

## Beginning Again: On Aristotle's Use of a Fable in the *Meteorologica*

Doron Narkiss

Foremost of false philosophies,  
The sea harangues the daft,  
The possessed logicians of romance.

— Laura Riding

Book Two, Chapter Three of Aristotle's *Meteorologica* opens as follows:

The sea's saltiness is our next subject. This we must discuss, and also the question whether the sea remains the same all the time, or whether there was a time when it did not exist, or will be a time when it will cease to exist and disappear as some people think.

It is, then, generally agreed that the sea had a beginning if the universe as a whole had, for the two are supposed to have come into being at the same time. So, clearly, if the universe is eternal we must suppose that the sea is too. The belief held by Democritus that the sea is decreasing and that it will in the end disappear is like something out of Aesop's fables [*mythos*]. For Aesop has a fable about Charybdis in which he says that she took one gulp of the sea and brought the mountains into view, and a second one and the islands appeared, and that her last one will dry the sea up altogether. A fable like this was a suitable retort for Aesop to make when the ferryman annoyed him, but is hardly suitable for those who are seeking the truth [*aletheia*].<sup>1</sup> (*Met.* II.iii.356b)

I want to focus on Aristotle's apparently casual use of "Aesop" here — Aesop as a representative of a certain way of knowing, and of the knowledge thus implied. I shall argue that what is apparently marginal in Aristotle's text, a refer-

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<sup>1</sup> See B.E. Perry, "Introduction", *Babrius and Phaedrus*, 1965, xiii nn. 1-8, for this and other examples of the use of fables in the early period of Greek literature. B.E. Perry, *Aesopica*, 1952, 324 n. 8 gives a slightly different version of this fable from the so-called Augustan recension. I am grateful to Dr. Amiel Wardi of the Hebrew University for his assistance in identifying and translating the Greek texts.

ence to another text, a fable, can be read as central not only to Aristotle, but to the concept of "reference" itself.

According to Aristotle — and everything here is "according to" Aristotle — Aesop invents or remembers the fable as part of a dispute with a ferryman, and this "low" or commonplace source is part of the fable's context for Aristotle, part of what allows him to dismiss its truth value. Regardless of Aristotle's guidance, however, we note that Aesop's fable is about origins and ends: of the creation and possible end of the sea, and of the land, as well as, trivially perhaps, of the end of the ferryman's source of income. This quasi-mythical tale is commonly classified as an aetiological fable, which is an attempt to explain a present state of affairs. Aristotle's purpose is to combat this aetiology, but his rhetorical use of Aesop's *mythos*, while seeming to support his cause, also works against it. He seems to present the fable, identified with Aesop, as venerated yet outmoded authoritative knowledge, but he then adds the curious coda which situates Aesop in respect to his disputant, and distinguishes between that situating and Aristotle's perception of his own situation.

There are a number of analogies between Aristotle and Aesop as interlocutors in Aristotle's text, and between Aristotle's *truth* and Aesop's *fable*. In terms of content, there is the obvious connection to the origins of the universe. But while Aesop and the ferryman, in "private" interaction, are content with the fable, for the truth-seeking "public" it is hardly sufficient. Aristotle's rules are those of logic — the universe and the sea came into existence at the same time, and if one is eternal, so is the other. Aesop's fable, implicitly, is *ad hominem*, and were he faced with a different audience, he may have chosen another *mythos*. Aristotle needs Aesop's enunciation not only to draw out the difference between what is private and ephemeral and what is public and eternal, but also — and here Democritus joins Aesop — as an example of an anterior truth. The use of Democritus and Aesop presents them not in a private function but as paradigmatic exemplars of a past public system of beliefs. In other words, what is presented as private, and therefore dismissible, in Aesop's case, is also used as a representative position which it is Aristotle's purpose to correct. Moreover, what seems to be a past aberration is, by being brought at this initial point into Aristotle's discussion, a present misconception that must be corrected. Public and private, past and present, truth and legend all exist as uncontrolled meanings generated by Aristotle's incorporation of other texts into his own.

Aristotle's authoritative dismissal of the text he quotes raises questions about his relation with the audience he envisions. For Aristotle talks about an audience, "those who are seeking the truth", and opposes it to the simple ferryman. Seekers of "the truth" is a general enough rhetorical term to include, and congratulate, anyone who is lucky enough to be reading Aristotle; it always refers to the reader's own self. The ferryman, however, is not one of us, nor would we choose to be in his position.

How does Aristotle create this effect? Even as he requires the example opposite to truth provided here by Aesop's fable, so he needs the opposite of a truth-seeking audience, a role filled by the ferryman. The ferryman as audience is no longer (both in time and in sensibility) a potential "reader" of Aristotle. He is dismissed by Aristotle's contempt for him and for Aesop, as he has been silenced

by Aesop's contempt, and the two contempts — Aristotle's and Aesop's — are of course connected. The implication that the ferryman "lost" the argument with Aesop, "dried up", is deduced from his total silence, and from his absence except in title from the story. The ferryman is present only to the extent that he is dismissed by Aristotle as an object not worthy of his discourse. This dismissal has the paradoxical effect of implying that he was a potential addressee of Aristotle, and that Aristotle needs Aesop's silencing of the ferryman, compounded by Aristotle's scorn of Aesop, in order to provide a silence, a rhetorical space, in which Aristotle himself may speak. It is only in this combination of others' words and silences that Aristotle can begin; and his beginning distinguishes between fables (others' words) and truth (his own words). Aristotle wants his words to replace those of Democritus and Aesop, to become or to reveal the truth. This he cannot do except by citing their words, and by rendering them worthless. Aristotle supports Aesop's dismissal of the ferryman, but he wants to dismiss, that is to silence, Aesop as well.

Aristotle's choice of citation is significant. Aesop's fable warns of ending through a reference to originating. But Aristotle contradicts both senses of Aesop's fable, and moreover deflects the fable's previous usage (by Aesop) — to dismiss or intimidate the ferryman — both from its perceived function as a persuasive, *ad hominem*, rhetorical device, and from its allegorical figurativeness — by literalizing it, treating it as a statement of fact or belief. But this contradicts Aristotle's own rhetorical method. In the *Rhetoric* (II.20.5), fable is presented simply as a persuasive device, whereas here Aristotle uses it not to exemplify a general truth, but to exemplify the problematic nature of fictional narrative when it uses assumptions about truth in order to persuade. Aristotle's use of fable, as opposed to his own definition of it, is a meta-fabular critique of fable; and it implies that fable is not "simply" a rhetorical device, or, rather, that its rhetorical definition does not control its actual, contextualized use. Aristotle's would-be control over Aesop's fable seems to lie in its remaking of the context within which it is quoted. But this context itself must be examined. Aristotle's specific context for the fable as *ur-untruth*, much as it tries to make us forget its "original" citation by Aesop and Aristotle's own view of the rhetorical function of fable, this very context, supposedly neutral, inevitably undergoes certain equivocating changes with the introduction of the fable.

Functionally and structurally this is the beginning of Aristotle's narrative of beginning. It is the moment that introduces Aristotle's discourse "about" the sea, the moment that will then privilege that discourse over that of the cited, but untruthful, Aesopic discourse. It is also the beginning of history, for it refers to ultimate origins. Incorporated into this context, Aesop's fable is also, perhaps predominantly, a figure for Aristotle's discourse. Aristotle claims to provide the truth (*aletheia*), an undoing of forgetting (*lethe*) and an uncovering. The trope for forgetfulness, for covering up, for untruth, is Aesop's fable. Yet in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle includes fable among other types of truthful exemplification (*parabole*) such as the historical *chrie*; and Theon's late and enduring definition of fable based on Aristotle calls it "a fictitious story [*logos*] picturing a truth".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Theon, *Progymnasmata*, ch. 3, quoted in Perry 1965 (n. 1), xix-xx.

Therefore not only is Aristotle's actual use of a fable at variance with his stated rhetorical definition of how fable is used, it undercuts its exemplary truth value as well. Aesop's fable participates in two discursive systems designated by Aristotle as a scientific system and a rhetorical one, systems which are here contradictory, and are so to a great extent because of Aristotle's attempts to systematize both aetiology ("*meteorologica*") and troping ("rhetoric"). As aetiology the fable is the figure of untruth, but as a rhetorical device it signifies and participates in the uncovering or revelation of truth. Here Aristotle would have us disregard part of the fable's signification and would have us concentrate on its factual or referential aspect, in order to supplant its truth with another, more scientific one; yet it is precisely by calling attention to the fable's absurd, fictitious, *ad hominem* status that he dismisses it both as trope and as truth.

What recommends Aristotle's theory as truth is only the discursive situation in which Aristotle himself can create a hierarchy of discourse and locate himself in a position of authority, dismissing and silencing other interlocutors. However Aesop and his fable elude Aristotle's control by the fable's retaining its topological status and by becoming as much a trope for this hierarchy of discourse as for untruth: like Aristotle, who wants to dismiss and silence Aesop, Aesop renders the ferryman marginal and speechless. Because Aristotle duplicates Aesop's example in the discursive situation, he could be said to be predicted by it, and Aristotle's text is forced to support and even exemplify Aesop's point in the fable.

Now let us consider how Aesop's discursive situation is presented. His text, though of paramount importance to Aristotle, because it represents something Aristotle means to rebut, is seen as fortuitous: "Aesop's fables" lose their paradigmatic rhetorical function of truthful exemplification, and become one more in a list of examples of the wrong kind of (scientific) thinking, which Democritus also expressed. Aristotle wants to undo a previous, and to him insufficient, standard of "truth", yet in order to do so he must exemplify it. He must therefore make public the very opinions he wishes to oppose. This is part of Aristotle's inherently ambiguous authoritative position. Yet even in this Aristotle is not an originator. The representation of Aesop's relation to the ferryman repeats Aristotle's and Aesop's relations. In both cases the speaker claims the authority of superior knowledge over an implied or explicit addressee. In this sense Aesop's fable in Aristotle's text is a part which contains and reflects the whole which contains it. Aristotle's dismissal of Aesop is a rhetorical expression of his text's vacillation between these conflicting authorities, over which text contains the other, which authority precedes, or supersedes, the other. This "metonymic" conflict is also expressed metaphorically in the conflicting views of the future of the sea. Aristotle insists that the sea is eternal, and would replace Aesop's "belief" with his "truth" forever, thus providing the rhetorical link between language and the reality it purports to explain — a point to which we shall return again and again. Aesop's fable is also its own figure: the state of tension and anxiety it sets up with and within Aristotle's discourse is a reflection — a replication — of the situation which it contains within itself. Just as Aristotle appropriates Aesop's fable in order to deny it, Aesop in the fable appropriates a myth, and uses its literal non-occurrence, its non-truth, as a way of achieving his own, let us as-

sume tendentious, ends; for the fable is, among other things, a threat to the ferryman. At the core of the story is the story of the core: the exposure of the land when the sea recedes, when Charybdis will make that last ingestive move and empty, that is end, the sea, and with it the ferryman's livelihood. Both Aesop's and Aristotle's discourses are based on the one indisputable fact, that neither sea nor universe have yet ended. Because there is no other observable natural truth, both explanations can enjoy the benefit of the doubt. They are based, that is, on the deferral of ending and of closure. The relation of citation between Aristotle's text and Aesop's fable foregrounds a similarity between natural events and textual ones. Whether one believes that texts are inexhaustible or not, neither option can be dismissed or proved, and so in the meantime Aesop quotes myth and Aristotle quotes Aesop. Universe and discourse are figuratively interchangeable; and multiplying discourse is therefore a necessary and endless task, for if discourse fails it may be true that the universe, with which it has been identified, might fail too. In this too, then, Aristotle and Aristotelian Aesop share a common method. Both take from what they perceive as a storehouse of discourse which includes, interchangeably, myth, rhetoric, and science; and they both blur the distinctions among them. There is one difference: Aristotle wants to eliminate Aesop's views, to eradicate and end them, though all he succeeds in doing is perpetuate them. Aesop, despite the scientific view that Aristotle attributes to him, remains the protean adversary precisely because he makes no distinction between discourses and easily uses a myth to intimidate an annoying ferryman.

Aristotle's rhetorical procedure, then, is influenced by the material he quotes, and this procedure retards the attainment of his aims by contradicting or questioning the truth of what he claims. In the passage Aesop is made to represent the view that the universe is diminishing and dwindling, that it is temporary, uncertain and finite; this forms a connection to and underlies the conception of fabular language. The discourse associated with Aesop's name must therefore be urgent and affective, must persuade and lead to action and change in the physical world. While Aristotle is in opposition to this particular fable's content, his rhetoric does not deny, and even implicitly supports, the same conception of persuasive language, both by his incorporation of a fable and by argument with its content as a verbal form which may be interpreted as providing truth. The relegation of fable material to the credulous and simple-minded is a rhetorical method which, no less than the fable, aims to persuade and move the audience. Despite their fundamental differences in opinion, Aesop depends on the threat — not the reality — of the story he tells, and Aristotle, following the same rhetorical method as Aesop, needs to interpret the story away from that uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida's words on the dangers of writing as implied by Plato are appropriate here: "Memory and truth cannot be separated. The movement of *aletheia* is a deployment of *mneme* through and through.... The powers of *lethe* simultaneously increase the domains of death, of nontruth, of nonknowledge" (J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson, 1981, 105). For Aristotle, much as he might want to distance himself from these sentiments, writing exhibits precisely these dangers. Aristotle seeks the truth in the *logos*, and quotes Aesop. Yet in the same rhetorical gesture he would deny the validity of Aesop's fable as

Power relations between the fable and its context and between the fable and its interpretation, and power relations within the fable itself, are thus both thematically and metapoetically constituted in the text. Power relations are implicated in the author's control over his material, in the use of citation and interpretation, and in persuasive, rhetorical control over his readers. The politics of power-positions on different levels assumes and creates a hierarchy. Aristotle as producer of the text tries to place his rhetorical, discursive presence in the supreme authoritative position, and he uses Aesop and the ferryman to bolster the conception of hierarchy, with the reader as the truth-seeking neophyte, and his own ultimate authority as provider of truth. This hierarchy may be read sequentially in the following schematic form: Aristotle — [Aesop — ferryman] — addressee; the square brackets are meant to express a certain equivalence in the relations between Aristotle and his addressees and between Aesop and the ferryman; that in the hierarchy the Aesop-ferryman relationship is a necessary "station" for Aristotle; that Aristotle, Aesop and the ferryman are prior to and more powerful than Aristotle's addressee. In order to communicate with his addressees Aristotle has to go "through" the Aesopic relationship, and as we have seen it is this necessity that lends Aesop what authority he has, and concomitantly undermines Aristotle's authority. Aristotle needs the addressee in much the same way as he requires Aesop, to be present but silenced in the face of the truth. For the addressee this is not necessarily a passive position to be in, though Aristotle's text may posit it as such: the communicative situation demonstrates response to the positions and postulates of others, and thus implies a response by the readers to Aristotle's words and to their logic, and this response may not be the response of acquiescence that Aristotle demands. Moreover, Aristotle's assumption that a readership does exist, that the communicative chain does end in truth-seeking addressees, in effect calls them into being, and imaginatively at least makes them initiate the communicative chain, thus further complicating the sources of Aristotle's authority.

Viewed in this way, Aesop's fable, like Aristotle's opening lines, is "about" power, authority, and hierarchy, and the use of fable here demonstrates how power is achieved, both by the use of the fable, and by the elements foregrounded in the fable. Aristotle's attempt to counter Aesop seems to exclude all possibility of other voices. But despite Aristotle's reluctance to engage dialogically, his incorporation of an "other" — a voice, a fable, a belief — and his choice of fable (this particular fable as well as the rhetorical device), which he uses as an example of wrongness, creates a dialogic upheaval that he cannot control and that challenges his authority. The "fable about Charybdis" itself is structured in a mode of reciprocity, both that of Charybdis with the sea, and of Aesop with the ferryman. This reciprocity characterizes the relations between Aristotle's subject ("The sea's saltiness") and his use of Aesop. But because this reciprocity seems to reside only in the fable, and exists in Aristotle's text

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*aletheia*, and thus implies that rewriting and memory (including his own) are "lethal". Aristotle displays a logocentric desire to dominate Aesop's text, to privilege (his own) presence. That this is done in the name of an indistinct and unverifiable origin is part of this logocentric project.



only as a result of the inclusion of a fable, its admission into the text, we may not want to accept this structuring as substantive. We may therefore want to privilege the first, monological view, but because this is undermined it cannot be accepted as final either. The instability of interpretation which is implied is mirrored in this opening text as the see-sawing of authority between Aristotle and Aesop. The instability inherent to citation in general is compounded by the conflicting authoritative claims between the figure of Aesop in the fable and of Aristotle in this section of the *Meteorologica*.

Significantly the notion of a temporal process is not only a scientific problem. Evidently the power relations discussed above exist both in time and as a function of time: Aesop precedes Aristotle and therefore is in some way the source of his truth and his authority; yet Aristotle supplants his authority in the name of a more modern, up-to-date truth. This is duplicated in the linear process of writing and reading and is exemplified by Aesop's text preceding Aristotle's yet being embedded in it, the reciprocal rivalry of priority embodying a duality which is part of the struggle over the power to provide truth. The fable itself is about time in the sense that not only the universe, but also the discursive universe, exists temporally, and will end. Aristotle's divergence from this lies in his different understanding of the concept of time. For Aesop, temporal relations are an imminent future suspended in an understanding of the past and the present, and this conception of time is vital to the success of the fable. In Aristotle's narrative what is, will be; the future is the present; he removes the threat of change and of ending. Yet this is obviously questioned by his relation to Aesop's authority, and by the sequential nature of all writing, his own included. Moreover, because the figure of fable is sequential, and requires change and climax, the incorporation of a fable with its temporal implications undermines Aristotle's promise of world without end. Aristotle wishes to supplant both prior knowledge and prior rhetorical means of providing knowledge; but his unavoidable reliance on this rhetoric weakens his claim that he can provide absolute truth.

The assertion of a beginning with no end is thus a figure for the desire for power, paradoxically evinced in Aristotle's use of Aesop's text on ending to begin his own. This is, in other words, a clash over the right to interpret as much as it is over the interpretation itself. Aristotle in effect betrays his anxiety over his belatedness.<sup>4</sup> It is this anxiety that leads Aristotle to deny both temporality and his own belatedness. Thus as author he may roam history freely, culling whatever authorities he chooses to support him; however, he chooses to incorporate those he would disown. The repetition of beginnings and of accounts of beginning in Aristotle's text allows him to claim the authority of superior knowledge. This is a further sign of his anxiety, of his determination to dominate these disruptive, powerful predecessors. Aristotle opposes Democritus and Aesop with

<sup>4</sup> See H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 1973. One could argue, following Said (E.W. Said, *Beginnings: Intentions and Method*, 1975, Preface; ch.3), that Aristotle is compelled by his own historical understanding of his position of authority to stress the repetition of beginning because he produces difference, because he combines "the already-familiar" with the "novelty of human work in language".

an a-chronological view, supposedly more empirical and coherent, that the universe is eternal, that time will never end, that change is continuous, whereas it is the mythic view implied by Aesop, contrary to an assumption of circularity and continuity often identified with myth, that is the more chrono-logically coherent, that once the notion of time and sequentiality is introduced, and separated from eternity (i.e. the pre-Charybdis period), time must have a stop.

The "chrono-logical" relations between Aristotle's discourse and Aesop's are connected to the concept of anteriority which Paul de Man uses to define allegory. De Man's view of the temporal relations in allegory also defines the relation between Aesop's fable and Aristotle's use of it. Paul de Man claims that the

relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition...* of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority.<sup>5</sup>

This refers first to allegorical texts like Aesop's fable, but Aristotle's text may also be seen as allegorical in relation to Aesop's, even though Aristotle denies this; and as de Man defines allegory this is the relation between any text and what it cites, and therefore a constitutive quality of all language. Here Aesop's fable, therefore, and Aristotle's own awareness of the rhetorical function of fable, may be seen as paradigmatic tropes of allegory, as allegory is of language in general.

Of the two ways of accounting for phenomena, Aesop's is inferior, says Aristotle, for it relies on origin. Aristotle wishes to rely on nothing but himself by denying previous authority, but cannot begin without invoking the story of an anterior origin. This is necessary in order to discredit the knowledge that Aesop represents, which will in turn confer on Aristotle the power to supplant and discredit the text with which he originated. Aristotle would replace Aesop's notion of origin with his own, and himself as source of truth instead of Aesop. Thus Aristotle must either accept the concept of anteriority and his own belatedness; or, what is no less self-defeating, must undermine the basis for anteriority and thus lose the position of originator he so covets.

Moreover, since Aristotle's text explicitly includes an addressee — one who seeks the truth — and since he exhorts this addressee explicitly to choose Aristotle's knowledge over Aesop's, Aristotle must choose one of these options. The knowledge, whose authority derives from Aristotle's rejection of an earlier view, which is a temporal relation, is translated into a value-determined, hierarchized power relation, by which Aristotle claims to reverse or negate the temporal relation and substitute himself in the position of precedence.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> P. de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality", *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. C.S. Singleton, 1969, 190.

<sup>6</sup> It is the repetition in Aristotle's text, of beginnings and of accounts of the beginning, that both allows Aristotle to claim the authority of superior knowledge and undermines his authority.



Aesop's fable does the work of culture. It attempts to explain aetiologically vast areas of experience — nature, the sea, the earth — by reducing them to human compass, by reference to the first culturally constituted object, the body (gulping, swallowing). The body is the measure of the world. The world comes into being, functions, and will end as a body. The human body in this sense is not only the measure by which human beings understand the world, it stands for the relation between the human and that part of the world which is not human. It is the model by which the world is explained, which represents otherness to the human.

Yet far from being invested in this relation, Aesop's rhetorical stance is a response to action in the world. He works through language and symbolization to bring about a desired conclusion, which is temporal, and, since it is not contingent on truth value, has no necessary claim to "reality". The intention of acting in the world, despite the world's unexplained workings, determines his use of language. Aristotle, however, is belated, and must take account of previous texts. His supposed detour through textuality becomes a dwelling there. His use of Aesop is part of his existence in language. Aesop's fable exists here only as Aristotle reports it, but once reported it has the same explanatory value as the sea itself, and its status as text, despite Aristotle's attempt to discredit it as truth, is equivalent to Aristotle's own. The term "fable" thus not only refers to the story used (previously) by Aesop, it retains its fabular power when it is quoted, and potentially takes over the context in which it is quoted by making that context into allegory.

Aesop tells of Charybdis, and of the possible end, as a reply to the ferryman who annoyed him. His fable uses language to explain the universe in terms of the body, and its application to the ferryman is immediate, even though Aristotle significantly elides the application, as he elides the cause which led Aesop to tell his fable. Indeed, his overturning of Aesop's "truth" depends on the elision of the original context, of Aesop's intention in telling the fable. Aristotle means to be as persuasive as Aesop, but for stakes higher than requiring an annoying ferryman. Even though the fable may have other contexts than providing truth, Aristotle juxtaposes truth and error, with Aesop representing error, though truth-value is not Aesop's concern, and tries to eliminate all other interpretative possibilities.

Fable is an attempt both to represent a mythic, archetypal, paradigmatic past, and to refer to a specific moment in the present. Fable and the use of fable in general center thematically and structurally on the representation of power relationships. The struggle for power has temporal aspects as well. The competition between conflicting interpretations is thus inherent to the fable as such, but also goes beyond fable and emerges in the citing and siting of all subsequent repetitions of a fable. The use of a fable is always a quotation and an interpretation. Power makes itself evident in the desire to insist on an interpretation, and this necessarily involves control by the author over the other agents in the communicative chain, which may theoretically be abstracted to the relations between author, text and addressee. The linear nature of this chain implies the direction of the desired control. The insistence on power and control implies in turn the potentially infinite repetition or extension of a hierarchy both in the fable and in

the communicative process, with the attendant danger that the fable will maintain its power over the context in which it is quoted, as it does here, and undermine the very authority which uses it and which it is meant to bolster.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem