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Slave Stories: Aesop and Walter Crane

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Aesop is one of the ancient Greek authors who has entered our language at such a deep level that most of the time we do not know when we are citing him. We have all used the phrase 'to take the lion's share', but how many of us realise that this is the moral drawn by the Aesopic Fable entitled 'The Lion, the Fox, and the Ass'? These three animals went hunting together. The ass divided the spoils into three identical piles, so the lion ate him and asked the fox to divide the food again. The fox gave the lion nearly all of the food and took only a tiny portion for himself. The lion took 'the lion's share', but the fox at least stayed alive.

Or take our proverb 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'. The original source for this is the fable 'The Hawk and the Nightingale', actually the earliest Aesopic fable attested in ancient Greek in the 8th century BCE. A nightingale, caught in the talons of a hawk, begged for his life, saying that the hawk should release him because if he spent his time hunting larger birds he would better slake his appetite. But the hawk, before eating him, grimly retorted, 'I would be crazy if I let go a bird already in my hand for the sake of other birds I can't even see'.

Many short phrases in our language are abbreviations of the morals of one of Aesop's *Fables*. When we say, 'give him an inch he takes a mile', we are abbreviating the moral of the fable 'The Trees and the Woodman'. A man came into a wood one day with an axe in his hand and begged all the Trees to give him a small branch which he needed for a particular purpose. The Trees were good-natured and gave him one of their branches. What did the man do but fix it into the axe head, thus making a tool with which he cut down tree after tree? Then the Trees saw how foolish they had been in giving their enemy the means of destroying themselves. They had given him an inch and he'd taken a mile.

The proverb 'Handsome is as handsome does' comes directly from Aesop's fable where a father comforts his clever but plain daughter when she compares herself unfavourably with her handsome brother. Or take the phrase 'blowing hot and cold'. This has slightly changed its sense, but still derives from the fable about 'The Satyr and the Traveller'. A man met a satyr in the forest and made friends with him. But one cold winter evening, the satyr saw the man blow on his fingers. 'Why do you do that?' asked the satyr. 'To warm my hands,' the man replied. At his home, the man prepared them two bowls of porridge. These he placed steaming hot on the table. But, much to the satyr's surprise, the man began to blow into his bowl of porridge. 'Why do you do that?' he asked. 'To cool my porridge,' replied the man. The Satyr sprang hurriedly to his feet and made for the door. 'Goodbye,' he said, 'I've seen enough. A fellow that blows hot and cold in the same breath cannot be friends with me!'

Whenever we say 'sour grapes', we mean that someone who has failed to acquire or achieve something they desired is now criticising the object of desire. If the fox can't get hold of the grapes, he needs psychologically to imagine that they are sour anyway. Here is the exquisite page illustrating this fable in my own favourite edition of the *Fables*, Walter Crane's *Baby's Own Aesop*, brought out in 1887 by Frederick Warne, a British company already famous for its children's books. My previous three slides also reproduced Crane's Aesopic illustrations. In this lecture I am going to use Crane's edition of the Fables as a launching-pad from which to conduct a tour of the cultural history of Aesop's famous stories. Who was Aesop? What are his fables? Are they records of the stories

slaves told each other in antiquity? Did they have a political message in antiquity? Were they used, as they are today, to introduce very small children to reading books? And how have they been used culturally and politically in more recent times?

Crane was not just a brilliant graphic designer and chromolithographer, but an ardent socialist, close friend of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, and a Trade Union supporter. He spent his childhood in Torquay, where he learned painting from his father and particularly enjoyed portraying animals. His father spotted his son's talent, and in 1859 apprenticed him to W. J. Linton, a renowned wood engraver, at his workshop just off the Strand. Crane in due course made his own name by contributing illustrations to a series of books called Toy Books, containing nursery rhymes and fairy tales. He loved the opportunity to portray beasts in strange settings, and often behaving and talking like humans: think Beauty and the Beast or Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf. From 1873 he lived with his wife in Shepherd's Bush and socialised with figures in the aesthetic movement.

He was already sympathetic to radical causes, both because that was the political outlook of his master W. J. Linton, and because he was fired up by the Paris commune of 1871. He became the artist of the cause, designing posters, trade-union banners, cartoons, and newspaper headings, adapting the emblematic figures of his paintings to socialist themes. His *The Triumph of Labour*, drawn for May Day 1891 and reproduced in Crane's *Cartoons for the Cause, 1886–1896* (1896), is a Renaissance-style triumphal procession rendered in the gritty texture of wood-engraving and filled with sturdy workers, bullock carts, and banners. Morris said it was the best thing he had ever done. In the 1880s Crane also became active in the politics of art. Both he and Mary Crane loved dressing up and they threw enormous parties. For their son Lionel's twenty-first birthday they invited seven hundred people. Crane dressed up as a crane and Mary as an enormous sunflower.

Crane's *Baby's Own Aesop* uses short, rhymed limerick stanza versions of the famous prose fables of the ancient Greek story teller Aesop. In Crane's preface he tells us that he has produced his version of the tales from a manuscript kindly lent to him by Linton, but Crane does say 'I have added a touch here and there'. The title page proudly reports that the rhyming fables come with 'portable morals'. These morals are usually printed in capitals in the white space surrounding the rhyme, which is itself embedded within the page's picture. But since both Linton and Crane were socialists, some of the morals have identifiably political morals. Many versions, including those in the older manuscripts, add explicit morals to the fables to be sure that readers or listeners get the point. As fables changed in different manuscripts and editions, so did the morals, some dramatically. Take, for example, 'The Cock and the Pearl.' A cock, scratching for food in a barnyard, finds a pearl. He looks at it and tosses it away. In many versions the cock is praised by the moralist for seeing ornaments as vain and fundamentally useless, especially if what you actually need is food to sustain your life. But one of the ancient sources, Phaedrus, an important Latin fable-writer who adapted Aesop to his own day, criticises the cock for not being able to recognise value when he saw it. Phaedrus humorously suggests that people who don't like *him* and don't realise the worth of his fables are like the cock who can't see the worth of the pearl. But for Crane, the moral is about feeding the hungry poor: 'If he asks bread, will ye give him a stone?'

Crane's morals are pointed. Take Fable no. 12 in his edition: King Log and King Stork. In this story, when the Frogs ask for a King, Jove first gives them a log—a useful thing for them in their daily lives. But they say they want a *living* king. Jove gives them a stork which eats them, just to teach them a lesson about being careful what they ask for. Crane's picture shows a recumbent Jove on the upper level, but he is uncrowned and looks more like a sage. The stork, however, has an elaborate crown and a hefty chain of office. The frogs crowd around in different attitudes of excitement and despair. The limerick reads:

> The Frogs prayed to Jove for a King:
> Not a log, but a livelier thing.
> Jove sent them a Stork,
> Who did royal work,
> For he gobbles them up, did their King.

The emphatic moral which this edition draws is a republican one: 'DON'T HAVE KINGS'.

A Marxist tinge colours Crane's fable of 'The Farmer's Treasure'. A dying farmer called his sons to his bedside. He told them not on any account to part with the estate that had belonged in their family for generations. He said to them, 'Somewhere on it is hidden a rich treasure. Spare no energy and leave no spot unturned in your search.' The father died, the sons set to work digging with all their might, turning up every foot of ground with their spades, and going over the whole farm two or three times. They did not find the treasure. But at harvest time

they realised they had done so much work that they had made an enormous profit. They understood that the treasure their father had told them about was the wealth of a bountiful crop. But, for Crane, the moral of this fable uses vocabulary which makes the fable politically relevant to his own day: 'PRODUCTIVE LABOUR IS THE ONLY SOURCE OF WEALTH'.

There have been thousands, not hundreds, of editions of Aesop's *Fables* published since the invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century. Every year, dozens of new versions are published all over the world in almost every language. Aesop has penetrated all cultural genres and media. The animal themes have attracted great artists from Thomas Bewick to Milo Winter, who produced gorgeous images for McNally & Co. in 1919.

But where do all these Aesops actually get their fables from? Most of them simply adapt previous printed editions, while commissioning new pictures or fresh writers. Few have much relationship with the original ancient sources at all. But there are numerous medieval manuscript collections, almost all of them containing different groups and selections of fables, variously expressed. In classical studies, the hero of the study of Aesop was Benjamin Perry, a Professor at the University of Illinois from 1924 to 1960. He gathered together as many ancient fables as he possibly could—over seven hundred—in the earliest form they are attested in ancient sources. They are drawn from all kinds of ancient authors, Latin as well as Greek, and a few from some sources in other Ancient Near Eastern Languages. Perry assigned them each a number (the so-called Perry Index)—the Eagle and the Fox is no. 1; the Fox and the Grapes is no. 15. In 1952 he published the gargantuan landmark study which will forever be the starting-point for any scholarship on Aesop, *Aesopica: A Series of Texts Relating to Aesop or ascribed to him or closely connected with the literary tradition that bears his name; collected and critically edited, in part translated from Oriental languages, with a commentary and historical essay*. He also edited the Loeb edition of the most important retellers of Aesop's fables in later antiquity, Babrius, who wrote in Greek, and Phaedrus, who wrote in Latin. The two most useful books for an interested lay person to get hold of today are both based on Perry's work and his system: Lloyd W. Daly's translation *Aesop without Morals* (Yoseloff, 1961), which contains a translation of Aesop's ancient biography, and Laura Gibb's *Aesop's Fables* (Oxford, World's Classics, 2002).

So what *were* Perry's main sources? The oldest surviving collection of fables under Aesop's name is in a manuscript called the *Collectio Augustana*. It is extremely old—written in the eleventh century. Housed in the Bavarian State Library, it contains 231 fables. A more influential collection was drawn up in Constantinople, now Istanbul, by Byzantine scholar Maximus Planudes in the late 13th century. This contains 127 fables. It was published in Milan in 1474, a decade before the British Aesop story was founded at William Caxton's new press.

But what do we actually know about the 'real' Aesop who has cast such a long shadow over the subsequent history of books and global culture? There is an ancient biography which you can read in *Aesop Without Morals* by Daly which I mentioned earlier. It exists in several versions. They have inspired different portraits of varying degrees of sympathy with Aesop. I am summarising the famous edition in English, French and Latin, illustrated by Francis Barlow and published in London in 1687.[i]

Aesop was born into slavery in Phrygia, which is now north-western Turkey. He was small, ugly, and deformed with a hunchback, pointed head, pot belly and swarthy skin. He had a brilliant mind but was so inarticulate as to be verging on total muteness. This meant he was held fit only for agricultural labour. Two fellow slaves stole and ate some of their master's prize figs, and then tried to pin the blame on Aesop, but he was too clever for them. He asked his master to give them all drinks of warm water and stuck his own fingers down his throat. While he vomited up only clear liquid, the slaves vomited up evidence of the not-yet-digested figs. So they were punished instead of him. This inaugurates Aesop's long career of outwitting slaves and freemen alike in comic episodes which nevertheless underline the dangers of being rude to other people just because they are low-status or strange or disagreeable to look at.

Next, he acquires the power of fluent speech as a gift from the gods after being kind to two itinerant priests of Artemis. He is purchased by a philosopher named Xanthus. After many episodes where he outsmarts his owner, including the achievement of intimacy with the philosopher's wife, he eventually manoeuvres Xanthus into emancipating him on the island of Samos. He becomes the Samians' spokesperson and helps them respond to King Croesus of Lydia when he sought to deprive them of their freedom. He then offers to go voluntarily to Croesus' court, and Croesus is so impressed with his wisdom and courage that he not only grants the Samians freedom from his imperial interference but bestows a large amount of money on Aesop as a reward.

The Samians in turn made him a freedman, and he travelled the world debating with famous philosophers. He came to King Lycerus of Babylon and after several adventures there in which his brilliant intelligence impressed

everyone, he went to King Nectenabo of Egypt. Nectenabo thought he had devised a problem even Aesop could not solve, by demanding a tower that touched neither heaven nor earth. Aesop solved this by training eagles to fly while supporting baskets which contained children building toy towers. He returned to Babylon and succeeded in solving riddles put to him by some of the cleverest men in the world, invited especially from Heliopolis. Then he decided to travel in Greece, where he earned himself an incomparable reputation for wisdom. It was natural that he would want to visit Delphi, home of the famous oracle of Apollo reputed never to lie. But the Delphians resented him, perhaps seeing him as a rival source of authority. They framed him as the thief of a golden goblet and executed him by throwing him off a precipice. In return for this, the gods inflicted a pestilence on the Delphians, which they were forced to expiate by erecting a statue of Aesop. And the leaders of other parts of Greece, along with a company of Greek sages, took their revenge by a military assault on Delphi as well.

Regardless of how much of the *Life* of Aesop is fact and how much fiction, it may well reflect the kind of stories slaves told each other in antiquity. The hero is a slave, who by his wits rises inexorably to the status of wealthy and admired freedman, sought out by kings and philosophers. Aesop is the first truly low-class hero in all Greek literature, which usually preferred well-born exemplars. The setting, at least in the first half, is thoroughly lowlife and much of the humour sexual or scatological. But what can this tell us about who enjoyed and told the *Fables* in classical antiquity? In the comedies of Aristophanes, Aesop's *Fables* are certainly associated with ill-educated people, both slaves and free, and are said to be discouraged at polite dinner parties. In Aristophanes' comedy *Wasps*, the lower-class father in Athens who must be taught refined manners by his upwardly mobile son is told on no account to relate Aesopic *Fables* in front of guests.

And scholars have not come to any agreement about the ideological import of the *Fables* in antiquity more widely. This is because so many of the fables are related to the issue of *power*. The poet Eric Ormsby, acknowledging the huge cultural influence of children's books, wrote a review of Seth Lerer's *Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008). He said that 'to shape the minds of the young through books is to exercise power over the future.' And the *Fables* of Aesop, perhaps the most influential 'children's book' of all time, are transparently all about power.

A large proportion of the most familiar fables directly address the relationship between beings of disparate power, whether physical or intellectual. The dominant types of moral to be drawn from the fables are these. (1) That *force majeure* is inevitable (the hawk is simply bigger and stronger than the nightingale). This is also the basic meaning of 'The Wolf and the Lamb', 'The Hare and the Hound', and 'The Eagle and the Jackdaw'. Like it or not, they demonstrate, that it is simply *inherent in nature* that big powerful animals beat smaller weaker ones. (2) A closely related group underlines the futility of aspiring to things which are not naturally yours or too good for you: 'The Ant and the Grasshoppers' and 'The Fox and the Grapes'. Not dissimilar is the type which suggests that gratitude for what you have already secured is more sensible than trying to increase your possessions: a prime example here is 'The Dog and the Shadow'. (3) Another whole set, while recognising that some entities are naturally more powerful than others, suggest that cunning can help to even up the balance, most famously in 'The Hare and the Tortoise'. (4) A further strategy for dealing with discrepancy in power is a system of reciprocal favours, as in 'The Lion and the Mouse' or 'The Bat and the Weasels'. A corollary of these, however, is 'The Gnat and the Bull', which shows that small entities can *think* they are being noticed when they try to build up favour with the great, but they may not even have been noticed at all. (5) There is also a disturbing number that stress that different groups are naturally irreconcilable – 'The Jackdaw and the Doves', for example – while others suggest that masses aren't as effective as individual leaders, especially 'The Mice and the Cat'. The mice decide at a meeting that a bell must be put on the cat but fail to decide who should carry out the deed. There were understandably no volunteers.

All these moral lessons seem to me compatible with the worldview of either rich or poor, free or slave, in ancient Mediterranean society. Scholars agree that the fables reflect at some level their origins as 'low' or 'popular' culture, oral stories generated and circulated by slaves and lower-class individuals in antiquity. This line of argument can be traced to the classical Greek prose writers themselves. But scholars *disagree* about how 'progressive' or truly subversive the ideology of the fables is. Some have identified Aesop's *Fables* as the literature of the underdog, with a healthy rebellious and subversive content. But Page DuBois has argued persuasively that the fables operated in antiquity in a rather reactionary way. She thinks that in 'naturalising' what are actually human social inequities by comparing them with inherent biological and natural differences between animals, they suggest that human inequities are immutable and unchallengeable as well.[ii] My own view is that the *Fables* actually worked

in *both* ways – they are indeed expressions of the tensions that underpinned a deeply hierarchical society, but expressed that tension dialectically in ways that spoke with an equally loud voice to people on both side of the power divide, and created a community across classes that could understand each other. Both slave and free can relate to the argument that big birds always eat small ones. They can also relate to the argument that small animals, if very helpful to big ones, might earn themselves some favours.

The political ambiguity of the *Fables* is further underlined by the ease with which they have been appropriated *by either side* in their subsequent reception. There have been countless readings we might call conservative or elitist. These include a whole genre of witty Jacobite Aesopic satires. They also include such horrors of Nazi children's literature as *Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid' und Keinem Jud bei seinem Eid!* ('Don't trust a fox, or the promise of a Jew') by Elvira Bauer, which sold at least 70,000 copies, and is horrifyingly sadistic. On the other hand, partly because Aesop and his Roman emulator Phaedrus were (or were said to be) slaves themselves, they have proved magnetically attractive to radicals and revolutionaries of a much more modernising kind, such as Walter Crane, to whom I shall return, and Hugo Gellert, the radical Hungarian-American lithographer. Gellert created a series of striking images to illustrate Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* at the height of the Depression (1934), but he also published a topical updated version of Aesop's *Fables* as *Aesop Said So* (1936).[iii]

Most 'Aesopic' fables reproduced for children feature talking animals, although many of the ancient fables available to us via the manuscript tradition feature exclusively *human* personnel. The usual number selected for children's publications is between ten and thirty. The English-language edition by Sally Grindley (author of the bestsellers *Shhh!* (1999) and *Wake Up Dad!* (1988)), illustrated by John Bendall-Brunello (1999), is not untypical. It contains eighteen fables, including the hard core of favourites which are rarely omitted: 'The Hare and the Tortoise', 'The Fox and the Grapes', 'The Hare and the Hound', 'The Lion and the Mouse', 'The Fox and the Crow', 'The Ants and the Grasshopper', 'The Jackdaw and the Doves', and 'The Mice in Council'.

Some introductions to collections of Aesopic fables allege that the fables were designed for ancient children, and so modern children who read them are just the latest generation to partake in a tradition of awe-inspiring antiquity. But the evidence that Aesop was a 'children's author' in antiquity is controversial. Although Aesop's *Fables* are bound up with the history of the teaching of literacy, literacy has not always been something normally or necessarily considered to be acquired exclusively in childhood. That the ancient Greeks and Romans saw Aesop as an author to be read as early as infancy just *may*, however, be implied by an important story in Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.15. The story reports that the art of fable was bestowed upon Aesop by Hermes, the god of words himself, because the Horai had told Hermes a fable about a cow when he was still in swaddling clothes; as he gave Aesop the gift, Hermes said, 'You keep what was the first thing I learnt myself.'

But, frustratingly, we can't actually prove that Aesop was part of the curriculum of children until they were rather older, at a stage when class, status, leisure and access to education begin to interfere with the picture in a society where literacy may have been as low as fifteen or twenty per cent of the total population. The composition of a fable (*muthos*) was certainly the first exercise attempted by middle- and upper-class teenagers beginning their studies of rhetoric. Aesop was important in the advanced school education in the Greek-speaking communities of Hellenistic and Roman ancient Egypt. In classical Greece, it is however possible that Aesop was used to teach small children literacy, for example at Athens where citizens needed to be able to decipher at least basic civic documents. But we lack a clinching piece of evidence that Athenian citizen boys were taught to read with the help of written collections of fables. We do not even know whether a physical collection existed as early as the golden age of Athens in the fifth century BCE, from when this portrait of Aesop dates.

The earliest example of a fable in Greek literature is the reference to the hawk and the nightingale in Hesiod, whose poetry dates from at least a century earlier than Aesop is supposed to have lived. But the first certain collection was made by Demetrius of Phalerum, regent of Athens 317-307 BCE.[iv] This may have been a repertory of fables designed for consultation by rhetoricians (see Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20). The question of whether reading Aesop was primarily associated with the distinction between childhood and adulthood, or with socio-cultural status, depends on how we interpret a particular passage in Plato's *Phaedo* (61b).[v] Socrates, in prison, tells Cebes that (61b) he has been whiling away the time by composing poetry—first, a hymn to a god, and then putting into verse the fables of Aesop which he had access to. The trouble is, we don't know whether he means he had a copy of the fables in prison, like a bible in a Mormon hotel, or whether he knew them off by heart and so had access to them in his memory. If so, it might imply that most Athenian men knew Aesop backwards, having learned them in infancy. This might be backed up by a passage in Aristophanes' *Birds*. The human who has gone

to Cloudcuckooland complains that the birds are so under-educated that they don't even know their Aesop (466-75).

Whether Aesop should be imagined as the literature of childhood *after* the invention of the printing press is also academically contested. During the 1470s and 1480s, when Aesopic volumes with elaborate illustrations were amongst the very first books published in German and French we well as English, one group is easily identifiable as designed for school work. A Latin school book printed between 1512 and 1514 by Wynkyn de Worde at Westminster is entitled *Aesopus. Fabule Esope cum Comento* [*sic*]. The title page woodcut shows a schoolmaster teaching three boys or youths, who are seated on a school bench and holding books from which they read. These boys, however, are not very young, and they are learning not English but Latin.

The intended readership of other early printed Aesops, in modern languages is less easy to define. There is no hard and fast rule for distinguishing between those meant for the very young, and those aimed at a much wider age group including adults. People have always learned to read at all ages, especially in cultures with high levels of adult illiteracy, and have always acquired radically different functional levels of reading ability.

The tropes of social distinctions by *age* and by *class*, in relation to knowledge of Aesop, frequently became confused in the rhetoric of later ages. Take this frontispiece engraving to Philip Ayres' 1689 *Mythologia ethica, or, Three centuries of Aesopian fables in English prose: done from Aesop, Phaedrus, Camerarius, and all other eminent authors on this subject*. The image depicts a rural idyll, with Aesopic animals looking on in the background. Cheiron the centaur is teaching the young Achilles, and the implication is that he is teaching him the fables of Aesop. The Latin inscription beneath the engraving comprises two verses, 'Here will be seen that virtuous Cheiron, the most upright of all the cloud-born ones, and teacher of great Achilles'.[vi] But it will be noted that Achilles in the picture, far from being a small boy, has the stature, appearance and clothing of a refined young man.

Ever since the first printed editions, Aesop often featured in the biographies of prodigious self-educators who succeeded in learning to read, often in adulthood, and consequently to extract themselves from poverty and obscurity. A French teenaged farm-boy from Lorraine, by name of Valentin Jamerey-Duval, was illiterate until he came across an illustrated edition of Aesop's *Fables*. So drawn was he to the visual images that he asked some of his fellow-shepherds to explain the stories, and subsequently to teach him to read the book. As a result, he developed an insatiable appetite for reading, and became a librarian to the Duke of Lorraine. At the other end of the social scale, however, the future Edward VI began reading his Latinised Aesop at the age of seven years old, and a Christmas theatrical entertainment called *Aesop's Crow* was prepared for his amusement in 1552. Aesop was used to teach royal princesses the language appropriate to their gender and class in late 17th-century England: French. A fascinating volume by Pierre de Lainé, tutor to Princess Mary (the future Queen Mary) and her sister Anne, published in 1677, includes a telling collection of texts in under the title *The Princely Way to the French Tongue.* There are extracts from the bible transposed into dialogue form, *Together with a larger explication of the French grammar, choice fables of Aesop in burlesque French*. These last examples underline the question of whether it is even legitimate to talk about 'children's literature' or 'literature for children' as a recognised or recognisable category at all, at least prior to the 18th century.

This is not to say that Aesop's *Fables* don't occupy a central place in the history of literature *for* children, because they do. This story begins with John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). The philosopher said the child had a need for 'some easy pleasant book... wherein the entertainment that he finds might draw him on,' and recommended Aesop's *Fables* as 'the best, which being stories apt to delight and entertain a child, may yet afford useful reflections to a grown man.' Locke here seems to approve of Aesop as the provider of ethical instruction for the very young. But he subsequently published a version of a selection of the *Fables* as an example of an ideal text for instruction in Latin by any individuals seeking to teach themselves, *Æsop's Fables, in English & Latin, Interlineary, for the Benefit of those who not having a master would learn either of these tongues* (1703). Aesop, for Locke, was therefore good *either* for teaching children, because he could function as a vehicle for ethical examples imparted without tears, *or* for individuals at any age desirous of learning a second language. But within not much more than a century of Locke's version, Aesop's *Fables* were formed the content of what is widely regarded as the first 'children's book' in the fully modern sense, that is as a volume designed to appeal to the imagination of a child and stimulate his or her powers of visualisation. The book was William Godwin's *Aesop, Fables, Ancient and Modern*, *Adapted for the use of Children from Three and Eight Years of Age*, which first appeared in 1805, under the pseudonym of Edward Baldwin.

Godwin's publishing ventures, and in particular his *Aesop*, took the discussion of what children should be given to read forward by several strides. He added to Locke's classical literary critical notions of the pleasurable

(*hēdu*, *dulce*) and useful (*ōphelimon*, *utile*), the revolutionary concept that a children's story might have a different narrative rhythm from that which might appeal to adults. Even more innovative was Godwin's desideratum that a book for a child would also stimulate his or her reflective and *imaginative* capacities:

> *Fables then should not be dismissed in a few short lines but expanded in language suited to the understanding of children: If we would benefit a child we must become in part a child ourselves. We must prattle to him: we must expatiate upon some points: we must introduce quick unexpected turns which if they are not wit, have the effect of wit to children. Above all, we must make our narrations pictures, and render the objects we discourse about, visible to the fancy of the learner.*

It was through thinking how to rewrite the ancient fables in a more extended way, which stimulated the Romantic notion of 'fancy', that Godwin developed his new style and mode of expression, perfectly complemented by the suggestive engravings of William Mulready.

In 'The Dog in the Manger', for example, Godwin's narrative moves at a leisurely pace that allows the reader to see clearly how the roles of the characters are fulfilled, and the characters themselves, rather than a stern godly 'voiceover', draw the moral through what they say and do: 'Silly dog, says the little boy, if I were as naughty as you, I should give you nothing to eat, as you prevented papa's horse from eating. There is a plate of meat for you; and remember another time, that only naughty dogs and naughty boys and girls keep away from others what they cannot use themselves.' Moreover, Godwin's characters are more psychologically developed than in any previous version of Aesop. Godwin's dog in his manger finally gives in, defeated by hunger, while in the most popular previous version, Samuel Croxall's of 1722, there was no such imaginative response to the dog: the 'envious ill-natured cur, getting up and snarling at him, would not suffer him to touch it'.

In his preface, Godwin explains that he had tried to adapt the material to make it appropriate to the emotional and cognitive needs of the child:

> *I have fancied myself taking the child upon my knee and have expressed them in such language as I should have been likely to employ when I wished to amuse the child and make what I was talking of take hold upon his attention.*

Godwin's combined household with his second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont, contained no fewer than five children, so it may not in practice have been difficult to find one to put on his knee!

Despite one reviewer objecting to the extent of the alterations in the original fables, and even to the possible anti-Christian implication that could be drawn from one tale, Godwin's Aesop did well, running through at least nine editions before 1821. Rewriting Aesop fundamentally shaped Godwin's views of storytelling for children. Three years later, in 1808, he commissioned and published Charles and Mary Lamb's *The Adventures of Ulysses*, the first *Odyssey* written specifically with children in mind.[vii] Indeed, Aesop's *Fables* and the *Odyssey* have subsequently been turned into more children's books than any other ancient texts, by a very wide margin. They are also the two ancient texts that have been most susceptible to transformation into other media – there were Aesop and Odysseus animated cartoons by 1950, and they can both be watched on television, listened to on audiobooks, and seen in all kinds of theatre. Aesop and Odysseus have arrived on playing cards, porcelain, and postage stamps. But when it comes to depth of cultural familiarity and ubiquity, Aesop actually knocks the Homeric *Odyssey* out of the water on almost any criterion of measurement. Aesop has achieved the kind of talismanic status that makes him susceptible to translation even into dead languages, including ancient Aztec (by a group of scholars based in Germany let by Gerdt Kutscher, in 1987).

These simple little tales for children, as they are commonly stereotyped, have been regarded as supremely important by an extraordinary string of famous thinkers, from Hesiod, Democritus and Socrates,[viii] to Martin Luther. He believed that good Protestants should be able to read Aesop as well as the bible in their native tongue. Malcolm X read them in Charleston State Prison and recommended them to his followers. Writers who have turned their pens to rephrasing Aesop—often through the intermediary of the Latin slave-fabulist, Phaedrus—include the twelfth-century poet Marie de France, Aphra Behn, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson. Admirers have included Richard Bentley, William Congreve, John Vanbrugh, Charlotte Bronte, and John Stuart Mill, who read Aesop in Greek when still a small boy, the first Greek author he ever studied.[ix]

Let me conclude by returning to the unexpected influence of Aesop, via Walter Crane, on workers' organisations. Because Walter Crane regularly created designs for posters for radical causes and the labour movement, his *Baby's Own Aesop* was scrutinised just as much by trade union organisers and workers' reading groups as by late Victorian and Edwardian children. Crane's illustration for 'The Man and the Snake', of which

the moral is that people should take care not to invite traitors into their homes and trust them too soon, ends up being adapted with a quite different meaning for the banner of the Liverpool Export Branch Dockers. Crane's socialist under-text to that fable, implied by the red cap or pileus of the freedman or revolutionary, did not go unnoticed. Instead of an anonymous father, we now have a muscular Hercules, strangling the twin serpents of capitalism—destitution and prostitution—instead of the snakes sent by his vindictive stepmother Juno.

Lastly, it was almost certainly through Crane's Aesop that illustrations of one of the most profound of Aesop's fables, 'The Bundle of Twigs', came to feature on several different trade union banners. The fable said that a father, worn out by the quarrels between his sons, asked them each in turn to break a tightly bound bundle of twigs. Each son failed. Then he asked them to break a single twig, a feat which they easily accomplished. The moral the father drew was that STRENGTH LIES IN UNITY; the political relevance is again underscored by Crane in the detail of the red freedman's cap. A visit to the People's History Museum in Manchester reminded me that once upon a time, before the different image of the Roman fasces was pirated by fascists in the twentieth century, artistic representations of twig bundles, were inspiring and wholesome.

When 19th-century workers without legal rights banded together against their employers and state legislation to form Trade Unions, Aesop was one of the few ancient authors most of them had met, since his fables were by then commonly used to teach elementary literacy. Integrating an illustration of the fable into a banner was visual shorthand for 'Unity is Strength', as I discovered in both the 1898 banner of the Watford branches of the *Worker's Union* and the Aston and Haydon miners' union. Whatever the original political message of Aesop's *Fables*, Crane's work meant that he indisputably became a figure with whose wisdom the oppressed underclasses of late Victorian Britain certainly identified.

[i] *Æsop's Fables, with his life: in English, French and Latin. Newly translated. Illustrated with one hundred and twelve sculptures. To this edition are likewise added, thirty-one new figures representing his life, by Francis Barlow*. London: H. Hills, 1687.

[ii] P. DuBois, *Slaves and Other Objects*. Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2003, pp. 170-88.

[iii] See further http://www.classicsandclass.info/product/2/.

[iv] See Diogenes Laertes' biography of Demetrius (*Lives* 5.80).

[v] See further Edith Hall, 'The Aesopic in Aristophanes', in Emmanuela Bakola, Lucia Prauscello and Mario Telo (eds.) *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of Genres*. Cambridge: CUP, 2013, pp. 287-97.

[vi] From Germanicus Caesar's translation of Aratus' Greek astronomical poem, *Phaenomena* (418-19), where the poet is describing the constellation Centaurus: '*Hic erit ille pius Chiro, iustissimus omnes / Inter nubigenas, et magni doctor Achillis.*'

[vii] On which see Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008, pp. 26-7.

[viii] See the earlier chapters in the magnificent study by Leslie Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations: popular tradition, cultural dialogue, and the invention of Greek prose*. Princeton, N.J. and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011.

[ix] John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*. Auckland, NZ: Floating Press, 2009 [1873], p. 8.