
QUICKNESS

I will start by telling you an ancient legend.

Late in life the emperor Charlemagne fell in love with a German girl. The barons at his court were extremely worried when they saw that the sovereign, wholly taken up with his amorous passion and unmindful of his regal dignity, was neglecting the affairs of state. When the girl suddenly died, the courtiers were greatly relieved—but not for long, because Charlemagne’s love did not die with her. The emperor had the embalmed body carried to his bedchamber, where he refused to be parted from it. The Archbishop Turpin, alarmed by this macabre passion, suspected an enchantment and insisted on examining the corpse. Hidden under the girl’s dead tongue he found a ring with a precious stone set in it. As soon as the ring was in Turpin’s hands, Charlemagne fell passionately in love with the archbishop and hurriedly had the girl buried. In order to escape the embarrassing situation, Turpin flung the ring into Lake Constance. Charlemagne thereupon fell in love with the lake and would not leave its shores.

This legend, “taken from a book on magic,” is set down even more concisely than I have recorded it in a book of unpublished notes by the French Romantic writer Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly (you can find it in the notes to the Pléiade edition of Barbey d’Aurevilly’s works, I.1315). Ever since I read it, the legend has

kept coming back into my mind as if the spell of the ring were continuing to act through the medium of the story.

Let me try to explain why such a story can be so fascinating to us. What we have is a series of totally abnormal events linked together: the love of an old man for a young girl, a necrophiliac obsession and a homosexual impulse, while in the end everything subsides into melancholy contemplation, with the old king staring in rapture at the lake. "Charlemagne, la vue attachée sur son lac de Constance, amoureux de l'abîme caché" (Charlemagne, his eyes fixed on Lake Constance, in love with the hidden abyss), writes Barbey d'Aurevilly in the passage in his novel (*Une vieille maîtresse*, p. 221) which he annotates by relating the legend.

To hold this chain of events together, there is a verbal link, the word "love" or "passion," which establishes a continuity between different forms of attraction. There is also a narrative link, the magic ring that establishes a logical relationship of cause and effect between the various episodes. The drive of desire toward a thing that does not exist, a lack or absence symbolized by the empty circle of the ring, is expressed more by the rhythm of the story than by the events narrated. In the same way, the whole story is shot through with a sense of death, against which Charlemagne appears to be struggling feverishly by clinging to the last remnants of life; a fever that then subsides in the contemplation of the lake.

The real protagonist of the story, however, is the magic ring, because it is the movements of the ring that determine those of the characters and because it is the ring that establishes the relationships between them. Around the magic object there forms a kind of force field that is in fact the territory of the story itself. We might say that the magic object is an outward and visible sign that reveals the connection between people or between events. It has a narrative function, whose history we may trace in the

Norse sagas and the chivalric romances—a function that continues to surface in Italian poems of the Renaissance. In Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* we find an endless series of exchanges of swords, shields, helmets, and horses, each one endowed with particular qualities. In this way the plot can be described in terms of the changes of ownership of a certain number of objects, each one endowed with certain powers that determine the relationships between certain characters.

In realistic narrative, Mambrino's helmet becomes a barber's bowl, but it does not lose importance or meaning. In the same way, enormous weight is attached to all the objects that Robinson Crusoe saves from the wrecked ship or makes with his own hands. I would say that the moment an object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships. The symbolism of an object may be more or less explicit, but it is always there. We might even say that in a narrative any object is always magic.

Returning to the Charlemagne legend, we find it has a literary tradition in Italian. In his *Lettere famigliari* (I.4) Petrarch tells us that he had heard this "not unpleasant tale" (*fabella non inamena*)—which he says he doesn't believe—while visiting Charlemagne's tomb at Aix-la-Chapelle. In Petrarch's Latin, the story is much richer in moral comment, and also in detail and feeling (the bishop of Cologne, in obedience to a miraculous voice from heaven, gropes with his finger beneath the cold, rigid tongue of the corpse: *sub gelida rigentique lingua*). But speaking for myself, I greatly prefer the bare résumé, in which everything is left to the imagination and the speed with which events follow one another conveys a feeling of the ineluctable.

The legend reappears in the flowery language of sixteenth-century Italy in various versions, in which the necrophiliac aspect

acquires the most emphasis. Sebastiano Erizzo, a Venetian writer of novellas, puts into the mouth of Charlemagne—while he is in bed with the corpse—a lamentation several pages in length. On the other hand, the homosexual aspect of the emperor's passion for the archbishop is hardly ever alluded to, or even expunged altogether, as in one of the most famous sixteenth-century treatises on love (that of Giuseppe Bettussi) in which the story ends with the finding of the ring. As for the ending, in Petrarch and his Italian followers, Lake Constance is not mentioned because the entire action takes place at Aix-la-Chapelle, since the legend was supposed to be an explanation of the origins of the palace and the church the emperor had built there. The ring is thrown into a marsh, whose muddy stench the emperor breathes in as if it were perfume, while "he takes delight in using its waters." Here there is a link with other local legends on the origins of the thermal springs, details that put even more emphasis on the mortuary quality of the whole affair.

Even earlier than this were the German medieval traditions studied by Gaston Paris. These deal with Charlemagne's love for a dead woman with variants that make it a very different story. Now the beloved is the emperor's legal wife, who uses the magic ring to ensure his fidelity; at other times she is a fairy or nymph who dies when the ring is taken from her; sometimes she is a woman who seems to be alive but is discovered to be a corpse once the ring is removed. At the bottom of all this there may well be a Scandinavian saga: Harald, king of Norway, slept with his dead wife who was wrapped in a magic cloak that gave her the appearance of being alive.

In a word, in the medieval versions collected by Gaston Paris, what is lacking is the chain of events; in the literary versions of Petrarch and the Renaissance writers, what is missing is speed. So I still prefer the version given by Barbey d'Aureville, in spite

of its rather patched-up crudity. The secret of the story lies in its economy: the events, however long they last, become punctiform, connected by rectilinear segments, in a zigzag pattern that suggests incessant motion.

I do not wish to say that quickness is a value in itself. Narrative time can also be delaying, cyclic, or motionless. In any case, a story is an operation carried out on the length of time involved, an enchantment that acts on the passing of time, either contracting or dilating it. Sicilian storytellers use the formula "lu cuntun nun metti tempu" (time takes no time in a story) when they want to leave out links or indicate gaps of months or even years. The technique of oral narration in the popular tradition follows functional criteria. It leaves out unnecessary details but stresses repetition: for example, when the tale consists of a series of the same obstacles to be overcome by different people. A child's pleasure in listening to stories lies partly in waiting for things he expects to be repeated: situations, phrases, formulas. Just as in poems and songs the rhymes help to create the rhythm, so in prose narrative there are events that rhyme. The Charlemagne legend is highly effective narrative because it is a series of events that echo each other as rhymes do in a poem.

If during a certain period of my career as a writer I was attracted by folktales and fairytales, this was not the result of loyalty to an ethnic tradition (seeing that my roots are planted in an entirely modern and cosmopolitan Italy), nor the result of nostalgia for things I read as a child (in my family, a child could read only educational books, particularly those with some scientific basis). It was rather because of my interest in style and structure, in the economy, rhythm, and hard logic with which they are told. In working on my transcription of Italian folktales as recorded by

scholars of the last century, I found most enjoyment when the original text was extremely laconic. This I tried to convey, respecting the conciseness and at the same time trying to obtain the greatest possible narrative force. See, for instance, number 57 in *Italian Folktales (Fiabe italiane)*:

Un Re s'ammalò. Vennero i medici e gli dissero: "Senta, Maestà, se vuol guarire, bisogna che lei prenda una penna dell'Orco. E' un rimedio difficile, perchè l'Orco tutti i cristiani che vede se li mangia.

Il Re lo disse a tutti ma nessuno ci voleva andare. Lo chiese a un suo sottoposto, molto fedele e coraggioso, e questi disse: "Andrò."

Gli insegnarono la strada: "In cima a un monte, ci sono sette buche: in una delle sette, ci sta l'Orco."

L'uomo andò e lo prese il buio per la strada. Si fermò in una locanda . . .

A king fell ill and was told by his doctors, "Majesty, if you want to get well, you'll have to obtain one of the ogre's feathers. That will not be easy, since the ogre eats every human he sees."

The king passed the word on to everybody, but no one was willing to go to the ogre. Then he asked one of his most loyal and courageous attendants, who said, "I will go."

The man was shown the road and told, "On a mountaintop are seven caves, in one of which lives the ogre."

The man set out and walked until dark, when he stopped at an inn . . . *

Not a word is said about what illness the king was suffering from, or why on earth an ogre should have feathers, or what

*"The Feathered Ogre," translated by George Martin, from *Italian Folktales* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1956, 1980).

those caves were like. But everything mentioned has a necessary function in the plot. The very first characteristic of a folktale is economy of expression. The most outlandish adventures are recounted with an eye fixed on the bare essentials. There is always a battle against time, against the obstacles that prevent or delay the fulfillment of a desire or the repossession of something cherished but lost. Or time can stop altogether, as in the castle of Sleeping Beauty. To bring this about, Charles Perrault has only to write: "Les broches mêmes qui étaient au feu toutes pleines de perdrix et de faisans s'endormirent, et le feu aussi. Tout cela se fit en un moment; les Fées n'étaient pas longues à leur besogne" (Even the spits on the fire, all laden with partridges and pheasants, went to sleep, and the fire along with them. All this happened in a moment: the fairies were not long at their work).

The relativity of time is the subject of a folktale known almost everywhere: a journey to another world is made by someone who thinks it has lasted only a few hours, though when he returns, his village is unrecognizable because years and years have gone by. In early American literature, of course, this was the theme of Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," which acquired the status of a foundation myth for your ever-changing society.

This motif can also be interpreted as an allegory of narrative time and the way in which it cannot be measured against real time. And the same significance can be seen in the reverse operation, in the expanding of time by the internal proliferations from one story to another, which is a feature of oriental storytelling. Scheherazade tells a story in which someone tells a story in which someone tells a story, and so forth. The art that enables Scheherazade to save her life every night consists of knowing how to join one story to another, breaking off at just the right moment—two ways of manipulating the continuity and discontinuity of time. It is a secret of rhythm, a way of capturing time that we can recognize from the very beginning: in the epic by means

of the metrical effects of the verse, in prose narrative by those effects that make us eager to know what comes next.

Everybody knows the discomfort felt when someone sets out to tell a joke without being good at it and gets everything wrong, by which I mean, above all, the links and the rhythms. This feeling is evoked in one of Boccaccio's novellas (VI.1), which is in fact devoted to the art of storytelling.

A jovial company of ladies and gentlemen, guests of a Florentine lady in her country house, go for an after-lunch outing to another pleasant place in the neighborhood. To cheer them on their way, one of the men offers to tell a story.

"Madonna Oretta, quando voi vogliate, io vi porterò, gran parte della via che a andare abbiamo, a cavallo con una delle belle novelle del mondo."

Al quale la donna rispuose: "Messere, anzi ve ne priego io molto, e sarammi carissimo."

Messer lo cavaliere, al quale forse non stava meglio la spada allato che 'l novellar nella lingua, udito questo, cominciò una sua novella, la quale nel vero da sé era bellissima, ma egli or tre e quatro e sei volte replicando una medesima parola e ora indietro tornando e talvolta dicendo: "Io non dissi bene" e spesso ne' nomi errando, un per un altro ponendone, fieramente la guastava: senza che egli pessimamente, secondo le qualità delle persone e gli atti che accadevano, profereva.

Di che a madonna Oretta, udendolo, spesse volte veniva un sudore e uno sfinimento di cuore, come se inferma fosse stata per terminare; la qual cosa poi che piú sofferir non poté, conoscendo che il cavaliere era entrato nel pecoreccio né era per riuscirne, piacevolmente disse: "Messer, questo vostro cavallo ha troppo duro trotto, per che io vi priego che vi piaccia di pormi a piè."

"Mistress Oretta, if you please, I shall carry you a great part of the way we have to go on horseback, with one of the best stories in the world." "Sir," she replied, "I pray you to do so; that will be most agreeable." Hearing this, master cavalier, who perhaps fared no better with sword at side than with tale on tongue, began his story, which was indeed a very fine one. But what with his repeating of the same word three or four or six times over, his recapitulations, his "I didn't say that right," his erring in putting one name for another, he spoiled it dreadfully. Also his delivery was very poor, quite out of keeping with the circumstances and the quality of his persons. Mistress Oretta, hearing him, was many times taken with a sweat and a sinking of the heart, as if she were sick and about to die. At last, unable to endure the torment any longer and seeing that the gentleman was entangled in a maze of his own making, she said pleasantly: "Sir, this horse of yours has too hard a trot, and I pray you to set me on my feet again."

The novella is a horse, a means of transport with its own pace, a trot or a gallop according to the distance and the ground it has to travel over; but the speed Boccaccio is talking about is a mental speed. The listed defects of the clumsy storyteller are above all offenses against rhythm, as well as being defects of style, because he does not use the expressions appropriate either to the characters or to the events. In other words, even correctness of style is a question of quick adjustment, of agility of both thought and expression.

The horse as an emblem of speed, even speed of the mind, runs through the whole history of literature, heralding the entire problematics of our own technological viewpoint. The age of

speed, in transport as in information, opens with one of the finest essays in English literature, Thomas De Quincey's "The English Mail-Coach." In 1849 he already understood everything we now know about the motorized highway world, including death-dealing high-speed crashes.

In the section called "The Vision of Sudden Death," De Quincey describes a night journey on the box of an express mail coach with a gigantic coachman who is fast asleep. The technical perfection of the vehicle, and the transformation of the driver into a blind inanimate object, puts the traveler at the mercy of the mechanical inexorability of a machine. In the clarity of perception brought on by a dose of laudanum, De Quincey becomes aware that the horses are running uncontrollably at thirteen miles an hour on the wrong side of the road. This means certain disaster, not for the swift, sturdy mail coach but for the first unfortunate carriage to come along that road in the opposite direction. In fact, at the end of the straight, tree-lined avenue, which looks like a "Gothic aisle," he sees a "frail reedy gig" in which a young couple are approaching at one mile an hour. "Between them and eternity, to all human calculation, there is but a minute and a-half." De Quincey gives a shout: "Mine had been the first step; the second was for the young man; the third was for God." The account of these few seconds has not been bettered even in an age in which the experience of high speeds has become a basic fact of life.

Glance of eye, thought of man, wing of angel, which of these had speed enough to sweep between the question and the answer, and divide the one from the other? Light does not tread upon the steps of light more indivisibly than did our all-conquering arrival upon the escaping efforts of the gig.

De Quincey succeeds in conveying a sense of an extremely short period of time that nonetheless contains both the calculation of the technical inevitability of the crash and the imponderable—God's part in the matter—in virtue of which the two vehicles do not collide.

The motif that interests us here is not physical speed, but the relationship between physical speed and speed of mind. This was also interesting to a great Italian poet of De Quincey's generation. Giacomo Leopardi, whose youth was as sedentary as one can imagine, struck a rare joyful moment when he wrote in his diary, the *Zibaldone di pensieri* (Casual Thoughts):

La velocità, per esempio, de' cavalli o veduta, o sperimentata, cioè quando essi vi trasportano . . . è piacevolissima per se sola, cioè per la vivacità, l'energia, la forza, la vita di tal sensazione. Essa desta realmente una quasi idea dell'infinito, sublima l'anima, la fortifica . . . (27 Ottobre 1821).

Speed, for example, of horses, whether seen or experienced, that is, when they are carrying you . . . is most pleasurable in itself; that is, for the vivacity, the energy, the strength, the sheer life of such a feeling. Indeed it almost gives you an idea of the infinite—elevates the soul, fortifies it.

In his notes in the *Zibaldone* over the following few months, Leopardi develops his reflections on the subject of speed, and at a certain point starts to speak about literary style:

La rapidità e la concisione dello stile, piace perchè presenta all'anima una folla d'idee simultanee, o così rapidamente succedentisi, che paiono simultanee, e fanno ondeggiar l'anima in una tale abbondanza di pensieri, o d'immagini e sensazioni spirituali, ch'ella o non è capace di abbracciarle

tutte, e pienamente ciascuna, o non ha tempo di restare in ozio, e priva di sensazioni. La forza dello stile poetico, che in gran parte è tutt'uno colla rapidità, non è piacevole per altro che per questi effetti, e non consiste in altro. L'eccitamento d'idee simultanee, può derivare e da ciascuna parola isolata, o propria o metaforica, e dalla loro collocazione, e dal giro della frase, e dalla soppressione stessa di altre parole o frasi ec. (3 Novembre 1821).

Speed and conciseness of style please us because they present the mind with a rush of ideas that are simultaneous, or that follow each other so quickly they seem simultaneous, and set the mind afloat on such an abundance of thoughts or images or spiritual feelings that either it cannot embrace them all, each one fully, or it has no time to be idle and empty of feelings. The power of poetic style, which is largely the same thing as rapidity, is pleasing for these effects alone and consists in nothing else. The excitement of simultaneous ideas may arise either from each isolated word, whether literal or metaphorical, from their arrangement, from the turn of a phrase, or even from the suppression of other words and phrases.

The metaphor of the horse for the speed of thought was, I think, first used by Galileo Galilei. In the *Saggiatore* (The Tester), arguing with an adversary who propped up his own theories with a vast number of classical quotations, he wrote:

Se il discorrere circa un problema difficile fosse come il portar pesi, dove molti cavalli porteranno più sacca di grano che un caval solo, io acconsentirei che i molti discorsi facesser più che un solo; ma il discorrere è come il correre, e non come il portare, ed un caval barbero solo correrà più che cento frisoni. (45)

If discoursing on a difficult problem were like carrying weights, when many horses can carry more sacks of grain than a single horse, I would agree that many discourses would do more than a single one; but discoursing is like coursing, not like carrying, and one Barbary courser can go faster than a hundred Frieslands.

“Discoursing,” or “discourse,” for Galileo means reasoning, and very often deductive reasoning. “Discoursing is like coursing”: this statement could be Galileo’s declaration of faith—style as a method of thought and as literary taste. For him, good thinking means quickness, agility in reasoning, economy in argument, but also the use of imaginative examples.

There is also a certain predilection for the horse in Galileo’s metaphors and *Gedanken-Experimenten*. In a study I once made on metaphor in Galileo, I counted at least eleven significant examples in which he talks of horses—as an image of motion, and therefore as an instrument in kinetic experiments; as a form of nature in all its complexity and also in all its beauty; as a form that sparks off the imagination in the hypothetical situation of horses subjected to the most unlikely trials or growing to gigantic proportions—and all this apart from the comparison of reasoning with racing: “Discoursing is like coursing.”

In the *Dialogo dei massimi sistemi* (Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems), speed of thought is personified by Sagredo, a character who intervenes in the discussion between the Ptolomaic Simplicio and the Copernican Salviati. Salviati and Sagredo represent two different facets of Galileo’s temperament. Salviati is the rigorously methodical reasoner, who proceeds slowly and with prudence; Sagredo, with his “swift manner of speech” and more imaginative way of seeing things, draws conclusions that have not been demonstrated and pushes every idea

to its extreme consequences. It is Sagredo who makes hypotheses on how life might be on the moon or what would happen if the earth stopped turning. But it is Salviati who defines the scale of values in which Galileo places quickness of mind. Instantaneous reasoning without *passaggi* (transitions) is the reasoning of God's mind, infinitely superior to the mind of man, which however should not be despised or considered nothing, insofar as it was created by God, and in the course of time has investigated and understood and achieved wonderful things. At this point Sagredo breaks in with an encomium on the greatest human invention, the alphabet:

Ma sopra tutte le invenzioni stupende, qual eminenza di mente fu quella di colui che s'immaginò di trovar modo di comunicare i suoi più reconditi pensieri a qualsivoglia altra persona, benchè distante per lunghissimo intervallo di luogo e di tempo? parlare con quelli che son nell'Indie, parlare a que li che non sono ancora nati né saranno se non di qua a mille e dieci mila anni? e con qual facilità? con i vari accozzamenti di venti caratteruzzi sopra una carta. (End of the first day)

But above all stupendous inventions, what eminence of mind was his who dreamed of finding means to communicate his deepest thoughts to any other person, no matter how far distant in place and time? Of speaking with those who are in India, of speaking with those who are not yet born and will not be born for a thousand or ten thousand years? And with what facility? All by using the various arrangements of twenty little characters on a page!

In my last talk, on lightness, I quoted Lucretius, who in the combinatoria of the alphabet saw a model of the impalpable

atomic structure of matter. Now I quote Galileo who, in the combinatoria of the alphabet ("the various arrangements of twenty little characters on a page"), saw the ultimate instrument of communication. Communication with people distant in place and time, says Galileo; but we should also add the immediate connection that writing establishes between everything existent or possible.

Since in each of my lectures I have set myself the task of recommending to the next millennium a particular value close to my heart, the value I want to recommend today is precisely this: In an age when other fantastically speedy, widespread media are triumphing, and running the risk of flattening all communication onto a single, homogeneous surface, the function of literature is communication between things that are different simply because they are different, not blunting but even sharpening the differences between them, following the true bent of written language.

The motor age has forced speed on us as a measurable quantity, the records of which are milestones in the history of the progress of both men and machines. But mental speed cannot be measured and does not allow comparisons or competitions; nor can it display its results in a historical perspective. Mental speed is valuable for its own sake, for the pleasure it gives to anyone who is sensitive to such a thing, and not for the practical use that can be made of it. A swift piece of reasoning is not necessarily better than a long-pondered one. Far from it. But it communicates something special that is derived simply from its very swiftness.

I said at the beginning that each value or virtue I chose as the subject for my lectures does not exclude its opposite. Implicit in

my tribute to lightness was my respect for weight, and so this apologia for quickness does not presume to deny the pleasures of lingering. Literature has worked out various techniques for slowing down the course of time. I have already mentioned repetition, and now I will say a word about digression.

In practical life, time is a form of wealth with which we are stingy. In literature, time is a form of wealth to be spent at leisure and with detachment. We do not have to be first past a predetermined finish line. On the contrary, saving time is a good thing because the more time we save, the more we can afford to lose. Quickness of style and thought means above all agility, mobility, and ease, all qualities that go with writing where it is natural to digress, to jump from one subject to another, to lose the thread a hundred times and find it again after a hundred more twists and turns.

Laurence Sterne's great invention was the novel that is completely composed of digressions, an example followed by Diderot. The digression is a strategy for putting off the ending, a multiplying of time within the work, a perpetual evasion or flight. Flight from what? From death, of course, says Carlo Levi, in an introduction he wrote to an Italian edition of *Tristram Shandy*. Few people would imagine Levi to be an admirer of Sterne, but actually his own secret lay precisely in bringing a spirit of digression and a feeling of unlimited time even to the observation of social problems. Levi writes:

L'orologio è il primo simbolo di Shandy. Sotto il suo influsso egli viene generato, ed iniziano le sue disgrazie, che sono tutt'uno con questo segno del tempo. La morte sta nascosta negli orologi, come diceva il Belli; e l'infelicità della vita individuale, di questo frammento, di questa cosa scissa e digressata, e priva di totalità: la morte, che è il tempo, il

tempo della individuazione, della separazione, l'astratto tempo che rotola verso la sua fine. Tristram Shandy non vuol nascere, perchè non vuol morire. Tutti i mezzi, tutte le armi sono buone per salvarsi dalla morte e dal tempo. Se la linea retta è la più breve fra due punti fatali e inevitabili, le digressioni la allungheranno: e se queste digressioni diventeranno così complesse, aggrovigliate, tortuose, così rapide da far perdere le proprie tracce, chissà che la morte non ci trovi più, che il tempo si smarrisca, e che possiamo restare celati nei mutevoli nascondigli.

The clock is Shandy's first symbol. Under its influence he is conceived and his misfortunes begin, which are one and the same with this emblem of time. Death is hidden in clocks, as Belli said; and the unhappiness of individual life, of this fragment, of this divided, disunited thing, devoid of wholeness: death, which is time, the time of individuation, of separation, the abstract time that rolls toward its end. Tristram Shandy does not want to be born, because he does not want to die. Every means and every weapon is valid to save oneself from death and time. If a straight line is the shortest distance between two fated and inevitable points, digressions will lengthen it; and if these digressions become so complex, so tangled and tortuous, so rapid as to hide their own tracks, who knows—perhaps death may not find us, perhaps time will lose its way, and perhaps we ourselves can remain concealed in our shifting hiding places.

Words, words that make me think. Because I am not devoted to aimless wandering, I'd rather say that I prefer to entrust myself to the straight line, in the hope that the line will continue into infinity, making me unreachable. I prefer to calculate at length the trajectory of my flight, expecting that I will be able to launch

myself like an arrow and disappear over the horizon. Or else, if too many obstacles bar my way, to calculate the series of rectilinear segments that will lead me out of the labyrinth as quickly as possible.

From my youth on, my personal motto has been the old Latin tag, *Festina lente*, hurry slowly. Perhaps what attracted me, even more than the words and the idea, was the suggestiveness of its emblems. You may recall that the great Venetian humanist publisher, Aldus Manutius, on all his title pages symbolized the motto *Festina lente* by a dolphin in a sinuous curve around an anchor. The intensity and constancy of intellectual work are represented in that elegant graphic trademark, which Erasmus of Rotterdam commented on in some memorable pages. But both dolphin and anchor belong to the same world of marine emblems, and I have always preferred emblems that throw together incongruous and enigmatic figures, as in a rebus. Such are the butterfly and crab that illustrate *Festina lente* in the sixteenth-century collection of emblems by Paolo Giovio. Butterfly and crab are both bizarre, both symmetrical in shape, and between them establish an unexpected kind of harmony.

My work as a writer has from the beginning aimed at tracing the lightning flashes of the mental circuits that capture and link points distant from each other in space and time. In my love of adventure stories and fairytales, I have always searched for the equivalent of some inner energy, some motion of the mind. I have always aimed at the image and the motion that arises naturally from the image, while still being aware that one cannot speak of a literary result until this stream of imagination has been turned into words. Just as for the poet writing verse, so it is for the prose writer: success consists in felicity of verbal expression, which every so often may result from a quick flash of inspiration but as a rule involves a patient search for the *mot juste*, for the

sentence in which every word is unalterable, the most effective marriage of sounds and concepts. I am convinced that writing prose should not be any different from writing poetry. In both cases it is a question of looking for the unique expression, one that is concise, concentrated, and memorable.

It is hard to keep up tension of this kind in very long works. However, by temperament I feel myself more at ease in short pieces: much of my work consists of short stories. For example, the sort of thing I tried out in *Cosmicomics* (*Le cosmicomiche*) and *t zero* (*T con zero*)—giving narrative form to abstract ideas of space and time—could not be brought off except within the brief span of a short story. But I have experimented with even shorter compositions, with narrative on a smaller scale, something between a fable and a *petit poème en prose*, in my book *Invisible Cities* (*Le città invisibili*) and more recently in my descriptions in *Palomar*. Of course the length or brevity of a text is an external criterion, but I am speaking of a particular density that, even if it can be attained in narratives of broader scope, nevertheless finds its proper dimension in the single page.

In this preference for short literary forms I am only following the true vocation of Italian literature, which is poor in novelists but rich in poets, who even when they write in prose give of their best in texts where the highest degree of invention and thought is contained in a few pages. This is the case with a book unparalleled in other literatures: Leopardi's *Operette morali* (Essays and Dialogues). American literature has a glorious and thriving tradition of short stories, and indeed I would say that its most precious gems are to be found there. But the rigid distinction made by publishers—either short story or novel—excludes other possible short forms (which still may be found in the prose works of the great American poets, from Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days* to many pages of William Carlos Williams). The demands of the

publishing business are a fetish that must not be allowed to keep us from trying out new forms. I should like at this point to break a lance on the field for the richness of short literary forms, with all they imply in terms of style and concentration of content. I am thinking of the Paul Valéry of *Monsieur Teste* and many of his essays, of the prose poems that Francis Ponge wrote about objects, of Michel Leiris' explorations of himself and his own language, of Henri Michaux's mysterious and hallucinatory humor in the very brief stories in *Plume*.

The last great invention of a new literary genre in our time was achieved by a master of the short form, Jorge Luis Borges. It was the invention of himself as narrator, that "Columbus' egg," which enabled him to get over the mental block that until nearly forty years of age prevented him from moving beyond essays to fiction. The idea that came to Borges was to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written by someone else, some unknown hypothetical author—an author in a different language, of a different culture—and that his task was to describe and review this invented book. Part of the Borges legend is the anecdote that when the first extraordinary story written according to this formula, "El acercamiento a Almotásim" (The Approach to Al'Mutásim), appeared in the magazine *Sur* in 1940, it was in fact believed to be a review of a book by an Indian author. In the same way, critics of Borges feel bound to observe that each of his texts doubles or multiplies its own space through the medium of other books belonging to a real or imaginary library, whether they be classical, erudite, or merely invented.

What I particularly wish to stress is how Borges achieves his approaches to the infinite without the least congestion, in the most crystalline, sober, and airy style. In the same way, his syn-

thetic, sidelong manner of narration brings with it a language that is everywhere concrete and precise, whose inventiveness is shown in the variety of rhythms, the syntactic movements, the unfailingly surprising and unexpected adjectives. Borges has created a literature raised to the second power and, at the same time, a literature that is like the extraction of the square root of itself. It is a "potential literature," to use a term applied later on in France. The first signs of this may be found in *Ficciones*, in the little hints and formulas of what might have become the works of a hypothetical author called Herbert Quain.

Conciseness is only one aspect of the subject I want to deal with, and I will confine myself to telling you that I dream of immense cosmologies, sagas, and epics all reduced to the dimensions of an epigram. In the even more congested times that await us, literature must aim at the maximum concentration of poetry and of thought.

Borges and Bioy Casares put together an anthology of short extraordinary tales (*Cuentos breves y extraordinarios*, 1955). I would like to edit a collection of tales consisting of one sentence only, or even a single line. But so far I haven't found any to match the one by the Guatemalan writer Augusto Monterroso: "Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí" (When I woke up, the dinosaur was still there).

I realize that this talk, based as it is on invisible connections, has wandered off in many directions and is risking dispersion. But all the subjects I have dealt with this evening, and perhaps those from last time, might indeed be united in that they are all under the sign of an Olympian god whom I particularly honor: Hermes-Mercury, god of communication and mediation, who under the name of Thoth was the inventor of writing and who—according to C. G. Jung in his studies on alchemical symbolism—in the guise of "spirit Mercury" also represents the *principium*

individuationis. Mercury with his winged feet, light and airborne, astute, agile, adaptable, free and easy, established the relationships of the gods among themselves and those between the gods and men, between universal laws and individual destinies, between the forces of nature and the forms of culture, between the objects of the world and all thinking subjects. What better patron could I possibly choose to support my proposals for literature?

For the ancients, who saw microcosm and macrocosm mirrored in the correspondences between psychology and astrology, between humours, temperaments, planets, and constellations, Mercury's nature was the most indefinite and variable. But, in the more widespread view, the temperament influenced by Mercury, inclined toward exchanges and commerce and dexterity, was contrasted with the temperament influenced by Saturn, seen as melancholy, contemplative, and solitary. Ever since antiquity it has been thought that the saturnine temperament is the one proper to artists, poets, and thinkers, and that seems true enough. Certainly literature would never have existed if some human beings had not been strongly inclined to introversion, discontented with the world as it is, inclined to forget themselves for hours and days on end and to fix their gaze on the immobility of silent words. Certainly my own character corresponds to the traditional features of the guild to which I belong. I too have always been saturnine, whatever other masks I have attempted to wear. My cult of Mercury is perhaps merely an aspiration, what I would like to be. I am a Saturn who dreams of being a Mercury, and everything I write reflects these two impulses.

But if Saturn-Chronos does exercise some power over me, it is also true that he is not one of my favorite divinities. I have never nourished any feeling for him other than a timorous respect. There is, however, another god with family ties to Saturn for whom I feel much affection. He is a god who does not enjoy

too much astrological and therefore psychological prestige, since his name was not given to one of the seven planets in the skies of the ancients, but still he has been well treated in literature from Homer on. I am speaking of Vulcan-Hephaestus, a god who does not roam the heavens but lurks at the bottom of craters, shut up in his smithy, where he tirelessly forges objects that are the last word in refinement: jewels and ornaments for the gods and goddesses, weapons, shields, nets, traps. To Mercury's aerial flight, Vulcan replies with his limping gait and the rhythmic beat of his hammer.

Here too I have to refer to some occasional reading of mine—from time to time enlightening ideas emerge from reading odd books that are hard to classify from a rigorously academic point of view. The book in question, which I read while studying the symbolism of the tarot, is André Virel's *Histoire de notre image* (1965). According to the author—a student of the collective imagination in what I take to be the school of Jung—Mercury and Vulcan represent the two inseparable and complementary functions of life: Mercury represents *syntony*, or participation in the world around us; Vulcan, *focalization* or constructive concentration. Mercury and Vulcan are both sons of Jupiter, whose realm is that of the consciousness, individual and social. But on his mother's side Mercury is a descendant of Uranus, whose kingdom was that of the "cyclophrenic" age of undifferentiated continuity. And Vulcan is descended from Saturn, whose realm was that of the "schizophrenic" era of egocentric isolation. Saturn dethroned Uranus, and Jupiter dethroned Saturn. In the end, in the well-balanced, luminous realm of Jupiter, both Mercury and Vulcan carry with them the memory of some dark primordial realm, changing what had been a destructive malady into something positive: syntony and focalization.

Even since I read Virel's explanation of how Mercury and Vul-

can are both contrasting and complementary, I have begun to understand something that I had only a rather vague idea of before—something about myself, about how I am and how I would like to be; about how I write and how I might be able to write. Vulcan's concentration and craftsmanship are needed to record Mercury's adventures and metamorphoses. Mercury's swiftness and mobility are needed to make Vulcan's endless labors become bearers of meaning. And from the formless mineral matrix, the gods' symbols of office acquire their forms: lyres or tridents, spears or diadems.

A writer's work has to take account of many rhythms: Vulcan's and Mercury's, a message of urgency obtained by dint of patient and meticulous adjustments and an intuition so instantaneous that, when formulated, it acquires the finality of something that could never have been otherwise. But it is also the rhythm of time that passes with no other aim than to let feelings and thoughts settle down, mature, and shed all impatience or ephemeral contingency.

I began this lecture by telling a story. Let me end it with another story, this time Chinese: Among Chuang-tzu's many skills, he was an expert draftsman. The king asked him to draw a crab. Chuang-tzu replied that he needed five years, a country house, and twelve servants. Five years later the drawing was still not begun. "I need another five years," said Chuang-tzu. The king granted them. At the end of these ten years, Chuang-tzu took up his brush and, in an instant, with a single stroke, he drew a crab, the most perfect crab ever seen.

EXACTITUDE

For the ancient Egyptians, exactitude was symbolized by a feather that served as a weight on scales used for the weighing of souls. This light feather was called Maat, goddess of the scales. The hieroglyph for Maat also stood for a unit of length—the 33 centimeters of the standard brick—and for the fundamental note of the flute.

This information comes from a lecture by Giorgio de Santillana on the precision of the ancients in observing astronomical phenomena, a lecture I heard in Italy in 1963 which had a profound influence on me. These days I have often thought of Santillana, who acted as my guide in Massachusetts during my first visit to the United States in 1960. In memory of his friendship, I have started this talk on exactitude in literature with the name of Maat, goddess of the scales—all the more because Libra is my sign of the Zodiac.

First I shall try to define my subject. To my mind exactitude means three things above all:

- (1) a well-defined and well-calculated plan for the work in question;
- (2) an evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images; in Italian we have an adjective that doesn't exist in English, "icastico," from the Greek *εικαστικός*;