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The Tortoise and the Hare, All in One

When Italo Calvino writes, “Hurry Slowly,” he recognizes the essential artifice of chronological narratives. When applied to a story, time becomes an amorphous entity; a pliable mould at the mercy of the writer’s manipulations. A story, after all, only abstractly characterizes reality. Society developed a set of characters to approximate all of reality. A swish of ink upon parchment; a triangle wedge pressed into moist clay; a hieroglyph etched into a wall; all vainglorious attempts at the impossible. The latin alphabet consists of twenty-six characters, giving the writer a challenging formula of twenty-six to infinity to approximate the world around him or her. The writer, first and foremost, must take advantage of the inherent fiction of the medium. As a literary device, time gives structure to a narrative. Time may move either fluidly and quickly, as in the condensed prose of the sweeping epic or of the succinct fairy tale, or in a more convoluted manner, as in the psychological prose of a Diderot or Dostoyevsky. Here, stories trace back to the thoughts of the narrator, a complex and inactive cerebral realm. Calvino prefers quick prose, where words keep pace with the active world outside. Tales of magic, transformation, kings and queens, all find form in swift narratives that capture the essence of the tale without brooding tones. He throws excess detail by the wayside, leaving the text with a most austere construction. In this way, the bare-boned folk tale—prevalent for centuries in the Italian countryside—may ironically possess a central tenet of modernity, minimalism. Prose, like poetry, must reduce complexity to simplicity, and must synchronize disharmonies until they arrive at a harmonious conclusion.

The “Hurry” of Calvino’s credo has two levels of meaning: The narrative must progress with agility, while the author must think quickly and cleverly in order to avoid staleness of thought and action, of image and word. This, however, need not imply haste on the part of the author. Enter the “Slowly” of Calvino’s contradictory code. The author may only hone his mental agility through years of labor and practice. In this way, the writer may understand with more certainty what to include and what to exclude in his narratives. The act of writing mirrors the development of the western alphabet, as literal pictographs evolved into more streamlined characters, until they reached their final state of pictorial abstraction. And yet by that point, the audience could understand and agree upon the inherent meaning of each simple form.

Not surprisingly, Calvino concludes his essay with the story of not a writer, but an artist. The Chinese artist had to render the simplest of drawings, yet it took him years to even attempt its portrayal. By the time he was ready to draw the crab, the artist had already envisioned the form in its simplest state of perfection, and could render it unto the page with alacrity. Such a story echoes to a comment made by a painter centuries later. The impressionist Henry Whistler received much criticism for his moody, atmospheric paintings, for they appeared as blurry smears of paint with a few calligraphic lines to denote a bridge, or waves of water. One patron complained that he should not have to pay for a piece that Whistler could dash off in a moment. In response, the artist protested, “Yes, but it took twenty years of hard work for me to learn to paint that image.” An artist or a writer must laboriously strive for perfect form, be it in the image or in the narrative. Only then may a quickness of thought and form arrive. For Italo Calvino, “Hurry

Slowly,” despite its contradictions, offers a wealth of pragmatic advice to any aspiring writer.

