Reading the Aesopie Corpus: Slavery, Freedom, and Storytelling in the Life of Aesop

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1. Introduction

About two-thirds of the way through the G recension of the Life of Aesop, just after Aesop has gained his freedom and negotiated a peace agreement between Samos and King Croesus of Lydia, there is a curious passage in which we are told that the legendary fabulist ‘wrote down (συγγραφάμενος) the stories and fables that go by his name even now and deposited them in the library (κατέλυσεν εἰς τὴν βιβλιοθήκην)’ (Vita G 100). The image of Aesop writing down his fables in Lydia may be the stuff of fiction, but in broaching the seemingly incongruous idea of Aesopic authorship, it also draws attention to the reality that Aesop’s fables were encountered in antiquity not only as an oral tradition but also as a written body of literature. Of course, ancient readers of the Life would have been keenly aware of the material nature of the text in their hands. Because the Life circulated together with fable collections in our earliest and best manuscripts (e.g., Vita G), it is possible to conceive of the biography as a whole – and, in particular, passages

1 The text I use throughout is Vita G, as edited by Perry 1952, but I have also consulted Ferrari 1997 and Papathomopoulos 1990. Vita G is generally held to be our oldest and best version of the Life of Aesop, but cf. Ferrari 1997, 12-20, for a dissenting view. References below to Vita W are also to Perry 1952 (with consultation of Papathomopoulos 1999), while references to the so-called ‘Planudean’ version are to Eberhard 1872. The best studies of the text history of the Life of Aesop are Perry 1933; 1936, 1-70; 1952, 1-4 and 10-32. Useful overviews can be found in Ferrari 1997, 41-45; Karla 2001, 10-15; Holzberg 2002, 72-73; Kurke 2011, 16-17.

2 Αὐτῶς οὖν αὐτῷ συγγραφάμενος τοὺς ἒδος λόγους καὶ μῦθους, τοὺς ἄχρι καὶ νῦν ἰδινομαζομένους, κατέλυσεν εἰς τὴν βιβλιοθήκην (Vita G 100).

Slaves and Masters in the Ancient Novel, 233–257
such as this one—as lending a kind of authority to the fables it introduced. Thus an ancient reader could feel confident (or, perhaps, take pleasure in the fiction) that the product he was holding was an authentic edition of Aesop’s fables, written by the fabulist himself before its safe installation in a Lydian bibliothēke.4

What is of primary interest to me in this paper is the crucial moment at which this passage occurs in the Life. Not only has Aesop acquired parrhesia and eleutheria (Vita G 89) in his release from slavery, he has also, for the first time in the Life, begun to tell recognizable Aesopic fables. That is, while the Life presents Aesop as a skilled manipulator of language and a talented ‘performer of wisdom’ in a wide range of circumstances,5 the legendary fabulist does not tell an actual fable until after his release from slavery (Vita G 89).6 Indeed, all of the known fables in the Life of Aesop appear between this scene and the end of the work (Vita G 94-142). My aim in this paper is to describe the differences between Aesop’s manner of storytelling during and after his enslavement, and to explore some of

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3 Holzberg 2002.
4 With two notable exceptions (Finkelpearl 2003 and Holzberg 2002), this passage is usually ignored by scholars, and that is understandable: the various recensions of the Life of Aesop differ from one another in many places, and in some ways this is just one of many unhistorical, preposterous moments in the text. Owing to the difficulties of the text history of the Life of Aesop, it is indeed risky to put too much interpretive pressure on any specific turn of phrase, especially one that is so blatantly anachronistic, and which, moreover, does not occur in the same form in every recension. As it happens, other versions of the Life of Aesop do not describe Aesop’s writing and depositing of his fables in precisely the same terms, but the idea that Aesop wrote down his fables after gaining his freedom does surface in Vita W at roughly the same point in the narrative (συγγράφως οὖν τούς ἱδίους μόθους τοῖς μέχρι νῦν ἀναγνωσκόμενος κυτάλια τῷ βασιλείᾳ, ‘Then, writing down the same stories known to be his even now, he left them with the king’, Vita W 100). In the so-called ‘Planudean’ Life there is no mention of writing or libraries, but an essential change in Aesop’s status and manner of fable-telling is nonetheless discernible. In addition, the opening section of a version of the Life that survives with the fables of Aphthonius (c. 4th century) describes Aesop’s fables as deemed ‘worthy of the library’ (ηξιόθη βιβλιοθήκης); see Eberhard, 1872, 306-308.
5 The description of Greek sage figures as ‘performers of wisdom’ in Martin 1998, which I discuss in more detail below, is especially useful for characterizing Aesop’s actions in the Life of Aesop; cf. also Kurke 2011, 102-106.
the ways in which ideas of writing and archiving function to mark the transformation of Aesop into a fully-developed fabulist. While I am primarily interested in how changes in the manner and register of Aesop’s storytelling fit into the overall structure of the narrative of the Life, I will also be approaching the Life as a text that is a valuable site for thinking about the fable tradition writ large, its status as a literary genre, its orality and textuality, and its relationship to and dependence upon the figure of Aesop.

2. Reading Aesopic Performances

To borrow a phrase from the work by Richard Martin on the dynamics of sage performances in archaic Greece, we may describe Aesop’s actions in the Life as ‘performances of wisdom’. ‘Performance’ accommodates both the non-verbal and the verbal elements of communication by drawing attention to the roles played by actor(s), audience(s), and context in the production of meaning. Whether applied to the telling of a famous fable before the people of Samos (cf., e.g., Vita G 94) or to Aesop using his body to prove his innocence to his master (cf., e.g., Vita G 2-4), the term ‘performance’ will cover most of the common features of the various types of Aesopic communication we will be analyzing.

In focusing attention on orality and textuality in the Life of Aesop, I do not intend to enter into the debate over when and where the Life itself was first written down, or over the particular processes by which oral traditions about Aesop’s biography evolved into a written Life. See Perry 1952, 2-4, West 1984, Luzzatto 1996, and Kurke 2011. For a recent and judicious overview, see Konstantakos 2013.

That is, my interest is in how ideas about oral and written storytelling surface in the narrative of the Life as it has come down to us. In this arena I have been influenced by studies of oral and text-based storytelling traditions in the fields of social anthropology and performance studies. In particular, the complex relationship between ‘embodied performances’ and the concept of the ‘archive’, as articulated in Taylor 2003, has been instrumental in shaping my approach to the Life in this paper.

Martin 1998. For his conception of ‘performance’ Martin draws on the work of social anthropologists and sociolinguists. Kurke 2011, 102-106, discusses the applicability to Aesop of Martin’s work on Greek sages in considerable detail.

‘Performance’ is a particularly useful descriptor because ‘fable-telling’ alone would be an inaccurate description of what we encounter in the Life. To begin with, the text of the Life does not itself tell fables, in the way, say, a collection of fables such as the Collectio Augustana might reasonably be described as telling fables. Nor is it quite as simple as stating that, in the Life, Aesop tells fables. As it happens, he does much that has nothing at all to do with fable, and, more importantly, scholars disagree over what ought to count as a ‘real fable’, both in the Life and beyond. Moreover, even in the few instances where there is universal agreement that this is precisely what Aesop is doing, there is still the fact that the reader is not being told a fable so much as reading a representation of a scene of fable-
As we will see below, there are numerous ways in which Aesop’s behaviors and communications in the Life are shaped by the particular audience he is addressing, and, more generally, by the conditions and exigencies of his status. But first we will look briefly at two particularly revealing examples of the connections between slavery, freedom, and the manner in which Aesop communicates his wisdom: the episode that culminates in Aesop gaining his freedom (Vita G 83-89) and the one in which Aesop returns to Samos after his ambassadorial visit to Lydia (Vita G 100).

The first passage is Vita G 83-89, which exploits the semantic range of λόσις-terms in ways that connect Aesop’s ability to interpret signs (τὴν τοῦ σημεῖου λόσιν λαβεῖν, Vita G 83) with his being unshackled (λόσις αὐτόν, Vita G 83). As Aesop’s master Xanthus puts it: ‘I am freeing you so you can solve the portent’ (ἀλλὰ λύω σε ἵνα καὶ σύ τι λοσῖς, Vita G 83). In the ensuing passages, links between Aesop’s slave status and his wisdom are further developed by forms of λόσις/λύω, with the result that Aesop ends up agreeing to perform a public λόσις (‘interpretation’) of a portent for the Samian people only if he is first granted his λόσις (‘freedom’) once and for all (Vita G 89):

ἀνδρές Σάμιοι, οὐκ ἔστιν εὖλογον δούλον ἐλευθέρῳ δήμῳ σημεῖον διαλύσασθαι. δὲν περιθέτε μοι τὴν <τῶν> εἰρημένων παρρησίαν, ἵνα ἔαν μὲν ἐπιτύχω ὡς ἐλευθερὸς τὰς πρεποῦσας τιμὰς ἀπολάβω, ἐὰν δὲ ἀμάρτω μὴ ὡς δοῦλος, ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐλευθερὸς κολασθῶ. ἐὰν οὖν ἐμοὶ τὴν παρρησίαν τῆς ἐλευθερίας περιβάλετε, μετὰ πάσης ἠδείας ἄρξομαι λέγειν.

telling. Everywhere in the Life Aesop is shown performing his wisdom for particular addressees in particular situations, and in each instance the fable-telling – or the riddling, or the manipulating of objects, or the gesturing – is framed by details about the performer’s own goals and motivations and the effects the performance has on the audience.

A number of recent studies have attended to links between the evolution of Aesop’s speech and his rise in social status. See especially Adrados 1979, 1981; Holzberg 1993, 1996; Kurke 2011; Jouanno 2011, 110-111. Aesop’s ‘rise’ in status has been approached from numerous scholarly perspectives. Recent studies have shown how the Life sheds light on the conditions of slavery and manumission in antiquity (Hopkins 1993, Ragone 1997, and duBois 2003); while others have shown how changes in Aesop’s communication help to plot the overall structure and design of the Life as a whole; cf. Mignogna 1992, Holzberg 1993, and Ferrari 1997. Still others have read Aesop’s ‘rise’ in status as revealing of central tensions in Greek culture and ideology (Kurke 2003, 2011) or indicative of the Life’s participation in broader Greek discourse on the nature and development of human speech (Ferrari 1997, Hunter 2007). There have also been a number of studies that have emphasized the role of Isis and the Muses in granting Aesop the slave a voice (Winkler 1985, Finkelpearl 2003, Dillery 1999; cf. Hunter 2007).
Men of Samos, it doesn’t make good sense for a slave to interpret a portent for a free people. So, grant me freedom of speech for what I have to say. That way, if I am right, I may get the honors due to a free man. And if I am wrong, I won’t be punished as a slave but as a free man. If, then, you grant me freedom of speech, I will go ahead and speak fearlessly.

The Samian demos demands that Xanthus grant Aesop freedom (ἄξιοιμέν ος, Ξάνθε, ἔλευθέρος τον Αἰσωπον, Vita G 89) so that he can perform his interpretation (διαλόγος ουκ). Soon after his successful interpretation of the portent, Aesop addresses a fable on the subject of slavery and freedom (the story of ‘The Two Roads’) to the people of Samos (Vita G 94), the first fable he tells in the Life. As I will suggest below, the fact that Aesop’s switch to formal fable-telling occurs after he has negotiated for parrhesia and eleutheria suggests a connection between literary fables — of the sort that circulated in antiquity under Aesop’s name — and the conditions of freedom. Moreover, the timing retroactively implies that Aesop’s earlier performances of wisdom were shaped and conditioned by his enslavement. Indeed, as we will see, a particularly revealing aspect of Aesop’s negotiations above is his insistence that he not be subject to physical abuse (ἀλλ’ ὡς ἐλεύθερος κοιλασθό, Vita G 89) if his interpretation turns out to be wrong.

The second passage is Vita G 100, in which the description of Aesop writing and archiving his fables in Lydia occurs in a general atmosphere of celebration and memorializing. Immediately after writing, Aesop returns to Samos triumphantly (Vita G 100):

Then Aesop wrote down the stories and fables that go by his name even now and deposited them in the library. When he had gotten from the king a letter wherein he agreed to make peace with the Samians for the sake of Aesop, he sailed for Samos, taking many gifts with him. He called an assembly and read
the king’s letter. The Samians, recognizing that Croesus had made peace with them for the sake of Aesop, voted honors for him and named the place where he had been turned over the Aesopeion. As for Aesop, he sacrificed to the Muses and then built a shrine to them, erecting in their midst a statue of Mnemosyne and not of Apollo. Thereupon Apollo became angry with him as he had once been with Marsyas.12

The text appears to go out of its way to advertise Aesop’s newfound prestige, underlining that the free and celebrated sage is emphatically no longer Aesop the hideously ugly slave, who for the first two thirds of the narrative was relentlessly disrespected, maltreated, and beaten (Vita G 1-89). Further acknowledgements of Aesop’s status as a sage frame the passage: upon meeting him, Croesus recognizes Aesop as someone who possesses a universal kind of knowledge (πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τύχην λόγους εἰπεῖν, ‘tell me stories of the ways of fortune with men’, Vita G 99);13 after he departs Samos, Aesop ‘tours the world’ (περιελθείν τὴν οἰκουμένην, Vita G 101), ‘lectures to audiences for a fee’ (τυμήματα δὲ ἀργυρικὰ λαμβάνων, Vita G 101), and is named ‘chamberlain’ (ἐκοίνωσεν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῆς διοικήσεως, Vita G 101) of King Lycurgus in Babylon. Thus the writing of Aesop’s fables becomes conflated with other supposedly lasting honors (τιμᾶς), and with permanent signs of Aesop’s beneficence on Samos, such as the naming of the ‘Aesopeion’ and the erection of a shrine to the Muses.14

In what follows, I will claim that the Life maps Aesop’s experiences of enslavement and freedom onto his evolution into a fable-teller in ways that suggest an analogy to the differences between oral and written literature. This does not amount to a claim that the historical or ideological dimensions of slavery or of the Life of Aesop as a text are unimportant; far from suggesting that we ignore socio-political realities, I am only suggesting that we attend more closely to the ways in

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12 The apparent snubbing of Apollo and the comparison with Marsyas have received much attention, especially in light of Aesop’s imminent, fatal confrontation with the Delphians. See Wiechers 1961, Jedrkiewicz 1989, Compton 1990, and now Kurke 2011.

13 The point is that Croesus somehow knows to ask Aesop to ‘tell stories of the ways of fortune with men’ (Vita G 99), rather than asking him for help with any particular problem. Aesop obliges, telling a tale about a cicada and adding, in a passage that undoubtedly is intended to echo the opening of the text (Vita G 1), that he (Aesop) ‘speaks words of commonsense and benefits the life of humans’ (φρενήρη θέγγομαι βίον τῶν μερόπων ὀφελῶν, Vita G 99).

which the Life thematizes slavery and freedom in its reflections on communication and on the production, transmission, and reception of Aesopica. Aesop’s concerns for his physical safety in his negotiations with the Samian people (Vita G 83-89) and the association of ‘Aesop’s fables’ with other fixed, lasting signs of Aesop’s wisdom (Vita G 99-101), reflect a larger pattern in the Life, according to which two distinct types of Aesopic storytelling are systematically differentiated: the enslaved and the free. The former involves an emphasis on the physical presence of Aesop, his impromptu responses to the context in which he finds himself, and the manipulation of language and signs to turn the tables against his addressee(s), usually his master (Vita G 1-89); the latter involves the telling of actual fables, having recognizable formal features and content (Vita G 94-142). While Aesop’s body figures prominently in representations of storytelling during the period of his enslavement, after he has earned his freedom and formally written down his fables in Lydia, a related but distinct type of corpus-based storytelling obtains, as the slave’s ingenious use of his body is replaced by the free fabulist’s apparent command of an established collection of fables.15

3. Performances During Aesop’s Enslavement

 Practically all of Aesop’s actions during the period of his enslavement (Vita G 1-89) are reactions: his performances are crafted in response to the immediate circumstances in which he finds himself.16 In a few instances, Aesop is simply asked a question, by his master Xanthus or by Xanthus’ wife, to which he responds directly with a kind of aetiology.17 More typically, however, Aesop the slave is given an order or threatened in some way, and he reacts by staging an improvised, lesson-bearing performance. That is, Aesop discovers, over and over again, a way to resist or challenge his master’s threats and commands by manipulating matters in such a way that his master — and anyone else within earshot — ends up learning

15 Significantly, after Aesop is freed we hear almost nothing about his body. One exception is the description of Aesop as ‘dirty, long-haired, and pale’ (ῥαπατόντις καὶ κομάτοντις καὶ ὁραμοντις, Vita G 107), after a period of imprisonment in Babylon; but these temporary effects on his appearance appear to have nothing to do with Aesop’s famous ugliness, which receives much attention in Vita G 1-89. On the meaning(s) of Aesop’s ugliness, see especially Jedrkiewicz 1989, Lissarague 2000, Lefkowitz 2008, and Kurke 2011.

16 See Rosen 2007 on the ways in which Aesop’s reactions are typical of ancient satirists.

17 At Vita G 63, Aesop explains the origins of dreams to Xanthus’ wife, and, at 67, he explains to Xanthus why people bother to look at their own defecation; cf. 68, in which Aesop intervenes in a fight between Xanthus and his fellow philosophers with an account of Dionysus’ invention of wine.
a kind of ‘lesson’. Either implicitly or explicitly, the lesson taught usually involves matters related to the proper and improper treatment of slaves. In these sections of the Life, our attention is drawn to the improvisational character of Aesop’s wisdom in numerous ways. Above all, it is the embedded character of these performances in both the immediate circumstances and in the broader context of Aesop’s enslavement that differentiates them from the types of performances enacted by Aesop the free man.

The programmatic stolen-fig episode (Vita G + W 2-3), with which the Life opens, is typical of the slave Aesop’s ability to discover novel ways to resist those who seek to do him harm despite his utter powerlessness. Characteristically, Aesop uses all he has – namely, his body – to turn the tables on his adversaries and save his own skin. Briefly, what happens is this: Aesop’s first master, whose name we do not learn, asks his servant (οἰκέτης, Vita W 2) Agathopous to look after some recently-acquired figs. Agathopous and another slave decide instead to eat the figs themselves and blame it on Aesop, whom they describe as ‘good for nothing but a whipping’ (οὐδὲν ἀλλο πρέπει αὕτω εἰ μὴ δέρεσθαι, Vita G 2). As soon as he is summoned before his master and learns he has been accused, Aesop ‘knows he will get a beating’ (μέλλων διάφεσθαι, Vita G 3). Although unable to speak (οὐχὶ τόν νευμάτων ἠτισεν ὁδόρ χλαρόν, Vita G 3), which is described (significantly) as being ‘at hand’ (παρακείμενον), Aesop drinks the water, forces himself to vomit, and proves his innocence through his resourcefulness (διὰ τῆς πολυπειρίας, Vita G 3). This dramatic and physical expression of Aesop’s πολυπειρία is programmatic in the sense that it introduces and models one of the legendary fabulist’s defining characteristics: namely, his ability to take whatever he can find ‘at hand’ (παρακείμενον) and, through a process of creative adaptation, transform it into what we might call, for lack of a better term, a teachable moment. Although mute, Aesop again manages to communicate that the other slaves should do as he did (τούτο ἠξίωσε καὶ τοὺς συνῳδοῦλους αὐτοῦ ποησαι, Vita G 3). They promptly vomit up their guilt and are beaten in turn, learning the ‘lesson’ – which is articulated in the spirit if not the form of a conventional epimythium – that those who scheme up trouble for others only bring trouble upon themselves.

While Aesop’s initial muteness makes his vulnerable body and his non-verbal gestures more prominent than they are after he gains the ability to speak at Vita G

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18 Aesop is introduced in Vita G 1 as ‘speechless ... dumb, and unable to talk’, but he is later visited in a dream by Isis and granted the gift of speech in Vita G 6-8.
19 δερόμενον δὲ ἔκεινοι ἔγνωσαν σαφῶς ὅτι ὁ κατὰ ἄλλου μιχανενόμενος κακὸν αὐτοῦ καθ’ ἐκατον τούτῳ λανθάνει ποιῶν (Vita G 3).
The situation as it unfolds in the stolen-fig episode is analogous to a number of episodes in *Vita G* 1-89. Moreover, the slave Aesop’s body – particularly in its susceptibility to physical abuse – remains a significant element in his performances throughout the period of his enslavement. The pattern that emerges is this: Aesop is threatened in some way; although powerless, Aesop makes use of something ‘at hand’ and somehow parleys it into a lesson-bearing performance. The threat is not always explicit (see below), but every command or task Aesop’s first master or second master, Xanthus (*Vita G* 28-90), gives him is given under the implicit threat of physical punishment.

Over time Xanthus comes to see Aesop’s quick thinking and improvisational skills as assets. After hearing him respond to the mistress’ question about the nature of dreams (*Vita G* 33-34), Xanthus realizes that Aesop ‘quickly finds the right thing to say’ (εὔφρεσιλογός, *Vita G* 34). Xanthus himself is described as unable on the spur of the moment to find answers to a philosophical conundrum (ὁ Ξάνθος ἀκόοσας φιλοσόφου μὲν ἔτημα, μὴ εὐφρίσκον αὐτό δὲ ταχέως ἀναλύσας, *Vita G* 35), but when he acknowledges Aesop’s sharp wit (ἀγχινοίας, *Vita G* 70), he seeks to benefit from his slave’s special gifts and he asks for help. Moreover, Aesop, for his part, seems to be well aware of his own improvisational skill set, and in the same terms described by the narrator and other characters: δέσποτα, εἰ τι περὶ λογικοῦ ζητήματος, ἑτοίμος ἔχω ἀποκρίνασθαι (‘Master, if it is a question of words, I am ready with answers’, *Vita G* 84); ἐπιλύσομαι ἐγὼ καὶ εὐκαίρως προσκληθήσομαι λέγειν (‘I’ll have a solution, and at the proper moment’, *Vita G* 85).

Thus the link between Aesop’s improvisational skills and the circumstances of his enslavement is inscribed in the *Life of Aesop* from the very beginning, and in such a way as to mark the slave’s performances of wisdom as fundamentally bound to his condition. Aesop’s slave status frames and determines the direction of these performances. Indeed, the motivation behind Aesop’s actions is often to resist or to challenge his master. This is most evident in a series of scenes in which

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21 Cf. εὐφρίστης (‘sharp thinker’), *Vita G* 72.
22 Cf. *Vita G* 82, where Xanthus’ inability to think and act quickly is described in the following terms: οὐχ ἔλθεν ἐς τὸ μέσον καὶ μηδὲν εὐφρίσκον κατὰ νοῦν εἰπὼν ἔλαβεν διώρισεν ὅπως τὸ σημεῖον ἐπιλύσῃ (‘Xanthus came forward and, unable to discover anything to say, requested time to interpret the portent’).
23 Cf. εἰ ἄριστος καὶ σωτήρ, ‘you are such a good guesser and so smart’, *Vita G* 79; σῶ μέγα δαμόνιον εἰ, ‘you are a great genius’, *Vita G* 80.
24 δῶμαι σου, Ἀλάωε, εἰ δυνάτον σου δικά τῆς σεαυτοῦ ἀγχινοίας, εὐρεῖν τινα πρόφασιν, δι’ ἤς νικήσω ἢ τὰς συνθήκας διαλύσομαι, *Vita G* 70.
Aesop repeatedly disobeys and embarrasses Xanthus by putting excessive pressure on the precision of his master’s commands and interpreting them so literally that the words lose their intended meaning. In the first scene (Vita G 38), Xanthus orders Aesop to take an oil flask and towels (ἄρον ἐπὶ χειρὸν σου λήκυθον λέντια τε) in order to accompany him to the bath. Aesop reacts by deciding to teach his master a lesson: ‘Masters who show an unnecessarily stern attitude about the service they want have themselves to blame for the trouble they get into. I’ll teach this philosopher a lesson in how to give orders’.25 Aesop then picks up the oil flask – without putting oil in it – and follows his master. When Xanthus asks for his oil flask and realizes there is nothing in it, he asks, ‘Aesop, where is the oil?’ (Αἶσωπε, τὸ ἐλαιὸν τοῦ; Vita G 38). Aesop’s response is as follows:


“At home”. Xanthus said, “Why is that”? Aesop said, “Because you told me ‘Take an oil flask and towels’, but you did not say ‘oil’. I was not supposed to do anything more than what you said; since if I messed up my command I would pay for it with a beating”. And with that he was silent.

Our attention is drawn to the ways in which Aesop discovers how to make creative use of all he has to work with – his master’s exact words (ἄρον λήκυθον καὶ λέντια) and the objects involved (e.g., λήκυθον), which Aesop has ‘in hand’ (ἐπὶ χειρὸν) – to assert himself and prove a point.26 Adaptation and appropriation of the immediate context are vital components of improvisation, and utterly necessary for the slave who has no possessions – none, that is, except his body, which the entire performance is designed to try to protect (ἐπεὶ τοῦ νόμου σφαλεῖς

25 οἱ τῷ νῷ περίπτυροι περὶ διακοινίαν δεσπόται κακοδαμιονίας έστειλε γίνονται παραίτητοι.

26 Almost identical exchanges occur in subsequent scenes, as when Aesop is told to bring Xanthus a footbath, but, as Aesop remarks, he is not told (οὐκ εἶπας) to put water in it or to wash his master’s feet (Αἴσωπος λέγει ‘ἐπὶς ταῦτας οἰκήθησης’, οὐκ εἶπας ’βάλε δῶρο καὶ νίπον μοι τοὺς πόδας’, Vita G 40); when Aesop is told to ‘cook lentil for dinner’, but not told (οὐ γάρ μοι εἶπας) to cook ‘lentils’, for ‘the one is singular and the other is plural (Αἴσωπος λέγει ’καί, οὐ γάρ μοι εἶπας ὅτι φακὸν ἐβιβάζων καί οὐ φακοὺς; ὁ μὲν γάρ ἐστιν ἐνικός, οἱ δὲ πληθυντικοί’, Vita G 41). Again, as Vita G 51, a typically vague command from Xanthus motivates Aesop to say to himself: ‘I will show him not to give me moronic orders’ (Αἴσωπος πρὸς έστειλε λέγει ‘ἐγὼ αὐτῷ δείξω μορὰ μή διατάττεσθαι’)}
READING THE AESOPIC CORPUS

Whether it is deliberately forgetting to bring oil to the bath or cooking inappropriate meals by deliberately misconstruing Xanthus’ instructions (see note 26), Aesop’s repeated subversions of his master’s authority are marked in the text in different ways: at *Vita G* 64, Xanthus describes Aesop’s insubordination as ‘game-playing’ (ἐπιαίζων) and begs Aesop to become a well-disposed slave (ἀρκεί έπιαίζων μοι, λήξον το λουσάν καὶ εύνοϊκος μοι δούλευε); at *Vita G* 54, Xanthus laments Aesop’s determination to ‘turn (my) words around’ (τὰ ἄνω κάτω λαλεῖν); finally, at *Vita G* 55, one of Xanthus’ students calls Aesop an ‘abusive and malicious slave’ (φιλολοίδορος καὶ κακεντρεχῆς δούλος οὕτως) and describes his efforts to ‘drive (his master) crazy’ (ταχέως σε εἰς μανιάν περιτρέψει).

The necessity that Aesop figure out a way to make creative use of his master’s orders or ‘whatever is at hand’ reflects, on some level, the powerlessness and helplessness of his position. As a slave, subject to physical abuse at every turn, Aesop’s body is utterly vulnerable. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the important role of Aesop’s body in the *Life of Aesop* from a number of different critical perspectives. Here I do not wish to focus on corporeality *per se*; rather, I want to focus on bodies in order to draw attention to the degree to which Aesop’s lesson-bearing performances in *Vita G* 1-89 are grounded in the physical, material situation in which he finds himself. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to claim that Aesop’s improvisational wisdom in *Vita G* 1-89 is dependent on the presence of bodies – both his own and those of his addressees – and on the particular circumstances in which these bodies find themselves.

There are two primary ways in which bodies figure in Aesop’s performances of wisdom in *Vita G* 1-89. First, the body and bodily functions feature prominently as themes of the slave Aesop’s performances. As a result, Aesop often uses his own body and the bodies of others to prove a point or to communicate. Second, the utter precariousness of Aesop’s slave body is always felt and shapes the performances in fundamental ways. After considering some manifestations of the body in Aesop’s performances in *Vita G* 1-89, I am going to claim that all of these

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27 Indeed, this essential powerlessness is precisely what Leslie Kurke’s recent work on Aesop has brought to the fore. Borrowing Claude Levi-Strauss’ notion of the ‘cultural bricoleur’, Kurke claims that Aesop is a ‘culture hero for those who feel themselves disempowered, so his ability to extort the self-incrimination of the powerful functions as a wish-fulfillment fantasy (or how-to guide) for the marginal or weaker members of society’ (Kurke 2011, 200). Kurke’s reading of Aesopic *bricolage* focuses on the outward, ideological potentialities of the *Life of Aesop*; but there is more to be said about the ways in which the link between slavery and improvisation in the *Life* sheds light on the inner workings of the narrative and, I would claim, on the literary history of the Aesopic tradition writ large.

heavily embodied performances stand in contrast to representations of Aesop’s fable-telling in *Vita G* 90-142, in which the significance of bodies is far less marked and in which Aesop’s own style of wisdom begins to take on some of the characteristics of the disembodied literary artifact.

Throughout the first half of the *Life of Aesop*, our attention is repeatedly drawn to Aesop’s hideous body and to his use of his own body and the bodies of others to make a point or otherwise communicate. Indeed, bodies are the primary tools of Aesop’s improvisation, and much of Aesop’s demonstration of wit in these chapters either involves bodies directly (vomiting at, e.g., *Vita G* 2-3; defecating, at *Vita G* 67) or is presented in the context of others’ reactions to seeing Aesop’s body, whether it is his ugliness (e.g., at *Vita G* 11, 15, 27, 55, 87-88) or Xanthus’ wife seeing him naked (*Vita G* 75-76). Other times a reaction is triggered by Aesop’s observation of the bodies and bodily functions of others, such as Xanthus’ public urination (*Vita G* 28) or his mistress’ exposed ass (*Vita G* 77). Bodies and bodily functions figure less explicitly but no less significantly when Aesop is charged with the care of his master’s body (oil flask for the bath, *Vita G* 38; water for foot-bath, *Vita G* 40) or assisting with his master’s eating and drinking (figs, *Vita G* 2-4; shopping for vegetables, *Vita G* 34; preparing lentil, *Vita G* 39; serving bathwater to drink, *Vita G* 40; serving pig’s feet for dinner, *Vita G* 42-43; preparing food for dog, not mistress, *Vita G* 44-50; cooking tongue for dinner, *Vita G* 51-55; attending a drinking party, *Vita G* 68 f.; helping Xanthus ‘drink the sea dry’, *Vita G* 70-74).

Aesop’s own body is, from the beginning of the *Life*, one of his primary modes of communication, both intentionally (through deliberate gestures) and unintentionally (through others’ responses to his ugliness, his nudity, etc.). As we have observed, it is through gestures (διὰ τῶν νευμάτων) that Aesop is able to prove his innocence in the stolen-fig episode. Similarly, in his interactions with a priestess of Isis (*Vita G* 4-7), which lead directly to Aesop being granted the gifts of speech (*Vita G* 7), Aesop uses ‘gestures’ (为抓παμαθεία, *Vita G* 4) to ask her if she has lost her way, then ‘leads her by the hand’ (ἐπιλαμβάνεται τῆς χειρὸς αὐτής καὶ ἠγαγεῖ, *Vita G* 4) to a grove where he offers her food before ‘leading her again’ (ὁ δὲ ἠγαγεῖν αὐτήν, *Vita G* 5) and ‘pointing out’ (δείξας, *Vita G* 5) the proper road. There is an almost comic exaggeration of what Aesop is able to communicate with non-verbal gestures: we are told that Aesop ‘began to nod (to the priestess) as if to say “Why have you left the road and come to the farm?”’ (为抓παμαθεία διανεύειν καὶ δηλοῖν ‘διὰ τι ἀπολυποῦσα τὴν δημοσίαν ὁδὸν εἰς τοῦτο τὸ κτῆμα εἰσελθόθας,‘ *Vita G* 4). Later (*Vita G* 9), in the same vein, when the overseer Zenas learns that Aesop can now talk, he fears the consequences:
When he was still mute he would gesture to me as if to say ‘If my master comes I’ll have you removed from your position; I will accuse you by means of gestures.’ If, then, he would bring charges against me with gestures, how much more persuasive will he be speaking!

Such aggrandizement of the communicatory powers of Aesop’s gestures also has the effect of establishing a connection between all of Aesop’s performances. It is as if the power of speech merely intensifies Aesop’s communicative abilities rather than simply marking a replacement of the physical with the verbal.

From the beginning, the mute Aesop’s physical vulnerability is linked to his complete dependence upon his body for communication. As we have seen, the fellow slaves who conspire to frame Aesop in the programmatic stolen-fig episode, describing him as ‘good for nothing but a beating’ (οὐδὲν ἄλλο πρέπει αὐτῷ εἰ μὴ δέρεσθαι), do so knowing that Aesop will be beaten precisely because he cannot speak. As Corinne Jouanno has observed, the persistent violence against Aesop’s body increases the reader’s emotional involvement in the narrative. But the threat of violence also frames and determines Aesop’s actions in more fundamental ways. The reader is constantly reminded in Vita G 1-89 that his master may beat Aesop at anytime. Moreover, Aesop and his master are presented as fully aware of the stakes: at Vita G 38, Aesop’s show of resistance against the strict language of his master’s orders is carried out with the knowledge that he is

There are also hints of a more profound commitment to the signifying powers of bodies in the Life. For example, throughout the entire scene on the auction block (Vita G 20-27), when Xanthus purchases Aesop, there is frequent reference to bodies, including detailed descriptions of each slave’s body and dress (Vita G 21), and a number of evaluative comments (Vita G 21, 23, 26); indeed, Xanthus explicitly encourages onlookers to view the display of bodies as a kind of philosophical problem (Vita G 22): μὴ νομίσητε τὴν ϕιλοσοφίαν διὰ λόγων μόνον συστάναι, ἄλλα καὶ διὰ τῶν ἔργων. Cf. Leikowitz 2008.

Cf. Vita G 13: ἣ δὲ καταστροφή αὐτοῦ τί; ἢ φ’ οὖ ἦρξατο λαλεῖν περίεργος γέγονεν (‘What is to become of him (Aesop)? From the moment he started talking he has been trouble’).

odoreis ἡ ἄλλη λαλεῖν μὴ δυνάμενος οὔτως διαφέρει, καὶ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν σου εἶ πεληρωκός (‘Since Aesop cannot speak he will be beaten, and you’ll get just what you desire’), Vita G 2. Moreover, before Aesop improvises his defense, he himself is said to have realized he will get a beating (μέλλον διαφέρεται).


Vita G 2, 3, 42, 50, 56, 58, 77, 80, and 83.
susceptible to physical violence if he does not perform well (ἐδει οὖν με μηδὲν τῶν εἰρημένων πλέον ποιεῖν· ἐπει τοῦ νόμου σφαλείς πληγῶν ὑπεύθυνος ήμην). Later (Vita G 42), when Xanthus becomes frustrated and embarrassed by his slave’s insubordinate challenges, he attempts ‘to find some pretext to thrash him’ (ὁ Ξάνθος ζητῶν ἄφορμὴν δὲ ἡς μαστιγώσει τὸν Ἀισωπον). In addition, there are times when Aesop cannot figure out a way to avoid physical abuse, despite his obvious blamelessness: for example, he is ‘thoroughly beaten’ (ἐδάρη ἐπιμελῶς) at Vita G 77, when he reports two crows outside but Xanthus only sees one (one flew away); and at Vita G 80, Xanthus orders Aesop to be ‘bound and locked up’ (ἐκελευσέν αὐτὸν δεθέντα συγκλεισθήναι) despite Aesop’s success in decoding an epitaph and discovering a buried treasure of gold for his master. Thus even when Aesop can communicate cogently and eloquently, his actions are determined and constrained by the fundamental vulnerability of the conditions of enslavement.

4. Representations of Fable-Telling After Manumission

As we have seen, for the duration of his enslavement the text repeatedly highlights the ways in which Aesop must draw directly on his surroundings to improvise his performances. But once the fabulist is no longer a slave – no longer subject to the threats and abuse of a master – his wisdom begins to take on many of the qualities of the disembodied literary artifact. One gets the sense that the free Aesop is in command of a kind of corpus, from which he can draw on occasion to advise or warn his addressee(s). This is partly a product of the many links between his words in these sections and familiar material in the extant corpora of the ancient fable tradition. But even without these demonstrable connections there are a

34 Vita G 79-80. Although Xanthus praises Aesop’s quick wit and wisdom (Vita G 79), and calls him a ‘genius’ (Vita G 80), Aesop loses in the end. Aesop generates multiple interpretations of the jumbled letters in an attempt to manipulate the lying Xanthus to keep his promise, but ultimately Xanthus does not share the gold or grant Aesop freedom – instead he binds him and locks him up.

35 This includes two ‘classic’ fables that were well known in antiquity and frequently ascribed to Aesop both in- and outside of the collections (cf. van Dijk 1995, 135), both of which appear in remarkably similar form in the Collectio Augustana: ‘Eagle and Dung Beetle’ (= Perry 3), at Vita G 135-139, and ‘Wolves and Sheep’ (= Perry 153), at Vita G 97. The ‘Eagle and Dung Beetle’ also surfaces three times in the Aristophanic corpus: Wasps 1446-1448; Lysistrata 691-695; Peace 127-134; cf. also Lucian, Icar. 10, 134-139. For ‘Wolves and Sheep’, cf. Plu. Dem. 23.5; Babr. 93; Aphth. 21; Ademar 43; Rom. Anglicus 31 (Hervieux 1893-1899, 2:586). Other fables Aesop tells in the Life that are attested in the collections are: ‘Cicada’ (Vita G 99); ‘Widow and Plowman’ (Vita G 129; cf. the story of
number of ways in which our attention is drawn to patterns and internal consistencies in his stories, contributing to a sense that there are certain fixed and traditional types of stories the free Aesop tells. Indeed, the nine stories Aesop tells in the Life that scholars most commonly acknowledge as ‘fables’ all appear in Vita G 90-142: ‘Two Roads’ (94); ‘Wolves and Sheep’ (97); ‘Cicada’ (99); ‘Widow and Plowman’ (129); ‘Simple-minded Daughter’ (131); ‘Mouse and Frog’ (133); ‘Eagle and Dung Beetle’ (135-139); ‘Farmer’ (140); ‘Father and Daughter’ (141). Other passages in the later scenes of the Life of Aesop, including the extended borrowing from the Aramaic Life of Ahiqar (Vita G 101-123), also represent the free Aesop as possessing a kind of storehouse of wisdom. While his words of advice and warning in these sections remain apposite to the situations in which he finds himself, they are nevertheless detachable from their contexts and coherent as standalone narratives in ways that vomiting figs or playing tricks with oil flasks are not.

The free Aesop’s words consistently display a surprising number of distinct narrative elements and structural features, which, in combination with one

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36 Taking into account variations in the different recensions of the Life of Aesop and in the heterogeneous sets of criteria used to determine what counts as a legitimate ‘fable’, scholars generally agree that Aesop only begins to tell proper fables once he has gained his freedom: cf. Nojgaard 1964, 471; Holzberg 1992, 1996; Hägg 1997, 179; Pervo 1998, 104; Shiner 1998, 162; Hunter 2007, 55. But, to be sure, there has been disagreement among scholars on the matter of just how many proper fables are to be found in the Life of Aesop. While the most common total count of fables in the Life of Aesop is nine (see above) as in Nojgaard 1964, 471, and Holzberg 1992, 1996 (cf. Shiner 1998, 162), Perry 1952 seems to count twelve. Two of these – Perry 3 and Perry 153 – are omitted from the section in Aesopica entitled ENUMERANTUR FABULAE NOVAE QUAE VITA AESOPITRADITAE SUNT (‘Listing of new fables transmitted in the Life of Aesop’) [Perry 379-388] for no other reason than that they are known from the Collectio Augustana and thus not ‘new’. Of Perry’s twelve, another two (Vita G 33, 67) occur during the period of Aesop’s enslavement (see above). Van Dijk 1995 identifies thirteen fables in Vita G (twelve in Vita W and ten in the so-called Planudean vita) and Jouanno 2011 counts sixteen, dividing the total into thirteen fables ‘en bonne et due forme’ and three ‘fables transformées’ (105). Van Dijk and Jouanno consider different material in Vita G 1-90 to count as ‘fable’, either because it may find echoes in the fable collections or may be linked to known fables in other ways. Both scholars also acknowledge and discuss the ways in which Aesop’s fable-telling in Vita G 90-142 is notably distinct from the earlier passages and has even closer and more demonstrable links to the fable tradition. Thus, regardless of whether one’s definition of ‘fable’ leads to a count of nine, twelve, thirteen, or sixteen total fables in the Life, it is widely acknowledged that there is something qualitatively different about Aesop’s manner of story-telling after he has been freed.
another, amount to a generic type of wisdom. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the way in which Aesop now introduces his performances by announcing his intention to ‘tell a fable’ (λόγος) or calling upon his addressee(s) to ‘listen to a fable’. The very first fable Aesop tells in the *Life* begins with a traditional and indefinite ‘Once upon a time’ (ποτε), while several others open by conventionally setting the scene in a distant and imagined past when animals spoke the same language as humans (e.g., καθ’ ὄν καιρόν ὁμόφωνον ἤσαν τὰ ζώα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις. ‘In the time when animals were homophonous with men’, *Vita G* 96). The themes and manner of characterization in these fables also repeat themselves and, moreover, are typical in the tradition. For example, the conventionally vague adjective ‘some’ (τις) to describe fable characters (animal or human) is used repeatedly: ‘some cicada’ (τινα άκριδα, *Vita G* 99), ‘some woman’ (γυνή τις, *Vita G* 129; 130; *Vita W* 141), and ‘some plowman’ (ἀρωτριῶν τις, *Vita G* 129). In addition, the fables the free Aesop tells also display what is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the genre, the *epimythium* or ‘lesson’, which explicitly spells out the relevance or ‘lesson’ of the fable. To be sure, while a slave, Aesop’s wisdom performances often had a ‘lesson’ to teach (as we have seen, usually directed at his master). But the structure and delivery of the *epimythia* appended to each of the free Aesop’s stories are standardized in accordance with the formulae and conventions of the extant fable tradition.

37 *Vita G* 93, 96, 129, 130, 134, 141.
38 *Vita G* 132, 140.
41 Some characters in these fables, such as the beetle and the cicada, are virtual celebrities in the fable tradition. For the cicada in Aesopica, cf. Perry 184 (‘The Ass and the Cicada’), Perry 241 (‘The Cicada and the Fox’); Perry 373 (‘The Ant and the Cicada’; cf. Babrius 140, Avianus 34, et al.); Perry 397 (‘The Bird Catcher and the Cicada’; cf. Aphthonius 4); Perry 470 = Plato’s *Phaedrus* 259b-c; Perry 507 (‘The Cricket and the Owl’; cf. *Phaedrus* 3,16).
42 For the history of the *epimythium* and its significance in the genre, see espec. Perry 1940.
43 *Vita G* 97: ἡδοὶ δὲ οὖν ὡμᾶς <κατά> τὸν μύθον μὴ εἰκῇ τοὺς χρηστοὺς παραδίδοναι (‘According to the fable, you should not rashly hand over useful men’); 99: ὡσαύτως κάγώ (‘Just so I...’); 129: ὅστε καὶ σο (‘And you, too...’); 131: ὁμοίως καὶ ἐμοί συνέβη, φίλε (‘In the same way also it has turned out for me, friend...’); 133: ὀμοίως κάγω, ἄνδρες, ἅπαθοθύνον μὴν μόρος ἔσοψαι (‘In the same way also, in dying I will be death for you...’); 139: ὁμοίως καὶ ὡμῆς, ἄνδρες Δέλφου, μὴ ἐπιμάθητε τὸ ἑρών (‘In the same way also you, Delphians, do not dishonor the shrine...’); 140: ὡσαύτως οὖν κάγῳ δυσφόρος ἔσω (‘So it is also that I am aggrieved...’); *Vita W* 141: τούτῳ κάγῳ πρὸς ὡμᾶς, ὁ Δέλφοι (‘This also I (feel) toward you, Delphians...’).
Let us now turn to look more closely at one of the fables Aesop tells in this section, the fable of the ‘Frog and Mouse’ (Vita G 133), in order to observe how these performances, although adapted to their contexts, are marked as traditional material. These fables are not direct responses to questions posed by an interlocutor or hyper-literal interpretations of a master’s commands; rather, as if drawing upon an established store of pre-fabricated narratives, Aesop chooses and adapts fables to fit the context by setting up various symbolic correspondences between fable and the situation in which he finds himself. Aesop tells the ‘Frog and Mouse’ fable after he is informed by the Delphians that he is to be executed that very day for the crimes of temple-robbery and blasphemy. Understanding the severity of the threat (Aίσωπος ἱδών αὐτοῦ ἀπελουμένος, Vita G 132-133), Aesop presumably expects the fable to persuade the Delphians to change their minds.

‘Λόγον ἀκούσατε’. οἱ δὲ ἐπέτρεψαν αὐτὸν λέγειν. ὦ δὲ Αἴσωπός φησιν: [Vita G 133] ὦτε ἤν τὰ ᾠδὰ ὁμόφωνα, μὺς φιλάνθος βατράχοι ἐκάλεσεν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ δείπνον καὶ εἰσήγαγεν αὐτὸν εἰς ταμείων πλοῦσιον πάνω, ἐφ’ ὦ ἦν ἄρτος, κρέας, τυρός, ἐλαία, ἰσχάδες: καὶ φησιν ἂν ἔστω. καλὸς ληφθείς ὁ βατράχος φησιν ἄλλα καὶ σὺ παρ’ ἐμοὶ δειπνήσασιν, ἐνά σε καλὸς λάβω. ἐπήγαγεν δὲ αὐτὸν εἰς λίμνην καὶ φησιν καλομίβησαν. οἱ δὲ μὺς· καλομίβησαν οὐκ ἐπισταμαί, ὁ βατράχος· ἔγω σε διδάξω. δήσας τε λίνῳ τὸν πόδα τοῦ μυὸν πρὸς τὸν ἱδῶν πόδα [ἐδήσεν] ἡματο εἰς τὴν λίμνην καὶ τὸν μὴν ἐσυρεν. ὦ δὲ μὺς πνυμόνους εἶπεν νεκρὸς ὃν ζῶντα σε ἐκδίκησο. ταῦτα εἰπόντος αὐτὸν καταδύσε τὸν βατράχοι ἐπινεξέν αὐτὸν. καμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἱδατος καὶ ἐπιπλέοντος, κόραξ ἠρπασεν τὸν μὴν σὺν τῷ βατράχῳ συνδεδεμένων, καταφεγόν δὲ τὸν μὴν ἐνδρίξατο καὶ τοῦ βατράχου. αὕτος ὁ μῦς τὸν βατράχον ἑξεδίκησεν. ὁμιλοῦσα κάνω, ἄνδρες, ἀποθανόν ὡμὴν μόρος ἐσομαι· καὶ γάρ Λυ-δίοι, Βαβυλωνίοι, καὶ σχέδον ἡ Ἑλλάς ὀλη τὸν ἐμὸν καρπίσονται θανατον.

‘Listen to this story’. They permitted him to speak. Aesop said: [133] ‘When all the animals spoke the same language, a mouse became friends with a frog and invited him to dinner. He brought him to a richly-stocked storeroom, in which there was bread, meat, cheese, olives, and dried figs. ‘Eat,’ he told him.

44 Van Dijk 1995.
45 Vita G 132: οἱ δὲ Δήλοι εἰσελθόντες πρὸς τὸν Αἴσωπον ἔφησαν ἃπο κρημνοῦ σε δεῖ βλαίηθαι σήμερον· σοῦς γὰρ σε ἑκφισάσας ἀνελέας, ἀξίων ὧντα <καὶ ιερόπλων> καὶ βλάσφημον, ἵνα μὴ ταφῆς ἀξίωθης, ἐτοίμασαι σαπετῶν.’ (The Delphians came to Aesop and said, ‘Today you must be thrown from the cliff. For this is the way we voted to kill you, a temple-rober and blasphemer unworthy of burial. Prepare yourself’).
46 For the historical and broader ideological implications of the Life’s representation of Aesop’s confrontation with the Delphians, see espec. Wiechers 1961 and now Kurke 2011.
Being received so hospitably, the frog said: 'You should come to my place for dinner, too, so I can give you a good reception!' He led the mouse to his pond and said 'Dive in!' But the mouse said, 'I don't know how to dive.' So the frog said, 'I'll teach you.' Using a chord, he tied the mouse's foot to his own foot and, jumping into the pond, dragged the mouse behind. As he was drowning, the mouse said, 'Even though I am dead I will get revenge on you.' As he said these words the frog went under water and drowned the mouse. As he lay there, floating upon the surface of the water, a raven snatched up the mouse, still tied to the frog, and after the raven ate the mouse he also ate up the frog. This is how the mouse punished the frog. So, too, men of Delphi, in death I shall be your doom. For the Lydians, Babylonians, and almost all of Greece will reap the harvest of my dying.'

On the one hand, there are a number of demonstrable formal and thematic links to the fable tradition. The explicit announcement of the 'fable' ('λόγον ἀκούσατε'), the conventional opening (ὁτε ἦν τα ζώα ὄμορφων), and the formalized epimythium (οὕτως ὁ μύς τὸν βάτραχον ἐξεδίκησεν. ὁμοίως κάγω, ἄνδρες, ἀποθανόν ὑμῖν μόρος ἔσωμα) all mark the tale as traditional. The fable also treats themes that are well attested both in- and outside ancient collections. As van Dijk has shown, in representations of Aesop's fable-telling in the Life, a connection 'between the fable and both its direct context and the Life as a whole can be observed'. Here I would like to extend Van Dijk's study by emphasizing that there is a significant difference between, on the one hand, a direct connection between the specific circumstances in which Aesop finds himself and his particular performance, and, on the other hand, an indirect, symbolic connection – one that needs to be explicitly drawn out and explained in order to make sense. In this case, according to the analogy set up by the fable, the mouse corresponds to the unjustly murdered Aesop, the frog to the Delphians, and the raven to the avenging force that punishes the guilty party; like the raven, the Babylonians, Lydians, and all of Greece 'will reap the harvest' (καρπίσονται) of Aesop's death.

One of the many peculiarities of the composition of the Life of Aesop is the extended borrowing (occurring at Vita G 101-123) of episodes from the vita of the legendary Assyrian sage Ahiqar. The earliest text of the Life of Ahiqar, an Aramaic papyrus, is dated 420-400 BCE, and it is generally accepted that Greeks first came into contact with the legend of Ahiqar in roughly the same period. Scholars have identified numerous points of contact between the Aesop and

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47 Van Dijk 1995, 143.
Ahqar legends, and it is difficult to say with certainty whether the Ahqar material is a late addition to a pre-existing Aesopic vita or whether it is more of a kernel around which a fragmented Aesopic legend took shape and expanded during the Hellenistic period. The episodes borrowed from the story of Ahqar have Aesop traveling to Babylon (Vita G 101-111; 123) and Egypt (Vita G 112-123), providing the Life with an exotic Near-Eastern aura and serving as a sort of bridge between Aesop’s experiences on Samos (Vita G 20-100) and his confrontation with the Delphians (Vita G 124-142). Reflecting general opinion, Tomas Hagg has observed that the Ahqar material is ‘quite alien to the spirit of the rest of the Life,’ in particular the way in which Aesop’s precepts are ‘almost wholly irrelevant to their context’. It is not my intention here to contradict this view by claiming that the Ahqar material in fact fits quite well in the Life. But I would like to draw attention to some broad analogies between certain aspects of the Ahqar sections and other representations of the free Aesop’s fable-telling in Vita G 90-142.

Specifically, at chs. 109-110, the sage’s manner of imparting wisdom is analogous to the other nine representations of the free Aesop’s fable-telling in two important aspects: (1) Aesop is shown delivering established, fixed forms of wisdom (not presented as improvisations); and (2) Aesop’s words of wisdom are of a generalized character, not bound to the exigencies of a particular context.

The passages in which Aesop is assimilated to Ahqar begin with a rapid and dizzying series of events, immediately following upon Aesop’s writing down and archiving of his fables in Samos (Vita G 100). There are a number of ways in which Aesop is acknowledged now as a famous sage, comparable in stature to the legendary Ahqar, enjoying a comfortable proximity to royalty and expanding his reputation in the Near East. Having been ‘recognized with many honors’ (Vita G 101), Aesop departs Samos and ‘tours the world’ (Vita G 101), ‘lectures to audiences for a fee’ (Vita G 101) and settles first in Babylon where he ‘gives an exposition of philosophy’ and is ‘acclaimed as a great man by the Babylonians’ (Vita G 101). Aesop ‘solves philosophical conundrums’ for the king Lycurgus.

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49 Diogenes Laertius ascribes to Theophrastus a work entitled ‘Akicharos’ (D.L. 5,50). Essential questions about how and when the Ahqar material came to be incorporated into the Aesopic vita tradition are vexed and remain open. Adrados 1979 dates the establishment of a connection between Ahqar and Aesop to the fifth century BCE (cf. Kurke 2011), while West 1984 dates the connection to the Hellenistic period.

50 Hagg 1997, 182.


52 Vita G 101: Πολλοίς δὲ χρόνοις ἐν τῇ Σάμῳ διατρίψας ὁ Αἴσοπος καὶ πολλοί τιμῶν καταξιωθεὶς θυμοῦσθεν περιελθὲν τὴν οἰκουμένην, καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄκροτηρίοις διελέγετο. τοιμάσατα δὲ ἀργοκικὰ λαμβάνον πάσαν τὰ χῶραν περιελθὸν ὁ Αἴσοπος ἐγγίνετο [δὲ] ἐν Βαβυλῶνι, ἐν Ἑβασίλευσιν Λυκοῦργος. ἐπιδεικάμενος δὲ αὐτοῦ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν μέγας
(προβλήματα φιλοσοφίας, Vita G 102), who in turn ‘becomes an admirer of Aesop’s character and intelligence’ (Vita G 101). Aesop then adopts a son, named Helios, in Babylon as ‘heir to his own wisdom’ (ὡς διάδοχον αὐτοῦ τῆς σοφίας, Vita G 103). Before beginning to recite an extended and unrelated series of proverbs to Helios, Aesop tells his adopted son to ‘preserve his words as a sacred trust’ (καὶ νῦν οὖν φύλαξον τούτους ὡς παρακαταθήκην, Vita G 109). It is clear that this parakatastheke does not involve imparting an intangible kind of instinct – the ‘quick wit’ (ἀχθονόιας) or ‘readiness with words’ (εὐφρεσίλογος) that characterized the slave’s wisdom performances in Vita G 1-90. Rather, this type of knowledge is presented as something quasi-material, something Helios can possess and preserve. Indeed, Aesop presents it to Helios as a body of wisdom in the form of a set of generalized precepts (Vita G 109-110):

When drinking wine do not discuss serious matters to show off your learning, for you will be tripped up in an off moment and get yourself laughed at. Be sharper than your tongue. Do not envy those who are successful, but rejoice with them, and you will share in their good fortune, for he who is jealous unwittingly harms himself. Take care of your slaves, and share what you have with them so that they may not only obey you as their master but also honor you as their benefactor. Rule your passions. If you learn a thing later than you should, do not be ashamed, for it is better to be called a late learner than a dolt. Keep your councils from your wife, and reveal no secrets to her, for womankind is a rival in married life, and she will sit all day plotting and scheming how to get you under control.

παρὰ τοῖς Βαβυλωνίοις ἀνδειξῆθη, ὡστε καὶ τὸν βασιλέα ἐραστὴν αὐτοῦ γενέσθαι τῶν ἡδῶν διὰ τὸ νοῦν αὐτοῦ ἔχειν, καὶ ἔποιήσεν αὐτὸν ἀπὶ τῆς διοικήσεως.
This excerpt is part of a series of twenty uninterrupted and unrelated proverbs, amounting to the material inheritance (παρακαταθήκη) promised to Helios.

In keeping with the Life’s representation of the free Aesop as the possessor of an established body of wisdom, more emphasis is placed upon the free Aesop’s status as a wise and learned man in Vita G 123 and 124. First, upon his return to Babylon after time spent in Egypt, Aesop is honored again with a statue and celebrated for his wisdom (καὶ ἐποίησεν ἑορτὴν μεγάλην ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐπὶ τῇ τοῦ Αἰσώπου σοφίᾳ). Then, we are told that Aesop traveled to other cities before his fateful adventure in Delphi; in these unnamed cities Aesop ‘gave demonstrations of his wisdom and learning’ (Vita G 123). It seems noteworthy that, once Aesop is a freedman – that is, once he becomes an established teller of fables and is no longer the slave bricoleur – we no longer hear a word about his hideously ugly body, so prominent in his performances of wisdom in the first half of the work, and we do not hear about any beatings or other forms of physical violence. To be sure, there is plenty of danger:53 we do read in these sections about two attempts to kill Aesop, and the second, at the hands of the Delphians, is successful.54

5. Conclusion

In the fictional world of the Life of Aesop, the conditions and exigencies of enslavement and freedom give rise to two distinct modes of performance. By looking closely at some key differences between Aesop’s enslaved and free performances, I hope to have demonstrated that Aesop’s non-verbal communication and improvisatory wit are connected with his physical vulnerability as a slave in various ways, while his transformation into a kind of authority on human nature (cf. Vita G 101) is bound up with his manumission and with his subsequent mastery of a coherent, seemingly fixed body of wisdom. To put it another way, the slave’s body is replaced by the free author’s (putative) corpus.

The distinctions drawn between enslaved and free performances in the Life also reflect a dynamic tension that surfaces in virtually every phase of the fable’s history: namely, a tension between (1) a putatively oral, improvisational, and precarious past, embedded in slavery, and (2) a written, fixed, and stable present, circulating in the material reality of the literary text. Rather than reading (2) as

53 Finkelpearl 2003, 45, observes that ‘moments of real danger’ occur in the Life when the fables take on a lasting, physical form. But Aesop faces serious physical danger from the beginning of the Life; it is more precise to note that the key difference is that the free Aesop faces existential threats but no longer physical ones.

54 Vita G 104, 127.
supplanting (1), and leading only to Aesop’s 

hubristic, fatal encounter with the Delphians, we ought to recognize how rich and productive the tension between the two has been for authors and fabulists throughout the history of the fable tradition. The two visions of Aesopic storytelling I have been describing are mapped onto a life-cycle or ‘career’ in the Life of Aesop, with the result that the first vision – in slavery – is the fable genre’s ‘past’, while the second vision – in freedom – is the fable’s ‘present’ (or ‘future’). A strikingly similar idea can be found in the middle of the prologue to the central book of Phaedrus’ five books of Latin verse fables (Phaed. 3 Prol. 33-38):

\[
Nunc,\ fabularum\ cur\ sit\ inventum\ genus, 
brevi\ docebo.\ \ Servitus\ obnoxia, 
quae\ quae\ volebat\ non\ auderat\ dicere,  
affectus\ proprios\ in\ fabellas\ transtulit, 
calumniamque\ fictis\ elusit\ iocis. 
Ego\ illius\ pro\ semita\ feci\ viam
\]

Now I will briefly explain why the fable genre was invented. The slave, being legally vulnerable, since he didn’t dare say openly what he wished to say, transferred his personal feelings into fables, and so avoided accusation with joking stories.
Where he cut a path I have built a broad road...

Phaedrus represents the pre-literate history of fable as something associated with slavery and something dangerous; but his literate product is something very different. Regardless of questions of historicity, Phaedrus presents himself as a free writer, one who wants his readers to think that he is writing down material that was originally oral and derived from slave experience. Thus in Phaedrus, our earliest surviving collection of Aesopica, the fable is presented as a translation into Latin and a versification of material that was originally Greek, prose, and socio-politically low. But what Phaedrus created is analogous to all of our surviving Aesopica, including the Life of Aesop: as it survives in the literary record (in its many different manifestations), it is always in a state of having already undergone a process of becoming a literary product.

55 Champlin 2005.
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