Animal-Animal and Human-Animal Relationships in Proverbs, Fables and Stories: Interpretations and Responses

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1. Introduction

Texts that offer people guidance in their interpretations of social predicaments or their ways of responding to them sometimes use animal metaphors as an intermediary code, allowing the writer to insert notes of criticism or, less often approval, without stepping too close to the reader's self-esteem. For this purpose, polemic terms such as 'worm' or 'vulture' are avoided, in favour of stock proverbial types such as 'fox' or 'lion' to which refinements are added for various effects.

Animal metaphors can also be indexical, in the sense of having a conventional place in some archetypal relationship. The lion is the king of beasts; the fox is a deceiver and thief, but also an avoider of traps. These profiles may further co-occur with gender or ethnic associations, as with the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood. But here, I mean to focus on situation-specific functions and roles, especially those associated with interactions such as experience sharing or advice giving.

I will begin by introducing a way of classifying speech roles and functions which can be used to compare text types in which animal metaphors are placed. Then I will look back on how animal proverbs and fables have been used in

the past to judge attitudes or actions while always allowing margins for special contingencies. In the course of this, it will appear that the task of applying 'morals' to complex situations becomes more open-ended over time, to the extent that people are increasingly expected to work out moral conclusions for themselves.

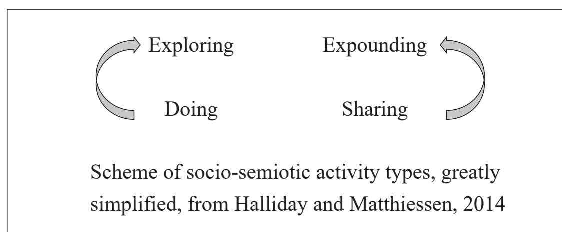
Finally, I will try to relate this principle of open-endedness to a class activity that I had a chance to view in a primary school recently: a 'Read and Share' session based on a story from the 'Kitsune no Ko' ('Fox Child') series of animal books by Moriyama Miyako (Moriyama, 1997).

2. A framework for interpretation and response

In my Introduction, I distinguished between 'interpretations' of predicaments and 'responses' to them. Thinking in terms of mood grammar, interpreting has to do with judging the present in the light of the past and is related in English to the indicative mood. Responding has to do more with taking the present as a guide for the future, which depends more on the imperative mood or modal uses of 'can', 'should', etc. Starting from insights like these, the functional linguists Matthiessen, Teruya and Lam (2010: 95–96) have devised a topology of socio-semiotic activity types. 'Socio-semiotic' means that these activities involve social signing systems such as talk or text. The topology ultimately goes back to a New South Wales model for teachable speaking and writing skill packages conceived as 'genres' but instantiated in individual texts (Martin and Rose, 2008: 1–9; Rose and Martin, 2012: 311–313).

The topology could be pictured in ring form, leading up from 'doing' on the left and 'sharing' on the right as simple, direct activities at the base to 'exploring' on the left and 'expounding' on the right as complex and indirect ones at the top

(Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014: 37):



Scheme of socio-semiotic activity types, greatly simplified, from Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014

But for my purpose I prefer to modify this layout by taking 'doing'-based and 'sharing'-based interactions separately, in matrix form, with the simpler, more direct types at the top each time:

Socio-semiotic Activity Types: I. Types based on Doing

Activity type	Subtype	Socio-semiotic function
Doing	Collaborating Directing	Practical use of language for performing a task Practical use of language for getting a task done
Enabling	Regulating Instructing	Supplying rules to control people's actions Supplying instructions to assist people's actions
Recommending	Promoting Advising	Proposing actions to further one's own interests Proposing actions to further receiver's interests
Exploring	Reviewing Arguing	Assessing a thing in terms of its societal value Assessing a choice in terms of its societal value

Socio-semiotic Activity Types: II. Types based on Sharing

Activity type	Subtype	Socio-semiotic function
Sharing	Sharing experiences Sharing values	Comparing others' experiences with one's own Comparing others' evaluations with one's own
Recreating	Narrating Dramatising	Imaginatively evoking an experience in words Imaginatively evoking an experience in actions
Reporting	Inventorying Surveying Chronicling	Setting out the elements of some class of things Setting out the parts of some area of space Setting out the stages of some series of events
Expounding	Explaining Categorizing	Accounting for general classes of phenomena Arranging general classes of phenomena

(Based on Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014: 40, but shortened and vertically reordered)

This makes a robust base for writing practice. It is enough to offer a model for each subtype in the matrix and supply examples and methods for achieving it. For reading, however, it is rare to find a text or talk that can be fully described in terms of just one activity type. A real-world 'report', for example, includes 'explanations' and may end on a 'recommendation'. The word 'Report' on the cover shows that it is meant primarily as a setting out of something, but it is not likely to stay true to that on every page and at every moment.

Going back to animal stories, a title like 'Fox Child' suggests a 'narration' or 'dramatisation', but in fact what stands out in Moriyama's stories is the way they involve 'sharing' of childhood experiences and values. That may be why the series title is 'Fox **Child**' ('Kitsune no **Ko**'), not 'Baby **Fox**' ('Ko**gitsune**'). For reading / listening purposes, then, the 'activity types' in the topology do not lead so automatically to text type labels. There is generally a remainder. These are interpretation frames, and real-world texts of more than minimal variability can be interpreted using more than one frame. After that comes the need to decide which reading and response choice, if any, is primary, and what more complex effect has been achieved by leading the reader or listener along more than one interaction pathway. Most animal stories have complex reading potential of this kind, because the interactions with animals, or among animals only, make up a one-step-removed code for a range of interpretation and guidance options. But to pursue this line further would be jumping the argument. Let us slow down again, and take a look at a few older animal metaphor texts through this framework just introduced.

3. How animal observations and stories have been used in the past

The origins and styles of animal proverbs and stories, and their applications

to human affairs, may be quite diverse even in a single collection. It is therefore unrealistic to attempt a sweeping overview of how all uses of animal metaphor work in moral norm setting. All that can be offered are selected instances. This will be enough, however, to make the point that texts and talks of this sort are widespread and frequently exchanged across oceans and continents. It is no surprise, for example, to find a proverb about ants, most likely taken from secular Persian or Greek sources, turning up in the 'wisdom' section of Jewish scripture as part of *The Proverbs of Solomon* (Hebrew: *Mishle Shlomoh*):

> Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!
> It has no commander, no overseer or ruler,
> Yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.
> How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep?
>
> *Proverbs*, 6. 6–9 (New International Version)

The term 'proverb' here goes back via Greek 'par-oimion' ('proverb'), to Hebrew '*mashal*', a broad term that covers most of the repertoire of Jewish wisdom preaching: wise sayings, oracles, taunts, parables, etc. (Gowler, 2000: 48; biblestudytools: The Nature of a Proverb). To express all of this in one English word would require a hold-all term like '*saying*', and in fact there are translations with titles like '*The Wise Sayings of Solomon*' (NLV).

This relatively late Ant proverb seems to be approaching what was later known in Greek as a '*parabole*' ('likeness', 'parable'). In Hebrew, too, '*mashal*' eventually came to refer narrowly to the opening interest-catching subject matter, leaving the explication to a separate element called the '*nimshal*', from a verb meaning 'be like'. The preacher would first offer a teasing paradox (*mashal*) which he would then account for (*nimshal*). From the preaching

viewpoint, this *mashal* – *nimshal* relation thus opens a strategy path leading to an objective: “The *nimshal* intends a normative teaching and the *mashal* is created to fit it” (Thoma and Wyschogrod, 1986: 168).

Returning to the activity type matrices again, it is noticeable that the opening and last lines of the proverb (‘…. consider the ant’s ways …. When will you get up from your sleep?’) belong grammatically together. They are in the second person (‘you’), in imperative / interrogative moods. In the matrix framework, they can be described as ‘promoting’ a wise way of behavior. The second and third lines (‘It has no commander …. Yet it stores its provisions ….’) are in the third person (‘it’), in declarative mood. They can be classed as ‘inventorying’: setting out the ant’s wise ways for the sluggard to learn from. These middle two lines are not strictly essential for the sense of the promotional message. But the proverb would lose all of its memorability and most of its persuasive appeal if these amusing details were left out.

There are two grounds, however, for saying that this text is not a parable as it stands. For one thing, the rebuke ‘you sluggard’ continues unchanged from line 1 to line 4. Secondly, the argument fits into a larger context. The purpose of *The Proverbs of Solomon* as a whole, as explained in its opening verses, is to lead people to wisdom by ‘giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young’ (1, 4) while ‘the wise listen and add to their learning’ (1.5). In the first seven chapters, these objectives are expanded on, and chapter 6, with the Ant, is part of the general expansion on ‘prudence’ and ‘discretion’.

All the same, there is something parable-like in the clash between the exemplum of the Ant and the sluggard’s idleness. And it is more than just a Jewish clash. Boyarin (2003) argues that the *mashal* – *nimshal* argument structure can serve more generally as a means of exemplification leading up to a ‘moral lesson’. He demonstrates this for Christian parables in *The Gospel according to Matthew*, but there is no reason why it should not work in other

religions too, or in secular ethics. As we shall now see, there is evidence to suggest that the contents and applications of Aesop's Fables, for example, may have evolved over time towards open-endedness.

4. How Fables have been used in the past, and how they have changed

Aesop is said to have served King Croesus of Lydia and have died around 564 BCE. After his death, by one process or another, he seems to have acquired a reputation as a teller of fables that were less simple than they seemed. Otherwise, views on him diverged. According to Aristophanes (2005: 566 f), writing in 422 BCE, Aesop fables such as 'The Wolf and the Lamb' were misused at trials to excite judges' compassion. In contrast with this, however, Socrates, facing unjust execution in 399 BCE, is said to have spent part of his last day reacting to the pleasures and pains of human life by putting some of Aesop's fables into verse (Plato, 2004: 10).

The earliest known large collection of Aesop's Fables was made in prose by Demetrius of Phaleron after 300 BCE (Britannica, 2019: 'Demetrius of Phaleron'). But this has not survived. Modern versions go back to prose and verse compilations from around the end of the first century CE, especially a collection in Greek verse by Babrius (Davies, 1860). A lean narrative form ending on a short concluding 'moral' ('epimyth') has remained the staple fable form ever since. Its antiquity was confirmed in 1844 through the recovery of a manuscript going back more directly to Babrius than any versions that were previously known (Davies, 1860: Introduction).

I will now return to my more detailed argument by selecting one fable from Babrius to compare with the 'Go to the ant' proverb we saw earlier. An obvious choice is 'The Ant and the Grasshopper', which Babrius, in his Mediterranean

climate, calls ‘The Ant and the Cicada’.

> In winter time, an ant dragged forth, to dry,
> Some corn by him last summer heap’d on high.
> A starved grasshopper begg’d that he would give
> Some share to it, lest it should cease to live.
> “What did you?”, asked he, “All the summer long?”
> “I lagg’d not, but was constant in my song.”
> Laughing, the ant said, as he barr’d his wheat,
> “Dance in the cold, since you sang in the heat!”
>
> Of needful things ‘tis better thought to take,
> Than joy and revels our mind’s study make.

(Babrius, translated Davies, 1860: 119)

In terms of interaction, this text can be broken down into three parts. The two lines at the top present a situation in which an ant is well stocked to survive the winter. But this is upset by the arrival of a ‘starved’ grasshopper in the third line. With this, the focus of interest shifts to an implied ethical contrast rather similar to the one in *Proverbs* between the ant and the sluggard. But as everything in the fable so far is presented in an unlocated past tense with no clear link to the speaker’s present, a search through the matrices of activity types suggests that it is on the way to becoming a ‘narration’ recreating a typical early winter predicament in an agrarian society.

This perception is modified in the passage from line 3 to line 8, however, as the interaction moves over to a direct speech dialogue, featuring ‘you’ and ‘I’ as the action subjects while ‘he’ (the ant) and ‘it’ (the grasshopper) remain as the speaking subjects. As far as actions are concerned, by line 8 the text

has virtually turned into ‘drama’. Notice, however, that the ‘you’ and the ‘I’ pronouns all refer to the grasshopper, whose predicament this is all about. As in the ‘Go to the ant’ proverb, the ant is only of interest as a role model or a moral accuser.

Finally, the fable closes with a general impersonal moral: ‘…. ’tis better thought to take ….’ In principle, this could be applied to anybody, but in practice it fits the ant positively and the grasshopper negatively. Any other match is ruled out by basic biology: real ants are predisposed to gather food, while grasshoppers – let alone cicadas – are programmed only to sing and die. There can therefore be no grounds for saying that the grasshopper could have fared any better by investing in food storage. That lesson is only of comfort to a human listener or reader.

In that sense, the ‘epimyth’ (the concluding ‘moral’) is sharply distinct from the narrative and dialogue. That may be why it is set apart with an empty line between. The separate epimyth is known to have existed in fables from ancient times and has been discovered in very old papyrus remains. But it is not a feature of every fable, and about half of those in the known Babrius collection end without one. Instead, in many cases there is an integrated closing speech of reflection spoken by a character, or a taunt delivered by a winning character against a losing one. If the separate moral couplet in Babrius’ Ant and Grasshopper story were to be left off, an integrated taunt of this kind would be exactly the ending that remained:

> ‘Dance in the cold, since you sang in the heat!’

It is not impossible that the fable once did end in this way, and that the couplet was added at a later stage by a copyist or commentator (Davies, 1860: Introduction, note 14).

If I tried to give even a minimal overview of developments in fable composition in centuries following Babrius, I would not be able to stay within the space limits I have set myself. Instead, let me just point to two greatly contrasting examples of how the concluding moral comment can be reduced to nothing or expanded to outweigh the fable story itself.

Jean de La Fontaine, who takes 'The Cicada and the Ant' ('La Cigale et la Fourmi') for the opening item in his collection of Fables (La Fontaine: 6–7), publication of which started in 1668, not only ends on the singing and dancing taunt, with no other moral to follow:

– Vous chantiez? J'en suis fort aise.	– You were singing? Delighted to hear it.
Eh bien! Dansez maintenant.	Well then! Now you can dance.

(La Fontaine, n. d. [1668]: 4. My translation.)

but also removes the opening lines that tell of the Ant's wisdom and frugality in laying up stores. What remains is wholly focused on the Cicada. Moreover, as 'cigale' and 'fourmi' are both feminine nouns in French, the tale turns by grammatical logic into a comedy of manners between two mismatched housewives: the underinvesting Cicada and the slow-to-lend Ant. The dialogue is the same in its basic development as in the dialogue section of the Babrius fable (lines 3 to 8), with the Cicada begging for grain in indirect speech and the Ant countering in direct speech, first with a question and then with a refusal and a taunt. But the six lines in Babrius are expanded to 22 in La Fontaine, and come loaded with vocabulary from activity areas like domestic economy and loans on interest that would be unthinkable if this were to be read as a metaphor only:

《Elle alla crier famine	“She went crying famine
Chez la Fourmi sa voisine,	To the Ant her neighbor,
La priant de lui prêter	Begging for a loan
Quelque grain pour subsister	Of some grain to tide over
Jusqu’à la saison nouvelle.	Just until next season.
Je vous paierai, lui dit-elle,	I’ll pay you back, she said.
Avant l’Oût, foi d’animal,	Animal’s word, by August,
Intérêt et principal.》	Interest and principal.”

(La Fontaine, n. d. [1668]: 4. My translation.)

At the other pole to this, one could cite the heavy prose in Thomas Bewick’s 1818 edition of *The Fables of Aesop and Others* (Bewick, 1818). Bewick’s Aesop editions were outstanding for their high-quality woodcuts, but the texts were not their selling point. When a text is read alone, it becomes obvious that nothing survives of the original lean narrative

> A commonwealth of Ants, having, after a busy summer, provided every thing for their wants in the winter, were about shutting themselves up for that dreary season, when a Grasshopper in great distress, and in dread of perishing with cold and hunger, approached their avenues, and with great humility begged they would relieve his wants, and permit him to take shelter in any corner of their comfortable mansion. (….)
>
> (Bewick, 1818: 307)

This is only the first half of the fable, and although the Ants respond again in dismissive direct speech as in the other versions we have seen, the effect seems to be aimed more at the reader than at the Grasshopper. The taunt for him to try dancing goes flat amidst a kind of temperance sermon against drink, song and

dance generally:

> (….) If that be the case, replied the Ant, all I have to say is this: that they who drink, sing and dance in the summer, run a great risk of starving in the winter.

The ‘Application’ (moral) that follows is about 25% longer than the fable itself and takes the form of ‘advice’ to work hard in youth so as to be able to save later for the wants of old age. It is worth remembering that this was the age of demobilisation after the Napoleonic Wars, when the roads were peopled with vagrants one of whose problems was how to go begging unobtrusively enough at back doors to escape being caught and sent to a workhouse. But, formally, the Application text is not about responding to unemployment and vagrancy as existing problems so much as about ‘advising’ the next generation how best not to follow their seniors into such poverty traps.

La Fontaine and Bewick represent almost opposite poles of the undertaking of retelling Aesop under varying sets of interaction conditions, and even if the grim predicament of the Grasshopper / Cicada never drops out of view in these stories, the ‘serve you right!’ attitude of the Ant / Ants is disconcerting for many readers today, either in its comedy-of-manners variant (La Fontaine) or in its Northumbrian work ethic one (Bewick).

5. Read for yourself, then talk together

As a closure for this paper, my initial idea was to discuss one or two attempts of divergence from mainstream fable traditions that offer the chance of an overhaul for the benefit of future ages. This could mean, for example, bringing

in more minority indigenous or immigrant views of community history and culture. One example of this would be the adaptation of an indigenous Australian story, 'The Echidna and the Shade Tree' (Green, 1984), as a composition model for primary school storytelling training, as discussed by Martin and Rose (2008: 244–247).

Another positive model to follow might be a recent project to identify core characteristics in the local fable legacy that could then be preserved while updating some less essential features. For example, in a German project of 'Writing Fables' as a school class activity (Levrai, 2011), the core legacy adopted was the line of descent from Martin Luther (Luther, 1995). The initial finding, as hinted in section 4 above, was that a fable in this lineage depends on a careful balance between simple and subtle. On the simple side, the animal protagonists stand for particular types or classes of people arranged around a theme of human foolishness. The stories have to be short and sparing on detail, with a small cast of characters – in many cases, just two. On the subtler side, the fact that the place and time of the action are unspecified generates a sense of universality. As no claim can be made that such a placeless, timeless action has really occurred, the fable appears on first sight as a fiction; yet with well-judged touches or phrases, the fault lines of contemporary society can be laid bare by this technique, so that it is not hard in practice to draw connections with real current events and people. In other words, the closing 'moral', where there is one, while in principle staying general in scope, in effect allows fairly sharp comments on the way things are happening in the world – albeit obliquely and deniably.

An ending of this very general sort was my original intention. However, in early September of this year, I had a lucky chance to watch some classes in the lower primary grades at the Japanese School in Istanbul and noticed that one of them was based, in a 'Read and Share' way, on a modern story that could be

regarded as an open-ended successor of an animal fable legacy. The author, who died in 2018, was Moriyama Miyako and the story used was ‘Yūyake’ (‘Sunset Glow’), one of a cycle of month-by-month childhood experiences shared by three class friends, Kitsune no Ko (Fox Child), Usagi no Ko (Rabbit Child) and Kuma no Ko (Bear Child). From the pronouns used (‘boku’, ‘watashi’), it can be inferred that Rabbit Child is a girl while Fox Child and Bear Child are boys. The title of the cycle is *12 no tsuki no chiisana ohanashi* (‘12 Months of Little Stories’) (Moriyama, 1997).

Moriyama was a prolific writer of animal stories for young children. A feature of most of her work is that the animal characters have no personal names, but only generic ones such as ‘Korisu’ (‘Little Squirrel’) or ‘Kousagi’ (‘Little Rabbit’). Once launched, the same character often appears in several more stories based on a human child’s growing experiences. Thus, there are ‘Kousagi’ (‘Little Rabbit’) stories from 1977, 1983 and 1986, ‘Kobuta’ (‘Little Pig’) stories from 1983, 1986 and 1989, and so on. If names are given, they are still based on the animal name (three stories about ‘Kobunta’, a pig, in 1990; three about ‘Kabao’, from ‘Kaba’ – ‘Hippo’, in 1985, 1986 and 1988) and so on. The name choices do not seem to be tied to publishing contracts, because in each case the series is spread across two or more publishers. I have not discovered any discussions of this naming practice among readers or critics, but it seems to me that the appeal of Moriyama’s books depends on the child being able to slip easily into a bonding relationship with Little Rabbit, for example, as she makes strawberry jam (1977) or learns her “a – i – u – e – o” syllables. Thinking of Niimi Nankichi’s more canonical fox stories, part of the special reading appeal of ‘Tebukuro o kai ni’ (‘Going to Buy Gloves’) is that the fox child and its anxious mother have no names, so that this story is more accessible to young readers than ‘Gon Gitsune’ (‘Gon the Fox’) in which both Gon and the local farmers are named.

Whether my view of this is right, I cannot say. But after Fox Child, Rabbit Child and Bear Child first came out as a threesome in 1997, the 'Fox Child' cycle of experience stories achieved particular popularity, apparently because of the immense bonding attraction with the Fox Child character. The Rabbit Child and the Bear Child are supporting 'classmates' characters, one a little more gentle, the other a little boisterous, who provide the Fox Child with the experience of a peergroup circle as they all three grow up together. As a result, the series is adept for taking in children's social anxieties and experiences, not so much personal or family ones. At any rate, at least two of these stories have been adopted as reading texts in authorised Japanese Language textbooks for first grade classes: 'Yūyake' ('Sunset Glow'), in 'Kokugo 1 nen' (Mitsumura Tosho, 2015) and 'Kaigara' ('Seashell'), in 'Kokugo 1 nen' (Tōkyō Shoseki, 2015).

My emphasis here on peergroup childhood experience is reinforced, and in some aspects no doubt awakened, by my reading of a detailed analysis of the 'Yūyake' story as a learning text included in a research blog compiled by Miwa Tamiko, a previous elementary school teacher and president of the Saitama branch of the Child Language Research Society. Miwa fills in the background that Moriyama's '12 months' cycle of stories goes back still earlier to 1990–1991, when the stories appeared periodically as 'Haru, natsu, aki, fuyu no ohanashi' ('Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter Stories') in a house magazine of the Benesse Corporation (Miwa, 2015). But more importantly, she stresses the empathetic way in which the three animal friends are always portrayed 'within their group, their natural surroundings and the various concerns that affect them' ('nakama, shizen, sorera to no kakawari').

While the adventures of the three playmates are not wholly comparable with the naturally and socially conditioned interactions of the Ant and Grasshopper, Fox and Wolf, and so on in Aesop, the overlapping interest in the personal

and communal outlooks, and the recurring encounters of the same limited cast of characters in varying life situations offers points of resemblance. And as Moriyama's interest is especially in the shared growing experiences, there is an ethical connection, as well, to the conflicts and compromises, tied up with multiple practical and moral issues, that need to be faced in the lifelong quest for wisdom in *Proverbs* and in the more open-ended raising and elucidating of teasing Parables that later grew out of this wisdom literature.

With Moriyama's stories, the learning activities are essentially a matter of reading into the Fox Child's feelings. In the 'Yūyake' story, it turns out that attention and encouragement are not as easy to win from peer-group friends as from parents, but have to be arrived at through byways, by joining in with the group first, and later sharing satisfactions and discoveries. Reading first what the characters say and feel about things ('hitoriyomi' – reading on your own) and then sharing impressions and ideas within the class about it ('hanashiai' – sharing what you have read) is the basic strategy for this kind of classwork. And clearly the teacher in the class I visited shared some of the same methodological ideas for this process that I later found set out in the research blog by Miwa.

6. Conclusion

This has been an exploratory study for me, and has included some areas I am far from familiar with. So let me simply recapitulate the ground I have covered.

I began by making the well-known point that animal proverbs and fables are not works of biology, but part of an ethical heritage in which animals and their purported relationships stand for human roles and relations. It is thus necessary to take a step back while reading them, and one way of doing this is to follow an 'interaction topology' so as to show which actions are similar and which

are different. Using this, I tried to trace some developments in the past use of proverbs in Middle Eastern wisdom literature and of fables, mainly in Europe. In both cases, there are multiple ways of telling the tale and of applying it, but there is a long-term tendency, I believe, for the process to become open-ended with passing time.

Finally, after sketching out two possibilities for further future enrichment of proverb and fable legacies, through diversification of sources and through greater discernment of what is essential to a fable and what can be changed, I returned to everyday life and reported a personal experience I had just a month before submitting this article: a visit to a first-grade 'Read and Share' classroom activity in an elementary school. It struck me that there was something in common between this discovery reading approach and the open-ended 'wisdom quest' that marks the future for proverbs and fables. In section 5, therefore, I examined my reactions to this insight, rather than attempting just yet to supply a well-reasoned account of what is going on here. That account, if it comes, will be for a future publication.

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