⁸ In addition, in contrast to older (mainly German) scholarship that regarded Aesop as a political sage as one of the oldest elements in the tradition, Holzberg contends that there is no early evidence for Aesop advising the Samian demos or interacting with Croesus (*Vitae G + W*, chs. 92–100). From this he concludes that the *Story of Ahiqar* adaptation (*Vitae G + W*, chs. 101–23), traditionally treated as a late, poorly integrated intrusion into the *Life*, was in fact the source of inspiration for the anonymous Roman imperial author of G, on the basis of which he fashioned the earlier sequence of Aesop’s sage advising to peoples and potentates.⁹⁹ Holzberg’s conclusion:

⁹⁷ For the articulation of such a methodology for reading literary texts in general, see Macherey 1978, Jameson 1981; for other examples of the application of this methodology to ancient Greek texts in particular, see Kurke 1995, 1999.

⁹⁸ Holzberg 1992b.41–75; cf. Holzberg 2002.78–84 for a brief summary of the findings of the earlier essay in English. Quotations taken from Holzberg 2002.79.

⁹⁹ Holzberg 1992b.63–69, 2002.80–81, rejecting the model of Aesop as political sage of (e.g.) Hausrath 1909; Schmid and Stählin 1929.672–78, 682–83; Zeitz 1936—because it is part of an older theory of an Ionian or Samian *Volksbuch*. But this older model, while developed together with the

Regarding the anonymous author's handling of source material: the original version of the *Aesop Romance*—written in the imperial age—did not simply comprise a string of loosely connected episodes, but was conceived as a homogeneous narrative unit. Its author was inspired in no small measure by the *Ahiqar Romance*, and in fact most of the *facta* and *dicta* attributed here to the fabulist are drawn from other lives; the subjects of these were great minds comparable to Aesop—Hesiod, the “Seven Sages,” Socrates, and Diogenes of Sinope, to name the most frequently used instances. Relatively little material, by contrast, was adopted from the existing biographical tradition for Aesop. Our anonymous author, we may therefore conclude, did not just take his pick from the available stock and merely adapt this compilation to suit prevalent tastes. Rather, he transposed the motifs he had borrowed, thus forming new episodes which he then assembled according to a carefully devised plan. The result: a new literary work.¹⁰⁰

But this is to throw out the baby with the bathwater. While I agree wholeheartedly with Holzberg's insistence that we read *Vita G* as “a homogeneous narrative unit,” “a new literary work” unified by formal patterns, such a claim in no way entails the complete writing-out of older Aesop traditions that Holzberg here derives from it. In general, it is a fallacy to assume, as Holzberg does, that the synchronic unity of the final product precludes its artful reuse and synthesis of much older material.¹⁰¹ Specifically, as I have already noted, there is plenty of evidence (although it is dispersed and fragmentary) stretching back at least to the fourth century BCE—and, I would contend, to the fifth—for Aesop as a political sage, advising the Samian demos, interacting with the canonical Seven Sages and with Croesus.¹⁰² Indeed, without this earlier tradition, Holzberg's own account makes no sense: why should the Roman imperial author of *G* be inspired to assimilate Aesop, the ugly, non-Greek slave, to the honored vizier

Volksbuch theory, does not in fact require it; as I shall argue below, we could well imagine oral traditions (especially circulating in East Greece and Samos) of Aesop as sage.

¹⁰⁰ Holzberg 2002.78–79; cf. Holzberg 1992a.XIII.

¹⁰¹ In contrast, Alter 1981 offers a nuanced reading in a different tradition (the Hebrew Bible) of the complex interaction of diachronic and synchronic, of a long-lived tradition with the artful shaping hand of a redactor. In fact, even the patterns Holzberg claims as the distinctive work of the *G* author are somewhat questionable. In the first place, “threefold-action sequences” have long been identified as a characteristic of oral folklore narrative, so we should not necessarily see them as the handiwork of one individual (thus Olrik 1965, “the Law of Three,” cited by Burke 1978.138; cf. Usener 1903). As for the “strategic” deployment of different kinds of Aesopic *logoi*, the symmetry of Holzberg's model is already critiqued by van Dijk 1995; I would contend that an alternative explanation for Holzberg's “pattern” is the deferral of fable to climactic scenes of public advising or abuse (see below, chapters 1, 3 and 4, and cf. Kamen 2004, Hunter 2007.54–56).

¹⁰² For detailed discussion of this earlier evidence, see chapters 3, 4, 10, and 11 below. Indeed, Holzberg himself (2002.81) acknowledges the existence of this earlier evidence by his citation of Perry's *Testimonia* 33–38, 41, but he attempts to downplay its significance in order to support his own revisionist claim.

Ahiqar in the first place? The instigation for this assimilation—which could have happened as early as the fifth or fourth century BCE or any time thereafter—was surely that there was already a strand in the tradition of Aesop as a sage and political adviser.¹⁰³ Holzberg himself, in his list of alternative sources, unwittingly acknowledges this—for how else are Hesiod, the Seven Sages, Socrates, and Diogenes “comparable to Aesop”? Thus, rather than evacuating the biographical tradition of Aesop of any imaginable content, we should treat the parallels between Aesop’s story and those of other representatives of the Greek wisdom tradition as clues to what the Aesop legend may have contained. What else would this fantasized lost “biographical tradition for Aesop” then consist of, if not his competition in *sophia* with other figures, texts, and traditions over hundreds of years? That is to say, what Holzberg posits as the onetime borrowing of a determinate author would perhaps be more appropriately thought of as an ongoing conversation of traditions—a conversation in which the Aesop legend not only reacts to traditional lore about other wise men (Hesiod, the Seven Sages), but may influence in turn the representation of figures like Socrates and Diogenes.¹⁰⁴

Another important argument for significant innovations by the G author/redactor is offered by Franco Ferrari. Starting from the fact that the G recension alone offers a consistent leitmotif of Aesop-Apollo antagonism entirely lacking from W, Ferrari contends that this theme is the late imposition on the legend of the G author/redactor (whom he takes to be later than the anonymous author of the first/second-century CE *Life*.)¹⁰⁵ Perry, who had already noted this unique strand in G, took it to be one of the oldest elements in the tradition of the *Life*, closely linked to Aesop’s persecution and death at Delphi, and he has been followed in this by most subsequent scholars.¹⁰⁶ Linked to this “new” theme of Aesop-Apollo antagonism, according to Ferrari, is the unique prominence of the Muses in G, closely associated with Aesop at key points throughout the text. Thus in G it is the Muses together with Isis who restore Aesop’s voice and endow

¹⁰³ Greek knowledge of the *Story of Ahiqar* may date to the fifth century BCE, if we accept Clement of Alexandria’s report (*Strom.* 1.15.69) that Democritus copied from a “Stele of Akikaros.” The text whose existence Clement attests is often rejected by scholars as a Hellenistic or later “pseudo-Democratean” interpolation (thus DK 68 B 299; West 1969.142, 1984.127). Nonetheless, it seems that the *Story of Ahiqar* was known to the Greeks by the fourth century BCE at the latest, since Diogenes Laertius credits Theophrastus with a volume entitled “Akicharos” (D.L. 5.50). Various scholars date the assimilation of Ahiqar and Aesop to the fifth century BCE (thus Adrados 1979) or to the Hellenistic period (thus West 1984). For more extended discussion of the relation of the *Story of Ahiqar* to the *Life*, see chapter 4 below.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Gigon 1959.176–80, Winkler 1985.289n. 23, Jedrkiewicz 1989.114 for a similar suggestion (Aesop as a model for the portrayal of Socrates).

¹⁰⁵ Ferrari 1997.12–20.

¹⁰⁶ Perry 1936.15–16, 1952.2–4; followed by Wiechers 1961.44–49; Gasparov 1967; Nagy 1979.279–97; Jedrkiewicz 1989.83–107; Jouanno 2006.39–40, 46, 50.

him with skill in inventing and fashioning Greek fables (*Vita G*, ch. 7; in the two strands of *W*, this function is performed by *Tuchē* or *Philoxenia*); and Aesop twice honors the Muses with statues erected together with his own statue (*Vita G*, chs. 100, 123; no statues of Muses in *W*).¹⁰⁷ In addition, Ferrari notes that the *G* author twelve times has various characters in the novel use the oath “by the Muses” in their speech (*Vita G*, chs. 8, 25, 32, 35, 47, 48, 52, 53, 60, 62, 65, 88), an oath that never occurs in the *W* recension.¹⁰⁸

Ferrari’s is a bold and innovative theory, but ultimately (like Holzberg’s) one that evacuates the older Aesop tradition of too much of its content. To demonstrate this, I will (in the first instance) evaluate separately the two thematic strands Ferrari links together: Apollo-Aesop antagonism and Aesop’s close affiliation with the Muses as his patron deities (although these two strands are unquestionably connected). For the former: I would contend that there is independent evidence in other Greek sources as far back as the fourth century BCE, even if this evidence does not take the form of an explicit statement of hostility between the oracular god and the low fabulist. Instead, we can identify a pattern of Aesop-Apollo opposition informing the *structure* of several different Socratic dialogues by Plato and Xenophon (Plato *Alcibiades I*, *Phaedo*, *Protagoras*; Xenophon *Memorabilia*), as well as the Platonist Plutarch’s later imitation thereof (*Banquet of the Seven Sages*).¹⁰⁹ In addition, Ferrari offers no explanation for why the late author/redactor of *G* should want to impose this theme of Aesop’s anti-Apolline stance onto a preexisting “story in search of a meaning” (as Ferrari has it).¹¹⁰ In contrast, I will argue in chapter 1 for a sociopolitical

¹⁰⁷ For the text of *Vita G*, ch. 100, I follow Papathomopoulos 1990/Ferrari 1997, rather than Perry 1952 (that is, assuming that Aesop sets up a statue of *himself* together with the Muses). For detailed discussion of this passage, see chapter 4 below.

¹⁰⁸ Ferrari 1997.17–20, followed by Braginskaia 2005; this prominence of the Muses in *G* compared to their complete absence from *W* was already noted by Perry (1936.14–16, 1952.11–12) and again assumed by him to be an old element in the tradition. Ferrari claims as proof that all these elements are late the fact that only “late” papyri pattern with *G*, whereas earlier papyri lack telltale connections with the Muses or the oath “by the Muses” where the *G* ms has them. But in fact the papyrus evidence is simply not probative either way. Only three of the six preserved papyrus fragments overlap with relevant bits of the text at all; of these, *P.Ross. Georg.* I.18 (seventh c. CE) patterns with *G* and preserves mention of Apollo’s hostility to Aesop, while *P.Berol.* inv. 11628 (late second/early third c. CE) patterns with *W*, mentioning only an honorific statue of Aesop set up by the Babylonian king Lykorus (with no statues of the Muses). The only papyrus that otherwise patterns with *G* but seems to lack the telltale oath “by the Muses” is the fourth–fifth c. CE *P.Oxy.* 2083 (incorrectly dated by Ferrari 1997.20 as third–fourth c. CE). But even on this papyrus, an oath “by the gods” intrudes where *G* has no oath at all (l. 17), whereas in the one spot where *G* has an oath “by the Muses,” the papyrus has a lacuna ending in—c, whose length would accommodate an oath “by the Muses” slightly better than one “by the gods” (hence Perry’s proposed supplement at Perry 1936.46, line 5). Thus the papyri really give us no help in settling this issue.

¹⁰⁹ See chapter 7, n. 98 below.

¹¹⁰ Ferrari 1997.5. Note that there are three problematic assumptions here akin to those that inform older *Quellenforschung*: (1) The long-lived oral tradition on Aesop is assumed to have no social

context that could motivate the narrative theme of Aesop-Apollo antagonism, possibly as far back as the classical era but continuing for centuries thereafter (and again, supported by independent sources that relate to a whole cluster of issues around Delphic Apollo).

As for Aesop's close association with the Muses as a distinctive element of the G recension, here Ferrari is on firmer ground, but even here the evidence is not as entirely black-and-white as he contends. Perry long ago pointed out that G ch. 134 seems to preserve an older tradition when it has Aesop take asylum in *a shrine to the Muses* at Delphi rather than the temple of Apollo itself (as in W). For the fable Aesop tells when the Delphians mercilessly drag him from the shrine—of the hare that takes refuge with the dung beetle against the eagle—is explicitly predicated on the eagle's contempt for the “littleness” of the beetle, which Aesop emphatically analogizes to his own situation at the end of the fable narrative: “Likewise also you, men of Delphi, do not dishonor this shrine to which I fled, even if the temple is little” (*Vita* G, ch. 139; similar sentiment in W). As Perry noted, this must be the original version of the narrative, since we know from independent sources that there was a small shrine to the Muses at Delphi, whereas it makes no sense for Aesop to describe the magnificent temple of Apollo as “little.” And since Aristophanes already refers to Aesop telling this very fable to the Delphians after the discovery of the sacred phiale planted in his luggage (*Wasps* 1446–48), this whole episode must presumably already have figured in the Aesop tradition as far back as the fifth century BCE.¹¹¹ That is to say, the author/redactor of G may have added many elements that link Aesop closely to the Muses throughout the story, but he did so on the basis of a connection that already existed in the tradition in some form.

Thus it may be that the G author/redactor added the Muses to the story of Aesop's supernatural initiation as a fabulist (*Vita* G, ch. 7), although, given the parallels with the stories of the poetic initiations of Hesiod and Archilochus, I suspect that this is in fact an old element in the tradition.¹¹² What we could say, following Ferrari, is that the author/redactor of *Vita* G is particularly

or cultural function or motivation (“a story in search of a meaning”); (2) That meaning can only be imposed or provided by the individual author G; (3) No reason or motivation is offered for G's supposed innovation.

¹¹¹ Perry 1936.16. Ferrari 1997.17–18 attempts to counter Perry's compelling conclusions by claiming that the W version is original and preserves a memory of the more modest pre-Alcmeonid temple of Apollo at Delphi. But I find it highly implausible that oral tradition (which we must assume as the medium of transmission from the sixth century to the fifth) would have preserved an accurate memory of the smaller size of the old temple of Apollo long after all traces of it had disappeared.

¹¹² For the Muses as (potentially) an old element in this episode, see Perry 1936.12–14, Winkler 1985.286, Compton 2006.22–23; for thorough discussion of the cultural logic of Isis participating in this episode as well, see Dillery 1999, Finkelppearl 2003, Kamen 2005, Hunter 2007. In contrast, the two strands of the W recension offer two alternative abstractions—*Tuchē* and *Philoxenia*—both of which seem like fairly vacuous stopgaps.

interested in elaborating a strand that already exists in the tradition, of Aesop's preeminence in ever more consequential contests of *sophia*, often flagged as such by explicit mention of the Muses. Thus specifically, in three passages Ferrari does not discuss (*Vita* G, chs. 36, 78, 88), the Muses are mentioned climactically in contexts where Aesop defeats an opponent or opponents in a competition of wisdom.¹¹³ In addition, I would agree with Ferrari that the oath "by the Muses" is a distinctive element of the G author/redactor's "voiceprint," which he uses as a kind of verbal tic throughout the narrative. If that is the case, this oath may itself give us a hint as to the identity of the G author/redactor. I would suggest that he is someone writing from within the sophistic/rhetorical education system, consciously aligning himself with the Muses, even if he feels himself to be oppressed or downtrodden within that tradition. (Hence my—only somewhat facetious—analogy in section I to "graduate student literature.")¹¹⁴

But if the oath "by the Muses" is an identifiable verbal tic of the G author/redactor, it is also worth noting where it does *not* occur in the *Life*: not at all in the Ahiqar section (chs. 101–23) or the Delphi section (chs. 124–42), and only once in the sequence of Aesop's performances as a political sage (chs. 87–100). As I have already noted, the scholarly consensus is that the Delphi episode is the oldest core of the Aesop tradition; the absence of the telltale oath "by the Muses" perhaps suggests that the two other sequences that immediately precede the *Vita*'s Delphic denouement are also old narrative units of the tradition, inherited by the G author/redactor and not so thoroughly reworked by him. I believe that there are independent reasons for regarding (at least) the narrative sequence of Aesop as a political sage as deeply traditional, as I will argue in detail in the chapters below.

The general conclusion I would draw from this critique of Holzberg and Ferrari is that we must assume some important continuities in the Aesop tradition, even while we give credit to the G author/redactor for distinctive features and final shaping.¹¹⁵ Just as the diachronic, *Quellenforschung* approaches considered above tend to underestimate the pressure of changing audiences through time that requires motivation and relevance for different elements to survive in the tradition, the advocates of G as artful innovator or sole creator tend to under-

¹¹³ Cf. Holzberg 1992b.47–48, who notices the first two of these passages and links them to Aesop's successful deployment of *logos*. For full discussion of the pattern, see chapter 4 below.

¹¹⁴ Thus also Jedrkiewicz 1989.177–181, 208–15 (what he refers to as the "goliardic" matrix of the *Life*) and Hopkins 1993.11 ("the *Life* makes jokes about academic pedantry and the respect due from children to their professors, which may indicate its origins or circulation among students"). Cf. also Jouanno 2006.14.

¹¹⁵ Thus also I would reject Ferrari's division between a first-second c. CE anonymous and G (presumed to be much later). Since, as I've noted, the papyrus evidence does not bear out such a division, it seems uneconomical to proliferate anonymi. I will instead use "G" throughout to signify the final shaping hand of the longer version of the *Life*.

estimate the pressure of ongoing tradition in shaping authorial uses and audience expectations for a story about Aesop. In these terms, it might be better to conceive the ongoing interaction of ambient oral traditions and individual written instantiations as akin to something like a biofeedback mechanism or symbiotic loop—because Aesop is strongly identified with certain features from early on, these elements tend to be intensified and replicated in written versions; then textual fixation in turn contributes to their further proliferation and dissemination.¹¹⁶ Alternatively, we might apply the structuralist linguistic model of *langue* and *parole* to the Aesop tradition. In linguistic terms, *langue* represents the whole language system, which is necessarily social or supra-individual, while *parole* signifies individual utterances as instantiations thereof. Such a linguistic model registers the social level that generates and constrains the tradition, but it also allows space for individual users to formulate new and distinctive “utterances” out of the elements of a shared cultural system.¹¹⁷

At the same time, this model of symbiotic loop or cultural *langue* and *parole* should give us a better purchase on the tradition and its contents. If we can identify general elements that all or many scholars across a range of approaches have detected in the *Life*, these should be promising starting points for a reading of the dialectic of text and tradition. But where synchronic readings have seen these elements as specific to the text of *Vita G*, we may need to assume some provocation and greater time-depth in the oral traditions behind the text. Thus, for example, several scholars have noted the importance of *logos* and suggested that a progressive development of Aesop’s verbal skills or distinctive styles of speaking is central to the text/tradition. We have already briefly considered Holzberg’s argument that a complex pattern of different types of Aesopic *logoi* structures *Vita G*. For Franco Ferrari, what is left as the “historic substrate,” once all the elements of Aesop-Apollo antagonism and the Muses’ special favor have been removed, is Aesop’s gradual development from inability to speak to speech as literalization, to complex forms of figured speech like puzzle solving, mantic utterances, and finally fables and political discourse. Ferrari suggests that this pattern of Aesop’s individual verbal development represents the core of the Aesop tradition inherited and reshaped by the *G* author/

¹¹⁶ Cf. the helpful formulation of Winkler 1985.279: “Like other folk-books, the *Life of Aesop* has a different kind of history from a text written by an author. From papyri we know that the *Life of Aesop* had achieved written form by the second century C.E., but before that we have to posit a repertoire of episodes, featuring Aesop as a fixed character, that undergoes continuous adaptation, contraction, and expansion at the hands of numerous storytellers. *The fact that Aesop stories are an inherited tradition, widely known by audiences in all ages, serves as a check on the freedom with which his life may be retold*” (my italics).

¹¹⁷ For a succinct summary of the linguistic model of *langue* and *parole*, see Culler 1975.6–10, and cf. Jameson’s appropriation of the Saussurian *langue-parole* distinction for his “second semantic horizon”: “Now the individual text will be refocused as a *parole*, or individual utterance, of that vaster system, or *langue*, of class discourse” (Jameson 1981.85).

redactor.¹¹⁸ Richard Hunter has recently picked up on and extended Ferrari's argument, noting a significant pattern distinctive to *Vita G* that evokes a species-level "anthropology" of the development of human speech through Aesop's individual verbal ascent. I regard both these interpretations as compelling and (together) a good example of the dialectic our readings should aim to capture, although I would characterize these two strands slightly differently. As an analogue to Ferrari's progression I would identify an old tradition of Aesop's development as a political sage with his own distinctive style of *sophia* still shaping or informing much of the structure of the written *Vitae*. And I would concur with Hunter's notion that an anthropology of human speech is a distinctive feature of *Vita G*, although I would characterize this more broadly as a Sophistic/philosophical "anthropology of *sophia*" superimposed by the G author (or some predecessor) on an older tradition of the life cycle of a sage. But in order to illuminate these two levels properly and to map their interaction, I must lay out the cultural system of traditional *sophia* before and beyond philosophy. We will have to consider how this system gets appropriated and transformed into philosophy as an elite, minority discourse, even as the older tradition of non-philosophical *sophia* remains broadly diffused through ancient culture. That is to say, we must chart how this layering occurs in culture in order to see how it is reenacted and inscribed within the text of the *Life*.¹¹⁹

In like manner, many scholars across a spectrum of approaches have read the figure of Aesop and the text of the *Life* as satiric or parodic in intent. For some scholars, the object of parody is the pretensions of academic philosophers and rhetors; for others, the arbitrariness and ideological paradoxes of the slave system; still others detect a scathing Cynic critique of all kinds of conventional values.¹²⁰ For most scholars, this is a phenomenon of the text of *Vita G*, located synchronically at the end point of a long tradition.¹²¹ But again, in order to explain what would motivate such use of the Aesop story, I would suggest that this element of parody is somehow central to the Aesop tradition from very early on, linked to Aesop's scurrilous, abject, outsider status. This is Aesop as an "ideologeme" for critique from below, as I have suggested—an alibi for "speaking truth to power," endlessly available to those who want to assume the mask, however playfully or seriously. And while these elements of parody are most

¹¹⁸ Ferrari 1997.20–32. For other versions of Aesop's development in verbal skill and/or sage advising, see Jedrkiewicz 1989.108–11, 183–98; Finkelppearl 2003; Kamen 2004.

¹¹⁹ See Hunter 2007 and chapters 2, 4, 5, 6, and 9 below.

¹²⁰ For critique of academic philosophers and rhetors, see Winkler 1985.282–91; Jedrkiewicz 1989.176–80; Holzberg 1992b.39n. 35, 74–75, 2002.83–84; Hägg 1997; Jouanno 2006.39–43; for exposure of the arbitrariness of the slave system, see Hopkins 1993, Fitzgerald 2000.33–34; for Cynic critique, see Jedrkiewicz 1989.116–27, Adrados 1999.659–83.

¹²¹ Winkler 1985 is an exception: cf. his notion of a "grotesque tradition" going back to Thersites, Margites, and subsuming mime, etc.

visible late in the tradition, we can find them earlier, fragmented and dispersed, if we sift the evidence carefully.

A third element that several scholars have identified in the *Life of Aesop* is the prevalence of the theme of appearance versus reality, most commonly in the contrast between Aesop's abject status and hideously ugly body, on the one hand, and the excellence of his mind and counsel, on the other. As scholars have noted, this theme is closely connected with the element of satire or parody, since it functions to expose the falsehood and arbitrariness of conventional values and assumptions.¹²² While all this is true, I would suggest that there is still more involved in this pervasive opposition as it attaches to Aesop in the *Life*. And here I would like to acknowledge as a significant precursor for my readings the brief and suggestive interpretation of the *Life of Aesop* offered by Annabel Patterson as a preface to her consideration of the political uses of fable in England from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century (the 150 years surrounding and containing the English civil wars).¹²³ Patterson, reading Francis Barlow's 1687 English translation of Rinuccio's Latin version of the Planudean *Life*, also notes the prominent "inside-outside dialectic" of the text, especially in its representation of "Aesop's uncouth body." Indeed, Patterson perceives in this opposition of appearance and reality "the hermeneutic key to the *Life*," whereby the entire narrative trajectory and the figure of Aesop serve to allegorize the power and workings of the literary form of fable. Thus for Patterson, the *Life* is itself a "metafable" that teaches us how to read the coded, indirect discourse of fable, which conceals a significant political message within the humble metaphors of the "irreducibly material"—the bodily and the animal. Aesop, the "father" of the genre, is thus "the philosopher of materialism and the body," the narrative of whose life and adventures offers a paradigm for the discursive resources available within conditions of oppression or unequal power relations. Or, in other terms, the *Life of Aesop* encodes an embodied political theory of fable.

Patterson's reading is mainly based on perceptions and representations of Aesop in the early modern period. But insofar as she is an attentive and astute reader of the implicit philosophy or literary theory of the (Planudean) *Life*, much of her interpretation is already applicable to the figure of Aesop and the traditions of his life circulating in the ancient world. And here again, it is a matter of a core signifying function of Aesop as "ideologeme" that we must track through the dialectic of text and tradition. Thus I will argue that the traditions about Aesop preserved in the ancient *Lives* offer us in narrative and embodied

¹²² For the theme of appearance versus reality, see Jedrkiewicz 1989.77, 118; Holzberg 1992b.73–75, 2002.83–84, 92; Hopkins 1993.13; Ferrari 1997.11–12; Hägg 1997.186–87; Jouanno 2006.32–37; several of these scholars associate the theme with the text's satiric intent.

¹²³ Patterson 1991.13–43 on the *Life of Aesop*.

form a whole theory of the characteristic discursive weapons to be deployed by the weak against the powerful, that include (but are not limited to) fable. It is clear that the written *Lives* were understood in such terms at least late in the tradition, when they came to be prefaced to the fable collections (probably in the Byzantine era).¹²⁴ But long before that, we can find traces of similar models of characteristic Aesopic discourses informing early texts like Herodotus's *Histories* and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and even perhaps shaping the Platonic representation of Socratic *logoi*.

Based on this account of core signifying or semantic functions within the *langue* of the Aesop tradition and their relation to the *parole* of *Vita G*, I would suggest the following interconnections among *Vita G*, the Aesop tradition generally, and *Vita W*: I take *Vita G* to be a text written or rewritten in the first or second century CE, drawing on a large stock of popular oral tales about Aesop with a fairly stable sequence and narrative trajectory. On my reading, the G author/redactor is someone within the system of elite education who feels himself to be low-status or oppressed within that hierarchy—as Stefano Jedrkiewicz nicely puts it, “situated on the margin of the class of professionals of culture.”¹²⁵ G appropriates and reuses traditional tales about Aesop's distinctive discursive weapons and his critique of *sophia* from below for his own purposes of playful parody of the institutions of education—academic philosophy and rhetoric. For this model, it is surely significant that the text of *Vita G* is in every respect the antitype to the Greek stylistic standards and values of the Second Sophistic: composed in *koinē* rather than Atticizing style and diction; almost entirely eschewing syntactic complexity, periodic style, and hypotaxis; and welcoming into the text a profusion of Latin loanwords, whereas Latinisms were generally banned from the purified archaizing Greek of the Second Sophistic.¹²⁶ I would suggest that we understand these stylistic features of our text as the product not of necessity—for example, Perry's theory that *Vita G* was written by an Egyptian nonnative speaker of Greek—but of deliberate choice. The G author/redactor is consciously flouting and overturning the ideologically loaded, fetishized Hellenism of high-style imperial Greek along with the educational system whose core values it represents. For this purpose, the low quasi-spoken idiom of popular stories about Aesop suits our Roman imperial redactor very well (and this is what allows for the preservation of many of these elements in his written text). In contrast, I find it much harder to say anything specific about the context of the two recensions of *Vita W*; like most commentators on the

¹²⁴ For different scholarly theories on the relation of the *Lives* to the fable collections, see section IIC below.

¹²⁵ Jedrkiewicz 1989.178.

¹²⁶ Holzberg 1992b.39n. 35 makes a similar point. For the thoroughgoing avoidance of Latinisms in Greek of the Second Sophistic, see Bowie 1974. For the point about avoidance of complex syntax, I am indebted to an unpublished seminar paper of Pavlos Avlamiis (Avlamiis 2006); cf. also Avlamiis 2010a.

tradition, I take both of these to be early Byzantine redactions produced by scholars intent on preserving material inherited from antiquity in somewhat sanitized form. Thus *Vita W* generally smooths out the lowest stylistic elements of *Vita G*, just as it effaces its most ideologically aberrant and problematic narrative features (like the strand of Aesop-Apollo antagonism).¹²⁷

IIC. Background on Fable and the Ancient Fable Collections

Finally, some brief background on ancient fable. It is important to bear in mind that in the ancient world, the definition and parameters of fable were broader and looser than our conventional modern conception of “beast fable.” From early on in the tradition (fifth–fourth c. BCE), Aesop is associated with pithy stories of talking animals, but also with aetiological tales involving gods, personified abstractions, human beings, and (sometimes) animals.¹²⁸ Ben Edwin Perry acknowledges the breadth of the ancient category and its close affiliation with other forms like proverb, parable, *chreia*, and simile/metaphor. As a minimal definition intended to differentiate it from these kindred forms, Perry proposes three distinctive features for fable as narrative: (1) a fable “must be obviously and deliberately fictitious”; (2) “it must purport to be a particular action, series of actions, or an utterance that took place *once* in past time through the agency of particular characters”; and (3) “it must be told, at least ostensibly, not for its own sake as a story . . . but for the sake of a point that is moral, paraenetic, or personal.”¹²⁹ Or, as Aelius Theon, the second-century CE author of *Progymnasmata*, succinctly defines fable, λόγος ψευδῆς εικονίζων ἀλήθειαν (“a fictitious story picturing a truth”).¹³⁰ The oldest Greek term for a fable is αἶνος, which occurs in archaic Greek poetry (hexameter and iambic), but never appears with this meaning in classical Greek prose. By the fifth century BCE, the standard term for a fable in prose and poetry is λόγος, and by the fourth century the terms λόγος and μῦθος are both commonly used (with the latter predominating in Hellenistic and later usage).¹³¹

¹²⁷ For the various kinds of sanitizing (both of content and of style) engaged in by the two strands of *Vita W* and by the Planudean *Life*, see Jouanno 2006.48–54.

¹²⁸ Cf. (e.g.) Aristoph. *Birds* 471–75, Plato *Phd.* 60c, *Alc.* I.123a.

¹²⁹ Perry 1952.ix; cf. Perry 1959.17–25, 1965.xix–xxviii. For thorough review of modern and ancient definitions and theories of fable, see van Dijk 1997.3–73; van Dijk usefully adds one other criterion to Perry’s definition: “fables are metaphorical” (van Dijk 1997.72).

¹³⁰ Theon II.72 Spengel (= Perry *Test.* 85); the same definition is repeated by the later authors of *Progymnasmata* Aphthonius and Nicolaus (II.21 Spengel [= Perry *Test.* 102] and III.453 Spengel, respectively). For discussion of Theon’s definition, see Perry 1959.22–23 (whose translation I follow), 1965.xix–xx; van Dijk 1997.47–48.

¹³¹ On the meanings, patterns of usage, and relative chronology of these three terms, see van Dijk 1997.79–111, Adrados 1999.3–17; on *ainos* in particular, see Meuli 1975b. As van Dijk 1997 notes, things are more complicated still, since all three of these terms are “polysemous” and can denote other verbal structures besides fable.

The earliest written compilation of prose fables we know of in the Greek tradition is that of Demetrius of Phaleron at the end of the fourth century BCE; Diogenes Laertius informs us that Demetrius composed a single volume of *Αἰσωπειῶν λόγων συναγωγαί* (D.L. 5.80).¹³² Demetrius's collection is lost, but is presumed to have formed the basis of later fable collections.¹³³ What we have preserved in medieval manuscripts are several different overlapping fable collections from antiquity. The oldest of these is generally thought to be the Augustana Collection (named for the best-known of the medieval manuscripts that contain it, a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century manuscript originally housed in Augsburg, now in Munich); the original collection is dated by B. E. Perry to the late first or second century CE.¹³⁴ The relation of all the different fable manuscripts preserved is very complicated, since it represents an open tradition in which different readers/redactors/copyists over centuries felt free to add or subtract material, as well as to rewrite or paraphrase existing fables. Indeed, we must assume abundant "contamination" among different written traditions as well as constant interaction with ambient orally transmitted fables and tales.¹³⁵ In addition to the prose fable collections, generally thought to be handbooks for writers and speakers looking for apposite exempla, we also possess versified fable collections by Phaedrus (Latin; first century CE); Babrius (Greek, probably second century CE); and Avianus (Latin; fourth–fifth century CE), which also presumably (at least in part) draw on earlier collections.¹³⁶

In general, the later fable collections will not figure much in my discussion, except insofar as they can give us evidence for earlier fable traditions. Given the complex, layered, and permeable process of transmission I've described, it is in fact quite likely that the late fable collections preserve some fables that were known and circulated orally much earlier, but any attempt to date individual fables remains speculative. I will therefore use the evidence of the late fable collections in two circumscribed ways. First, where an earlier text provides a brief

¹³² Some scholars contend that there was already a written collection of fables circulating in the fifth century, based on Aristophanes' use of the verb *πεπάρτηκας* at *Birds* 471, but this is questionable (see discussion above). Thus (e.g.) Nøjgaard 1964.471–75.

¹³³ On Demetrius of Phaleron's collection, see esp. Perry 1959.32–35, 1962a. Perry suggests that the first–century CE *P.Rylands* 493 may actually represent a fragment of Demetrius's book, and also argues that it may have been an important source for Book 1 of Phaedrus's versified Latin fables in the first half of the first century CE.

¹³⁴ See Perry 1962a.288–89n. 8, 1965.xvi–xviii.

¹³⁵ For discussion of the mss containing fable collections and different analyses of the complex interactions among these, see Perry 1936.71–230, Adrados 1999.48–138 (somewhat wild and speculative). For helpful brief summary discussion (including charts of different scholars' theories of the mss interrelations), see Jedrkiewicz 1989.15–34.

¹³⁶ For the purpose of the prose collections: Perry 1940, 1959.29–36; contra (arguing that the prose collections are literary texts composed purely for entertainment and pleasure reading), Nøjgaard 1964.131–38, 464–513; Holzberg 2002.84–93. For a readily available text of Phaedrus and Babrius, see Perry 1965; for excellent recent discussion of literary, political, and ideological aspects of Phaedrus's verse fables, see Henderson 2001.

elliptical account or only an allusion to a particular fable, I will draw on the fuller version preserved in the late collections to supplement and fill out details.¹³⁷ Second, rather than insisting on the antiquity of specific individual fables, I will focus instead on continuities of story type and formulaic diction. Thus, for example, comparison with a whole set of fables from the fable collections about the allotment of various traits to mankind will help us contextualize the elaborate fable Plato puts in the mouth of Protagoras in the dialogue that bears his name. As for formulaic diction: scholarly work on fables has demonstrated that their language is highly formulaic, and that there are marked continuities of formula between early renditions of fables preserved in literary texts and those that figure in the *Life of Aesop* and the late fable collections. These continuities include introductory and closural formulae (much like our “once upon a time”), patterns of indirect discourse and direct quotation, and speech formulae. In addition, scholars have noted that the external “moral” or *epimuthion* attached to fables in the later collections corresponds to and continues the internal verbal quip or “punch line” frequently offered by one of the characters within the fable, which is properly termed the *epilogos* or “epilogue.”¹³⁸ Such continuities of diction will help us track less obvious allusions to and echoes of fable in earlier written texts.

Finally, the *Lives* of Aesop and the fable collections stand in complex relation to each other. All the *Lives* we possess occur in manuscripts together with fable collections, as their preface and introduction. Scholars still debate whether the *Lives* were initially composed for this very purpose or only attached to the fable collections late in the process of transmission.¹³⁹ I concur with those scholars who see the development and circulation of the extended *Lives* like G and W and the fable collections as largely independent throughout the ancient world, because these two categories of texts seem very different in style, ideology, and presumed literary purpose (as I hope to have demonstrated).¹⁴⁰ I therefore imagine that the *Lives* came to be sutured to the fable collections only in the late

¹³⁷ Thus (e.g.) in chapter 3, section II below, I will use Babrius 95 to fill out an allusion to fable in Solon fr. 11 W. This procedure is analogous to what Burke 1978.81–85 describes as the “regressive method,” used to “make ends meet” in the reconstruction of the popular culture of earlier periods.

¹³⁸ For various fable formulae and their continuity, see esp. Perry 1959.19n. 9, 29–30; Fraenkel 1964; Karadagli 1981.97–139; Adrados 1999.654–58; for the development from (internal) *epilogos* to (external) *epimuthion*, see Karadagli 1981.2, 53–71. For the prevalence of a verbal contest between two characters in traditional fables, see also Perry 1959.24–26, and for a similar project of identifying the formal features and “poetics” of the closely related popular prose genres of proverb, maxim, apophthegm, and anecdote, see Russo 1997.

¹³⁹ For the former theory, see Holzberg 2002.72–76; for the latter, Gasparov 1967; Adrados 1999.648–52, 682–83.

¹⁴⁰ For the general tendency of the fable collections to support the hegemonic ideology on such issues as slavery and status, see La Penna 1961, Gasparov 1967, Fitzgerald 2000.99–102, Zafropoulos 2001, duBois 2003.170–88. For the misfit in ideology and purpose between the *Lives* and the fables, see especially Gasparov 1967.

antique period, as a kind of bricolage by Byzantine scholars and monks making effective use of what they had at hand. Indeed, we might read the extensive revision and rewriting of the *Vita Accursiana* (whether or not we credit it to Maximus Planudes) as implicit acknowledgment by one such Byzantine scholar of the misfit or inappropriateness of much of the low, scurrilous, and obscene material in the traditional *Life* for this new purpose.

III. SYNOPSIS OF METHOD AND STRUCTURE OF ARGUMENT

Thus the goal of the readings I shall offer here is to respect and catch something of the dialectic of diachronic and synchronic; of popular oral tradition and elite written text in ongoing dialogue. This entails a two-pronged approach to Aesop and the traditions that surround him. On the one hand, I am attempting to reconstruct the ideological uses of a long-lived oral tradition behind our written texts that may go back in some cases to the fifth century BCE but continues for centuries thereafter. This diachronic approach acknowledges the aggregate or accretive structure of the written *Life*, in the first instance reading it piecemeal.¹⁴¹ I will work backward from the end of the *Life*, the Delphic portion, since this is universally regarded as the oldest kernel of the tradition, and thence to the earlier sequences of Aesop as a political sage advising the Samian demos, Croesus, and Lycurgus, king of Babylon. These readings will suggest that Aesop is a focalizer for a civic critique of Delphic sacrificial and oracular practices, and limn his complex relations to a broadly diffused wisdom tradition. In each case, the diachronic analysis requires the careful reading against each other of all the versions of the *Life*, as well as the comparison with securely datable independent sources on Aesop and on the institutional, religious, and cultural systems he engages and critiques. I will thereby be trying to imagine an ongoing conversation of “great” and “little” traditions that spans hundreds of years.

But the other half of the dialectic is to put *Vita G* back together again and attempt to read it as a coherent text, tracing out several different patterns and leitmotifs that run through and unify this unique exemplar of the *Life*. Even here, our preliminary survey of ancient wisdom traditions will allow us to see some textual patterns as older and deeper, others as overlaid on those (perhaps by the *Vita G* author himself). Thus I will argue that the oldest elements of the *Life* are its representation of the characteristic trajectory or life cycle of an archaic sage, as well as its figuration of Aesop’s distinctive positive and negative discursive tools. Superimposed on these patterns are the theme of a species-level anthropology of wisdom and frequent playful moments of philosophical parody. In order to disentangle these strands, even the approach to *Vita G* as a coherent text will be twofold. For the deeper patterns, *Vita G* is an essential

¹⁴¹ For arguments in defense of such a methodology, see Hägg 1997.

resource simply because it is the fullest, best-preserved version of the *Life*, but we would expect to find older elements paralleled in the W recension, the papyri, and other scattered references to Aesop. On the other hand, where the G recension stands alone, offering specific features unparalleled in other parts of the tradition, we may be able to detect the distinctive imprint or shaping hand of the G author/redactor.

The argument of the book falls into two parts. The first half (consisting of five chapters) considers the figure of Aesop as he is implicated in or responds to various enduring religious institutions and cultural systems. I will begin with the end of the *Life* and what is generally acknowledged to be its oldest kernel—Aesop's adventures at Delphi. Chapter 1 will argue for Aesop as the bearer or vehicle for a popular critique of elitist practices that hedged round access to the Delphic oracle with a complex system of exclusions and sacrificial exactions. We will find recurrent motifs in the Aesop tradition of Aesop challenging Apollo's oracular monopoly and demystifying the peculiar sacrificial economy of Delphi. This critique of the Delphic god and his rapacious functionaries in fact provokes Aesop's death at the hands of the resentful Delphians in certain versions of the story, while elements of this same critique find parallels in several texts of the archaic and classical periods. Chapter 2 will turn from Delphic sacrificial and oracular practices to Greek wisdom traditions that were themselves in many cases intimately connected to Apollo and his Delphic shrine. There I will lay out in general terms the lineaments of a pre- or nonphilosophical system of competitive *sophia* that again has its roots in archaic and classical Greece, but (I will argue) endured as a widely diffused popular model for centuries, embracing poetic texts like those of Hesiod, Theognis, and Solon; traditions of the Seven Sages and pre-Socratic philosophers; and religious figures like Empedocles and Pythagoras. Chapters 3 and 4 then chart Aesop's complex implication in this system of *sophia*, as himself a sage with his own distinctive style of wisdom and discursive tools. Chapter 5 in turn will consider evidence for Aesop as a figure for critique or parody of the high wisdom tradition, and we will see that the oscillation of Aesop as sage and Aesop as parodist characterizes the tradition from its beginnings and is still visible in the late text of the *Life of Aesop*.

The second half of the book (consisting of six chapters) will then put the findings of the first half to work to excavate a significant Aesopic element at the beginning of Greek mimetic prose writing—both prose philosophy and prose history. Starting from the fact that, as I've already noted, both Herodotus and Plato explicitly identify Aesop with the making of narrative or mimetic prose and implicitly acknowledge the low fabulist as a precursor for their own projects, we must consider the possibility of an Aesopic strand in the "invention of Greek prose," a strand that implies its own problematic sociopolitics of literary form. Here again, at the moment of the emergence of written mimetic or narrative prose, Aesop and fable will turn out to be useful for multiple different

appropriations, critiques, and cultural innovations. I will chart these first in the domains of technical rhetoric, Sophistic experimentation, and philosophy, since all of these emerge as new forms from the older tradition of *sophia* considered in chapters 2–5. In all these domains of a new technology of *logos* in the late fifth and fourth centuries, Aesop, playing at the margins of the wisdom tradition, is mobilized as a representational resource in ongoing heated contests of and over *sophia*. Thus we will find the Sophists recasting fable as an elegant form in artful prose, while Xenophon offers more traditional, humble renditions of fable to characterize Socrates' useful advice and teaching in certain circumscribed contexts. Plato, in turn, will exhibit the most radical appropriation of Aesop, borrowing his critical parodic edge and his distinctive discursive weapons for the literary representation of the “unique” Socrates. Finally, shifting to the beginnings of prose history, we will find Herodotus deploying Aesop for different purposes again, at times exploiting the disruptive power of the low fable-maker to explode the pretensions of Eastern potentates and Greek dynasts, while also taking advantage of a well-known Aesopic strategy for offering coded, indirect advice to a more powerful audience.

Especially in the cases of Herodotus and Plato, tracing out an Aesopic strand in their writings will help defamiliarize these texts and genres. We are too comfortable reading the texts of Herodotus and Plato teleologically as “history” and “philosophy,” respectively, but in their original contexts, these categories did not yet exist as freestanding, autonomous disciplines or genres of writing, and these texts represented new—often startling—experiments and uneven generic mixtures. Attending to the Aesopic as itself a synecdoche for all kinds of low elements incorporated in these founding texts of Western literature will, I hope, restore something of the strangeness of the beginning of Greek prose writing—and of the cultural risks it entailed. For, as I noted at the outset, throughout the ancient world, Aesop and fable were consistently coded as both sociologically and generically low and abject (recall Philostratus's fable of the origin of fable). The welcoming of Aesop or the Aesopic within the boundaries of a “serious” text thus carried with it a potential status taint that could attach to the text and to the author himself. In each case, we must ask why Herodotus and Plato should take such risks.

To further this project of estrangement, I have followed a parallel practice in my discussions of Plato and Herodotus. In each case, I have started from ancient reception of these texts because ancient readers are often more alert than their modern counterparts to weird or anomalous generic and stylistic elements and to their problematic sociopolitics. Thus in chapter 6, I consider ancient as well as modern commentary on the Platonic dialogue and its literary and cultural sources, and in chapter 10, I examine something of the reception of Herodotus's *Histories*, focusing mainly on Plutarch's dyspeptic treatise *On the Malice of Herodotus*. But if we are to understand Plato's idiosyncratic appropriation of Aesop, it will turn out to be necessary to situate it in the context of competing deployments of prose fable by the Sophists and Xenophon (chapter 7), before

considering Plato's parodic rewriting of Sophistic fable (chapter 8) and his own more adventurous uses of Aesop (chapter 9). The book will then conclude with an analogous reading of Aesopic elements in Herodotus in chapters 10 and 11. Finally, I have opted not to write a standard conclusion or epilogue, so as not to impose a single interpretive "moral" on these "fables of reading."

The two halves of the book thus mime the cultural dialogue or back-and-forth that is one of my central concerns. The chapters of part I will trace out a set of Aesopic responses to the Greek institutional culture of Delphic practices and wisdom traditions, whereas the analysis in part II will allow us to observe the ways in which high literary texts appropriate and respond to Aesop in turn. This dialogic structure means that the patterns of part I are difficult to date or pin down with any certainty, and we might best imagine them as cultural conversations that extend over centuries. But with the literary appropriations of and responses to Aesop in part II, the argument will be more localized to the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and what we might call the "battle over prose" initiated by the Sophists and their contemporaries. In any case, hearing both sides of the conversation must inevitably reorient our readings of ancient Greek texts *tout court*, insofar as it forces us to recognize the traces and strains of difference within.

And because the book covers such a wide range of topics, different readers may opt for different routes through the argument. To facilitate such selective reading, I have tried as far as possible to make each chapter a coherent, free-standing essay. Philosophical readers may want to focus on chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6–9, while historians and Herodotean scholars will find the most relevant material in chapters 1, 3, 10, and 11. As for nonclassicist readers, folklorists may target part I, while literary scholars interested in the beginnings of mimetic prose that led eventually to the novel may gravitate to part II.

But at the same time, it is my hope that the argument builds and gains persuasive force through the gradual accretion of evidence and connections across the individual chapters, so that it will repay sustained reading of the whole. Indeed, one thing I have learned in the process of writing this book is that, with ever greater professional specialization, different academic subfields (even within a small, relatively circumscribed discipline like classics) have become largely impermeable to each other. Thus, for example, Plato scholars rarely engage with Herodotus and the scholarly literature on Herodotus (and vice versa), while those who work on ancient fable seem to be generally ghettoized and ignored by almost everyone. To counter this kind of field myopia, I would advocate taking Aesop not just as our subject, but also as a model for a wayward, mobile practice that forces us to poach and to trespass—across the boundaries of different fields and subfields; across different texts, both literary and "sub-" or nonliterary, both canonical and marginal; and even across texts and images from wildly different periods, on the understanding that old material can be sedimented in late representations, and that later Greeks' own readings of their traditions have much to teach us.