THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF NARRATIVE ELEMENT IN NEOCLASSICAL FABLE

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In grateful memory of my spiritual guide, professor Henryk Zbierski.

1. Introduction

The fable, originating in the classical period, in the European literature of modern times became fully canonized as a genre only in the age of Neoclassicism. Because of their relatively simple structure and moralizing character, fables gained enormous popularity both as a means of education by entertainment, and as convenient disguise for manifestations of political or social convictions, which the fabulists of the Age of Reason frequently conveyed in their texts.

On the one hand, the conventional character of the fables, their simplicity and brevity, imposed formal constraints on the writers. On the other hand, however, the same qualities of the genre precluded any narrative structure other than the manifestation of the relationships between actors in the presented world in terms of basic oppositions, thus making the message of the text easily decipherable for the readers. The idea of the basic oppositions manifesting themselves at the surface level of the text in various ways is the leit-motif of the present paper, in which we will attempt to propose a simple, polar model of a text grammar on the basis of the graceful material of John Gay's little masterpieces.

Before we proceed to the theoretical part of this paper, let us first make some observations concerning the history of the genre in England, and the role John Gay played within that history.

2. Neoclassical fable in England

Strangely enough, the fable, although very popular in the Europe of Neoclassicism, in England did not become a literary form in which many poets would take interest. In fact, John Gay did not have many opportunities to learn the difficult art of writing fables from the English authors, although he may have read Dryden's Fables
Aristote n’admet dans la fable que les animaux; il en exclut les hommes et les plantes. Cette règle est moins de nécessité que de bien séance, puisque ni Ésope, ni Phèdre, ni aucun des fabulistes, ne l’a gardée; tout au contraire de la moralité, dont aucun ne se dispense. Que s’il m’est arrivé de le faire, ce n’a été que dans les endroits où elle n’a pu entrer avec grâce, et où il est aisé au lecteur de la supprimer. On ne considère en France que ce qui plaît; c’est la grande règle, et pour ainsi dire la seule. Je n’ai donc pas cru que ce fût un crime de passer pardessus les anciennes coutumes, lorsque je ne pouvais les mettre en usage sans leur faire tort. Du temps d’Ésope, la fable était contée simplement, la moralité séparée, et toujours ensuite. Phèdre est venu, qui ne s’est pas assujetti à cet ordre: il embellit la narration et transporte quelquefois la moralité de la fin au commencement.

(La Fontaine 1965)

[In the fable Aristotle allows animals only; he excludes people and plants. This principle seems to be dictated to a greater extent by the requirements of the particular character of his fables than by any objective necessity, especially that neither Aesop, nor Phaedrus, nor any of the fabulists to follow would observe it. The case is converse with the moral: all the fabulists include it. Myself, I sometimes disregard the moral, but only in such places where it could not be introduced without turning a graceful harmony of a passage into ruin, or where the reader may easily deduce it on his own. The French respect only what they please; this is the great rule and, one could say, the only one. Therefore, I do not believe that it is a crime to leave an ancient custom aside whenever observing it could prove detrimental to this very custom. During the times of Aesop the fable would be narrated in a simple manner; the moral was separate and always placed at the end of the story. Then came Phaedrus, who would not follow these rules: he embellished the narration and, now and again, he would shift the moral from the end to the beginning of the fable.]

Gay basically leaves the structure of the fable unchanged: like Phaedrus, he places the moral, being at the same time an introduction of the problem he intends to discuss, at the beginning. Then he inserts his commentary, being the introduction to the problem, or, in other words, a subject matter presentation. Later comes fable proper: the narrative illustration of the issue, and finally comes the point, which either is a part of the fable proper, or is included in the author’s commentary.

1 Margaret Drabble (1985: 335) mentions that "...La Fontaine, the greatest of modern fable writers, was imitated by Gay."

2 Aesop’s Fables were translated into Polish by Biernat z Lublina in the beginning of the 16th century. From that moment, the fable became one of the most popular satirical and educational genres in Poland. Most of the Polish poets of Renaissance, Baroque and particularly of Neoclassicism wrote fables.

3 Cf. section 3 of the present paper.
at the end of the whole text. Each of the fables includes a title, an obligatory element, which in fact is the title of the fable proper.

Let us then concentrate on the major constituents of the fable.

3. Elements of the fable

3.1. Moral

Moral is an indispensable element of Gay's fables. Whenever it is present as a separate part of the text, it always comes in the form of a promythion. In the fables in which the moral is not an independent element it is included within the fable proper. In the majority of cases John Gay makes use of a promythion to present the more complex ethical issues. The moral is a preceptual voice, a statement of evaluative power and of mentalion function. It is usually expressed on the form of a proverb or as a direct advice to be followed. Particularly in the second volume of the Fables the promythion coalesces with the author's commentary, thus becoming the manifestation of Gay's views. Since morals are characteristic for their brevity (which is an important factor facilitating their perception), it is possible to quote some of them as examples:6

(a) Who friendship with a knave hath made,
   Is judg'd a partner in the trade ...
   (Fable XXIII, Vol. I)

(b) Lest men suspect your tale untrue
   Keep probability in view.
   (Fable XVIII, Vol. I)

(c) I grant corruption sways mankind;
   That int'rest, too, perverts the mind;
   That bribes have blinded common sense,
   Foil'd reason, truth and eloquence;
   I grant you, too, our present crimes
   Can equal those of former times.
   (Fable IX, Vol. II)

3.2. Commentary

The author's commentary is the voice of his personal experience and the manifestation of his views. The majority of Gay's fables include the commentary. Nevertheless, in a number of them, especially in the fables in which the moral issue at hand is clearly understandable, the moral alone functions as a commentary.7 The commentaries are often illustrated with examples or proverbs, and their style always meets the requirements of decorum and poetic diction. In this element of a fable, Gay often juggles with sophisticated metaphors, creates parabolic sen-
tences and draws surprising parallels. Frequently, he utilizes these tropes in order to obtain the effect of brevity, which does not contradict his being convincing. In the second volume of the Fables, the commentaries often turn into political and sociological treatises (often moralizing in character); the side effect of such prolonging of the commentaries is that the fables lose their compactness, and their reception is more difficult. The moment the reader reaches the fable proper is significantly deferred, which results in the decrease of his/her attention.8 In some of the fables there occurs an important element such as a dedication, like the one that Gay included in the introductory fable of the first volume of his Fables:

(d) Accept, young Prince the moral lay,
   and in these tales mankind survey;
   with early virtues plant your breast,
   the specious art of vice detect.

Usually, the presence of a dedication influences the shape of the author's commentary: it assumes the form of a mentalion speech given to the addressee of the fable. In this type of commentary, Gay always uses the form of the second person (either singular or plural).

3.3. Fable proper

The fable proper is the central part of the fable's structure. It is a short narrative with a vivid plot and, out of necessity, limited imagery. The plot mentioned always contains a conflict of characters or ideas. Therefore the fable proper serves as an illustration of the problem the whole fable discusses. Hence it is also the most suggestive part of the fable, and for that reason the message conveyed by it can immediately be understood. La Fontaine says:

Dites à un enfant que Crassus, allant contre les Parthes, s'engagea dans leur pays sans considérer comment il en sortirait; que cela le fit périr, lui et son armée, quelque effort qu'il fît pour se retirer.

Dites au même enfant que le renard et le bouc descendirent au fond d'un puits pour y éteindre leur soif; que le renard en sortit s'étant servi des épaules et des cornes de son camarade comme d'une échelle; au contraire, le bouc y demeura pour n'avoir pas eu tant de prévoyance; et par conséquent il faut considérer en toute chose la fin. Je demande lequel de ces deux exemples fera le plus d'impression sur cet enfant. Ne s'arrêtera-t-il pas au dernier, comme plus conforme et moins disproportionné que l'autre à la petitesse de son esprit?

(La Fontaine 1965)

[Tell a child that Crassus, while marching against the Parthians, ventured deep in their country without considering ways of re-

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6 All quotes from John Gay's Fables come from Gay (1808).
7 Cf. Fable L in the mentioned edition.
8 Cf. Fable VI.
facilitates our task. It is easily observable that this type of the fable presents certain ideas by means of contrasting opposite, polar concepts. If we assume that the opposites are burdened with certain roles, the number of the roles in question is automatically limited to two.

Let us assume the following terms to mark each of the deep level roles in our model:

a) positive actant (positive concepts, such as good(-ness), wisdom)
b) negative actant (negative concepts, such as evil, stupidity)

Hence, on the surface level we will distinguish the positive actor and the negative actor. To make the generalization significant, the collective actor will be treated here as the representation of a single actant at the deep level.

The analysis of John Gay, I. Krasicki, S. Trembecki, and Jean La Fontaine suggests a conclusion that there is only one distinctive structure determining the relations between the actants in the deep structure of the plot of the fable proper. To mark this structure, let us assume a working term of a clash. By clash we will henceforth understand a contrast in which the negative actant is opposed to the positive actant. The clashed ideas do not necessarily have to overlap with those presented in the moral; they can as well serve as a tool, thanks to which a surface representation leading to the moral can be generated.

On the surface level, the clash may be realized in four ways:

a) Positive Actor: Negative Actor opposition (+-)
b) Implied Positive Actor: Negative Actor opposition (+-)
c) Neutral Actor: Positive Actor opposition (0+/-)
d) Negative Actor: Negative Actor opposition (-+/-)

Let me illustrate the instances with examples. Situation (a) occurs in fables in which both positive and negative characters are present in the text of their respective fables preceding proper. The second instance is more complex, because it occurs in fables in which the positive actor does not exist overtly in the text, but is implied by the elements preceding or following the fable proper. The implied positive actor is usually an idea (or a set of ideas) opposite to the concept represented by the negative actor (the non-existence of the positive counterpart of the negative actor can be regarded as a minus-device). The contrast in this case is established between the negative and positive actants, according to the model.

The next instance refers to the fables in which the actors presented do not stand at opposite poles. Consequently, in such cases the clash does not produce very dramatic results at the surface level, since the message is conveyed by means of an arbitrary statement of one actor only, whereas the function of the other one(s) is to elicit this statement.

The last example refers only to the more complex fables, which employ more then one illustrative opposition. Such oppositions are then contrasted with any of the remaining clash realizations, i.e. (a), (b) or (c). There usually occurs some element common to the contrasted clash realizations; this element constitutes the point of reference of the mentioned contrast.

9 Translation mine (P.J.)
11 Cf. also: Grzegorczyk 1989.
Here we face a contrast between an implied positive actor and a negative actor. The clash results from the opposition of stupidity and non-criticism against wisdom and critical thinking. The latter elements are not present in the text of the fable proper, but are implied by the use of such negative concepts as “malice”, “envy”, “mischief”, etc., and obviously, by the epimythion following. It is worth noting that the maverick strategy employed by the author makes the message very clear and reinforces it by inducing readers’ surprise and the feeling of embarrassment they experience at the straightforward comparison of people and monkeys.

monkeys : implied positive actor

- : +

5. 4. Fable XVII. The Shepherd’s Dog and the Wolf

In this fable the Wolf, usually associated with evil, is presented as a positive character, since he is “fierce and bold “with hunger, and thus justified in his actions. The Dog, from the human perspective serving “the right cause, is shown in a neutral light. The latter’s task is to elicit the Wolf’s monologue, which at the same time serves as the moral of the fable. Thus at the deep level we are dealing with the clash of “necessity of survival (Wolf) and the “lack of understanding of others necessity of survival (Dog). The moral, however, refers to the concepts of the necessary vs. intended evil, and openness vs. pretending. It is not based on the deep structure of the fable proper, but rather on the deep level of the Wolf’s monologue (being another text within the text under discussion). The schematic illustration of this type of contract would be the following:

Dog : Wolf

0 : +

5. 5. Fable XVIII. The Painter Who Pleased Nobody and Everybody

The very title of this fable contains a contradiction: pleasing nobody and everybody at the same time seems to be an impossibility. In fact, the Painter first “pleases nobody”, and only later he finds a way to please everyone. This fable is a very specific one, since its deep structure consists of two sub-levels:

clash: TRUTH: LIE

clash: HONESTY : HYPOCRISY
clash: DISHONESTY : HYPOCRISY

Painter: customers

Painter: customers
As it is marked on the diagram, the fable proper falls into two parts. The first one is the story of the Painter, who, painting his pictures with perfect fidelity never pleased his customers, and, as a consequence, lost them. In the second part, the Painter decides to render on canvas unfaithful images of his customers and improve them greatly, thus to please their vanity. As a result, the two sub-levels of the deep structure consist of two different types of contracts:

\[
\text{Painter} : \text{customers} \quad \text{and} \quad \text{Painter} : \text{customers}
\]

\[
+ : - \quad - : +
\]

The above types of contrast result respectively from positive actor: negative opposition, and negative actor: negative actor opposition. We can also observe an element being a common point of reference in both constituent stories of the fable proper, namely the customers, denoting hypocrisy in both cases. If we neglect the point of reference, we deal with a schematic "proto-opposition, i.e., Truth: Lie (+/-), which is represented on the surface level by the Painter in the first, idealistic period, and the Painter, who has changed his idealistic views. To summarize this fable, let me present the schematic picture of the deep level contrast:

\[
\text{Painter} : \text{Painter}
\]

\[
+ : -
\]

5. 6. Fable XXIII. The Old Woman and Her Cats

The deep structure of this fable, unlike in the case of the previous one, is quite schematic; i.e., here we have a positive vs. negative (+/-) opposition on the surface, and a clash between Bad Name and Good Name at the deep level. The Old Woman is the negative actor, whereas Cats play the opposite role of a collective positive actor. The bad fame of the Old Woman is unjustly transferred upon the innocent animals, who suffer consequences of this fact.

The schematic diagram is the following:

\[
\text{The Old Woman} : \text{The Cats}
\]

\[
- : +
\]

5. 7. Fable XL. The Two Monkeys

Again, the reader deals with Gay's maverick presentation of the world: the fabulist confronts monkeys and people, but in this case monkeys, however traditionally associated with stupidity, turn out to be wiser than people, because they do not try to imitate human customs. The deep level clash consists then in the juxtaposition of the concept of naturalness and the concept of unnaturalness. On the surface level we are presented a negative: positive opposition of people and monkeys, appearing as negative and positive actors (respectively).

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Monkeys} \\
+ \\
\end{array} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{People} \\
+ \\
\end{array}
\]

The effect of the fable is reinforced by the inversion of the roles (monkeys as spectators, people as performers in the show) and by direct comparison of men to apes ("Great Apes of reason"), which immediately reminds the reader that a common term for the 18th century was the Age of Reason. The comical value of The Two Monkeys, even if the very idea is funny, is still increased by the conclusion the monkeys draw from the performance:

(c) ...When they strain beyond their guide,
    I laugh to scorn the mimic pride.
    For how fantastic is the sight,
    To meet men always bolt upright,
    Because we sometimes walk on two! -
    I hate the imitating crew.

5. 8. Fable L. The Hare and Many Friends

Fable L, the last fable of the first volume, is an illustration of the proverb: "A friend in need is a friend indeed. The surface structure of this fable is based on the positive: negative opposition of the Hare (the positive actor) and other animals (collective negative actor). Its deep structure consists in the clash of the concepts of true and untrue friendship, which makes the diagram quite schematic:

\[
\text{Hare} : \text{Animals}
\]

\[
+ : -
\]

It is worth noting that this fable includes the author's self-reference in the first two lines of the fable proper, which Gay could have inserted there in order to reinforce the message of the fable with the voice of his personal experience of a situation similar to that of the Hare.

5. 9. Fable VI. The Squire and His Cur

This is another fable belonging to the series characteristic for a certain complexity of the fable proper. It is important to add that The Squire and His Cur comes from the second volume of Gay's Fables, and as it has already been mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, the structure of the fables belonging to that volume is somewhat different than in the case of those in the previous one.

Again, as in the case of The Painter Who Pleased Nobody and Everybody, the
fable falls into two parts, this time constituting two different fables proper, both of which illustrate the same moral. Therefore, again, we have to do with a multi-level underlying structure:

```
    honesty : dishonesty
     /       \\       \\/
honesty : honesty dishonesty : honesty honesty dishonesty honesty : honesty

ruler peasant courtiers ruler squire cur squire neighbor
```

If we excluded from our consideration the points of reference, i.e., the Ruler from the first branch of the diagram and the Squire from the other, we would be left with with the original deep level opposition of the "proto-clash between honesty and dishonesty, realized at the surface level as the juxtaposition of the peasant and the courtiers on one hand, and the cur vs. the neighbor on the other. The schematic diagram is then as follows:

```
Peasant : Courtiers          Cur : Neighbor
          + : -                  - : +
```

5. 10. Fable IX. The Jackal, Leopard and Other Beasts

The structural analysis of this fable does not differ much from the one of The Painter Who Pleased Nobody and Everybody. Also, in this case, the story falls into two parts. Unlike in the case of The Squire and His Cur, the parts do not constitute separate fables proper, and therefore the diagram will be much simpler:

```
    honesty : corruption
     /       \\       \\/
corruption : corruption corruption : honesty

jackal hog hog leopard
wolf fox fox
monkey
```

Again, if we neglect the point of reference, we face the original honesty: Corruption clash, represented on the surface by the positive: negative juxtaposition of Leopard and Jackal.

The schematic diagram will be the following:

```
Leopard : Jackal
+ : -
```

6. Closing remarks

The present paper does not presume to be either exhaustive or novel. It attempts, however, to transform vague intuitions concerning the deep structure of the neo-classical fable into an intersubjectively verifiable model. The most important methodological assumption of the model is its polarity, or in other words, the presupposition that the mechanism of every deep level contrast in narrative literature is that of two basic oppositions or their combinations.

Before I finish this paper, I would like to add a handful of personal remarks on John Gay's Fables. Well written and witty, the Fables shine with decurum and poetic diction, at the same time being vivid and straightforward. In spite of the fact that they were created more than two centuries ago, the Fables have lost neither their importance nor their validity. Although in animal disguise, the world of humans presented by Gay is equally ridiculous as ours. The evil, revealed in the fables, is our share as well as it was for John Gay's contemporaries. The moral issues raised in the little masterpieces are timeless, and evoke serious reflection on human nature, and on our own.

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