

Walter Benjamin (Fragments from *The Storyteller*)

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 forms as white light is to the colors of the spectrum. However this may be, among all forms of the epic there is not one whose incidence in the pure, colorless light of written history is more certain than the chronicle. And in the broad spectrum of the chronicle the ways in which a story can be told are graduated like shadings of one and the same color. The chronicler is the storyteller.** If we think back to the passage from Hebel, which has the tone of a chronicle throughout, it will take no effort to gauge 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 concatenation 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 story-teller the chronicler is preserved in changed form, secularized, as it were. Leskov 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.

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.

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 completely by the gentle flame of his story. The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.

Walter Benjamin (Fragment from Notes to “On the Concept of History”)

The messianic world is the world of total and integral actuality. In it alone is there universal history. What goes by the name of universal history today can only be a kind of Esperanto. Nothing can correspond to it as long as the confusion originating in the Tower of Babel is not smoothed out. It presupposes the language into which every text of a living or dead language must be translated in full. Or rather, it is itself this language. Not though, as written, but as festively celebrated. This celebration is purified of every ceremony; it knows no celebratory songs. Its language is the idea of prose itself, which is understood by all men as is the language of birds by Sunday’s children. (P, 48)

“The idea of prose coincides with the messianic idea of universal history. [Compare the passage in ‘The Storyteller’], *SW* 4, 404.]

Frank Kafka (Fragment)

Wer einmal scheintot gewesen ist, kann davon Schreckliches erzählen, aber wie es nach dem Tode ist, das kann er nicht sagen, er ist eigentlich nicht einmal dem Tode näher gewesen als ein anderer, er hat im Grunde nur etwas Besonderes >erlebt< und das nicht besondere, das gewöhnliche Leben ist ihm dadurch wertvoller geworden. Ähnlich ist es mit jedem, der etwas Besonderes erlebt hat. Moses zum Beispiel hat auf dem Berge Sinai gewiß etwas >Besonderes< erlebt, aber statt sich diesem Besonderen zu ergeben, etwa wie ein Scheintoter, der sich nicht meldet und im Sarg liegen bleibt, ist er den Berg hinunter geflüchtet und hatte natürlich Wertvolles zu erzählen und liebte die Menschen, zu denen er sich geflüchtet hatte, noch viel mehr als früher und hat dann sein Leben ihnen geopfert, man kann vielleicht sagen, zum Danke. Von beiden aber, vom zurückgekehrten Scheintoten und vom zurückgekehrten Moses kann man viel lernen, aber das Entscheidende kann man von ihnen nicht erfahren, denn sie selber haben (es) nicht erfahren. Und hätten sie es erfahren, so wären sie nicht mehr zurückgekommen. Aber wir wollen es auch gar nicht erfahren. Das läßt sich daran überprüfen, daß wir zum Beispiel gelegentlich den Wunsch haben

können, das Erlebnis des Scheintoten oder das Erlebnis des Moses bei Sicherstellung der Rückkehr, >bei freiem Geleit< zu erleben, ja daß wir sogar den Tod uns wünschen, aber nicht einmal in Gedanken wollten wir lebend und im Sarge ohne jede Möglichkeit der Wiederkehr oder auf dem Berge Sinai bleiben...