

## Revisiting the Aesopic Race in the Late Twentieth Century: New Facets of Speed in Vikram Seth's "The Hare and The Tortoise"\*

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In 1991, Vikram Seth published *Beastly Tales: From Here and There*, composed of ten fables. Seth says in his "Introduction" that "[o]f the ten tales told here, the first two come from India, the next two from China, the next two from Greece, and the next two from the Ukraine. The final two came directly to me from the Land of Gup" (i). In his comic re-telling of the Aesopic tale "The Hare and The Tortoise," Seth expands Aesop's short fable into 258 lines of verse narrative. He does so by re-contextualizing it in a modern setting, which he humorously calls "the land of Runnyrhyme":

Once or twice upon a time  
In the land of Runnyrhyme  
Lived a hare both hot and heady  
And a tortoise slow and steady. (1-4)

The reader easily recognizes the familiar figures of the "heady hare" and "steady tortoise." The very first line of Seth's poem parodies the clichéd beginning sentence of traditional tales, and underpins, at the same time, its link to the classical text. However, through the word "twice," it points to its status as a rewriting. The humorous tone of the poem and its parodic intent become obvious in these first four lines with the modification of the phrase "once of upon a time," the playful sound of Runnyrhyme and the rhythm of the rhyming couplets, which sounds, to our modern ears, a bit mechanical.<sup>1</sup> Seth gives us a

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at [www.connotations.de/debate/re-telling-aesopic-fables-in-the-21st-century/](http://www.connotations.de/debate/re-telling-aesopic-fables-in-the-21st-century/).

hint about his original touches with the specification of the setting. Thus, the first stanza instantiates the overall structure of the poem: it both aligns itself to a tradition by rewriting an Aesopic fable and signals its difference from the source text from the very beginning, through the words "twice" and "Runnyrhyme," drawing attention in one humorous blow to the race in Aesop's fable and to Seth's choice of verse form. Seth depicts Runnyrhyme as a modern setting with contemporary modes of transportation, communication and information systems, which reshape social relations and construct new criteria for victory.

Although they abound in modern references and offer a critical commentary on present-day issues, Seth's fables in verse, unlike his fiction, have received relatively little attention. Existing scholarship on his fables falls roughly into two opposite camps as to whether Seth's original contributions to the tales provide the reader with any new and significant insights: M. K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan, for instance, argue that Seth "fails to invest these traditional tales with a new, contemporary significance" (73). In the other camp, there are two scholars who delve into the socio-political aspects of Seth's fables. Samarth Singhal examines the juxtaposition of text and image in *Beastly Tales* with regard to how it depicts and elaborates on the plight of postcolonial nation states, and thus invests them with a contemporary significance (61-62). Seth's engagement with gender politics in the fables has also come under scrutiny: analyzing Seth's fables from a queer perspective, Bianca Jackson asserts that Seth's animal tales show how the norms of heteropatriarchal society suppress homosexuality and pave the way for queerphobic communities (172). Departing from these approaches, this article argues that Seth's adaptation of the Aesopic tale "The Hare and The Tortoise" offers a send-up of the environment created by modern technologies and lays bare their working mechanisms in doggerel verse.<sup>2</sup> My contention will be that, in "The Hare and The Tortoise," Vikram Seth gives the Aesopic race a comical bent and plays on the notions of speed and victory to problematize the effect of fast technologies on the modern individual.

## The Fable and Its Protagonists: Ancient and Modern

A fable is a cautionary narrative in which talking animals exhibit human vices and follies, and the fabulist makes the reader laugh at them. As a genre, it is characterized by allegory, hence the function of the surface action is to highlight a didactic secondary meaning. In his definition of the Aesopic fable, the rhetorician and Alexandrian sophist Aulus Theon emphasizes this feature of the genre: the fable is “a fictitious story picturing a truth” (qtd. in Perry xx). Many recent critics have made use of this brief definition. For instance, Ben Edwin Perry focuses on how Theon’s formula suggests indirect and inexplicit ways of saying something, thus pointing to the allegorical structure of the genre (xxi). In the same vein, H. J. Blackham asserts that the word “picturing” in Theon’s definition “implies a metaphorical representation of ‘truth,’” denoting all the things happening in the external world (xi). As seen in its various definitions, the fable relies on indirect representation in an allegorical fashion.<sup>3</sup> Personification, as the principal technique of allegory (Baldick 7), is the figure of speech that enables the fabulist to portray situations and events from human life in a non-human context. These stories are often called “beast fables,” in which animal characters stand for human types, foregrounding a single aspect or dominant motive.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, in Aesop’s “The Hare and The Tortoise,” which is often translated into English in straightforward prose,<sup>5</sup> the reader does not encounter well-developed characters. The fable draws the reader’s attention to the hare’s crass and condescending attitude towards the hardworking tortoise:

A hare was one day making fun of a tortoise for being so slow upon his feet. “Wait a bit,” said the tortoise. “I’ll run a race with you, and I’ll wager that I win.” “Oh, well,” replied the hare, who was much amused at the idea, “let’s try and see.” (Aesop 229)

The hare not only mocks the tortoise for his natural slowness but also congratulates himself upon his own fast pace. At this point, the fable relies on the physical features associated with these two animals, hence they are basically depicted as the physically faster and the

slower. Taking this as a starting point, Aesop's fable initially presents a corporeal conceptualization of speed.

Triggered by the hare's disrespectful and abusive behavior, the tortoise challenges the hare and self-confidently suggests that they should run a race. The hare accepts the deal and cannot understand why the tortoise, in such a self-assured way, dares to claim that he will be the winner. The self-confidence of Aesop's hare, in turn, epitomizes the value placed on speed: faster than the tortoise, the hare views his pace as an empowering asset that will make him the winner.<sup>6</sup> When the race starts, the hare immediately outruns the tortoise. He is so comfortable in his own skin that "he thought he might as well have a rest. So down he lay and fell fast asleep" (Aesop 229). In the meantime, the tortoise goes on doggedly and slowly, and, thanks to its persistence and self-discipline, wins the race. When the hare wakes up, it is too late for him to catch up with the tortoise. By making the tortoise win, Aesop breaks the illusion that "speed is power," and the reader encounters the critique of this ideology in Aesop's fable: to be proud of your speed may make you the loser at the end. In Aesop's narrative, "[s]low and steady wins the race" (229).

Although the slower is the winner in Aesop's race, the competition between these two animals shows that speed was a matter of prestige in classical times as it is today. However, Aesop's understanding of speed in this fable is solely corporeal in the sense that the idea of running a race denotes a physical, athletic, and competitive activity in which the fastest one gains the victory. The winner's achievement is a notable one, especially if one acknowledges the Panhellenic significance attributed to athletics in classical antiquity, particularly with reference to the Olympic Games. These athletic contests constructed the cult of the competitive athletic body as "an icon of power and social rank" (Garrison 7-8).<sup>7</sup> Aesop's fable challenges this mentality by emphasizing hard work and discipline.

Unlike Aesop, Seth spends time on developing his two protagonists. Yet, he does not alter their dominant traits and motive, that is winning the footrace. In Aesop's fable, the hare's decision to sleep in the

middle of the race, for instance, not only shows his self-confidence but also implies his laziness. Seth builds on this portrayal of the Aesopic hare by expanding it:

When at noon the hare awoke  
 She would tell herself a joke  
 Squeal with laughter, roll about,  
 Eat her eggs and sauerkraut,  
 Then pick up the phone and babble,  
 —‘Gibble-gabble, gibble-gabble’—  
 To her friends the mouse and the mole  
 And the empty-headed vole:  
 ‘Hey, girls, did you know the rat  
 Was rejected by the bat?’ (5-14)

Instead of the early morning, Seth’s modern hare wakes up lazily at noon, and she starts her day by cheering herself up with a joke. Her quotidian activities show that fast technologies are very much part of the hare’s lifestyle. After having breakfast, she calls her friends to pass on the latest gossip. The friends are the mouse, the mole, and the vole, all classified as rodents, known for their strong teeth and jaws. Relying on this natural feature of these animals, Seth humorously attributes a mouth-related human activity to them. The hare has a wide and active social circle, which is composed of idle friends (as the word “gibble-gabble” indicates). Not only the trivial content of their talk, but also the medium, the telephone in this case, lays bare the character of the hare: she is always interacting with others to keep herself updated about any new matters, just as communication technologies encourage the modern individual to do.<sup>8</sup>

In the next stanza, Seth builds on Aesop’s representation of the tortoise, who, unlike the hare, does not have a social network. Instead, he is a rather isolated figure, who tries to protect the older model of the small family. The reader notes Seth’s humorous take on Aesop’s self-disciplined tortoise: after waking up, the modern tortoise “[d]aily counted all his toes / Twice or three times to ensure / There were neither less nor more” (26-28). In a rather miserly fashion, he also checks the savings in his bank account and even counts his grandsons,

Ed, Ned and Fred, to whom he speaks the same words of wisdom over and over again:

'Eddy, Neddy, Freddy—boys—  
 You must never break your toys.  
 You must often floss your gums.  
 You must always do your sums.  
 Buy your own house; don't pay your rent.  
 Save your funds at six per cent.  
 Major in accountancy,  
 And grow up to be like me.  
 Listen, Eddy, Neddy, and Freddy—  
 You be slow—but you be steady.' (35-44)

All these recommendations, including the moral of "slow and steady" that echoes Aesop, indicate that the tortoise promotes working diligently and saving money, whereas other animals are the willing participants of the consumer culture that characterizes late twentieth-century's accelerated lifestyle. For instance, the beasts of Runnyrhyme, who all "[g]athered to behold the race" at the appointed time (95), "[g]obbed popcorn, guzzled beer" (97). Both of the verbs Seth employs denote fast consumption, a habit modern consumer capitalism encourages continuously. The tortoise, on the other hand, warns his grandsons against this threat. They should not break their current toys so as not to spend money on new ones and are supposed to save their money. But his traditional values do not ensure him against errors, as he advises them to buy their own house rather than pay rent. This recommendation sounds humorous especially when one thinks of a tortoise's capability to carry his home on his back. By utilizing this unique feature of an animal and ironically presenting the tortoise in need of a home, Seth leads the reader to reflect upon how modern consumer capitalism creates unnecessary demands.

Juxtaposing two contrasting types, Seth develops Aesop's protagonists by underlining the difference between the pace and variety of their social interactions. While the hare uses modern communication technologies, we do not witness the tortoise using a phone. The reader sees that the hare can reach a wide community, whereas the tortoise

communicates solely with his grandsons. Seth's fable appears to reflect Marshall McLuhan's argument in *The Medium is the Massage* that speed technology fosters unification and involvement, encouraging people to construct new forms of interacting social networks, paralleling these new media (McLuhan 8). This leads to the destruction of "the older, traditional ideas of private, isolated thoughts and actions" (McLuhan 12). Seth's two characters stand in opposition to each other in this respect. Moreover, the tortoise's strategy for managing his financial sources by relying upon archaic methods of calculation (like telling his toes) is linked to the traditional banking functions in the nineteenth century. He does not refer to any modern financial services, which in 1991, when Seth published his fables, were already in use. In this respect, it is evident that the tortoise cannot keep pace with developments the twentieth-century understanding of speed has triggered in the field of economy. Thereby, Seth presents the tortoise as a character trying "to do today's job with yesterday's tools—with yesterday's concepts" (9), in McLuhan's words. Seth extends Aesop's portrayal of the tortoise as an absurdly self-disciplined character through exaggeration, so much so that he turns into an obsessive figure. Whereas Aesop depicts the tortoise almost as a role model who has overcome difficulties through hard work, Seth's modern tortoise is not a sympathetic figure.

#### The Footrace in Runnyrhyme:

##### From the Corporeal to the Technological Understanding of Speed

In his re-handling of the rising action, which triggers the competition between the two protagonists, Seth depicts a dialogue between the hare and her friend, the mouse. Meeting by the Fauna Fountain, they talk about the "pathetic" and "appalling" (58) pace of the tortoise's walk and even make fun of him by saying "[h]e won't even get here in an hour / If he uses *turtle power*" (59-60; emphasis mine). This reference to the 1990 film *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, directed by Steve Barron, is another modern element Seth introduces into the story. Revolving around the adventures of a team of turtles and their

rat master Splinter, the movie shows these animals as mutants who have been turned into their present state (heroic intelligent creatures with agency) due to toxic waste. The allusion to this movie points to the enduring human interest in talking beasts, dating back to classical fables. It also informs the reader that Seth's hare and her friends are familiar with popular media culture. This is of great significance in terms of how the hare will later strategically manipulate the mass media for her own interests.

Like Aesop's hare, speed is something to boast about for the modern hare, who scoffs at the tortoise and yells: "'Teddy Tortoise, go and grab / Tram or train or taxi-cab!'" (61-62). While the challenge and ridicule in Aesop's race is linked to bodily speed, Seth's hare suggests that the tortoise had better use one of the mechanical means of transportation, functional in covering distances in short periods of time. McLuhan interprets the modern individual's relation to such technologies by stating that "all media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical" (26), and the wheel, in that respect, stands "as an extension of foot" (30-32). A comparison between Aesop and Seth makes clear the shift from agile feet (the speed of the body) to wheeled vehicles (technological speed). It is evident that, in this modern rewriting, the theme of speed not only refers to the natural pace of animals, as it does in Aesop's version, but also to technologically produced and enhanced speed. In this respect, Seth's rewriting of the Aesopic fable does not merely transfer the story to the modern age. As the narrative progresses, the significance of these modern technologies over the course of events becomes clearer, which points to how Seth, entering into a dialogue with Aesop, problematizes the modern conception of speed.

Seth follows the basic movements in Aesop's plot, and, as is the case with Aesop's fable, the tortoise responds to the hare's condescending attitude by challenging her. Acknowledging "hares exceed / Tortoises by far in speed" (77-78), Seth's tortoise still claims that he will beat out the hare "slowly" and "surely" (81). He dares the hare to run a race, saying "'[c]hoose your place, and I'll be ready. / Choose your time,



and make it soon'" (88-89). The reader again observes the repetitive tendency of the tortoise, which Seth has already presented in an extravagant manner to comic effect in the third stanza. In these two successive lines, Seth builds on this humorous presentation through two figures of speech, namely an anaphora and parallelism. They highlight the character's monotonous tone by mirroring his obsessive actions at the formal level of the poem through repetition.

In the next stanza, the reader sees both protagonists on the race-course, preparing for the race in very different ways. The tortoise, believing that the race depends upon physical speed, is limbering up by flexing his toes (100). Like an athlete, he is engaged with the condition of his body. The hare, on the other hand, appears in her "silk nightie" (102). (The reader is not told what the tortoise wears.) In ancient Olympic footraces, if it was not an armed race, athletes were nude. The clothes of the modern hare suggest that she is actually putting on a show for the media. Seth's portrayal of the hare as a female character is another original touch. The gendering of this protagonist bears special significance as Seth expects the reader to recognize her as a representation of a popular media figure and laugh at the way she imitates twentieth century women celebrities coming to the forefront by manipulating their female sexuality. Introduced as "hot" at the very beginning of the poem (3), the hare does not represent the classical notion of the athletic body, arousing respect as it *does* something, but a modern one, admired due to its self-fashioning in accordance with late twentieth-century taste. This is the reason why the reporters seek to record the attractive hare's words, not the tortoise's, to broadcast them on *Rhyme & Runny News*. Although the occasion, the reason why all these beasts are gathered there, is the race, the press is not interested in it as an event with two contenders but only in the hare, who has already won the race from the reporters' point of view:

'What's at stake besides the honour?'  
 'Is the tortoise, Ma'am, a goner?'  
 'Why did you agree to run?'  
 'Is the race already won?' (107-10)

In these lines, the rhyming couplet serves the humorous tone of the poem as the shift from the word "honour" to "goner" stands as an example of bathos, which signals a move from the classical notion of glory, associated with competitors in the ancient games, to a modern informal usage referring to those doomed to lose.<sup>9</sup> Challenging the classical concept of honor observed in Aesop's text, reporters pose a question about material gain. Moreover, all the questions suggest that the hare is more than a favorite competitor, she is almost already the winner before the race even starts, and the tortoise, the so-called "goner," has no chance but to lose. What the hare says before the race supports this idea: "Who will win? Why - can't you tell? / Read the lipstick on his shell.' / There she'd smeared a scarlet '2'" (121-23). Claiming that the tortoise can only come second, the hare employs her scarlet lipstick as a weapon to insult the slow and steady tortoise. This scene of using the lipstick as a pen achieves a comic effect by reminding the reader of the clichéd scenes in modern movies where an attractive woman uses a lipstick to write on a mirror. The jocular use of the lipstick suggests that the tortoise can only be a mirror reflecting the hare. That she risks the cup she won when she became Miss Honeybun (119-20) further supports her endeavor to be in the spotlight as an icon of beauty and sexuality. The press's perpetual interest in the hare and its complete neglect of the tortoise allow for such an interpretation. The hare's flaunting her sexuality and putting forward the cup she won in a beauty pageant reveal that she is aware of the working mechanisms of consumer capitalism, which has added economic connotations to what "running a race" means in the twentieth century. Triggered by and leading to the speeding up of the tempo of modern life, the strategies of capitalism, including fetishizing, creating demand, and exploiting desire, are conducted mainly through the media and the new technologies (see Harvey 343). Likewise, Seth's hare employs such strategies to exploit the press for her own interest, which shows that she is not interested in the footrace per se. Rather, the competition supplies her with a chance to present herself as a modern media figure.

The significance of the press and its use of fast technologies are foregrounded while Seth portrays the referee as a passive figure, a non-entity, which is a satirical gibe at modern contests held under a media blitz. He mentions a “secretary bird” (126) briefly at the beginning of the race, who just “[g]ently murmur[s]: ‘[i]t’s begun. / Ma’am, perhaps you ought to run’” (127-28). In Aesop’s fable, the first thing the hare and the tortoise do when they plan this race is to find a third animal, an objective eye to decide on the route of the race and to announce the winner at the end. Ironically, the fox, an archetype for his tricky and cunning nature, is chosen as the referee who is expected not to connive in any unfair dealings but to be unbiased. Thus, only three animals appear in Aesop’s fable. Seth’s story, on the other hand, is full of other animals, most of which are the passive audience watching a spectacle.<sup>10</sup> In classical Greece, visual information was privileged so much so that “their verb *oida*, ‘I know’ means literary ‘I have seen’” (Garrison 10). Aesop’s fox stands as the proof of this mentality, seeing who has crossed the line first is enough for him to know the winner. In Seth’s version, instead of a referee who actually “sees” and announces who the winner is, the press holds the authority position to announce who the winner is even before the race takes place.

For the tortoise, running a race denotes its traditional meaning, which is evident in his emphasis on time and place in his challenge (88-89). He takes this event seriously as a sports competition and murmurs he has “got to win this race” (136). The narrative voice depicts his struggle by saying “the tortoise plodded on / Like a small automaton” (133-34). This simile refers to how the tortoise, unlike the hare, fails to pay attention to anything other than the race, such as the press, but stays focused on his target. It also reveals a similarity between the hare’s and the speaker’s use of language as they both refer to mechanical technologies to foreground the natural slowness of the tortoise. This parallelism signals the outdatedness of the tortoise’s methods in the age of speed technologies.

The hare does not even run when the race begins with a gunshot and prefers to become part of the show. Ostentatiously, she has changed into satin shorts "[c]ut for fashion more than sports" (138). After two hours, the hare realizes that it is two o'clock, time for her beauty sleep and when another beast asks her about the race, she replies "'[t]he race will keep. / Really, it's already won.' / And she stretched out in the sun" in a self-assured manner (142-44). The hare implies that she does not have to cover a certain area within a time limit, which is the age-old time and space criterion to win a footrace. Attentive to the dynamics of her own day, Seth's hare does not rely on her bodily speed, as Aesop's hare does, but on the mass media, which offers a virtual landscape, instead of the racetrack, and to which she strategically delegates her physical speed. The press, in Seth's narrative, shows how technologically produced and enhanced speed promises to go beyond the conventional limits of time and space. Moreover, it provides the modern individual with a new temporality: the hare does not wait for the end of the race to know that she will be the winner, no matter what she does.

#### The End of the Race: Who is the "Real" Winner?

Sleeping for two hours, the hare wakes up and asks where the tortoise is. Learning that he is "[o]ut of sight," she starts to run at "her rocket-fuelled pace" (151). Seth once again offers a comparison with technological speed. Yet, when she sees a field full of various mushrooms, the hare cannot resist the temptation and stops to eat them. The persona notes that devils-of-the-dell, a kind of mushroom the hare eats, must have "a cerebral effect" (160). Soon, the intoxicated hare starts to sing out of tune and shouts "[b]oring, boring, life is boring. / Birdies, help me go exploring. / Let's go off the beaten track" (169-71). The scene is of great importance in the way it comments on the hare's numbing of her senses. She finds this experience, which causes her to lose touch with reality, amusing. Although she must follow the path they agreed upon, the hare suggests that she will embark on a different route. Meanwhile, the tortoise continues to plod on, and he

sees the finish line and the golden cup. Hearing the gunshot, which announces that he has won, the tortoise “[c]lasp[s] the cup with quiet pride, / And [sits] down, self-satisfied” (199-200). Instead of uttering a simple, brief and telling statement like Aesop’s tortoise, Seth’s protagonist plans to speak at length in praise of his ethos. In the same way that he preaches to his three grandsons, the self-disciplined tortoise would like to advocate the notions of hard work, regularity, slowness, and steadiness against all the things the hare stands for: pride, laziness, ostentatiousness, and of course the speed she has boasted of.

Now she’ll learn that sure and slow  
Is the only way to go—  
That you can’t rise to the top  
With a skip, a jump, and a hop—  
That you’ve got to hatch your eggs,  
That you’ve got to count your legs,  
That you’ve got to do your duty,  
Not to depend on verve and beauty. (207-14)

Giving voice to the internal monologue of the tortoise, the poem again employs an anaphora to parallel his repetitive habits and monotonous tone. However, the tortoise does not get to make the speech as it is again the hare that attracts the press corps at the end of the race, who say “[o]h, Miss Hare, you’re appealing / When you’re sweating” (223-24). They find something alluring in her even when she is the loser. A powerful media mogul, namely Will Wolf, fills a gorgeous cup “[w]ith huge rubies to the brim” (230), epitomizing extravagance and lavishness, and tells the hare that “[i]n my eyes you win” (234). Thus, Seth’s poem shows that one cannot rely on the merits of the case, indeed cannot find justice done in the modern world, whereas the virtuous and hardworking competitor is rewarded in Aesop’s fable. Will Wolf’s words indicate that he can use the power of the mass media he holds in his hands to alter the audience’s perception with regard to who the real winner is. This brings to mind the hare’s relation to reality in the field of mushrooms and her decision to take

an uncommon path. Like the hare, the audience is out of touch with reality in the sense that what has happened in the footrace does not matter. Although she does not outrun the tortoise, the hare becomes a celebrity overnight: she was "[s]uddenly [...] everywhere" (236); her remarks appear on the front pages of all the papers (238), and the BBC, which Seth humorously renames "Beastly Broadcast Company" (240), broadcasts her story in the news with the title of "All the World Lost for a Snooze" (242), referring to her failure in the competition. Although it is evident that she has lost the race, the hare, not the tortoise, becomes the one who "saw her name in lights, / Sold a book and movie rights" (243-44). As Virilio argues, new technologies characterized by movement at high speed will eventually cause "the withdrawal, the retreat, of the real" (122). Similarly, the press causes "the withdrawal of the real" by declaring the hare the winner, without allowing the audience to see, think or judge on their own. Modern communication technologies separate the audience from the real, and, due to this disconnection, the hare becomes an instant celebrity out of nowhere.<sup>11</sup>

Thanks to her success in appealing to the mass media, the hare earns a huge amount of money. As a true adherent of consumerism, the hare thinks that saving it would be a "sin" (250), thus, she buys a manor house in which she lives with her friends, the mole and the mouse (251-52). The persona ridicules this group of the nouveaux riches by noting that when they play Scrabble, the hare spells "'Com-pete' with K" (256). Yet, she is cunning enough to make use of new technologies, and becomes famous, wealthy and perhaps "the real" winner as the media mogul says. The tortoise, on the other hand, represents those who cannot comprehend the effect of instantaneous technologies. According to McLuhan, such people regard "all phenomena from a fixed point of view" (68). In that respect, the tortoise is so bound to his traditional views that he still believes that crossing the line first makes one "the winner," which bears no significance when the race is not subject to conventional time and space parameters due to the impact of speed technologies. Invaded by the press and all sort

of mass media devices, the modern racecourse in the land of Runnyrhyme is not designed for athletics. Whereas the hare recognizes and acts according to the tenor of the modern racetrack, the tortoise cannot comprehend it. The poem ends with the following couplet: "Thus the hare was pampered rotten / And the tortoise was forgotten" (257-58).

## Conclusion

In his revisiting of the Aesopic fable, Vikram Seth, with a satirical sense of humor, sheds light on the working mechanisms of fast technologies and how they give shape to human relations in the modern world. By introducing present day cultural elements into this well-known fable, Seth underscores a fact not recognized by many: there is no poetic justice in the late twentieth-century world, and all is subject to the adverse effects of speed technologies. What renders Seth's rewriting successful is that he makes this grim proposition and his social criticism through comic laughter. Exerting its influence over social relations, time and space parameters, and the perception of reality, modern speed defies old structures and frames. Seth's "The Hare and The Tortoise" supports this argument by showing that his characters are caught up within the networks of speedy transformation, communication and information systems. As Seemita Mohanty observes, Seth's fable does not deliver a succinct message as fables conventionally do (91). In this respect, the moral of this fable differs from that of Aesop's: The late twentieth-century society is now suffering for its technological sins, and there is no solution the poem offers to the reader. The slow and steady is doomed to lose and disappear in such a speeded-up world. Though he is critical of the hare, Seth, unlike Aesop, does not idealize "slow and steady" as he presents the tortoise as a pompous and unsympathetic figure, who is behind the times and eventually forgotten.

The fable genre has been, from its inception, a form of social criticism. It is directly or indirectly satirical and at the same time didactic. Despite the didactic function of the genre, Vikram Seth does not instruct the reader about how s/he should behave in the era of transforming speed. By using the age-old tools of fabulists, he exposes in riotously comic rhyme the plight of the modern individual. Neither the media-savvy hare in step with the modern ethos nor the old-fashioned tortoise presents a viable model for the present age. Seth benefits from the seemingly simple yet suggestive nature of the fable since the story leads the reader to question his/her position vis-à-vis modern "races": Is s/he running like the slow and steady tortoise by disregarding the technological environment of the late twentieth century, or is s/he exploiting to advantage the working mechanisms of this accelerated world, where speed widens its sphere of influence day by day? And the most significant question posed by Seth's modern fable is who the "real" winner is, or maybe, whether there is a "real" winner at all.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Vikram Seth writes in rhymed couplets as the father of English literature, Chaucer, does when he includes a humorously told beast fable in his *The Canterbury Tales*, "The Nun's Priest's Tale." Chaucer retells the medieval fable of Chanticleer and the Fox, which is frequently compared to Aesop's "The Fox and The Crow."

<sup>2</sup>Alternative readings of Vikram Seth's fables are possible from the post-colonial angle or in light of adaptation theory. When he rewrites Aesop's "The Hare and The Tortoise," Seth focuses exclusively on speed to delve into the new meanings and functions it has acquired in the modern age. Hence, how Seth plays with this concept is the main focus in this essay.

<sup>3</sup>Since the present essay focuses on how Seth's rewriting humorously depicts the new facets of speed in the age of consumer capitalism, a longer history of the fable and various rewritings of Aesop's fables through the ages are not included. For an in-depth study of the genre, see Blackham's *The Fable as Literature*. There are also various sources dwelling upon the use of the fable within certain historical periods and handling of certain themes such as Patterson's *Fables of*



*Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* and Lewis's *The English Fable: Aesop and Literary Culture, 1651-1740*. On the earliest examples of the tradition of rewriting Aesopic fables, see Perry's *Babrius and Phaedrus*.

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed account of the term, see Ziolkowski's first chapter, "Inspiration and Analogues" (15-35), in his *Talking Animals*.

<sup>5</sup>In English literature, the fable has been one of the most popular narratives, so much so that one of the first books issued by William Caxton, who introduced the printing press into England 1476, was "his translation of the French translation of Steinhöwel's fables" in 1480 (Lenaghan 4). Thus, the Aesopic fable became one of the first texts published in England and Aesop's famous short fable, "The Hare and The Tortoise," was also included in this collection. In later years, it kept being translated and included in various editions.

<sup>6</sup>Dwelling on the conceptualization of speed and fast technologies in the modern age, the French critic Paul Virilio asserts in an interview with John Armitage that "speed is power" and has been so throughout the ages (Armitage 35). The hare's attitude before the race stems from a similar mindset.

<sup>7</sup>The competitive spirit not only belongs to the domain of athletic games but also characterizes many different aspects of classical culture. Even the most famous tragedies are products of this prevailing mood, as they were performed in the competitions held during religious festivals.

<sup>8</sup>The hare's relation to modern communication technologies is reminiscent of Nokia's slogan; that is, "connecting people," which was coined by Ove Strandberg and has been in use since 1992.

<sup>9</sup>Classical literature teems with examples dwelling on the theme of glory attached to competitors. For instance, in his "Pythian VI," Pindar celebrates the winner of the chariot race by saying "a treasure-house of songs" waits for the "Pythian conqueror" (4-5), and by comparing it to monuments and temples, the poem indicates that this treasure house, unlike others, will not be destroyed and will endure when monuments and temples fall prey to time (10-15). Through this meta-poetic metaphor, Pindar shows how the achievements of athletes and competitors were evaluated in the classical period.

<sup>10</sup>Due to space limitations and because it is not included as an objective of this study, the attitude of the audience in Seth's fable is not examined in detail. On the topic of the passivity of the audience in the face of the spectacles of the media and technology, one might see Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*.

<sup>11</sup>As the hare's so-called title "winner" has no foot in reality, how she becomes famous epitomizes Baudrillard's fourth base of the image, which he explains by noting that "it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (368). The media mogul's celebration of the hare as the real winner, the press's interest in all things she does and announcing her as the winner even before the race starts exemplify the Baudrillardian "hysteria of production and reproduction of the real" (374).

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