La Fontaine, *Les Vautours et les pigeons* (VII, 8): An Intertextual Reading

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... il en est de la lecture comme des auberges espagnoles, et de l'amour... : on n'y trouve que ce qu'on y apporte.

—André Maurois

The most striking single feature of so-called French classical literature is its extraordinary, programmatic commitment to the binary. This is no doubt why the uninitiated reader often finds this kind of writing so monotonous and difficult to appreciate; this is also why certain individual passages are so easy to remember, often impossible to forget. It is a matter of evidence that the works of Corneille, Pascal, Racine et al., are littered with such statements as these, in which antithesis is the central rhetorical support:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Je consens, ou plutôt j'aspire à ma ruine.} & \\
\text{[Corneille, *Polyeucte*, IV, 2, 1139]} & \\
\text{S'il se vante je l'abaisse, s'il s'abaisse, je le vante.} & \\
\text{[Pascal, *Pensées*, Lafuma, no. 130]} & \\
\text{La magnanimité méprise tout pour avoir tout.} & \\
\text{[La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, no. 248]} & \\
\text{J'ai pour moi la justice et je perds mon procès.} & \\
\text{[Molière, *Misanthrope*, V, 1, 1492]} & \\
\text{Toujours prête à partir, et demeure tout toujours.} & \\
\text{[Racine, *Andromaque*, I, 1, 131]} & 
\end{align*}
\]

What these texts have in common is a style which asks to be read as the surface manifestation of a deep semantic structure, and more pointedly

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This essay had its origins in an MLA panel discussion (Chicago, 1985) organized by David Lee Rubin under the title "New Approaches to the *Fables* of La Fontaine": *Les Vautours et les pigeons* was the text on which Richard Danner, Marcel Gutwirth and myself were invited to focus our remarks.
still as the rhetorically and syntactically coded expression of a habitual, collective way of thinking about human psychology and behavior: its duplicity, its tensions, its incompatibilities, and its perversity. Turn this style inside out, and it becomes a moral content. Open Corneille or Racine to any page, and you are knee deep in ambiguity, alterity, asperity: the then and the now, the inner and the outer, the lesser and the greater, master and slave, monarch and subject. French classical literature at its most typical surrounds us with nervous, anxious people locked in conflict, often within the claustrophobic space of an alexandrine line.

Open La Fontaine's *Fables* to almost any page and what do you find? Sweetness and light, smoothness, polish, sinuous fluidity—what Leo Spitzer describes, in his magisterial study of the transition in La Fontaine, as an updated version of Horatian *suavitas.* You will look in vain for those charged, tension-ridden antitheses that are endemic to the writing of Racine: "Présente je vous fuis; absente je vous trouve" (*Phèdre*, II, 2, 542); the dominant figure in La Fontaine is the mocking, the witty, the often whimsical periphrasis: "Le plus terrible des enfants/Que le Nord jusque-là eût porté dans ses flancs" (*Le Chêne et le roseau*, I, 22, 26–27). In this respect, our access to La Fontaine is oddly skewed and, in the end, severely limited. Or, to put the matter in terms of my earlier characterization of French classical writing: if antithesis is a polarizing figure whose function is confrontational, periphrasis is a figure of avoidance, whose function is cosmetic, in that its essential role is to interpose aesthetic distance between the reader and the semantic content that it purports to convey. The pages of La Fontaine are filled, to be sure, with concrete, graphic examples of deceit, greed, injustice, and violence. All this evil transpires, however, so decorously and naturally, at times even so pleasantly and appealingly, that the French can still think of the *Fables* as suitable for memorization by their children.

And yet, the memorizable, delightful, elegant La Fontaine is not a figment of the mind either, for it harks back to a perception of the *Fables* that is also firmly grounded in the text; it often seems in fact as if, underneath all that bonhomie and naturel, there is really nothing much going on. Once begun, the reading progresses with a limpidity and a simplicity that can be highly unsettling, especially to professional, academic readers who labor in the conviction that they should somehow be able to talk about La Fontaine in the same detail and at the same depth as they are accustomed to do with Pascal and Racine. For the serious reader, the problem is always the same: to find some break in the flow of the text,
some palpable sign of a hidden complexity, some ungrammaticality to
tell us that everything is really not alright after all. Where, so we ask, is
the catachresis that will lead us to the hypogram? Where in a given fable
is La Fontaine’s counterpart or equivalent to “La fille de Minos et de
Pasiphaë” (Phèdre, I, 1, 36)? In the following pages I would like to offer
an empirical description of the ways in which one reader has gone about
confronting these and related questions as they pertain to a consideration
of Les Vautours et les pigeons.

My first reaction to this fable was triggered by a personal association
to the apparently coincidental collocation in the opening lines of the
proper names “Mars” and “Vénus”:

Mars autrefois mit tout l’air en émute.
Certain sujet fit naître la dispute
Chez les oiseaux, non ceux que le Printemps
Mène à sa cour, et qui, sous la feuillée
Par leur exemple et leurs sons éclatants,
Font que Vénus est en nous réveillée;
Ni ceux encor que la mère d’Amour
Met à son char; mais le peuple vautour . . .

[ll. 1–8]

These same two deities—as I first vaguely recalled, then verified—play a
prominent role and, according to the standard authorities, fulfill a semi­
nal allegorical function in Lucretius’s prologue to De rerum natura.
There, in her capacity as Venus physica, as what Lucretius will later call
“rerum natura creatrix,” Venus represents “the creative power of nature,”
whereas Mars, as god of War, stands by contrast for the countervailing
principle of destruction.\footnote{Taken together, these two antinomial figures
recapitulate the complex, conflictual totality of Being, the way Life is, the
Nature of Things.}

The possibility of a central, structuring Lucretian intertext which, in
the absence of any more compelling insight, I chose as my working hy­
pothesis, needed more, however, than my chance personal association for
its validation. And upon closer inspection, I was able to bring into play a
number of additional elements. I noted first that Venus is not merely re­
ferred to in passing, but that her presence in the poem becomes the object
of a double overdetermination: 1) the mention of her name in line 6 (“Vé­
nus est en nous réveillée. . . .”) is immediately relayed in the next line by
the periphrasis “la mère d’amour”; 2) this rather mannered redundancy
draws further attention to itself by virtue of the emphasis placed on Ven­
us's connection with birds; first with nightingales as harbingers of Spring (l. 3: "ceux que le Printemps/Mène à sa cour"), and then with the doves that draw her chariot (ll. 7–8: "que la mère d’Amour/Met à son char"). This marked feature—the bird-relatedness of Venus—has in turn a dual reference: 1) to the fable's title, specifically to the word pigeons, of which Venus's doves—snow white, gentle, tender—are a noble variant, and 2) to the passage in Lucretius's prologue in which Venus is described in terms of the same two characteristics as La Fontaine was to place in the foreground: her connection both with the onset of Spring and with birds of/in love:

Nam simul ac species patefacta est verna diei
Et reserata viget genitabilis aura favoni,
Aeriae primum volucres te, Diva, tuumque
Significant initum, perclusae corda tua vi.

When first the day puts on the aspect of spring, when in all its force the fertilizing breath of Zephyr is unleashed, then, great goddess, the birds of air give the first intimation of your entry; for yours is the power that has pierced them to the heart.

[I, ll. 10–13] 5

I hasten to add that, never having read Lucretius in Latin, I had no personal recollection of these lines, and that I gained knowledge of them from a note in Régnier's edition of the Fables in the Grands Écrivains de la France collection. It is significant in this regard that Régnier prints the passage from Lucretius with no gloss or commentary, as if he considered it so well known and the Latin so accessible that his intended reader of 1884—whether this reader existed in reality or in his own idealization—would be able to decipher it without difficulty. The baldness of Régnier's note also suggests that, within the cultural preview of his classically educated reader, the nature of the kinship between La Fontaine's and Lucretius's juxtaposed descriptions of Venus would be self-evident.

However this may be, I attach considerable importance to the fact that Régnier, although by another avenue, had been led before me to posit or, at the very least, to suspect a trace of the Lucretian presence in La Fontaine's poem. On second thought, I should perhaps have said that I found Régnier's note particularly meaningful not "although," but because he reached Lucretius for other reasons and by a different route from my
own. The fact that he identified La Fontaine's "source" presumably as a result of explicit verbal reminiscence, whereas I hypothesized an intertextual relationship through having read Lucretius thirty years earlier in English translation—the fact that two such different readers, at an interval of a hundred years, coming from two widely separated corners of history, geography, and literary tradition, should have converged in this instance on Lucretius's prologue, points to something basic in the way that Les Vautours et les pigeons has been programmed to produce meaning. That is to say, the Lucretian intertext would seem to be so snugly embedded in La Fontaine's poem that, by one means or another, some careful, curious, alert reader had to come along sooner or later and notice it. If both Régnier and I were led back independently to the same passage in Lucretius, does this not suggest that it was there all the time waiting to be recovered? In any event, it is certain that some sensitive, perceptive reader was bound to observe, even in complete ignorance of the parallel passage in Lucretius, that Venus and Mars, although not specifically contrasted with each other in La Fontaine, do in fact represent, by the mere presuppositions of their names, such polar qualities as tenderness and violence, creation and destruction, peace and war, or as echoed in the title of the Woody Allen film of some years back, Love and Death. In the business of reading, all roads, however circuitous or divergent they may appear to be, eventually lead to Rome.

As an editor working within certain artisanal-formal conventions and within a historically circumscribed notion of literary transmission, Régnier also felt called upon to provide his reader with this note at the proper name Mars: "Le Dieu de la guerre, pour 'la guerre, une guerre.' C'est le ton de l'épopée que La Fontaine sait prendre avec tant d'art quand il veut relever ce qu'il dit." What Régnier did not do—and it is this consideration that distinguishes between the respective dynamics of source criticism and intertextual reading—was to observe or, if he did so observe, to mention, that Mars is also present in the prologue to De rerum natura, and at a distance of less than twenty lines from the description of Venus that he himself was to allege at line 6 of Les Vautours et les pigeons;

Effice ut interea fera moenera militiai
per maria ac terras omnis sopita quiescant.
Nam tu sola potes tranquilla pace iuuare
mortalis, quoniam belli fera moenera Mauors
armipotens regit, in gremium qui saepe tuum se
reiicit, aeterno deuictus uolnere amoris . . .
Meanwhile, grant that this brutal business of war by sea
and land may everywhere be lulled to rest. For you alone have power to
bestow on mortals the blessing of quiet peace. In your bosom Mars
himself, supreme commander in this brutal business, flings himself down
at times, laid low by the irremediable wound of love.

[I, ll. 29–34]

Once we have, for whatever reason and by whatever process, traced the
names Mars and Venus back to their common locus in *De rerum natura*,
it is no longer possible to prevent the dialectical resonance that inheres
in this conjunction at least from impinging on our reading of the “Mars”/
“Vénus” collocation in La Fontaine. Whereas the indication of a source
or model allows for the assertion of a contact or an “influence,” the per­
ception of an intertext, as I am using the term here, invites us to open up
a process of exploration and interrogation. Having been sent out by the
names “Mars” and “Vénus” in *Les Vautours et les pigeons* to the begin­
ning of *De rerum natura*, the reader brings back from it, willy nilly, as s/he resumes contact with La Fontaine’s words, a suggested vision of the
world as it might be, if the antagonism distilled by these two names could
be subdued or dissolved. Lucretius’s prologue contains an unexpressed
idea which is actualized and disengaged by the reader when s/he com­
pares Venus’s identical effect on the birds in the sky and the God of War:
the former, necessarily, as part of nature, “pierced . . . through the heart”
(*perclusae corda*), succumb to the controlling force of Love; in the same
way, Mars, so it must be earnestly hoped, will similarly be “laid low by
the irremediable wound of love” (*aeterno deuictus uolnere amoris*). This
double seduction by Venus subtends a world view and builds on a cos­
mological theorem that have found lasting, proverbial expression in the
Virgilian maxim: *Omnia vincit amor* (*Eclogues*, X, l. 69).

I readily admit that my interest in wanting to link *Les Vautours et les
pigeons* intertextually with Lucretius’s prologue may appear idiosyn­
cratic or arbitrary. I might also concede for the sake of argument that the
convergence of my associations with Régnier’s was fortuitous and coin­
cidental. On one point, however, I would stand absolutely firm: the over­
determined status of the name “Vénus,” her bird-relatedness, and the
equation *pigeon* = *colombe* are inherent, objective properties of the text.
In the absence of any knowledge of Lucretius or of any earlier literary
treatments of Venus and her doves, the careful, docile reader must never­
theless attend to the emphasis laid on the generic word “oiseaux” (l. 3),
which La Fontaine first pushes into relief through the *enjambement*
and then foregrounds further in the polarizing sequence: "non ceux . . .
Ni ceux encor . . . mais le peuple vautour . . ." (ll. 3–8). Whereas the
vultures are named outright, the other birds that are mentioned in anticipatory
contradistinction to them ("non ceux . . . Ni ceux encor"), are
not identified, but presented to us at one remove from behind the veil of
periphrasis, which it becomes the reader's first order of business to penetrate. To take up this challenge, to defeat La Fontaine's periphrastic evasion, and thus fill the semantic void which it is designed to create, is to participate in the production of meaning and to collaborate with the poet in his chosen distribution of emphasis. But, even the lazy, insensitive, or ignorant reader who declines this invitation will not be let off that easily, since La Fontaine's editors, as self-appointed or commercially enlisted guardians of his text, are there in chorus to remind us that our response to Les Vautours et les pigeons will be incomplete and deficient as long as we do not know that the bird of spring is the nightingale and the bird of Venus is the dove. Only with this information at our command, so they insist in behalf of the poet who is no longer there to defend the integrity of his words, are we equipped to read on intelligently.

Having said this much, however, and having recovered the submerged content of La Fontaine's circumlocutions, the editors still do not tell the story in all its intricacy, for La Fontaine's periphrastic overdeterminations are compounded further by the fact that the nightingale is not only the harbinger of Spring, but it is also, in the same way as the dove, a bird of Venus, inasmuch as Spring stands metaphorically for the season of Love. Thus, at line 8, with the long-heralded, long-awaited mention of the word vautours, several preliminary generalizations become possible: 1) The sequential set: bird of spring > season of Love > birds of Venus signals a first amplification of the titular word pigeons by way of a proleptic and gratuitous actualization of the word colombe. I say "gratuitous," because nothing at this point in the text's narrative line requires such specialization of meaning. La Fontaine is doing here by indirection what he had done straightforwardly in La Colombe et la fourmi (II, 12, 12), where he describes the bird in the title periphrastically as a "oiseau de Vénus." 2) We find next, parallelwise, a proleptic and gratuitous mention of Venus, first as metaphor for love or desire (line 6: "Vénus est en nous réveillée"), then, periphrastically and tautologically, as mother of cupid (line 7: "la
mère d'Amour"), who, in that capacity, rides in a chariot drawn by doves. The contextual function of this powerfully concatenated network of periphrases, is to attune the reader's response to the idea that the pigeons of the title are to be read, retroactively, not as the common, mottled, dirty rooftop or courtyard kind, but as the snow white, sentimentally and poetically refined variety, of noble affect and irenic disposition, perched at the very top of the columbiform paradigm, or in Littre's terse definition, s.v. Colombe; "Pigeon, en style élevé." 3) If once we take the word pigeon (= dove = bird of Love) as emblematic of the presence of Venus, we may go a step past description to interpretation and attribute proleptic semiotic value to the juxtaposition of "pigeons," the last word in the fable's title, and "Mars," the first word in the fable's text. 4) The first eight lines of Les Vautours et les pigeons may now be read as a tautological amplification in Greco-Roman or mythological code of the same polarity that the fable's title expresses in ornithological code:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vautours</th>
<th>War Birds</th>
<th>Mars</th>
<th>War</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pigeons</td>
<td>Love Birds</td>
<td>Venus</td>
<td>Peace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, this opposition between "Mars" and "Vénus," as representative of two antithetical affective postures and cultures, is exemplified elsewhere in La Fontaine: in Le Meunier, son fils et Vane (II, 1, 81), we read: "Quant à vous, suivez Mars, ou l'Amour ou le Prince . . ."; and in A Monseigneur, le duc de Bourgogne, (XII, 1, 9 and 17), "Le métier de Mars" is set contrapuntally against "les Ris et les Amours." There is further evidence of calculated antique resonance both in the mock-epic description "Maint chien perit, maint héros expira" and the ensuing reference to "Prométhée" (ll. 14-15), as well as in La Fontaine's pseudo-Homeric description of the battle scene,

Tout élément rempli de citoyens  
Le vaste enclos qu'ont les royaumes sombres  
[ll. 23-24]

a clear echo of the invocation to the Muse at the beginning of the Iliad, where the wrath of Achilles is described as having "hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls of heroes" (Lattimore trans.). When the reader reaches lines 25-27,
the equation \( \text{pigeon} = \text{colombe} \) and the polarizing thrust that it portends become, in Riffaterre’s aggressive formulation, “obligatorily perceptible.” This “autre nation,” soon to be identified as “le peuple pigeon” (l. 30), is presented to us by means of a periphrasis (“Au col changeant, au coeur tendre et fidèle”) that actualizes the two essential features in the traditional descriptive system of the dove: its loving, faithful nature and its iridescent neckline. The dove’s susceptibility to variegated color change is listed in the *Thesaurus linguae latinae* (s.v. *Columba II*) as foremost among its proverbial characteristics (*de proprietatibus columbarum, quae in proverbium venerunt*). Cicero mentions the dove’s “plumae versicolores” (*De fin. 3, 18*) among nature’s ornaments, along with the beards of men and peacocks’ tails; many other writers, among them Lucretius, specify that this distinctive coloration is localized in the region of the neck;

\[
\text{pluma columbarum quo pacto in sole uidetur,}
\text{quae sita ceruices circum collumque coronat} . . .
\]

Observe the appearance in sunlight of the plumage that rings the neck of a dove and crowns its nape . . .

*De rerum natura, II, ll. 799–802*

Apuleius describes the doves that pull Venus’s chariot in terms of the same stereotypic feature, “quattuor candidae columbae . . . picta colla torquentes” (“Four white doves . . . bowed their rainbow-colored necks,” *Golden Ass 6, 6*, Aldington-Gaselee trans., Loeb) that La Fontaine was to subsume in the expression “Au col changeant.” As for the pigeon or dove as lovebird, not even the casual reader of La Fontaine will fail to summon up at the words “au coeur tendre et fidèle” the corresponding verse that opens one of his best known fables: “Deux pigeons s’aimaient d’amour tendre” (IX, 2, 1). This association, once it has been made, is in itself sufficiently powerful to send us back to the beginning of *Les Vautours et les pigeons*, specifically to the periphrastic description of those birds affected to the service of “la mère d’Amour” (l. 7). At all events, it is now possible to view the words *vautours* and *pigeons*, both in the title and in the body of the fable, as semiotic markers that point attention to the same antagonism which pits Mars against Venus, killers against lov-
ers. This theme or scheme of irreconcilable alterity is instinct and inscribed, moreover, in the very word *colombe*, which, again according to the *Thesaurus linguae latinae* (s.v. *Columba II A*), is opposed, in a bevy of examples from across the range of Latin literature, to such “wild and rapacious birds” (*opponitur avibus ferocibus et rapacibus*) as eagles, kites, crows, and vultures.⁸

When I originally suspected that the “Mars”/“Vénus” opposition in *Les Vautours et les pigeons* might be read as a tautological variant of the Lucretian message—“That’s the nature of things,” “That’s the way things are”—I did not know that the binary idea of the prologue to *De rerum natura* was itself tributary to a larger, even more ancient cosmological/metaphysical vision. It was in Cyril Bailey’s standard English edition and commentary (II, l. 590), which I consulted out of a mixture of curiosity, ignorance and obstinacy, that I learned of the tendency in classical scholarship to view Lucretius’s conjunction of Mars and Venus as the intertextual excrescence of an *Ur-text* in Empedocles (ca. 493—ca. 433 B.C.), who had reduced the secrets of the universe and the nature of things to a series of dialectical encounters between Strife and Love (*Neikos* and *Philotēs*). My fortuitous access to this bit of information proved useful in several unpredictable ways. To begin with, the emergence of the word “Strife”—not the idea, but the mere word—in polar conjunction with the word “Love,” set me to wondering whether the Mars/Venus binary in Lucretius and La Fontaine were not simply continuous with the venerable *discordia concors-concordia discors* motif that had become so familiar to me as a reader of Montaigne.⁹ This question was sufficiently tantalizing to send me on a trip to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, where I was quickly and well rewarded for my pains, since I was able to recover there, under the entry *Discors 2*, the Horatian “rerum concordia discors,” which when traced to its source reads thus:

```plaintext
quid velit et possit rerum concordia discors,
Empedocles an Stertinium deliret acumen?

What is the meaning and effect of nature's jarring concord?
Is it Empedocles or shrewd Stertinius that's talking nonsense?
[Epist. I, 12, ll. 19–20]¹⁰
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Re-enter through another door Empedocles and, fast on his heels, *Lucretius*! I found some cause for satisfaction in the fact that the *concordia discors* topic had proven to be the missing link in an intertextual chain
that extended from Empedocles—at first a proper name on which I had stumbled, but eventually a conceptual fountainhead—to Lucretius, Horace, Montaigne, and La Fontaine, while passing on the way through a number of equally noteworthy intermediary stations in Lucan, Manilius, and Ovid. In short, I was encouraged to observe that, whatever its ultimate utility in interpreting Les Vautours et les pigeons, the Mars/Venus collocation seemed to be branching out, taking on a life of its own, and, in the course of its peregrinations, generating an expanding nexus of tautological examples. What Régnier had casually noted as a “source” was emerging as a prominent strand in an increasingly intricate intertextual web.

Although I was not prepared to say whether La Fontaine knew anything about Empedocles and pre-Socratic philosophy or, even, for that matter, whether he had any serious first-hand knowledge of Lucretius, I was convinced, as a matter of principle—even as an article of faith—that whatever he did have to say about the idea of cosmic, universal “Strife” would somehow have to crystallize around the French word discorde which, as I quickly ascertained through the concordance to his writings, he does in fact use. La Querelle des chiens et des chats, et celle des chats et des souris (XII, 8) opens with this series of declarations:

La discorde a toujours régné dans l’univers.
Notre monde en fournit mille exemples divers:
Chez nous cette déesse a plus d’un tributaire.

After this exordium there follows the body of the fable, which illustrates the permanence of Discord in human affairs, and, later on, the moral:

J’en reviens à mon dire. On ne voit sous les cieux
Nul animal, nul être, aucune créature
Qui n’ait son opposé: c’est la loi de nature.

[ll. 38–40]

With the recovery of this passage, a third, major superimposition becomes possible: we need only look in isolation at the words “discorde” and “univers” (l. 1), “opposé” and “nature” (l. 40), to witness yet another replication of the message shared by the Lucretian prologue and Les Vautours et les pigeons: Mars and Venus, by their mythological history and the accumulated presuppositions of their names, recapitulate a primal, conflictual dispensation, instinct in the Cosmos, which La Fontaine, in the wake of Lucretius and Empedocles, now compresses into the
single word "Discorde" as locus of an overarching principle that governs the relations between dogs and cats, cats and mice, vultures and pigeons, Love and War. This is the way of the world and the nature of things. "C'est la loi de nature." 12

Now this latter formulation, which is exceptionally forthright and outspoken for the habitually understated La Fontaine, happens to figure elsewhere in the Fables; as Régnier points out in a note to line 40 of La Querelle des chiens et des chats, this very same hemistich appears earlier in the opening line of L'Ane et le chien (VIII, 17): "Il se faut entr'aider; c'est la loi de nature . . ." In the context of this fable, La Fontaine's liminal maxim proves to be cruelly ironic in that, in practice, the reverse turns out to be true; it is the case here, with all the rigor of natural law, that no one helps anyone except with stale, platitudinous, indifferent advice. In Les Vautours et les pigeons, to which I now revert by way of the word "s'entr'aider"—a verb that aptly describes the doves' treatment of the vultures—altruism is in fact depicted as destructive and suicidal. It is as if it were also written into the scheme of things that the attempt to "s'entr'aider," to eliminate conflict and harmonize dissonance—"accorder une telle querelle" (1. 29), "accomoder un peuple si sauvage" (1. 40)—as if the effort to unravel the concordia discors, to reconcile Mars and Venus, were to violate the order of nature and to unleash disaster.

In further illustration of this pattern, I would now like to offer a last example, which, just like all the others, came my way in a completely fortuitous manner. Very late in my reading, just to see whether I might not have overlooked other significant parallels, I checked in the Littre under the word Colombe, and this is what I found as the first entry:

Pigeon, en style élevé. Le Saint-Esprit descend sous la figure d'une colombe. Notre-Seigneur a dit: "Soyez prudents comme les serpents et simples comme les colombes."

Since the dove serpent binary was new to me, I naturally wanted to document it further. More particularly, I was curious to know whether this opposition was current in La Fontaine's day, and soon learned from Furetière (s.v. Colombe) that it was:

I was struck here by two things: 1) the dove is identified as female of the species, and credited with spiritual and moral qualities (simplicity and its presuppositions) that are presumably less prominent in the male;\textsuperscript{13} 2) the words of Jesus (which originate in Matthew X, 16) are cited by Furetière, without indication of origin, as proverbial.\textsuperscript{14}

And when we return this saying to its source in Scripture, another series of intertextual connections and superimpositions begins to come into view:

\textit{Ecce ego mitto vos sicut oves in medio luporum. Estote ergo prudentes sicut serpentes et simplices sicut columbae.}


With the emergence of the dove/serpent and lamb/wolf variants of the original pigeon/vulture and Venus/Mars binaries, we can add to our list, now mediated in a familiar biblical code, yet another pair of tautological reductions of a recurrent and constant message. Matthew is telling his readers, as Jesus was telling his disciples, that the world and humanity are split down the middle, in internecine hostility, by a principle of discord and a force of moral disjunction that was built into the original Creation in the person of the serpent, who, we may now recall, was introduced to the reader of Genesis (III, 1)—Matthew's intertext in the present instance—as cunning and clever, \textit{callidior cunctis animantibus.}\textsuperscript{15} Doves are to serpents, as saints are to sinners, as angels are to devils, as lambs are to wolves. And, of course, the practised reader of La Fontaine can hardly write these words, or even begin to think these thoughts, without embarking on yet another intertextual journey, without effecting yet another re-entry into the binary universe of the \textit{Fables}, ruled by \textit{La Discorde}, where \textit{Les Loups et les brebis} (III, l. 13) and \textit{Le Loup et l'agneau} (I, 10) had earlier and variously rehearsed the ritual encounter between crafty predator and innocent victim—the very same ritual that was to be duly re-enacted in \textit{Les Vautours et les pigeons}.\textsuperscript{16}

The wheel has come full circle and I am back once again at my starting point, where I will indulge in one last observation, which derives and takes its substance, in turn, from La Fontaine's last observation in \textit{Les Vautours et les pigeons}, just prior to his pronouncement of the \textit{moralité}. Here are the words with which his fable proper ends:
La gent maudite aussitôt poursuivit
Tous les pigeons, en fit ample carnage,
En dépeupla les bourgades, les champs.
Peu de prudence eurent les pauvres gens
D'accommoder un peuple si sauvage.

[ll. 36–40]

Here, at the word "prudence," Les Vautours et les pigeons coincides with Matthew X, 16, and relays the proverbial wisdom recorded in Furetière; in so doing, it redeploy the reader's attention back down the intertextual chain to the fable's beginning and its subsequent reverberations. All roads lead to Rome.

As for La Fontaine's moralité itself, it recapitulates in its fashion, but in no uncertain terms, the extensive and expansive intertextual message of the entire fable: division, discord, difference are built into the world order; any attempt, however well intentioned, to correct or alter this dispensation will go down as an assault on the essential, radical alterity of life and the human condition. Why so? Because the innocent are not prudent, because the prudent are not innocent. De deux choses l'une. One is wolf or lamb, vulture or pigeon, Mars or Venus. This, after all, is the real motivation behind the seemingly superficial, frivolous anthropomorphism that informs such routine political and topographical periphrases as "le peuple vautour," "le peuple pigeon," "une autre nation," and "la gent maudite." The weak and the strong, the lovers and the killers of this world, are consigned by nature—c'est la loi de nature—to irrevocable difference, to be lived out extraterritorially in perpetual estrangement and alienation. This is the nature of things. If in the opening to this fable, we were allowed to entertain ever so briefly the intertextual image of Venus and Mars lying together in peaceful, exhausted exhilaration in illustration of the implicit maxim omnia vincit amor, by the time we reach La Fontaine's moralité this message has been turned upside down:

Tenez toujours divisés les méchants:
La sûreté du reste de la terre
Dépend de là. Semez entre eux la guerre,
Ou vous n'aurez avec eux nulle paix.
Ceci soit dit en passant: je me tais.

The fable that lies in between the original evocation of Venus and Mars and this negative and cynical conclusion, the space covered by the story
of columbine altruism and its lethal effects, illustrates, if anything, another unstated maxim which, in parody of the Lucretian hope, might be rewritten thus: *omnia vincunt amorem*.

Northrop Frye, writing in another connection, recalls the following remark by the 16th-century Anabaptist Hans Denck: “Whoever leaves an antithesis without resolving it lacks the ground of truth.” Frye follows this fascinating quotation with this equally fascinating comment: “Brave words, but they are the words of a theologian who must put all things under his feet.” It is not hard to see what position La Fontaine would take on this question. As a *moraliste*, with no melioristic expectation, he has chosen to tread a privileged and perilous piece of ground where the twain never meet, where contradictions elude simplification, where complexity transcends reduction, where unresolved antitheses are multiplied and revisited in infinitely renewable, interchangeable variants. This statement would be true enough as a mere intratextual catalog and description of the *dramatis personae* of the *Fables*, where reed and oak, fox and crow are squared off dialectically against each other, where lamb and wolf, pigeon and vulture are yoked together in exemplary prolegomena to violence.

It has been the purpose of this essay to suggest and, with hope, to demonstrate and persuade how the divisions and tensions that are so obviously present *intratextually* in La Fontaine’s *Fables*, have an *intertextual* dimension as well—a dimension that far outstrips in importance the superficial affiliations between La Fontaine, Aesop, Phaedrus, Abstemius, and the other earlier fabulists. Given the inherent slightness of the fable as a vehicle, its lowly place in the generic hierarchy, and the irresistible tendency to think of it in terms of infantile pedagogy or overt didacticism, we are always in danger of reading La Fontaine down from his proper philosophical and intellectual eminence, when we study him within what seems to be his natural milieu. Or to put it in another way: when we view La Fontaine intratextually, we see with utmost clarity how consistent and coherent his ideas are as we move horizontally across his book from fable to fable, and sample the varied riches of their content. It is, however, an indispensable complement to this approach to La Fontaine *tel qu’en lui-même* to measure the status and impact of his message vertically and intertextually, by tracking it diachronically along a continuum that stretches from remote antiquity to the most impressive modern appropriations of classical culture. It is only along this axis that we can begin
to appreciate the true sophistication and toughness of La Fontaine's world view, as we watch it overlap and localize under a common grid and in a shared network with Empedocles and Lucretius, Horace and Ovid, Jesus and Montaigne—his true predecessors and his most appropriate intellectual and spiritual partners.

Notes

3. At the MLA session in question, Richard Danner drew spontaneous and audible laughter when he quoted these lines from *Le Chat, la belette, et le petit lapin* (VII, 15, 44–45):

   Grippeminaud le bon apôtre
   Jetant des deux côtés la griffe en même temps,
   Mit les plaideurs d’accord en croquant l’un et l’autre.

4. Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, ed. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), II, 589. For the several generalities concerning Lucretius that I will have the occasion to advance here, I rely on Bailey’s notes and commentary.
6. All the standard and current editions (e.g., Régnier, Couton, Collinet) identify the veiled or submerged meaning of these two periphrases; the mannered form of the message, by drawing attention to itself, encourages, even constrains the reader to place a proportionately greater emphasis on the content of each periphrasis once that content has been revealed. For a similar reaction, at the simple level of readerly response and appreciation, compare Chamfort’s comment at the words, “non ceux que le Printemps/Mène à sa cour”: “Tournure, poétique qui a l’avantage de mettre en contraste, dans l’espace de dix vers, les idées charmantes qui réveillent le printemps, les oiseaux de Vénus, etc. . . . et les couleurs opposées dans la description du peuple vautour” (*Éloge de La Fontaine* in his *Oeuvres complètes* [Paris: Chaumerot, 1824], I, 124, my italics).
7. In Marvell’s *The Garden*, the dove, a symbol for the liberated, heaven-bound human soul, is described in terms of the same inherited topos as waving “in its plumes the various [= changing] light” (l. 56).
8. Cf. Chamfort’s comment at line 27, “Au col changeant, au coeur tendre et fidèle”: “Description charmante, qui a aussi l’avantage de contraster avec le ton grave que La Fontaine a pris dans les quinze vers précédants” (ibid., my italics). Here again, Chamfort’s reaction is triggered by a contextual emphasis, actualized
in this instance by the periphrasis, on the antinomial presuppositions of the words “colombe” and “vauteur.”


12. The concrede/discorde binary, that inhabits and informs Les Vautours et les pigeons at the hypogrammatic level, had been fully actualized by two of La Fontaine’s predecessors: Abstemius, no. 96, De accipitribus inter se inimicis quos columbae pacaverant and Haudent, part two, no. 153, Des colombz et des esperviers. In his moral, Haudent uses discorde/concorde as emblematic of the fable’s message:

La fable monstre laisser viure
Les mauvais en noyse & discorde
Car quand entre eulx sont en concorde
Aux bons sont veuz tout mal poursuyure.

La Fontaine in his moral will use guerre/paix to effect the same emphasis.

13. The Dictionnaire de l’Academie Francaise (1694) also lists the colombe as “femelle de pigeon.”

14. This saying was apparently proverbial already in the time of Jesus; see the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Friedrich; trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968), s.v. Dove, VI, 70. These typologies were apparently secure enough for Boccaccio that he felt free to mix and juggle them in ironic, playful combinations. Cf. Decameron, Giornata ottava, novella settima, ed. Enrico Bianchi et al. (Milan: Ricciardi, 1952), I, 575: “quantunque io aquila non sia, te non colomba, ma velenosa serpe conoscendo, come antichissimo nimico, con ogni odio e con tutta la forza di perseguire intendo . . .” I thank Philip Berk for bringing this example to my attention.

15. At Genesis III, 1 the Septuagint gives “phronimotatos”; the Segond translation has “le plus rusé” and the King James “more subtle.”

16. The same verbal/conceptual stereotype is found in Ovid:

Ut fugiunt aquilas, timidissima turba, columbae,
Utque fugit uisos agna nouella lupos,
Sic illae timuere viros sine lege ruentes . . .
As doves, most timorous of birds, flee from the eagles, and the weanling lamb when it spies the wolf, so feared they the men rushing wildly on them (Ars amatoria I, ll. 117-19; J. H. Mozley trans., Loeb)

... sic agna lupum, sic cerva leonem, sic aquilam penna fugiunt trepidante columbae, hostes quaeque suos . . .

So does the lamb flee from the lion; so do doves on fluttering wing flee from the eagle; so every creature flees its foes. (Metamorphoses I, ll. 505-7; F. J. Miller trans., Loeb)