

Literary Criticism (From Plato to Leavis)
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Walter Benjamin's The Storyteller

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The Storyteller
Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov



Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant. To present someone like Leskov as a storyteller does not mean bringing him closer to us but, rather, increasing our distance from him. Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him, or rather, they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head or an animal's body may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision. This distance and this angle of vision are prescribed for us by an experience which we may have almost every day. It teaches us that the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story



Hello everyone. Today we are going to discuss the essay, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” by Walter Benjamin. Walter Benjamin was a famed Frankfurt critic and today in this discussion, we are not going to so much stress on the works of Leskov, rather we are going to see the theoretical stance that Benjamin takes when he defines who a storyteller is. How is he different from the modern novelist and other factors that he brings in. And I would like to point out from the beginning to take note of how the storyteller, in a sense, kind of anticipates in a postmodern way, the critique of authorship that Barthes and Foucault undertake.

Barthes in his 1966 essay, “Death of the Author” declares that the author is dead and the birth of the reader happens. And Foucault also after sometime writes the essay called “Who is an Author?”. So, we need to look at this essay in which Benjamin is kind of anticipating their arguments in terms of authorship, in terms of the authority of an authorship when he talks about the storyteller. What he states is more on the agency of storytelling than an authority over the story. So, the storyteller in this essay is not a person of capitalist production, is not a person who gets money for writing, he is not a professional per se. But what it does has a more social value than money making or a more professional value.

Let us get into the essay. We will read a few critical excerpts from the essay and then we will talk about it. Benjamin, we will see that he explains himself very well. At the beginning, he posits the storyteller as a person who often comes from far away, comes from faraway lands with faraway experiences, with new experiences, experiences that we do not have and sometimes it is important to have—to pay heed to other people's experiences. If we look at Rabindranath Tagore's short story "Kabuliwala", we see that there is a Kabuliwala who comes from Afghanistan and there is this little Bengali girl, to whom he tells his stories and we see that there is this huge difference.


He is a man, an elderly man; she is a small girl. One is from Bengal, one is from Afghanistan. Still, in the form of storytelling, in all the stories that he tells Mini, we see that there is a bonding that happens between them. Benjamin also starts in the same vein, he says that "familiar though his name may be to us the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force." He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant. You can see that he is using the awayness, the far-awayness of the storyteller in double use. He is saying that a storyteller is often a person who comes from far, but it is a condition of our times that he is also getting farther away from us.

Then he goes on to say that "this distance and this angle of vision are prescribed for us by an experience which we may have almost every day. It teaches us that the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly." And you can see this line is very important, this distance and this angle of vision. We can already see that he is positioning himself to a place. He is positioning himself to a place from where he is looking at things. And if we look at the idea of modern theory, the word theory also comes from the word 'seeing', in a sense. He is theorizing here and he is pointing out to us that the essential work of theorizing, the essential work of thinking about something is also an essential work of seeing and seeing from a certain point of view. "It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our positions were taken from us; the ability to exchange experiences."

He kind of says that the ability to explain experiences is a fundamental right of human beings. It is something that human beings do. And if we take a look at modern neuro studies, we will see that what differentiates humans from other animals mostly is our ability to tell stories. There are rarely any other animals that tell stories to each other. But humans have something; they tell

stories, they share experiences in the forms of stories, not in direct practical knowledge, but in forms of stories. We have that power of narration. But he is saying that slowly, that key sign of humanity, that key sign of being human is being taken away from us. And it is slowly moving away from us.

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Illuminations

fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

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Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers. Incidentally, among the last named there are two groups which, to be sure, overlap in many ways. And the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who



He says, “One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value and it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world, but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which we never thought was possible.” We see that what Benjamin says is that the storyteller exchanges primarily his experience. Storyteller is a person who comes from far through his journeys, he learns things, he experiences things and when he/she comes to a place, he tells us certain things that we learn about. So, he is saying that that kind of experience is slowly going away. If we remember our childhood, most of us who had grandparents in our place would see that they would tell us stories of their times.

That is what they were doing, they were imparting their experience to us. But now that we see that families are slowly getting drifted apart, family time, spending time together is getting a little more problematic. We see that these experiences are not coming to us through the art of storytelling. And he is saying that, “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?” The war he is talking about is the First World War that took place and it is very interesting. We just

discussed that when someone goes far away, or someone goes away, when they come back, they have experiences to tell us about. But he is saying that the war is such a thing where if you go, you do not come back with a lot to speak about.

Instead, when you come back you come back with a lot of speechlessness, you can barely speak. And if we read the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, we will see that the character Septimus Smith is an ideal example of this. After the First World War, this condition in main was diagnosed as PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder or shell shock. It was thought that so much bombing, so much sound kind of made men numb and they were barely able to speak and they could not communicate their experiences. That is what Benjamin is talking about here. He is saying that the war has made us speechless. It has made us talk less and less and less. And he is saying, “For never has experienced been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare and moral experience by those in power.” So, these experiences, these new forms of experiences, inflation, power, warfare, he is saying that these are not conventional human experiences.

The art of storytelling according to him is something that came naturally to us. It was something that made us human but these new experiences, these are more concocted experiences that is kind of undermining our way of being human and how we have been human for a long time. And it is saying, “A generation that had gone to school on a horse drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and beneath these clouds in the field of force of destructive torrents and explosions was the tiny, fragile human body.” We see here that Benjamin poses the art of storytelling also as an embodied condition. It is something that also incorporates the body because you take your body, take your mind through these different places and you come back and you tell the story. But if the body is under threat, so will the mind be. He is talking about an embodied consciousness here.

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And now he talks about the importance of experience that we discussed in the previous paragraph. "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales it is the great ones whose written versions, differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers." It is very interesting here that he says mouth to mouth, not mouth to ear. We see that he is suggesting a certain flow that if we say mouth to ear, it seems that the person who listens does not communicate it further. But for Benjamin storytelling is an act of communication that keeps on going. So, very consciously he uses the term mouth to mouth. You tell the story to someone else and that person will also tell that story to someone else and it will keep traveling.

And he is saying that among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from speech of the many nameless storytellers. If we look at many stories, many folktales, many fairytales, we will see that they do not have any authors, but they have been told for generations and we have been told them by people we know and that is how they move on. And we do not know who the authors are but the thing is, every time that story is told, the intactness of that story escaped, and probably the teller adds something to it and makes it more interesting for the person who it is being told to.

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traditions. So again, we are brought back to the idea that storyteller is also a person who comes from far, but it also can be a person who stays at home, who stays at home and imparts knowledge, imparts wisdom. And again, we are reminded of our grandparents who would probably be there and if we go to them, would have a lot of stories to tell.

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The Storyteller

the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers. Each of these tribes preserves some of its characteristics centuries later. Thus, among nineteenth-century German storytellers, writers like Hebel and Gortchell stem from the first tribe, writers like Sealsfield and Gersticker from the second. With these tribes, however, as stated above, it is only a matter of basic types. The actual extension of the realm of storytelling in its full historical breadth is inconceivable without the most intimate interpenetration of these two archaic types. Such an interpenetration was achieved particularly by the Middle Ages in their trade structure. The resident master craftsman and the traveling journeyman worked together in the same rooms, and every master had been a traveling journeyman before he settled down in his home town or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place.

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Leskov was at home in distant places as well as distant times. He was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, a man with genuine religious interests. But he was a no less sincere opponent of ecclesiastic bureaucracy. Since he was not able to get along any better with secular officialdom, the official positions he held were not of long duration. Of all his posts, the one he held for a long time as Russian representative of a big English firm was



And he is saying that the most archaic representatives of the storyteller is a resident tiller, a man of the soil and the other is the trading seaman. But he is saying that even if it seems that there is an essential difference between one person and the other—one person lives on the land, lives on the soil and tills the soil and the other person makes his living from the sea—they all come together and they all come together, the diversity comes together by the act of storytelling. “The resident master craftsman and the traveling journeyman work together in the same rooms and every master had been a traveling journeyman before he settled down in his home, somewhere else.”

He is saying that everyone who is staying at home had traveled once and everyone who is traveling now will have to get back to home and stay there. So, it is a cycle, as we have already mentioned—storytelling is also a cycle. You tell the story to someone, that person tells it to another person. So, this cyclical nature, he is talking about it, but he is also talking about the war, the onslaught on human experience brought about by war. It is the sort of thing that breaks the cycle that has been sustaining us for so long.

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Now he points out to how Leskov was one of the ideal storytellers and he is saying that “Leskov was at home in distant places as well as distant times. He was member of the Greek Orthodox Church, but he was a no less sincere opponent of ecclesiastic bureaucracy.” We also discussed Arnold’s essay “Sweetness and Light” and we saw there how Arnold also criticized institutional religion, institutionalization of religion. And he is saying that Leskov here also was really religious but he opposed the Greek Orthodox church, the institutionalization; and he was also opposed to ecclesiastic bureaucracy.

He says that the official positions he held were not of long duration, so he was not in one place for a long time. And he was the Russian representative of a big English firm and it was presumably the most useful one for his writing. We see again that cultural collision, that it is not one pure culture that is caved that is segregated. But no, the storyteller comes from a different culture, goes into a different culture and tells people about different cultures. He is a Russian representative of a big English firm. Here we see again a coming together of cultures, which is very important, a mixing together of cultures.

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seldom an ascetic, usually a simple, active man who becomes a saint apparently in the most natural way in the world. Mystical exaltation is not Leskov's forte. Even though he occasionally liked to indulge in the miraculous, even in piousness he prefers to stick with a sturdy nature. He sees the prototype in the man who finds his way about the world without getting too deeply involved with it.
He displayed a corresponding attitude in worldly matters. It is in keeping with this that he began to write late, at the age of twenty-nine. That was after his commercial travels. His first printed work was entitled "Why Are Books Expensive in Kiev?" A number of other writings about the working class, alcoholism, police doctors, and unemployed salesmen are precursors of his works of fiction.

IV
An orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers. More pronouncedly than in Leskov this trait can be recognized, for example, in Gorthelf, who gave his peasants agricultural advice; it is found in Nodier, who concerned himself with the perils of gas light; and Hebel, who slipped bits of scientific instruction for his readers into his *Scharas-kästlein*, is in this line as well. All this points to the nature of every real story. It contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today "having counsel" is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of ex-



And "he traveled through Russia and in the Russian legends Leskov saw allies in his fight against Orthodox bureaucracy. There are a number of his legendary tales whose focus is a righteous man, seldom an ascetic, usually a simple active man who becomes a Saint apparently in the most natural way in the world." He is saying that the people of Leskov are not ascetics, but there are people of the world, they are people with worldly knowledge. And that is something Benjamin is also hinting here. In Benjamin's writing we will not see something of a transcendental value, he is not saying that we need to value transcendental things and let go of things that are of this world. But he is positioning the storyteller as someone who is very worldly, who is very worldly voice, who has got to give worldly wisdom and that is very important here.

His first printed work was entitled "Why are books so expensive in Kiev?" A number of other writings about the working class, alcoholism, police, doctors and unemployed salesman are precursors of his works of fiction. We see that when we are talking about Arnold and his definition of culture, he also said that culture is not a badge that you wear for elitism. It is not something that should set you apart from other people, but something that should bring people together. And here we also see that in Benjamin's idea of the storyteller, you must write stories, you should write stories about people from all stairs of society and he will come back to it again and say how the storyteller moves very easily between these layers of society.

An orientation towards practical interest is characteristic of many born storytellers. We see here the importance of learning worldly things, the importance of learning practical things. It is not

about metaphysical preoccupations that are not important to us or very elitist, stuff for some philosophers that the common people cannot understand, but it is more about practical interest. It is told by common people and it is for common people. All this points to the nature of every real story, it contains openly or covertly, something useful.” So, this stress on something useful might sound a little archaic to our ears. But what Benjamin is saying here, it is not something moral that is a strict guideline for society, but a form of wisdom.

The moral is something that the storyteller has learned as experienced with his life and is telling us, from which we can learn. “The usefulness may in one case consists in a moral” and we also saw in ‘Sweetness and Light’ how Arnold says that moralities should still be a consideration, that culture takes mortality into consideration. “In another, in some practical advice, in a third in a proverb or maxim. In every case, the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today having counsel is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence, we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel, one would first have to tell the story.”

This part is very important, so he is saying to seek counsel we must also learn to tell stories. Now if we look at psychoanalysis that came up during the First World War and everything that was called the talking cure. There the person who is going out to seek a solution to his problems would have to first tell the story, tell his own story to the therapist, to the psychoanalyst. And if we read Freud, we will see that what Freud and other psychoanalysts do at that time is to take the story of the person who is being psychoanalyzed and continue the story in a sense. When the person who is on the psychoanalyst chair is asking for counsel, he is also telling a story. He is also telling his own story. And when the psychoanalyst is responding, he is also telling another story back to him. We see that seeking counsel, this answering is a form of storytelling in this sense. We can relate it very nicely to the way psychoanalysis or talking cure came up during that time.

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real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a "symptom of decay," let alone a "modern" symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.

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The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation



And he is saying “counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom is dying out.” He is saying that there is a lack of wisdom in our world, that wisdom is slowly dying away. This however, is a process that has been going on for some time and he is saying that it has slowly been vanishing, this art of wisdom. And we will see what it means. The earliest symptom of the process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel. Here we see that Benjamin is posing the rise of the novel in the opposite spectrum of the decline of storytelling. As the rise of the novel is happening, storytelling is declining. But why is that?

“What distinguishes the novel from the story is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel becomes possible only with the invention of printing.” This is very interesting. While storytelling did not require any printed medium, it did not require anything between the storyteller and the person. It is the stories getting told, there would be nothing that would be written or recorded but just memory. A person would speak, another person would listen, remember and it would be so impressive that the person would go back and again tell that to another person. But what he is saying is that the invention of printing has changed that. Now a person does not need to be in front of another person to tell a story. They can write a book, that book can go through the printing press and reach the readers just like that.

There does not need to be a direct contact between who is telling and who is being told. “What differentiates the novel from other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend or even

the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience, his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself; the birthplace of the novel is a solitary individual. He is himself uncounseled and cannot counsel others.” Benjamin is very right when he is pointing this out. We can see that during the rise of the novel, the architecture of English houses had changed. They had changed in a way that they gave the modern person more freedom, more isolation.

If you see in the novel *Clarissa*, we will see that Clarissa, while she writes, she locks herself away in a chamber and she vigorously writes several letters. We see that the novelist is almost a Clarissa-like figure or even like the person who is the captor of Clarissa. When they write they both isolate themselves, the writing does not take place in the presence of others. So, reading the novel is almost a voyeuristic thing. It is almost like looking into something that has been produced in a private sphere. As opposed to the storyteller, as opposed to storytelling when it is told in open and you get to meet the person who is telling you the story. This is very important, he is right when he is pointing out that the birth of the novel actually happens because the novelist has been given that space to isolate himself.

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form. The *Bildungsroman*, on the other hand, does not deviate in any way from the basic structure of the novel. By integrating the social process with the development of a person, it bestows the most frangible justification on the order determining it. The legitimacy it provides stands in direct opposition to reality. Particularly in the *Bildungsroman*, it is this inadequacy that is actualized.

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One must imagine the transformation of epic forms occurring in rhythms comparable to those of the change that has come over the earth's surface in the course of thousands of centuries. Hardly any other forms of human communication have taken shape more slowly, been lost more slowly. It took the novel, whose beginnings go back to antiquity, hundreds of years before it encountered in the evolving middle class those elements which were favorable to its flowering. With the appearance of these elements, storytelling began quite slowly to recede into the archaic; in many ways, it is true, it took hold of the new material, but it was not really determined by it. On the other hand, we recognize that with the full control of the middle class, which has the press as one of its most important instruments in fully developed capitalism, there emerges a form of communication which, no matter how far back its origin may lie, never before influenced the epic form in a decisive way. But now it does exert such an influence. And it turns out that it confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information.

Villemessant, the founder of *Le Figaro*, characterized the nature of information in a famous formulation. "To my readers," he used to say, "an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important

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And he gives the example of the *Bildungsroman*. The *Bildungsroman* is a form of writing that traces the growth of a person. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, would be a really good example of a *Bildungsroman*. What we see in *Great Expectations* is a person called Pip growing

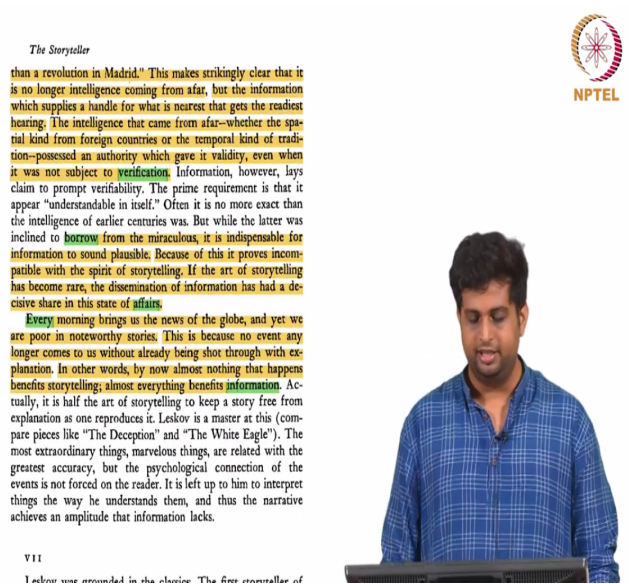
up. And we see that Pip's life is fraught with pitfalls. There is no one who he can look to for counsel. He must assume things as he goes along and we see that he is always haunted by this anonymous benefactor. He does not know who the benefactor is. He thinks that somebody is channeling his life. Somebody wants him to become something, but he does not know actually what it is and his life is spent in that confusion. And when he finally meets his benefactor, he sees that it is Abel Magwitch, a criminal convict from before. So that knowledge, that wisdom, when it finally comes to him, hits him.

Benjamin says exactly about this, that this isolated existence of the author, this isolated power that the author of the novel has runs very contradictory to the power the storyteller has. The novelist writes from afar and we do not know the person, we do not know where he is coming from and we assume things. But the storyteller, he comes in front of us. If we also look at a 2013 adaptation of *Great Expectations*, it is called *Mr. Pip*. It is a novel and it has also been made into a movie. There we see a class teacher who reads from the book and he makes omissions, but he kind of makes it about himself and the students start calling him "Mr. Pip". We see how the storyteller also becomes a character in his story. I would suggest if possibly you take a look at the movie or read the book after you take a look at *Great Expectations* and that can be read very nicely in the light of this essay.

And he goes on to say, "It took the novel whose beginnings go back to antiquity, hundreds of years before it encountered in the evolving middle class those elements which was favorable to its flowering." We see here, Benjamin is also holding the middle class responsible for certain things. And if we remember, Arnold in his *Sweetness and Light*, also calls the middle class the Philistines. And he says that, the Philistines, the middle class, must take more responsibility in upholding the values of society. And certain moral pitfall, certain pitfalls that have happened in society is because the middle class has taken it upon itself to make the pursuit of riches, the pursuit of wealth as an end onto itself.

Here also Benjamin is pointing out how the middle class is very complicit in the rise of the novel and the fall of storytelling. And he says that one of the reasons why this happens is the middle class's stress on the act of information that has slowly according to him substituted wisdom. Information/Wisdom is another binary that Benjamin draws upon. And he says that the founder of *Le Figaro* said "an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid."

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than a revolution in Madrid." This makes strikingly clear that it is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing. The intelligence that came from afar—whether the special kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition—possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear "understandable in itself." Often it is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Because of this it proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. Leskov is a master at this (compare pieces like "The Deception" and "The White Eagle"). The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.

VII

Leskov was surrounded in the classic: The first storyteller of

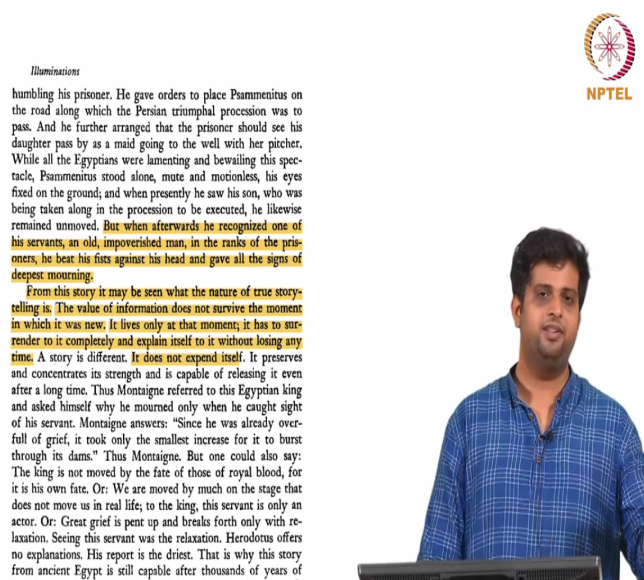
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"This makes strikingly clear that it is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing. The intelligence that came from afar, whether the special kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition, possessed an authority, which gave it validity even when it was not subject to verification." Information has become a much bigger nuisance in our times, but he is saying that with the rise of information, our worlds have gotten smaller, we are more interested in what is happening around us in a very close quarter than what is happening in the wider world, what is happening in the outside world. When we began the essay we saw that he was posing the storyteller's mind who comes from afar, as Leskov, who was a British person working in a Russian territory. There is this intermingling of culture. There is this person who is coming from a different culture and going into a different culture.

But here we see that we are slowly becoming more cloistered. We are slowly becoming more narrow-minded in our worldview. And why is that? It is because of information. Now, if we look at the recent concerns about elections and everything, we see that information manipulation means spreading of misinformation, disinformation has become a very important thing. We have something called fake news these days. This is what Benjamin is slowly approaching. He could see that this huge stress of information on information could slowly lead us to a place where the world could be dominated by fake news where this manipulation of information could bring governments into power. "To borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible." Information must always sound believable and that is the problem.

Whenever we are given any information, we tend to think that it is true. And that is how fake news goes around because we believe that since it is information it must be true. And he says that “it is incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. If the art of storytelling has become rare, it is because the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in its state of affairs.” We would rather look at some information, some numbers than hear another person say out their experiences about things. And he is talking about the newspaper, how every morning it brings us news but the information it brings to us is making us poorer than making us richer.

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humbling his prisoner. He gave orders to place Psammenitus on the road along which the Persian triumphal procession was to pass. And he further arranged that the prisoner should see his daughter pass by as a maid going to the well with her pitcher. While all the Egyptians were lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus stood alone, mute and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground; and when presently he saw his son, who was being taken along in the procession to be executed, he likewise remained unmoved. But when afterwards he recognized one of his servants, an old, impoverished man, in the ranks of the prisoners, he beat his fists against his head and gave all the signs of deepest mourning.

From this story it may be seen what the nature of true storytelling is. The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. Thus Montaigne referred to this Egyptian king and asked himself why he mourned only when he caught sight of his servant. Montaigne answers: "Since he was already overfull of grief, it took only the smallest increase for it to burst through its dams." Thus Montaigne. But one could also say: The king is not moved by the fate of those of royal blood, for it is his own fate. Or: We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life; to the king, this servant is only an actor. Or: Great grief is pent up and breaks forth only with relaxation. Seeing this servant was the relaxation. Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of

And he goes on to give us the example of Herodotus story on the Egyptian King Psammenitus who was captured by another king. And while he was standing his family was being paraded in front of him and taken for execution. And he was very straight-faced till he saw his wife, his children being carried. But when he saw finally that his old servant was also being carried away, he finally broke into tears and kind of hit his head. We see that Benjamin here says that there are multiple ways that we can interpret this story. The story does not tell us that, okay, interpret it this way and the story does not encode itself or decode itself for our own pleasure. We have to hear it and we have to decode it according to our minds, what the story should tell us.

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...the road along which the Persian triumphal procession was to pass. And he further arranged that the prisoner should see his daughter pass by as a maid going to the well with her pitcher. While all the Egyptians were lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammetichus stood alone, mute and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground; and when presently he saw his son, who was being taken along in the procession to be executed, he likewise remained unmoved. But when afterwards he recognized one of his servants, an old, impoverished man, in the ranks of the prisoners, he beat his fists against his head and gave all the signs of deepest mourning.

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And in this page, he gives a brilliant explanation on how this story can be read. I would suggest you read that, but all of them are plausible. And all of them show that there is a certain point of view in the world that we must believe in to believe that this is what the story is about. Why did the king not cry when he saw his family being taken away for execution but when his old servant was being taken for execution, he cried. He burst out into tears. I suggest you read up his explanation and see which one seems the most plausible to you.

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VIII

There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer. If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places—the activities that are intimately associated with boredom—are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. With this the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears. For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unraveled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship.

IX

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work—the rural, the maritime, and the urban—is itself an artisan



He says that the stories preclude psychological analysis. And he is saying that this process of assimilation, by assimilation it means when we hear a story, we assimilate the story. And we must assimilate the story to speak it later again because if we are not listening to it properly, not

assimilating it, we cannot impart it to another person. And he is saying that this process of assimilation, it is helped by the process of boredom. And he says “if sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation.” He is saying that storytelling is not an act that you do in a very tensed way, a story is not something that you do like a chore. It is not something you do because you have to do; it is something to do when you are relaxing your mind, you are bored and you are listening to a story.

And here he is not using the term boredom in a very negative way. If we read this passage, we will see how romantic Benjamin was in his outlook. He says “Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places—the activities that are intimately associated with boredom—are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well.” So, boredom for Benjamin is a very important thing. He is pointing out how in modern life, in a hustle and bustle, there is very little time to get bored. And also, if we are getting bored, we think we are missing out on life—I am bored. I must do something. But instead he says that boredom is a very important part of our lives.

We must learn how to sit still and listen to stories in that time. And he is also saying that “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories.” So, telling stories is always also re-telling of stories because it is not the first time the story is getting told. It would be interesting to look at the poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Coleridge in that light. We see that, Coleridge, the persona in the poem is actually going into a place and there the old sailor is telling him a story and we see that the sailor is a storyteller in this sense. He has come from far; he has strange experiences that he is telling to Coleridge. And Coleridge is listening to that and also writing it for our sake. But when he is writing, he is writing it in a narrative style. It is almost like, since he cannot tell the story to us directly, he writes it as his experience of listening to that person; to keep it intact, to keep the experience of listening to a story, the thrill of listening to a story, intact.

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... on which he supposedly based a whole passage and events which he then goes on to relate; or he thinks of Dostoevsky's funeral, where he sets his acquaintance with the heroine of his story "A Propos of the Kreutzer Sonata"; or he evokes a gathering of a reading circle in which we are told the events that he reproduces for us in his "Interesting Men." Thus his tracks are frequently evident in his narratives, if not as those of the one who experienced it, then as those of the one who reports it.

This craftsmanship, storytelling, was actually regarded as a craft by Leskov himself. "Writing," he says in one of his letters, "is to me no liberal art, but a craft." It cannot come as a surprise that he felt bonds with craftsmanship, but faced industrial technology as a stranger. Tolstoy, who must have understood this, occasionally touches this nerve of Leskov's storytelling talent when he calls him the first man "who pointed out the inadequacy of economic progress. . . . It is strange that Dostoevsky is so widely read. . . . But I simply cannot comprehend why Leskov is not read. He is a truthful writer." In his artful and high-spirited story "The Steel Flea," which is midway between legend and farce, Leskov glorifies native craftsmanship through the silversmiths of Tula. Their masterpiece, the steel flea, is seen by Peter the Great and convinces him that the Russians need not be ashamed before the English.

The intellectual picture of the atmosphere of craftsmanship from which the storyteller comes has perhaps never been sketched in such a significant way as by Paul Valéry. "He speaks of the perfect things in nature, flawless pearls, full-bodied, matured wines, truly developed creatures, and calls them 'the precious product of a long chain of causes similar to one another.'" The accumulation of such causes has its temporal limit only at perfection. "This patient process of Nature," Valéry continues,

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And here he says that writing in the later times has become a profession. Now it is something that you make money through, so you write for the market. And we see a lot of market books that make a lot of money but have barely any wisdom to impart. They are just being written so we can go through them and throw them away into the dustbin after some time. And many of those books, we will not even remember after 50 years. But he says in one of his letters, "Writing is to me no liberal art but a craft." It cannot come as a surprise that he felt bonds with craftsmanship but faced industrial technology as a stranger.

Here we see it is a very interesting thing. The writing for Leskov was not a liberal art but a craft. It was more like some art of weaving or work of building something. And it is also not a form of industrial production but more of a nonindustrial production, more of a cottage industry in that sense. And Benjamin cites Paul Valéry as one who has also given similar kind of imaging imagination about what writing is.

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"was once imitated by men. Miniatures, ivory carvings, elaborated to the point of greatest perfection, stones that are perfect in polish and engraving, lacquer work or paintings in which a series of thin, transparent layers are placed one on top of the other—all these products of sustained, sacrificing effort are vanishing, and the time is past in which time did not matter. Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated."

In point of fact, he has succeeded in abbreviating even storytelling. We have witnessed the evolution of the "short story," which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.

x

Valéry concludes his observations with this sentence: "It is almost as if the decline of the idea of eternity coincided with the increasing aversion to sustained effort." The idea of eternity has ever had its strongest source in death. If this idea declines, so we reason, the face of death must have changed. It turns out that this change is identical with the one that has diminished the communicability of experience to the same extent as the art of storytelling has declined.

It has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And in the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which may have been its



And he says, "Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated. And also mentions "miniatures, ivory carvings, elaborated to the point of greatest perfection." If we go back to, Jane Austen, what she said about writing *Pride and Prejudice*, she said that that it was her own piece of ivory, that she has been perfecting, she has been crafting. In Jane Austen's writing, even though she was a novelist, we see that the same ethos is reflected, that she thinks of herself not as a liberal artist, but a craftsman, a craftsman who has been working on a novel, like a person would work on a piece of ivory slowly, slowly building it.

And he says that "modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated." We are scared of things that cannot be abbreviated. We are scared of that solidity and information has become the way we abbreviate things these days. But as Benjamin says, that kind of abbreviation is problematic, that kind of use of numbers. I mean, if we told that this many people have died of hunger in a place, have died from a famine, but those just come to us as numbers, numbers of people who probably got killed by bombing, people who were killed by hunger. That does not make any sense to us. But if we could listen to an actual person from that place who is starving, to hear that experience of starvation, we would have a more moral reaction to it. We have more impulse to do something about it.

Next Benjamin talks about the slowly fading importance of death in a society. He is saying that the idea of eternity has ever had his strongest source in death. If this idea declined, so we reason, the face of death must have changed. He is talking about how death has slowly been moved away

from our homes and houses. He is saying that previously every house in a country would have a place where people would be taken to die and it would be a spectacle. Everyone around the house would also see that person dying, passing on. We see also here how passing on has this strong correlation with storytelling. When we are also telling a story, we are passing a story on. And when we also die, we pass on to another realm, transcendental realm. He is saying what gave authority to the storyteller was the authority of death that we can pass on, we can pass on, not ourselves, but our experiences can be also passed on.



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has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living. **There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died.** (The Middle Ages also felt spatially what makes that inscription on a sun dial of Ibiza, *Ultima multis* [the last day for many], significant as the temper of the times.) **Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity,** and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs. It is, however, characteristic that not **only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death.** Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.

x1

Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back. This is expressed in exemplary form in one of the most beautiful stories we have by the incomparable **Johann Peter Hebel.** It is found in the *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes*, is entitled **"Unexpected Reunion,"** and begins with the betrothal of a young lad who works in the mines of Falun. On the eve of his wedding he dies a miner's death at the bottom of his tunnel. His bride keeps faith with him after his death, and she lives long enough to become a wizened old woman; one day a body is brought up from the abandoned tunnel which, **saturated with iron vitriol, has**





But he is saying that slowly dying has been taken out from the houses and it has been taken into the hospital. Our houses have been made a more sanitized place where we cannot witness the spectacle of death. And the hospitals are also sanitized spaces where people are taken to die, where death is almost whitewashed. This passing on, this passing on of experience, this passing on of people, it is slowly being taken away. And if we read someone like Foucault in his book, *The Birth of the Clinic*, we see how the gaze of the doctor has come in and where the patient can no longer tell a story. But the doctor looks at the patient, turning a subject into an object; they have the final authority in the narrative about the patient.

Benjamin is anticipating Foucault's argument that the hospital is the place where we go to lose our sense of narrative, where we go to lose our authority over our narratives. To cite the importance of death he refers to a story by Johann Peter Hebel, the story is called 'Unexpected Reunion.' He says that in this story, a man is supposed to get married to his wife the next day;

but before the day of the marriage, he works in a mine and he goes there and he dies. And he is covered in iron vitriol that kind of freezes his body, without old-age.

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this long period of years graphic, he did so in the following sentences: "In the meantime the city of Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake, and the Seven Years' War came and went, and Emperor Francis I died, and the Jesuit Order was abolished, and Poland was partitioned, and Empress Maria Theresa died, and Struensee was executed. America became independent, and the united French and Spanish forces were unable to capture Gibraltar. The Turks locked up General Stein in the Veteraner Cave in Hungary, and Emperor Joseph died also. King Gustavus of Sweden conquered Russian Finland, and the French Revolution and the long war began, and Emperor Leopold II went to his grave too. Napoleon captured Prussia, and the English bombarded Copenhagen, and the peasants sowed and harvested. The millers ground, the smiths hammered, and the miners dug for veins of ore in their underground workshops. But when in 1809 the miners at Falun . . ."

Never has a storyteller embedded his report deeper in natural history than Hebel manages to do in this chronology. Read it carefully. Death appears in it with the same regularity as the Reaper does in the processions that pass around the cathedral clock at noon.

XII

Any examination of a given epic form is concerned with the relationship of this form to historiography. In fact, one may go even further and raise the question whether historiography does not constitute the common ground of all forms of the epic. Then written history would be in the same relationship to the epic



But the bride grows old. She does not stay young forever. But after a lot of years when the man is taken up, he is still frozen in that same manner, the age has not passed. But to give an idea of the time that has passed, Benjamin quotes from the story, I suggest you read it, he says that Hebel uses many instances of death and destruction to signify the passing of time. The storyteller, when he talks about the passing of time, about eternity, about this passing on, he must also talk about passing on as we pass on in death. So, death becomes a very important aspect of storytelling that we cannot avoid.

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the difference between the writer of history, the historian, and the teller of it, the chronicler. The historian is bound to explain in one way or another the happenings with which he deals, under no circumstances can he content himself with displaying them as models of the course of the world. But this is precisely what the chronicler does, especially in his classical representatives, the chroniclers of the Middle Ages, the precursors of the historians of today. By basing their historical tales on a divine plan of salvation—an inscrutable one—they have from the very start lifted the burden of demonstrable explanation from their own shoulders. Its place is taken by interpretation, which is not concerned with an accurate concentration of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world.

Whether this course is eschatologically determined or is a natural one makes no difference. **In the storyteller the chronicler is preserved in changed form, secularized, as it were.** Laskov is among those whose work displays this with particular clarity. Both the chronicler with his eschatological orientation and the storyteller with his profane outlook are so represented in his works that in a number of his stories it can hardly be decided whether the web in which they appear is the golden fabric of a religious view of the course of things, or the multicolored fabric of a worldly view.

Consider the story "The Alexandrite," which transports the reader into "that old time when the stones in the womb of the earth and the planets at celestial heights were still concerned with the fate of men, and not today when both in the heavens and beneath the earth everything has become indifferent to the fate of



And then he talks about the epic and how the Chronicle has been a form of epic which has been helping in historiography, has been helping in preserving history. And he says that in the storyteller the chronicler is preserved in changed form, secularized as it were. We see the importance of secularization here also, that Benjamin and Arnold, as we have seen, do not deny the impact religion has had in society. But they also note that some of its function is still alive in society, in a more secularized fashion, in a fashion where people can take part irrespective of where it is coming from. It is not restricted to certain religious beliefs. And he talks about 'The Alexandrite', a story where it is almost like he is vouching for astrology but it is not like that.

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terize the course of the world that is illustrated in this story of Leskov's. Is it determined eschatologically or naturalistically? The only certain thing is that in its very nature it is by definition outside all real historical categories. **Leskov tells us that the epoch in which man could believe himself to be in harmony with nature has expired.** Schiller called this epoch in the history of the world the period of naive poetry. The storyteller keeps faith with it, and his eyes do not stray from that dial in front of which there moves the procession of creatures of which, depending on circumstances, Death is either the leader or the last wretched struggler.

XIII

It has seldom been realized that the listener's naive relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told. The cardinal point for the unaffected listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story. **Memory is the epic faculty par excellence. Only by virtue of a comprehensive memory can epic writing absorb the course of events on the one hand and, with the passing of these, make its peace with the power of death on the other.** It is not surprising that to a simple man of the people, such as Leskov once invented, the Czar, the head of the sphere in which his stories take place, has the most encyclopedic memory at his command. "Our Emperor," he says, "and his entire family have indeed a most astonishing memory."

Mnemosyne, the rememberer, was the Muse of the epic art



He is saying that in the story it is lamented how different planets that we did not know, the unknowns, how they shaped our lives and how it was said that they also control our lives. But now we can see that such beliefs have been dispelled and there are no unknowns out there. We almost know all the galaxies that are out there, we have named them, we have named the farthest stars. But there was a time when we probably knew very little about the cosmic world. And a lot was left up to imagination. And again, the whole idea about those planets determining our way of life is also, in a sense, the far impacting the near. He is saying that the storyteller is a person, again stressing the idea of the storyteller as someone who comes from far and he kind of dissolves these boundaries of what is far and what is near; as they both come together in the storyteller.

But with information, he is saying, we are building these boundaries around us where we are still pushing the far, farther away, so that it cannot come to us. And this is exactly the same thing that he is pointing out here with the cosmos: that we used to feel the influence that the world has on us was very, very far away. It could influence us from very far away. And if we look at something like Judith Butler's essay on precarity, in this vein, where she says that if we are turning the newspaper one day or turn on the TV and we see someone suffering, the image of someone suffering, suddenly, we do not ask to see these images of suffering. But when they hit us, they make us feel that we have an ethical obligation towards doing something for those people.

And sometimes it does not matter from how far that image is coming, but the fact that human suffering or any other kinds of suffering can make us feel like that about people we do not know, people who are far away from us, is still a sort of faith in humanity that we can keep. It is the essential way of being human. And here we see that Benjamin is talking about the importance of memory, that “it has seldom been realized that listener’s naive relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what is told.” And this power of retaining is memory. He says that memory is the epic faculty par excellence. Only by virtue of a comprehensive memory can epic writing absorb the course of events on the one hand, and with the passing of these make its peace with the power of death on the other.

What is memory here? Memory stands against death in Benjamin's theorization. We have memories and we recount those memories to others and when they listen, our memories become their memories. Memories are something we can transmit to other people; we can pass on to other people. While our bodies, our lives may pass on, our memories will keep passing on through people whom we can tell about it. We can still pass on our memories to others and that way death can still be put away. We can still not be haunted by death knowing that our memories, our way of living will be passing on through other people.

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memory—manifests itself in a form quite different from the way it manifests itself in the story.

Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It is the Muse-derived element of the epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties. In the first place among these is the one practiced by the storyteller. **It starts the web which all stories together form in the end.** One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them there is a **Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop.** This is epic remembrance and the Muse-inspired element of the narrative. But this should be set against another principle, also a Muse-derived element in a narrower sense, which as an element of the novel in its earliest form—that is, in the epic—lies concealed, still undifferentiated from the similarly derived element of the story. It can, at any rate, occasionally be divined in the epics, particularly at moments of solemnity in the Homeric epics, as in the invocations to the Muse at their beginning. What announces itself in these passages is the perpetuating remembrance of the novelist as contrasted with the short-lived reminiscences of the storyteller. The first is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle; the second, to *many* diffuse occurrences. It is, in other words, *remembrance* which, as the Muse-derived element of the novel, is added to *reminiscence*, the corresponding element of the story, the unity of their origin in memory having disappeared with the decline of the epic.

XIV

“No one,” Pascal once said, “dies so poor that he does not leave something behind.” Surely it is the same with memories



“Memory creates a chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It starts the wave which all stories together form in the end. Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to stop.” We see that he is talking about web which

reminds us of intertextuality as later theorized by many postmodern thinkers that texts are not bound in books, that they overflow, there is a flowing of text, one text leads to the other and another text leads to the other. There is this intertextuality that Benjamin is already talking about, about the interconnectivity. And he let us remember that he is talking before the start of the internet and with the internet this web has grown larger and larger and as we call it, world wide web.

He is kind of talking about that intertextuality, how one text points to another and they can work in harmony. And he also refers to Scheherazade from a *1001 Arabian Nights*. And we also see Salman usually talking about this, that Scheherazade, she is told that she must tell a story, otherwise she will be killed. And every night she must come up with one story so she does not get killed. Storytelling as Benjamin also says here, runs counter to death. It is something that will always postpone death. It will always postpone the finality of our lives. By storytelling, through memories, through transmission of memories, it can always continue. It can always pass on to the next person.

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said Desautels, "that was perhaps the finest thing in our lives." With such an insight the novel reaches an end which is more proper to it, in a stricter sense, than to any story. Actually there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate. The novelist, on the other hand, cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing "Finis."

XV

A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener.) In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were. Indeed, he destroys, he swallows up the material as the fire devours logs in the fireplace. The suspense which permeates the novel is very much like the draft which stimulates the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play.

It is a dry material on which the burning interest of the reader feeds. "A man who dies at the age of thirty-five," said Moritz Heimann once, "is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five." Nothing is more dubious than this sentence—but for the sole reason that the tense is wrong. A man—so says the truth that was meant here—who died at thirty-five will appear to remembrance at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life. The nature of the character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the "mean-

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Here he talks about the reader, how a reader of a novel is very different from a listener of a story. He says "A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller. Even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other readers." We see often that the image of reading a novel is given as a secluded, that the book and I, we can be lost in a corner away from the world, someplace. "In this solitude of his, the reader

of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it as it were. Indeed, he destroys, he swallows up the material as the fire devours the logs in the fireplace. The suspense, which permeates the novel is very much like the draft which stimulates the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play.”

Reading a novel is to Benjamin almost like consuming something voraciously. It is eating something up and we see why that image is very problematic. And it is also not a communal eating. It is not an eating that takes place in the presence of everything. If you remember Jesus in his last supper, he did not take the meal by himself, but he was surrounded by all his apostles and he shared the bread, shared the wine with everyone. So, there is this contrast that Benjamin is bringing out with eating alone, selfishly devouring things, and eating in company, telling stories in company where everyone comes together and listens to stories.

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Illuminations
colonial soldiers. All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier.
“And they lived happily ever after,” says the fairy tale. The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest. This need was the need created by the myth. The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest. In the figure of the fool it shows us how mankind “acts dumb” toward the myth; in the figure of the youngest brother it shows us how one’s chances increase as the mythical primitive times are left behind; in the figure of the man who sets out to learn what fear is it shows us that the things we are afraid of can be seen through; in the figure of the wisecrack it shows us that the questions posed by the myth are simple-minded, like the riddle of the Sphinx; in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of the child in the fairy tale it shows that nature not only is subservient to the myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man. The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits. (This is how the fairy tale polarizes *Mut*, courage, dividing it dialectically into *Unermut*, that is, cunning, and *Uermut*, high spirits.) The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not

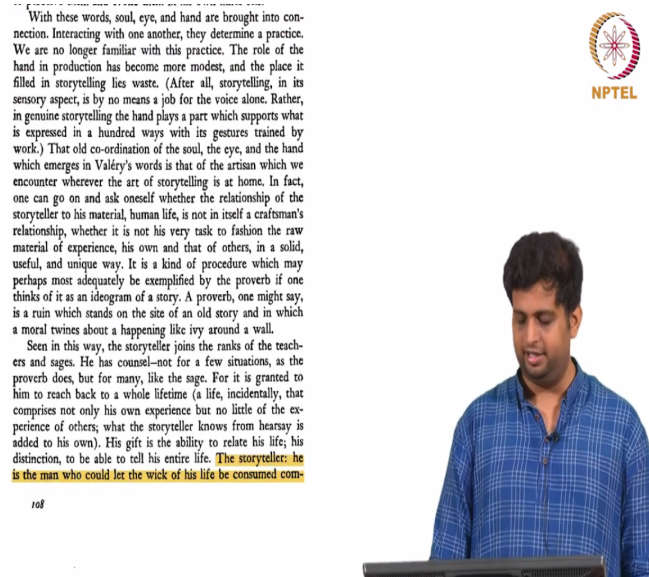


And here Benjamin again comes back to what Arnold has also talked about culture. That it is a great leveler. It does not make upper, higher class or lower classes in society, but kind of levels people and it has that mobility to move in different spheres of society. He is saying that “all great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder, a ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to reach even the deepest shock of individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier. ‘And they lived happily ever after’ says the fairy tale, the fairy tale which to this day is the first tutor of children

because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales.”

We saw how fairytales and folktales do not have authors assigned to them. They have been handed down from generation to generation; even if they have been written mostly, they do not have an explicit author associated with them. We know through the retellings that this or that person retold the story, but they do not have a central author associated with them.

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With these words, soul, eye, and hand are brought into connection. Interacting with one another, they determine a practice. We are no longer familiar with this practice. The role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies waste. (After all, storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work.) That old co-ordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand which emerges in Valéry's words is that of the artisan which we encounter wherever the art of storytelling is at home. In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. It is a kind of procedure which may perhaps most adequately be exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall.

Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel—not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. **The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed com-**

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NPTEL

I would ask you to read the whole essay. We are today approaching the end and we will conclude here. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story.”

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The Storyteller
pletely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the
incomparable aura about the storyteller, in Leskov as in Hauff,
in Poe as in Stevenson. The storyteller is the figure in which the
righteous man encounters himself.



“This is the basis of the incompatible aura about the storyteller in Leskov as in Hauff, in Poe as in Stevenson. The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.” We see that the storyteller is someone who would be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. We saw just a few minutes back, how reading a novel was about being voracious. It was about almost like lighting a huge fire and getting burned in that. But the storyteller is like a gentle flame. It is like a smaller flame by which the storyteller is always aware of his own passing life, of his own death.

But what promotes his storytelling is that awareness of death. That one day we shall all die with our own experiences. And if we do not communicate our experiences, the wisdom, whatever we might have learned from our lives, then our lives will become less meaningful and our lives will become less impactful. So, the simple act of storytelling, the simple act of telling others what has happened to us without any psychological coloring, without telling them what they should take from it. But just telling them that okay, this is what happened to me and you should know about it.

There is a certain wisdom in how we live and how we tend to pass our lives and how we tend to survive in this world. Because the world can often be cruel and to survive in a world, to be something in a world is of great power and that is something we can tell others, okay, this is how we survived and probably this is how you can survive too. This is a beautiful essay that I would like you to read in its entirety because he makes some beautiful points in there that due to the

lack of time and scope, we could not reach today. But if you want to discuss him further, please post a comment in the forum and we will take it up. Thank you for listening!