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Nethersole, Reingard

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TITLE: Benjamin's *Storyteller* Through African Eyes: Rallying the Experience of the "Ordinary" in Late Modernity

BY: **R. Nethersole**

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Benjamin's *Storyteller* Through African Eyes: Rallying the Experience of the "Ordinary" in Late Modernity.

Reingard Nethersole (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg)

"Für den, der keine Erfahrung mehr machen kann, gibt es keinen Trost"
Walter Benjamin, *Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire*

Benjamin's famous figure of "The Storyteller"[1], uncoupled from its exemplary historical representatives like Nicolai Leskov, Johann Peter Hebel and, among others, Herodotus, Poe and Kipling, has become almost stock in trade in contemporary reflections on narrative[2]. Literary criticism in particular has engaged with the storyteller[3] and, to a lesser extent, with his artisan-like craft and the form of the tale as opposed to the novel. Yet, the importance of experience as being both an enabling condition and an effect of narration which Benjamin's essay foregrounds is often concealed. Nevertheless, it is the experience of modernity, as I shall argue, which animates this text in as much as its companion piece, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", and numerous others of the later writings, not least "On some Motifs in Baudelaire". Experience furthermore, as "The Storyteller" makes abundantly clear, situates us and governs the way we conduct, what amounts to, the narrative of our lives, or to put in Biblical terms: the way in which "We spend our years as a tale that is told"[4]. Conversely, as Benjamin says in relation to Baudelaire's character: "For someone who is past experiencing, there is no consolation. But it is nothing other than this inability which denotes the actual essence of anger. The angry man 'does not want to listen'; his arch-image (*Urbild*) Timon rages against people indiscriminately; he is no longer in a position to

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "Der Erzähler. Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolei Lesskows", *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 2, Werkausgabe vol. 5 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 438-465; in English: "The Storyteller. Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov," *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 83-109. References to this and other texts are given in parenthesis in the body of the text, first to the German version and then to the published English translation. The reader who consults the latter will notice that the English renditions of Benjamin's passages differ to some extent from the published translations.

[2] Cf. among others Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[3] Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). Hartmann refers to Benjamin in support of his argument on the necessity of refinement of literary appreciation, suggesting that Benjamin "connects the disappearance of the art of storytelling to our psychological and urban restlessness" (p. 102). Thomas Regehly, "'Kannitverstan' - Benjamin, Hebel und die Hermeneutik" in: "*Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen*". *Frankfurter Benjamin-Vorträge* ed. by Lorenz Jäger/ Thomas Regehly. (Frankfurt: Aisthesis, 1992), 59-95. Wlad Godzich. "After the Storyteller...comes the storyteller", Foreword to *Story and Situation. Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* by Ross Chambers (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xi-xxii. Reprinted: Wlad Godzich, *The Culture of Literacy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 96-105.

[4] *Book of Psalms*, 90:9. It also serves Isabel Hofmeyr as main title for her *Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom.* (Porthmouth, NH: Heinemann, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, London: James Currey), 1993

distinguish the proven friend from the mortal enemy"[5]. It is at this intersection between the (historical) conditions of possibility of experiencing and 'non-experiencing' or 'raving' where I wish to situate my reading of "The Storyteller" against the foil of a recent 'local', that is a Black South African, appropriation of the well known text in order to examine the figure of a narrator, Ndebele, who is, as yet, not fully detached from the oral tradition of his community, unlike most Western novelists. In addition, Benjamin's concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) in its two dimensions of theory and critical method of investigation will be of major concern, as will be the quality and desirability of a 'transaction of experience' or *austauchbare Erfahrung* today.

Njabulo Ndebele's "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction"[6] assays, like Benjamin's essay' to which Ndebele refers, the interrelation of narration and experience in the present, albeit very different, world. Having, unlike Benjamin's storyteller its sources in agrarian rather than artisan culture, the Black academic, critic and story writer Ndebele[7] is concerned with:

> a serious examination of key social issues affecting some rural and semi-rural communities in one 'Third World' country, Turkey. There seemed to be something disturbingly familiar about these stories; something the echoes of which edged the focus of my mind towards the South African literary situation, where it seemed there was something missing. Was there, in contemporary South African fiction, a tradition of such compelling and imaginative recreation of rural life as in Kemal's stories? I could not come up with ready examples. On the contrary, instead of showing any serious interest in rural life, our writers seemed decidedly preoccupied with urban culture. Granted that such occupation may be justified and valid, what, nevertheless, was the state of the resulting urban fiction itself as art? (11).

Ndebele finds the "art" of Black South African fiction sorely wanting because of the impact of journalism which substituted *narration* with *information* and an ensuing "numbing sensationalism and its consequent smothering of creative thinking" (24). For writing to be released from the shallow tendency "to inform without involving readers in a truly transforming experience" (24), Ndebele aims at improving the local "craft of fiction":

> "Basically, the demands of the craft of fiction are that the writer has to have a more than casual view of the relationship between fiction and society, or between artistic information and social information. The world of fiction demands that the writer grapple with some of the following problems which are basic to his art: setting, conflict, credible characterisation, consistent narrative

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[5] "Über einge Motive bei Baudelaire", *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, 2, Werkausgabe vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 607-653; 642; in English: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 157-202, 186.

[6] Njabulo S. Ndebele, "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction" in: *Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg: COSAW-Congress of South African Writers, 1991), 11-36. In the following page numbers are given in parenthesis in the text. - The essay appeared originally in *Staffrider*, a journal founded and published by Ravan Press, a small, politically left publishing house devoted to provide a voice for emerging Black authors as well as for criticism of the Apartheid regime, existing precariously in the face of excessive censorship. Ndebele's own collection of stories *Fools and Other Stories* was published with Ravan in 1984. One of the *Anatolian Tales*, "A Dirty Story", by Kemal is featured in the same issue as Ndebele's "review" (cf. *Staffrider* 6,1 1984 7-14). Ndebele's essay (ibid. 24-25, 42-48) is reprinted unchanged in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* under the COSAW imprint which, in many ways, can be considered the successor to Ravan. Ndebele, professor of English and African Literature and now head of the University of the North, succeeded Nadine Gordimer as chairman of COSAW in 1993.

[7] Ndebele - like Benjamin - was exiled from his country of birth due to political persecution at the time of writing the essay. This was also a time when even statements made ostensibly in the name of culture barely escaped the all pervasive state oppression.

> point of view, the complexities of fictional language and time. Beyond these essential technical issues, a serious writer must address himself to the ideological nature of fiction, since the handling of social information, whether within the narrative, or within ordinary discourse, is always ideologically determined. The moralistic ideology of liberalism for example, has forced our literature into a tradition of almost mechanistic surface representation. On the other hand, an ideological stance which stresses social or historical process as a condition for the meaningful acquisition of knowledge will more easily dispose writers towards a more explanatory approach to fiction. To work from the perspective of process is to attempt to situate individual events within an explainable totality of social meaning (28).

This prescriptive passage, with its display of two rather obvious (Western) influences current in Black literary criticism at the time, namely American-type instruction in creative writing (the "technical" issues mentioned) and marxist informed practical criticism, loosely echoing Lukács, thus attempts to create an "art" from a "craft". By doing so, however, Ndebele essentially fuses two historically distinct processes of narration, namely that of the teller of tales with that of the fiction writer (*Romancier*, 443). Hence, when stitched into Benjamin's "Storyteller", these formulaic pronouncements resemble the configuration of the novel rather than the tale. Yet, Ndebele's embrace of Kemal' s "compelling body of fiction"(19), and his admiration for rural settings as the traditional home of African life and work prior to Western colonial contacts conveys a desire to retain the figure of the (oral) storyteller, albeit in "the maturity of the writer" who "is called upon to be fair-minded even to those he socially abhors" (30).

Quoting Benjamin, Ndebele stresses the "communal quality of a traditional tale passed from mouth to mouth" (15), and embraces the work of the contemporary Turkish writer, Yashar Kemal (born 1922), because of a perceived similarity of socio-economic and political conditions and concerns in "Third World" countries. Thus Ndebele's essay, unlike Benjamin's, situates itself in an identified sameness of experience, albeit in geographically distant spaces. In his essay, furthermore, Ndebele's admires the Kurdish author Kemal, for producing "an art" rooted in an indigenous "history of storytelling"(15). Thus Ndebele's assessment of local "fiction" is "triggered" (11) by a review of "Kemal's *Anatolian Tales*" which "is a collection of stories", displaying the artistry of a fellow contemporary writer, which ought to serve, according to Ndebele, as inspiration for Black South African writers. Given the devaluation, debasement and even destruction of indigenous oral storytelling in colonial South Africa, Kemal's firm rootedness "in the timeless tradition of storytelling" (14) seems not only enviable but has to be emulated. For it promises an affirmation of self-worth for Ndebele and fellow authors together with the very practical possibility of inserting one's own voice, hitherto only the object of the coloniser and liberal sympathies, into a universal and "timeless" tradition, while also consciously mending the break with a lost "peasant past"[8]. In contrast, the initial impulse which gave rise to Benjamin's essay, apart from a welcome publication assignment for the journal *Orient und Occident* in 1936[9], was the opportunity of addressing the apparently long cherished idea of a "new theory of the novel".

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[8] As Ndebele observes in relation to the "liberation struggle" which has so far overlooked "the millions of Africans in rural areas" in its emphasis on "the workers in the cities" as "the decisive element in determining the course of the coming South African political struggle": "Whatever the reason, it does look as if, both from the political and the cultural perspectives, an important dimension has been left out of the total South African experience as that experience attempts to be conscious of itself and to define itself. However, one can predict the coming, in the not too distant future, of an era of urban obsession with rural areas as genuine sources of an array of cultural symbols by which to define a future cultural dispensation in South Africa. In a sense, that era has already begun." (21ff.).

[9] For details of the emergence of and circumstances surrounding "The Storyteller" see "*Gesammelte Schriften* II, 3 vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980) 1276-1281.

Whereas Ndebele, pleading for a "genuine art" which "makes us understand"(31), makes no generic distinction between narratives other than, by implication, between "fiction" and non-fiction, "The Storyteller" seeks to explain "the transformation of epic forms" (443, 88) in conjunction with transformations of both, "secular historical forces of production" (442, 87) and the advent of new cultural technologies, whereby the "slow changes" of narrative genres are compared to the gradual metamorphosis characteristic of natural history (cf. 443, 88).

Ndebele's assessment of the local situation corroborates the much cited disappearance of the "storyteller" even in a remote part of the world where, in conjunction with that mode of temporal experience usually referred to as 'the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous' (*Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*)[10], different existing cultural forms and practices, not yet fully superseded by modernity, seem to suggest otherwise. As Benjamin puts it in the opening lines of his essay: "What we have of the storyteller is the sound of his familiar name but he is not at all present in his living efficacy" (438, 83). In other words, it is the very absence of an "effective, living presence" which, as is typical for Benjamin's (dialectical) modality of thought, makes it possible for the storyteller, and his specific production of tales, to become an object of investigation from the perspective of a historico-temporal 'now' (*jetzt*[11]). That "our daily experience prescribes both this distance and this perspective (*Blickwinkel*)" together with the "experience" which "tells us that the art of storytelling is coming to an end" (438, 83) is usually taken as evidence of decay of, and nostalgia for an irretrievable 'better', because idyllic past. In the case of "The Storyteller" nothing could be further from the truth as will be shown below. To be sure, Benjamin and Ndebele need to recoup storytellers and example tales which seemingly have "no present immediacy" (Zohn translation, 83) in their respective societies, but their very treatment of Leskov on the one hand, and Kemal, on the other, suggest possibilities for altering the state of narrative and its corollary, experience, in and for Late Modernity because of an ethical imperative, inscribed more strongly in Benjamin's text and assumed by Ndebele, whereby the "storyteller is that mode or shape (*Gestalt*) in whom the "just" (*der Gerechte*) meets himself" (465, 109).

Benjamin's introductory remarks concerning a reconstruction of "the figure of the storyteller in its full corporeality"(440, 84), characteristically appeal to the reader's representation or perceived knowledge, either in form of popular sayings which everyday communication has retained, although the truism of "When someone goes on a journey he

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[10] Cf. here Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* trans. by Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press 1985). Koselek's project is the investigation of temporal structures in relation to the concept of 'history' and the (18th century) assumption of predictable 'progress' in and through historical processes. Of importance to the present discussion is his schema of "three modes of temporal experience", whereby apart from (1) the "irreversibility of events" and (2) the "repeatability of events" the third mode is of particular concern here: "The contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*). A differential classification of historical sequences is contained in the same naturalistic chronology. Within this temporal refraction is contained a diversity of temporal strata which are of varying duration, according to the agents or circumstances in question, and which are measured against each other. In the same way, varying extensions of time are contained in the concept *Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*. They refer to the prognostic structure of historical time, for each prognosis anticipates events which are certainly rooted in the present and in this respect are already existent, although they have not actually occurred.

From a combination of these three formal criteria it is possible to conceptually deduce progress, decadence, acceleration, or delay, the "not yet" and the "no longer," the "earlier" or "later than", the "too early" and the "too late", situation and duration - whatever differentiating conditions must enter so that concrete historical motion might be rendered visible."(94ff.).

[11] .Cf. in this connection also Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit* in: "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (701, 263).

has something to tell" no longer necessarily generates a tale, or by picturing the pleasure derived from listening to "local tales and traditions" (440, 84). Besides setting-up the axial spatio-temporal framework on which all narration depends, this, literally speaking, 'fleshing-out' of the traits of the storyteller illuminates Benjamin's procedure of wedding thought, or *res cogitans*, to *res exstensa* or the sensory spheres of existence over time. It is this move, I argue, which for Benjamin constitutes experience as that doublet of (philosophical-historical) knowledge and sensual perception, residing at the vertex of the co-ordinates defined by life and death which informs all his work.

Experience, or the lack of it, arising from historically specific mediations between "embodied phenomena" (*das Wesenhafte*) and the temporal (*das Zeitliche*)" (454) operates as the trajectory across past and present, the 'has been' and the 'now', sedimented in language, and hence accessible to everyone who is attentive[12] to its workings by way of that critical act, best described by the attitude of *eingedenken*, a mnemonic 'thinking-into something', which, instead of taking possession of an object in thought, attempts to focus on that very interstice residing between thought and object. It is this an interstice which defies homogenisation, and which generates, in an image (*Bild*) and through the process of *eingedenken*, a momentary recognition as if in a "flash"[13]. Commensurate with the spaces of *das Wesenhafte* and *das Zeitliche*, which intersect in experience, are Benjamin's notions of 'meaning' (*Sinn*) and 'life' (*Leben*); in other words: the embodied nature of objects, due to their innate ability (*Vermögen*)[14] of disclosing the wealth (*Vermögen*) of their interiority as significant, when engaging the exteriority of other *Wesenheiten*, register as experience during a limited but continuous process of life, marked by emergence and fading when viewed from the perspective of "eternity", as Benjamin puts it (449, 93). "The thought of eternity has had its strongest source in death, ever since", and used to be present as the inevitable, yet mistical foil to life. Eternity, represented by "the face of death", furthermore, not only structured life in its temporal but also in its spatial, visual dimensions, like "the sun-dial in Ibiza" (ibid.), and oriented it towards a goal, by concentrating on the *hic et nunc*. Thereby making each moment in life because it might be the last, a significant or, potentially, fulfilled one, in contrast to the sense of time, displayed by the clock registering the ticking of time in modern life [15]. However, in as much as the "thought" of death, and with it the attentiveness to eternity fades, as can be observed in the manner in which the *Trockenbewohner der Ewigkeit*, the "dry dwellers of eternity" organise the act of dying out of public view, "we must conclude", Benjamin says, "that the face of death" has become a different, namely an 'un-natural' and, therefore, an incommensurable one. "It has shown itself that this change is identical with that brought on by the diminished transmissibility of experience. This, in turn, is corroborated by the manner in which the art of storytelling has come to an end" (449, 93). This means, too, that " not only knowledge or wisdom, but especially [man's] lived life - which are the material for stories, and which derive their transmissible form in the dying" have diminished:

> Just as sequences of images evolve within the interiority of the dying - consisting of views of his own person in which, without being aware of it, he meets himself - suddenly in his expression and gaze 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. (450, 94)

Commensurate with a 'drying-up' of life, due to the disappearance of death as signifier in the *Merkwelt*, the world of perception (449, 94), eternity is concealed at the

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[12] "Perception, according to Novalis' assessment, is 'attentiveness'" in: "On Some Motifes of Baudelaire" op. cit. 646.

[13] Cf. in this connection ibid. ,695 (257) as well as with regard to the image: *Zentralpark* (GS, I, 2, 669): "... the preparedness to always make an image serve thought."

[14] In German, *Vermögen* means both, ability and wealth or plentitude.

[15] Cf. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", op. cit. 643.

moment when history as the activity of a constitutive subject, realising itself through meaningful work, entered the scene in a secularised world. With the loss of transcendence, generated by the transformation from pre-history to history, experience, together with the temporal dimension, changed in a fundamental manner. Instead of being episodic and accumulative over time, continuous experience (*Erfahrung*), as lived experience as well as preconscious 'encountering' of 'embodied phenomena', became punctuated by *Erlebnis*, experience[16] in form of an event or conscious occurrence. Whereas *Erfahrung* relates to the mnemonic aspect of remembrance, *Erlebnis*, according to "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", relates to recollection[17]. Although both leave mnemonic traces, compounded exitation resulting from the typically 'modern' stimulus, born of the city and induced by conveyor-belt type work lacking content together with a continuity of labour, as was the case with artisan work, produces shock[18]. "The phenomenon of shock."[19], as Benjamin says in the *Notes On Charles Baudelaire. Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, not only "distinguishes *Erlebnis* from *Erfahrung* but constitutes an ultimate rupture, "exploding the context of *Erfahrung*"[20] and resulting in the pathology of rage, unless sublimated in the form of art, as is the case, for instance, with Baudelaire's poetry. Remembrance, the dimension of time, however is the very hallmark of (epic) narrative's ability and plentitude (*Vermögen*) (453, 97) or, as one might say, the very power of narrative, signified by "Mnemosyne, the muse of recollection". Whereas that power derives its authority from death, and "death" in turn, "is the sanction of everything which the storyteller can tell" (450, 94), "remembrance founds the chain" which enables experience as event (*das Geschehene*) to be passed on from generation to generation. Remembrance and narration as productive activities, displayed and disclosed as text, are thus responsible for creating history, albeit by producing discontinuities resulting from different bonds between the *Wesenhafte* and the temporal.

Yet, as our experience has changed due to different concepts of time in relation to eternity and death, narrator and narration together with the narrative contract have undergone profound transformations. Thus the storyteller as a righteous/just figure residing in, as well as transmitting, the *hic et nunc*[21] of his own "*whole* life" as well as that of others "by allowing the wick of his life to be consumed in the gentle flame of his story" (465, 109), is displaced by the novelist (*Romancier*, 454, 98). The novelist is a mere inheritor of an already diminished bequest, due to a different experience of time in the face of an occulted death in a secularised world, defined by "transcendental homelessness" (ibid.). Whereas the tale inscribes the experience of cosmological and phenomenological time in which death appears as future certainty, albeit mysteriously, embedded in nature at regular intervals (cf. 451, 97), the novel, no longer under the (exterior) unifying sign of eternity, attempts to arrest life and time by summation inscribed in the interior of the text by way of a particular emplotting of

[16] It is important in this connection to be aware of the semantics of "experience" as the apprehension of an object, thought or emotion through the senses or mind, as well as an activity through which knowledge or skill is gained; experience as *Erfahrung* thus, means a way of apprehending things in the world as well as knowledge or skill derived from it. In contrast, experience as *Erlebnis* in German means an event or a series of events undergone. *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in German are quite distinct; whereas the latter might produce *Erfahrung*, not all experiences (*Erlebnisse*) necessarily lead to *Erfahrung*.

[17] Op. cit. 612. Cf. here also the important discussion on Proust's handling of Bergson's *durée* (pp. 612 615) which has "eliminated death in the depraved eternity of the ornament" (643).

[18] Ibid. 632f, and especially *Notes on Baudelaire as Poet of High Capitalism* GS, I, 3, 1183f.

[19] GS, I, 3, 1176.

[20] Cf. "On Some Motifs...", op.cit. footnote p. 635. Also p. 615/165: "The greater the part played by shock in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against exitation; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter *Erfahrung*, but rather comply with the concept of *Erlebnis*.

[21] Cf. in this connetion "Johann Peter Hebel <3>" in GS II, 2, 635.

novels, in the hope of mastering death in retrospect[22] by making it the arbiter of the 'meaning of life'. A good story reflects the close bond between embodied objects and time, which derives its meaning from involvement with life rather than death, and its contingent intermingling of life and meaning (cf. ibid.) by way of episodic rather than emplotted situations as evidenced by storytelling chains (cf. Sheherazade, 453, 98). However in its attempt to "master" the plot[23], novelistic fiction cuts that very bond. Thus, where both forms of narration were united once in the epic, memory has become bifurcated into the "eternalising memory" of the novelist as opposed to "the short-term one of the storyteller". The effect of that differentiation is sedimented as the 'story' of a central event, "*one* hero, *one* odysee, *one* battle", in contrast to "*many* dispersed", or precisely episodic events (*Begebenheiten*)" (ibid.), contributing to an accumulation of *Erfahrung*. In addition storytelling, defined by communality, has a public side to it: "Who ever listens to a story is in the company of the storyteller, and even if one reads the tale, one remains part of this company" but a reader of novels seems to be drawn to a fictional life only "in the hope to warm his shivering life with the death he reads about" (457, 101). Thus the reader of fiction draws on experience but by merely reflecting on it for and by himself in privacy, any *Erfahrung* gained from the act of reading no longer necessarily enters the chain of communicability. That fictional life, devoid of eternity, and consumed in privacy by the modern subject signals, according to Godzich [24],

> the epoch of the modern imaginary in which arbitrariness reigns and the symbolic (as the instance of the Law) is neutralized. [...] Modern consciousness knows itself to be a consciousness of falsehood and accepts this fact; it knows that this means that it cannot generate a narrative capable of totalizing the meaning of existence and of the world. This ultimate step in the demystification (*désenchantement, Entzauberung*) of the world, accelerated by some historical catastrophes [...], leads the subject to give up truth (the law) altogether and to accept the advent of the imaginary by instituting *fiction* as the way to constitute subjects in the world.

Although the novel constitutes an impoverishment of a good story because of its depletion of the potential wealth and collective communicability of experience, that particular form of communication defining modernity, namely the newspaper, merely generates information, reducing the very possibility of experience all together. As Benjamin states in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire":

> Man's inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate data of the world around him by way of experience (*Erfahrung*). Newspapers constitute one of the many evidences of such an inability. If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it supplies as part of its own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But its attention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader. The principles of journalistic information (freshness of

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[22] Interestingly, Scheherazade, for Benjamin the embodied signifier of "epic remembrance and the Muse-inspired element of the narrative" (453, 98), functions as sign for story-narrative, weaving life together in episodes *in* the face of the certainty of death, unlike current narratology (Barthes) which regards the signifier as signifying the life-force in relation to the deferral of death and désire, as functioning retrospectively (*from* finitude), which would be the novelistic point of view.

[23] Hence Peter Brooks, op. cit. p.28 can state: "If in Benjamin's thesis [...] 'Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell', it is because it is at that moment of death that life becomes *transmissible*." And this is due to plot and "its movements forward that recover markings from the past in the play of anticipation and retrospection, lead to a final situation where the claim to understanding is incorporate with the claim to transmissibility"

[24] Wlad Godzich, "Pauld de Man and the Perils of Intelligence" in: *The Culture of Literacy* op. cit. p. 141.

> the news, brevity, comprehensibility, and, above all, lack of connection between the individual news items) contribute as much to this as does the make-up of the pages and the paper's style.[...] Another reason for the isolation of information from experience is that the former does not enter 'tradition'. Newspapers appear in large editions. Few readers can boast of any information which another reader may require of him.
>
> Historically, the various modes of communication have competed with one another. The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience. In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand. (610ff., 160ff).

Hence, as "The Storyteller" states: "If the art of storytelling has become rare, then it is the dissemination of information which has had a decisive share in this state of affairs"(444, 88). Information is no longer grounded either in the experience and judgement of the storyteller nor in the 'authority' of a novelistic author, but derives its truth content from immediate verification of the message, that is from its "plausibility"(ibid.).

> Every morning instructs us in the news of the globe. And yet we are poorer as far as memorable[25] stories go. This is due to our not receiving knowledge of events which would not already be shot through with explanations. In other words, almost nothing which happens befits the story, instead everything befits information. Actually, it is already half of the art of storytelling to reiterate a tale without recourse to explanation(445, 89).

Such a tale, then, will induce, due to its polyvalent density arising from weak emplotting with respect to closure, in the reader a freedom of interpretation in accordance with his own needs which the modality of information curtails[26]. In short, Benjamin sees in the substitution of the story by the novel, and finally by information an increasing closure of significance[27], commensurate with their respective cultural technologies as well as changes in work patterns from which each of these three distinct forms were born in the first place. In other words, whereas the ending of a tale generates the question, arising from a continuous, albeit episodic *Erfahrung* of life, still experienced while hearing or reading the story: "And how did it (the story) continue"? (455, 100), the novel's boundary, in the shape of the retrospective *finis* of death, precludes the experience of life other than as reflection. Whereas novelistic fiction usually prevents any continuation of narration by way of circulating "from mouth to mouth", thus making the transaction of experience and its ensuing exchange of information 'useful' for others, the press as the informative tool *par excellence*, delivers information only as an end product designated for end users. As today's sound bites and media snippets indicate, even this information is now being depleted due to excessive fragmentation.

Various generic discursive formations like myth, fairy tales, stories and the novel - but not 'information' - preserve traces of specific experiences relating to particular conjunctive constellations of meaning and life in the shape of ruins, long after those constellations have been erased; the storyteller and his tale are a demonstrative example of

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[25] The German *merkwürdigen* means both, worthy of memory (memorable) and 'strange'.

[26] By comparison, Ndebele's admiration for Kemal's "unsentimental yet sympathetic portrayal of peasant life", arises, interestingly, from a reader-response grounded in "a kind of understanding that is much deeper than any 'direct message' or 'instruction'. Deeper because the stories are an occasion not for easy messages, but for asking further questions" (18).

[27] Cf. here also Benjamin's reference to Herodotus in Part VII together with the idea that "information" exhausts itself in its momentary conveyance of "news".

one of them. As Benjamin deduces with reference to the artisan like relation between the storyteller and his raw material lived experience, it is the proverb, seen as an ideogram of a tale, which marks the ruined place of stories: "Proverbs, one could say, are the ruins which stand at the site of old stories around which, like ivy twining around a wall, a moral intertwines a *Gestus*" (464, 108), that is a fragmented corporal significatory relation, attached to a situation out of which is born a behaviour (gesturing), is covered by an indexical message (moral). Or, in contemporary terms: the ruin represents the trace in the erasure (of the particular constellation), but the intertwined "ivy" functions as signifier of the erasure of that trace. Thus, instead of providing the fullness of lived experience as embodied in the storyteller, with its attendant ability to supply counsel for many occasions, the proverb as fragment affords only one piece of advice. Although this advice remains transmissible and, like the tale displays an "orientation towards practical interests" (441, 86), without it being embedded in the tale, it signifies depletion of potential fullness with respect to the interpretandum; and a diminished function on part of the addressee as concerns her ability of becoming a conduit for the transaction of experience. "Every true [or authentic] tale", Benjamin says,

> carries with it, openly or hidden, its usefulness. This usefulness may, at one time, be a moral, at another it may be some practical advice; at a third time it may be a proverb or a maxim - in every case, however, the storyteller is someone who knows how to counsel his listeners. If advice ("*Rat wissen*") begins to sound old fashioned to the ear, today then it is because of a diminishing of experience. In its wake we are unable to provide ourselves and others with counsel (*Rat*). After all, advice/counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story (at its unfolding). In order to receive advice, one would, at first, have had to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a person will only open himself to advice in as much as his situation is allowed to speak). (442, 86).

Benjamin begins his reflections on the storyteller, as we have noted, with a proverb, to which he restores, during the unfolding of his own critical narrative, the plentitude of storytelling, prior to its dispersion and consequent reduction of experience in modernity. In addition, Benjamin situates an observable (empirical) inability to "exchange experiences", which amounts to nothing less than a depleted life (439, 83), within the general economics of exchange governing capitalist modes of production and transaction. The German text[28] of the often quoted following lines bears this out:

> Immer seltener wird dieBegegnung mit Leuten, welche rechtschaffen etwas erzählen können. Immer häufiger verbreitet sich Verlegenheit in der Runde, wenn der Wunsch nach einer Geschichte laut wird. Es ist, als wenn ein Vermögen, das uns unveräußerlich schien, das Gesichertste unter dem Sicheren, von uns genommen würde. Nämlich das Vermögen, Erfahrungen auszutauschen.
>
> Eine Ursache dieser Erscheinung liegt auf der Hand: die Erfahrung ist im Kurs gefallen. Und es sieht so aus, als fiele sie ins Bodenlose. Jeder Blick in die Zeitung erweist, daß sie einen neuen Tiefstand erreicht hat, daß nicht nur das

[28] 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 we wish to hear a story expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.
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 were never thought possible.[...] 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." (83ff.).

> Bild der sittlichen Welt über Nacht Veränderungen erlitten hat, die man niemals für möglich hielt. Mit dem Weltkrieg begann ein Vorgang offenkundig zu werden, der seither nicht zum Stillstand gekommen ist. Hatte man nicht bei Kriegsende bemerkt, daß die Leute verstummt aus dem Felde kamen? Nicht reicher - ärmer an mitteilbarer Erfahrung. [...] Denn nie sind Erfahrungen gründlicher Lügen gestraft worden als die strategischen durch den Stellungskrieg, die wirtschaftlichen durch die Inflation, die körperlichen durch die Materialschlachten, die sittlichen durch die Machthaber.

The semantics of the word *Vermögen*, as noted earlier, not only circumscribe 'ability' but also 'wealth' and plentitude, and it is this a wealth - rather than a "possession" referring to a reified commodity as suggested by the translation - whose nature in the form of use value seemed, precisely, not for sale but rather inalienable (*unveräußerlich*), especially since it is also marked by an interiority (*un-*) which can be turned into an exteriority (*außen*) only in the vertex of experience through narrative work. As such, experience, not as commodity exchange, but as a mutually interdependent, participatory process at the confluence of two phenomena seemed to be "the securest among all securities". However, experience has become devalued stock (*im Kurse gefallen*) because the material assets like human life, the "tiny, fragile human body", whose interior wealth of experience had supported the value of the rate of exchange in the stock market has been severely depleted the shocking "force field of destructive currents and explosions". Experience (*Erfahrung*) has not only become cheap but appears as a lie (*Lügen gestraft*) there, where its relation to the events (*Erlebnis*) which inform it, is severed, due to the changed quality and quantity of happenings like "trench war fare", "inflation", "tank battles" (*Materialschlachten*), and the execution of power on part leaders (a power which not only derives from the deaths it legislates, but which also represses the power of the narrative). Whereas the first altered the experience (as a form of knowledge) gleaned form past war strategies, inflation changed economic experience, material war fare transformed bodily experience and, finally, ethico-moral experience lost its import in the face of an unprecedented execution of power. It is against the backdrop of a four-fold shock-experience (*Erlebnis*) that, to speak in the words of Wlad Godzich[29], Benjamin's

> inquiry proceeds on the assumption that the storyteller and his function are in decline. Though the immediate historical reference is to the aftermath of the Great War, the process must have started earlier since the references to the period in which the storytellers flourished clearly establish that they preceded our modernity: peasants told the stories of the land that they toiled and thus endowed it with a dimension of temporal continuity; seamen related tales of the lands to which they had sailed and thus extended (made continuous) the space of human experience; and the artisans, who in years of their apprenticeship had to roam the land as journeymen but then settled to practice their craft, achieved a conjunction of both the temporal and spatial dimensions, earning their class the title of the storytelling university.

Storytelling 'craftsmen' like the Russian Leskov and the German Hebel, but also the South African Ndebele, disclose in their tales and criticism, respectively, the particular "part played by narration in the economy of mankind" (457, 101) at the time of pre-history and pre-literacy. That is, a time in which events are narrated in "chronological" rather than "explanatory" fashion because the path to knowledge is not so much linked to (discontinuous) events than to continuous collection and re-collection of experience; when "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth" (440, 84) secures the tradition of a complex community and extends the precedent of accumulated knowledge in the form of wisdom, "the epic side of truth" (442), embodied in its chief purveyor, namely the righteous or just figure of the storyteller, from generation to generation. - The storyteller as the just or righteous "plays the main part in the theatrum mundi" (461,) due to his many personal 'gifts'

[29] Godzich in Chambers, op. cit. xvff..

of being close to the 'creature-world' (463) in his capacity of being mediator and advocate of all living things which, at the same time "achieve their [highest form and] corporality in him"; and all those who, irrespective of rank and standing, incorporate all the wisdom, all grace/ charity and all the consolation of the world, urge towards the storyteller" (459). - It is a time in which stories represent the cultural capital in the shape of experience (*Erfahrungsschatz*, 457), as yet undivided into 'fact' and 'fiction', truth and 'story'. It is an infinite world of resemblances, bound only by heaven and earth, which embraces the animate as well as the inanimate, when it assays " the *kreatürliche* (creature, living) world in its the depth and width" (460, 104), and where a logic of practice invests experience rather than cognition with the pursuit of acquiring *Kunde*, that is knowledge in the shape of wisdom (and not the somewhat berated 'lore'!; 440 and 447,). It is a time and a place where the "storytellers move (lightly) up and down on the steps of their *Erfahrung* as if on a ladder. It is this a ladder which reaches deep into the earth and looses itself in the clouds, it is this the image/picture of a collective experience, for which even that deepest shock of an individual experience, death, does neither represent an embarrassment nor a limit" (457,). In short, it is an undivided world of plentitude, sedimented in the tale whose reciprocal experience is infinitely, symmetrically exchangeable, unlike the world of modernity, and of commodity transactions, where exchange is unequal, albeit infinite, but as "false/ bad infinity"[30] which is, as Benjamin says: "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."

Storytellers or narrators, given Benjamin's examples, to which is added now Ndebele, are universal although their tales draw from local experience, thus inter-linking the general with the particular. Thus Ndebele draws from the local milieu and its oral tradition which, making the dimension of experience consummate with that represented in Benjamin's example tales, is operative still, as contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous, in certain rural parts of South Africa. In Ndebele that moment of transformation from orality to literacy, and from one form of socio-economic organisation to another, discloses, as does the constellation of the names of Leskov and Hebel, the confluence of two modes of existence. Typical for their rural and semi-rural worlds, only recently changing into town and city life, respectively, is a complex but not extensively stratified social organisation, defined by a sense of community rather than society. Where literacy is not yet predominant, such communities are dominated by the politics of performance and communal cultural activities, in which not only the body plays a prominent part, but where storytelling is central and participatory: "The storyteller takes that which he narrates from experience; from his own or from reported experience. And he makes it, in turn, into an experience for those who listen to his tale" (443,87), Benjamin says. Stories constitute the sole cultural capital and the "treasure of experience" (457, 101), and their "practical interest" (414, 86), manifest in the "usefulness of the tale" (442, 86) is corroborated, on the one hand, by local African informers who are still part of an oral tradition, and who stress the advisory and educational traits of storytelling. On the other hand, this tradition resonates not only in Ndebele's judgement of narratives but colours also his response to political oppression, in as much as he intends forging a "truly transforming tool of liberation" (26)[31] by improving writing. "In furthering education", says the informer, "men teach courage and endurance through stories told of tribal heroes. This takes place by the fire-side at the men's place (*kgoroxong*). From actual narration or adult conversation, the boy also learns about tribal migrations, ethnic history, tribal lore, law and custom."[32] Typically, stories are not differentiated as to fiction or non-fiction but, says another informant: "They would tell us stories followed by historical

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[31] It is worth noting that most Black writers in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent are teachers and politicians, imbued with the same power and respect accorded storytellers in the past.

[32] Cit. in Hofmeyr, op. cit. 84.

narratives. Sometimes they would speak about themselves and their bravery."[33] Thus history and story are, as in Benjamin's example of Herodotus (445, 89ff.), still intertwined; and the tale unlike the novel, compliciteous with life, does not require psychological analysis (446, 90). The story, due to its "dry" density, rather, arouses astonishment (*Staunen*), leading to "a process of assimilation which takes place in depth"[34] in an unhurried "atmosphere of relaxation" (446, 91). The latter, apart from being a scarce commodity in an industrial age, adds density to the tale, derived from the many "layers of the story's reiteration" by "creating the net[work] for its circulation" (448, 93). Again, a local informant explains: "The whole thing came in as a story, tale, something like that. My grandmother says this, my auntie tells this, my uncle tells that, then this one tells a different story, and that one tells yet another story. When I tell my friend about the chief here, I tell him like this and that, and then this one is going to tell him about the same chief, not the same story, though, a different story. So that's why our chief has many colours."[35] Thus a story, unlike a novel, is malleable despite certain stylistic features which assist recollection and reiteratebility of the tale, mentioned by Benjamin and supported by researchers[36]. Although the element of performance in an oral tale defines the deictic process, sedimented in the written story, in which, furthermore, the predominance of dialogue points to communal, and collective forming of beliefs and opinions through a reciprocal transaction of experience[37], orality is not the boundary of a story. Rather, it is the situation of being in the world and the experience (*Erfahrung*) derived from that world, as mentioned earlier, which, irrespectively of their oral or written form, not only inscribes the border of the story, but separates it from the novel. The "novel", says Benjamin, "neither arises nor contributes to the oral tradition" (443, 87), because, despite a transformation of authorial function which sees the storyteller being substituted by the 'author', story and novel partake in different and distinct milieus and dimensions of knowledge.

Thus, experience as primary involvement with the world has increasingly been substituted by cognition, whereby explanatory systems became privileged at the expense of the former to such an extent in modernity, that experience, issuing from the Cartesian *res extensa*, and with it narrative knowledge have been reduced to its Other. In addition, modernity interpolated selves as individual, transcendental 'subjects' and agents who are no longer corporeal entities of collectives but 'independent 'minds'. This entailed, as we have seen earlier, the transformation of narration and the narrative from storytelling to the novel, and it is at this moment of transformation where Ndebele offers his programme for an improvement of the "craft of fiction", by responding to the poverty of information with its ensuing "numbing sensationalism and its consequent smothering of creative thinking" (24).

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[33] Ibid.

[34] This 'depth', due to its "layering" as opposed to a central meaning which needs to be explicated, does not require a hermeneutic, rather the opposite, namely a communal discursive reception.

[35] Hofmeyr, op. cit. 96.

[36] Research into the oral tradition confirms Benjamin's reading of the storyteller's tales: The character of oral narrative is largely shaped by the prerogatives of oral memory and its need to create mnemonic systems, states Havelock in: *The Literate Revolution*, 122-50 and Ong, (*Orality* Ch. 3, 140) feels that "With its formulaic and rhythmic character, oral narrative is the roomiest 'repository' for information Or, as Havelock puts it, "... the preferred format of verbal storage in an oral culture will be the narrative of persons in action, and the syntax of the narrative will predominate" (Havelock, 137) Emanating from this narrative format will be a number of stylistic features that facilitate recall in performance. These include heroic larger-than-life characters that an episodic rather than a climatic plot that is easier to remember in performance: an additive and copious style that facilitates recitation; and the use of formulaic images through which the story segments can easily be retrieved in performance (Lord, *The Singer* Ch. 2) minimal scene setting and switching; two characters to a scene; dramatic dialogue; and use of gestural, performance and phonological resources. All cit. in Hofmeyr, op. cit. 106.

[37] Benjamin apprehends the storyteller's world from Leskov's and Hebel's tales, in whose typically 19th century framed narratives the oral milieu resonates

However, neither "the technical issues" to which the "serious writer must address himself" nor "an ethos of individualism" (28), together with "a moment of insightful intimacy with himself; a moment of transcendence" (29), essential hallmarks of novelistic fiction, which Ndebele praises, for instance in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, can hide the attempt at transforming an essentially oral tradition. And Ndebele is sufficiently ambivalent when he speaks of "fiction" as to whether he refers to the novel or to the tale. Significantly, his examples of successful "handling of social information"(28) on the part of storytellers, who are "not just case makers" but are capable of giving "African readers the opportunity to experience themselves as makers of culture" (33), are drawn from both written and orally transmitted stories. Ndebele, appropriately, reminds us of the "common experience" (33) shared by a community and constituting the content of the tale, thus corroborating Benjamin's observations. Praising, for instance, a South African story for having laid bare "the entire African experience of going to school before me, accompanied by an exhilaration emerging from my having been given the opportunity to recall, to reflect and to evaluate a common experience in all the townships of South Africa; indeed, the world over." (33), Ndebele emphasises the reality-effect of "collective"[38], shared experience, and not the meaning-effect of the representation of an individual life. That Ndebele's essay, despite borrowing one of the diachronic breaks from Benjamin's text, namely the distinction between "*journalistic*, informational ambience" and "*storytelling*, narrative ambience" (31), can not reflect on the socio-historically induced difference between tale and novel, the storyteller and the novelist, has its reason precisely in the only now emerging existence in African urban areas of "the individual in his solitude as the birthing chamber of the novel", as Benjamin puts it (443, 87). The "original novel is not only set outside" (Sub-Saharan) Africa and written in a European language until recently[39], but the very notion of a transcendental subject, informing Western ideas of subjectivity and individualism, together with the written word and bourgeois rule[40], is foreign to the majority of Black Africans. Hence the novelist who "has isolated himself" and who "can no longer express his most important concerns in an exemplary fashion, uncounseled himself, he is incapable of counselling others", in Benjamin's words (443, 87), has, as yet, not fully substituted the storyteller in African culture. It is the (con)fusion of storyteller and novelist, of a concern with "the meaning of life" in contrast to "moral of the story" (455, 99) which is sedimented in Ndebele's text". Imbued with the storyteller's sense of justice, his disposition as sage as well as his position of teacher and counsellor, Ndebele, in accordance with African oral tradition, considers art and especially narrative as essentially an educational tool. His educational aim is to redirect the South African writers away from all prevailing journalism towards "fiction" by strongly condemning "information",. for "*information* in a modern capitalist society appears to be at the root of the matter" which, according to Ndebele, produces "a conflict between the aim of storytelling and that of imparting social information." (24). For Benjamin, it will be remembered, the press as one of the "most important instruments of high capitalism" engendered "a new form of communication as information", provoking a crisis also for the novel (444, 88).

Benjamin-criticism frequently collapses the distinct entities of narrator, storyteller, and writer and sees narration as a universal continuous historical process in which eventually,

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[38] Cf. Benjamin, "Storyteller", p.457/ .

[39] "Mbulelo Mzamane". An interview with the South African writer and critic Mbulela Mzamane, reproduced from the April 1983 issue of *Okella*, a journal of the creative Writer's Workshop, Abmachu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria, in: *Staffrider* 6/1, 1984, 39-41. The point is made in connection to "A remarkable exercise in syncretism, in merging cultures, obliterating cultural boundaries, for the original novel is not only set outside Nigeria but written in French." p. 41.

[40] Cf. Benjamin's observations concerning "the art of book printing" (442, 87) and on the emergence of the novel in conjunction with evolving politico-economic supremacy of the bourgeoisie Part VI (444, 88). Of interest here, too, are Godzich's comments

in the words of Ricoeur[41], "the art of narration exceeds itself to the point of exhaustion, in attempting to draw near the inscrutable". Admittedly, Ricoeur refers to the fictional narrative, whose objective it is, in the final analysis, "to redeem time itself", whereby it is fiction's multiplication of our experience of eternity which is "bringing narrative in different ways to its own limits". Referring to Benjamin's notion of the contemporary lack of sharable experience[42], Ricoeur thinks it not only "necessary to have confidence in the call for concordance that today will structure the expectations of readers" which might bring forth "new narratives forms" but also hopes to "bear witness to the fact that the narrative function can still be metamorphosed, but not so as to die. For we have no idea what a culture would be where no one any longer knew what it meant to narrate things.". Besides telling us in the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" that this would be a raging rave culture of gamblers and intoxication without consolation, seeking gratification rather than any form of knowledge, Benjamin's discontinous concept of *Geschichtsphilosophie* militates, firstly, against an organic, teleological motion of history and, secondly, makes no provision for a successive intermingling of storyteller and writer or novelist in triadic ('inverse' Hegelian) steps. Instead, Benjamin, who does not occupy himself with fiction *per se* other than describing the narrative situation and concomitant attributes of the novelistic genre, specifically stresses the distinction between the spaces of the storyteller and the novelist. Rather, as stated before, storytelling and novel (fiction), to which is added 'information', signal three different domains of experience shaped, as Karl Marx, pointed out in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, by "the five senses" whose forming has been "a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present"[43]. Although this shaping of sense perception in the dual manner of mind (*res cogitans*) and body (*res extensa*) is a continuous one within a particular culture which has 'developed' from agrarian and artisan modes of production to modernity, and hence allows for the consecutive unfolding of story, novel, and information, it is discontinous at the same time from the perspective of the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous in areas where some of these modes either do not exist or exist side by side. The latter was the case in industrialising Germany during the 19th century, where Hebel's *Schatzkästlein des Rheinischen Hausfreundes* existed side by side with *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*. In similar fashion, the work of the Russian nineteenth century writer Nicolai Semjonowitsch Leskov, (pseud. N. Stebnizki 1831 - 1895), much admired by Benjamin[44], existed side by side with Tolstoi and Dostoevsky. It is, furthermore, not only the situation in present-day South Africa, as signified by the tension produced in Ndebele's text, but also in a globalised world, in which Yasar (Yashar) Kemal's work[45], "in which we are", according to Ndebele "treated to a detailed, imaginative recreation

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[41] Ricoeur, op.cit. Vol. 3, 270ff.

[42] Ibid. Vol. 2, 28.

[43] (New York: International Publishers, 1964) 141.

[44] As the English translation has omitted the footnote to the German text, I shall offer the following translation: Nicolai Leskov was born in the province of Orel in 1831 and died in St. Petersburg in 1895. With his interest in and sympathy for the peasants Leskov shows a certain affinity with Tolstoi, whereas his religious orientation is more like that of Dostoevsky. However, it is especially the writings and early novels which express those principles and doctrines which have shown themselves to be the transient parts of his oeuvre. Leskov's importance stems from his stories, and these belong to a later stratum of his production. Since the end of the War [1st World War] a number of efforts were directed towards publicising these stories among a German reading public. Apart from smaller anthologies by Musarion and Georg Müller publishers, there is, fore mostly, the nine volume selection by C.H. Beck. (E. 438). - It seems that despite Benjamin's efforts, Leskov's realist renditions of life of the petit bourgeoisie, merchants and especially the clergy of rural mid-19th century Russia have largely escaped the attention of Western readers today.

[45] Yashar (Yasar) Kemal won international recognition for the novel *Ince Mened* (1955; translated as *Mehmet, My Hawk* in 1961), featuring a modern Robin Hood, who takes from the rich landowners to give to the poor peasants. *Anatolian Tales* (1968); and *Seagull* (1981), contain stories which blend myth with realistic depiction of provincial life at the outer reaches of modern Turkey.

of rural life in the Anatolian plains of Turkey" (11), becomes acceptable to post-industrial German society, for instance[46]. It seems the pluralistic world of today enjoys again the narrative knowledge (*Kunde*) from afar which reflects for it the possibilities of another, less alienated and reified life.

Contrary to this taste for the remote and foreign in the shape of Kipling's adventure tales during the colonial era, contemporary (serious) literary preference seems to appreciate the ordinary life of everyday existence in a place away from the proximity of an anonymous mass culture in a modern city, which Benjamin describes in "On some Motifs in Baudelaire" as one generating the experience (*Erlebnis*) of shock rather than *Erfahrung*[47]. In such a space, the concerns of everyday life and settings, like Kemal's marginal locales of Turkey, which the reader usually would not tolerate in her own back yard, always seem idyllic. Thus a neo-romantic longing, completely absent in Benjamin's fascination with the popular and folkloristic in a Hebel and a Leskov, desires to return from its "transcendental homelesness"[48] to a past, which it never had, by embracing the exotic Other in order to fashion for itself a continuous tradition. In contrast, the names of Leskov and Hebel embody for Benjamin the residual traces of an untimely archaic tradition of narrative practices even under post-enlightenment conditions due to Leskov's and Hebel's "naiv"[49] awareness of natural history and theology, a naiveté usually considered by literary institutions precisely as "folkloristic"[50] and therefore previously located outside the accepted canon. Where Benjamin's "Storyteller" needed to construct an affinity with past historical practices across the distance of time and space in order to "rescue" from historical faultlines and, at the same time, to disclose the disappearance of a remote and seemingly "archaic" form of participatory narrative (444, 88) "in its beauty at the moment of its disappearance" (442,), contemporary nostalgia for the past seemingly cements its shadow in a totalising gesture, something from which Ndebele is not immune either when he attempts to rescue the oral narrator of tales and insert him into 'fiction' as the author of a novel. Benjamin's 'historical-philosophical'[51] interpretative perspective in the "Storyteller", however, does not seek to unify the past, which appears to him like the very ruin referred to earlier. Given, in the words of Weber[52] in relation to Benjamin's notion of an 'origin', the irreparable fissure or crack that impairs the possibility of history ever being written or thought in full and authentic manner", a restoration of the

[46] Kemal has been nominated for the 1997 Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels.

[47] Cf. the description of "the masses" and : "This is the nature of Baudelair's *Erlebnis* [of the masses] to which he gave the weight of an *Erfahrung*." (GS, I, 2, 652ff.)

[48] Benjamin, it will be remembered, quotes from Lukács' theory of the novel at length in order to situate the novel as "written life" within the experience of an emerging modernity (454, 99).

[49] Naïve Dichtung see reference; together with his concern for textual and visual genres outside the accepted canon

[50] Reghely reference

[51] One of the most illuminating descriptions of this critical approach which is typical for Benjamin can be found in a footnote to Samuel Weber's "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play* in: *MLN* 106/3, April 1991 (465-500), p. 467 "From his earliest writings to his latest, Benjamin always conceived 'history' and 'historical-philosophical' as notions, that entail a theological perspective. In his notes to the 'Arcades Project' (*Passagen-Werk*) he relates the theological aspect of history to what he calls *Eingedenken*, remembrance, whose transformative (or as we might say today, performative) power contrasts with the constative stance of science: 'History is not simply a science but also and no less a form of remembrance. What science has 'determined' (festgestellt), remembrance can modify. Remembrance can make what is unfinished (happiness) to something finished and what is finished (suffering) to something unfinished. That is theology; but what we experience in remembrance prohibits us from conceiving history in a fundamentally atheological manner, just as it excludes its being written in directly theoloical concepts'. (*GS* V, 1, 589). The question thus becomes that of interpreting how 'theological concepts', whether direct or indirect, function in the writing of Benjamin." With respect to the present discussion, the notion of the storyteller as a "just" or righteous man will be a case in point.

[52] Ibid. 473.

ruin would, in any case, be impossible. After all, the ruin as signifier of a trace in the erasure, but also an erasure in the trace cannot be stripped of the ivy (history) with which it is interlaced. Instead, it is the critic's task to investigate this ruin in order to disclose it as that "history that hides in the crack that separates it [history], internally, as it were, into 'pre- and post-history' to be something more than the mere registration and reproduction of what has been. In a note written a decade later, Benjamin recalls the significance of this Sprung [crack]"[53]:

> From what are the phenomena to be saved? Not only, and not so much from the disrepute and contempt into which they have fallen as from the catastrophe that a certain kind of tradition, their "valorisation as heritage", very often entails. - They are saved through the disclosure (Aufweisung) of the breach (Sprung: leap, crack) in them. (GS V,I, 591)

The "disclosure" at work in the "Storyteller", by way of bifurcating the past in a series of moves which dispense with the commonly accepted (and read)) succession of phenomena, is a twofold one: By addressing the disappearance of the storyteller, *not* as "merely a 'symptom of decay', and certainly not to be seen as 'modern'"( ), but, rather, as an epiphenomenon of "secular historical productive forces", Benjamin positions experience as the guiding reference for a praxis of living in the contemporary world, defined as, precisely, one of *Erfahrungsarmut* [54]. Such a world, in which the experience of shock dominates, knowledge, as cognition, of a diminished innate wealth and ability on part of subjects, which has become almost utterly exteriorlised, is required in order that we remember what experience we desire. Such remembrance, however, can only be fully restored in and by narrative knowledge, a knowledge no longer residing in the (literary) canon (*Bildungsgut*)[55], due to the severance of its communicative experience, .but in the craft of storytelling which, due to the valorisation of the former has been marginalised. Its "beauty", however, becomes recognisable and hence accessible to "feeling" at the very moment when "the story has disappeared from living speech" (442, 87). Desiring such beauty, we are made aware of the vacancy left by the near disappearance of experience, an experience of potential, wisdom, justice and plentitude, recoupable not from 'art' but from 'craft'. The second disclosure, therefore, concerns the question of the nature and purpose of a skill, which the decline of craftsmanship, together with the near disappearance of artisan culture, commensurate with the rise of industrialisation and the "art of the novel" (455,) had occulted. Yet, when considering "The Storyteller" in relation to its companion piece, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" of 1935/6, the necessity of a re-evaluation of writing and narration as craft becomes strikingly apparent.

Whereas the latter essay constitutes an investigation into art and the aesthetic, culminating in the well known statements regarding the 'loss of the aura'[56] and the concomitant aesthetisation of politics, "The Storyteller" dedicates itself to tracing the 'art of a craft', by strongly emphasising in the figure of Leskov, that "writing for me is not a liberal art, but a craft" (447,). Considering the manner in which the media, and especially advertising, have absorbed the aesthetic effect, a re-evaluation of practices, designated as 'craft'[57], traditionally more popular, become doubly important. Besides, it is worth noting

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[53] Ibid. 474.

[54] "Erfahrung und Armut", GS II, 1, 215.

[55] Ibid.

[56] I disagree with Zohn's translation which uses the term "aura" to describe the *Stimmung*, the ambience, surrounding the storyteller, precisely because we talk about a craft and not an art, albeit not less valuable. (465, 109).

[57] 'Art' (lat.:*ars*), it will be remembered, has changed its meaning with its use through history. Although Roman antiquity distinguished between the *artes liberales* as 'science' and the lesser *artes*

that in the oral situation in those regions where the tradition functions in its original setting, concepts such as art and craft are not yet divided. To be sure, the valorised maker and teller of tales is regarded by his community of listeners as exceptional and he learns his 'craft'/'art' by practice: As a rural informant in South Africa, Obed Kutumela, explained: "We listen to our grandfathers at night, while seated around the fire as a group. Those who listened carefully would be good storytellers. It is like oration, something learned by word of mouth."[58]. This rural situation and its setting with its designated gathering place for public meetings, ritual ceremonies and a space for literary and historical education, where storytelling is performed and listeners are active participants rather than consumers, has no conception of that naturalised notion of art which Western bourgeois society produced only in the 19th century. Instead, Kutumela and Ndebele give credence to Benjamin's statement, quoted by Ndebele (15): that, besides oral transmissibility, it is "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". These are to be found not only in rural but also in urban areas in South Africa, and they might be found elsewhere in an 'ordinary' milieu. As Ndebele reports:

> I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work in South Africa. The majority of them have woven master-pieces of entertainment and instruction. Others were so popular that commuters made sure they did not miss the storyteller's trains. The vast majority of the stories were either tragedies or comedies about lovers, township jealousies, the worries of widows; about the need to consult medicine men for luck at horse racing, or luck at getting a job or at winning a football match; or they were fantastic ghost stories. [...]there were fewer overtly political stories. When they talked politics, they talked politics; when they told stories, they told stories. If any political concept crept into the stories, it was domesticated by a fundamental interest in the evocation of the general quality of African life in the township. (32).

These kind of ordinary tales in contrast to "the spectacular" conveyed in journalism[59] retain some of the wealth and wisdom, which Benjamin associates with the epoch of "natural history", and which offer an antidote to the false plentitude of the media industry.

Although not defined by artisan culture in the sense which Benjamin had in mind when referring to the guild system, it is this milieu, albeit transferred from its original rural, work related setting to an urban commuter situation, shared by Black labourers who still draw on "common experience" (Ndebele, 33)., which discloses the innate riches of participatory experience in the face of abject socio-economic poverty. Precisely because storytelling as craft is a skill, it can, unlike 'aureatic art', which is subject to exceptional execution be acquired. If such a skill was devalued as mere 'craft' during the 19th century, it was because art in the narrower sense had become autonomous and the skills necessary for the 'art' of the novel required different linguistic and formal applications. By emphasising the artistic skill associated with an artisan world, Benjamin re-evaluates craft at the end of his essay, summarising the preceding Valery-quote:

> With these [Valery's] words, soul, eye and hand are brought into one and the same context. Effective due to their being intertwined they define a praxis. We are no longer familiar with this praxis. The role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place occupied by it in narration lies waste. (After all, narration is, considered from its sensual side, not at all solely the work of the voice. Rather, the hand intervenes (*wirkt*) in any authentic narration which, with its gestures derived (*erfahren*) from working, supports that which is said in a

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vulgares et sordidae (ordinary and 'dirty' artisan work) and the *artes ludicrae* (acting), oral narration became associated with the latter only in literate society with the advent of printing.

[58] In: Hofmeyr op. cit. 84:):.

[59] Ndebele, "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" in op. cit. p. 50.

> hundred ways.) That ancient co-ordination of soul, eye and hand, which surfaces in Valery's words, is the artisan's craft (*Handwerk*) which we encounter (*auf die wir stoßen*) there, where storytelling is at home. (464, 108).

This re-evaluation, besides highlighting Benjamin's typical methodological rendition, nourished by the doublet of experience, seeks to restore to memory a situation which, under the tradition of 'high art' had been smothered. Far from being a mere footnote to *rettende Kritik*, the 'sense' of this passage is to be found in the (historical) knowledge of changed patterns of work, while 'sensual perception' inhabits the metaphor borrowed from Valery which happens to designate the very ideal of a corporal communicable transaction, albeit from the perspective of the storyteller/narrator rather than a recipient. Yet, the purpose of this passage is not so much the recall of an ideal for its own sake, than an illumination of the potential plentitude of a non-reified body, "the tiny, fragile human body" (439, 83) restored to its inalienable *Vermögen*[60]. The, by now, seemingly archaic figure of the storyteller and his milieu are the signs of possibility.

(Prof.) Reingard Nethersole
Comparative Literature,
UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND,
Private bag 3,
P.O. WITS 2050
South Africa

E-mail: 128RN@muse.arts.wits.ac.za

[60] It is interesting to note that Adorno, (*Adorno - Benjamin, Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994) who incidentally regarded the storyteller-essay as a "far lesser" companion piece to the analysis of "the decay of the aura" (185), criticised Benjamin's "anthropological materialism" in a letter of to him, of 6 September, 1936: "It seems as if the measure of the body were for you the concretion. [...] now a non-dialectical ontology of the body emerges from this piece" (193).