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CHAPTER ONE

The Local and the General

Repetition, Resonance, Anticipation

The first thing that strikes someone studying the history of “plagues”—a history that seems to be coextensive with the writing of history itself—is how different what came to be known as “the plague” was from the pandemic that emerged in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019 and that continues today (September 2021). The plague, whose earliest manifestations were recorded over 2,500 years ago, and which devastated much of the world until its cause was identified at the end of the nineteenth century, killed a large percentage of those it afflicted, and it killed them rapidly, within the space of days, not weeks or months. It decimated populations, often over 50% of the localities it “visited,” and brought incalculable suffering and disorganization in its wake. Nothing like that can be said of Covid-19. But as epidemiologists warn us, this could have been different. Instead of killing less than 5% of those it afflicts, Covid-19 could have resembled more recent epidemics such as Ebola (Case Fatality Rate 60%), MERS (CFR of 37%), or SARS (CFR 10%).¹ However, in contrast to these far more deadly epidemics, Covid-19, which has a much lower fatality rate, has proved far more contagious and difficult to control because its transmission is spread not just through direct contact but through droplets and much smaller “aerosols,” and because it can be spread not just by those who display signs of illness but by those who are either asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic. From the start, asymptomatic and aerosol transmission made it almost impossible

to confine to a limited area, especially in this age of global travel and interconnectedness.

But the way in which Covid-19 relates to its environment is significantly different from the plague. This is a consequence of the difference between a bacterial and a viral illness. Bacteria are traditionally defined as microorganisms that are capable of living and reproducing themselves on their own, as it were. As we will see, this definition is not without its problems, since bacteria also require certain environmental supports to exist and reproduce. But they require them in a less internal way than viruses. Indeed, for a long period and even today, one fact has been considered as a reason to disqualify viruses as living beings: viruses are not able to reproduce themselves without invading host organisms and taking over their reproductive mechanisms. That attitude has recently been called into question, since as just mentioned, the reproductive capacity of bacteria is not absolutely self-contained. And thus, the sharp distinction between reproduction that is relatively autonomous, used as a defining characteristic of “life,” is no longer considered entirely unproblematic.² Nevertheless, it is clear that viruses depend on host organisms, and thus on their environment, in ways that bacteria do not. This also affects their transmissibility, which, as already mentioned in relation to Covid-19, can take place not just through direct physical contact but also through airborne transmission. Moreover, the closer relation between virus and host seems to emphasize the importance of the preexisting condition of the host organism: its receptivity or reactivity, via the immune system, to the intrusions of the virus.

In other words, at least with Covid-19, the susceptibility of persons to infection varies greatly depending both on their individual histories and their living conditions. And the outcome of the infection is also determined by the quality of medical care, even in the absence of a direct treatment or cure. The same factors that made the pandemic inevitable, namely, the degree of worldwide connectedness in an age of globalization, have also influenced the progress of research and treatment of the disease, enabling a communication — but also

a competition — that previously was unthinkable. The result is that a vaccine could be produced less than a year after the genome of the virus was made known, whereas previously this would have taken several years. Also, modes of treatment have been developed that, without constituting a cure, have significantly lowered the mortality rate since the disease first emerged.

Despite the differences between a bacterial-caused pandemic — the “plague” in the traditional sense — and the current virus-based pandemic, certain underlying continuities between traditional plagues and the current pandemic remain. Whether viral or bacterial, the spread and seriousness of pandemics, as with all illnesses, depend on what has been labeled “preexisting conditions.” This term is itself emblematic of what it names. Although it can and probably should have the general meaning of signifying a current situation that is the result of accumulated factors — in short, of signifying the dependence of the present on the past — in this specific context it reflects a practice of the American “healthcare industry,” which has turned healthcare into a profitable commodity. As a result, the dependence of the present on the past is recognized primarily as a means of calculating the best way of maximizing future profits. “Preexisting conditions” thus becomes a means of excluding accumulated risks to this end, by only insuring persons for illnesses they do not already have or are not liable to get. The plague reveals that from a health point of view, as distinct from a profit point of view, the exclusion of “preexisting conditions” is untenable, since these “conditions” also condition the susceptibility to the pandemic, as to any other illness. The plague, however, reveals this on a massive, collective scale, since the preexisting conditions affect not just individuals but specific groups. Here, as elsewhere, Covid-19, like the plagues that preceded it, has a revelatory function: it reveals precisely the existence of “preexisting conditions” that differentiate susceptibility and vulnerability to illness. Everyone is mortal, but not everyone is equally mortal. Or rather, not everyone is mortal in the same way. Thus, it is not just an accident that the advent of Covid-19 has served as a catalyst to stimulate protest

movements against preexisting conditions of social and economic inequality. The social classes that benefit from such inequalities also react in much the same way they have always reacted: by deflecting attention from preexisting inequalities toward the victims of those conditions, who are held responsible for the pandemic. During the fourteenth century, as Europe was ravaged by the Black Death (the bubonic plague), Jews were often accused of poisoning the wells and a series of pogroms took place in Germany, Spain, and Northern Europe. The desire to find a culprit — a human cause — for the suffering and death inflicted by pandemics remains active today.

The search for a cause that can then be controlled, if not eradicated, as in the case of scapegoating, can be seen to be a response to the shock effect of plagues. Traditionally, and today as well, the “plague” was experienced and portrayed very much in line with the etymological history of the word in English, French, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew: namely, as a “blow” that strikes suddenly, lethally, and from without.³ From the point of view of “Western” countries and cultures, plagues are generally said to originate in the “East” just as the forty-fifth President of the United States referred persistently to Covid-19 as “the Chinese virus” — although there is growing evidence that its emergence in Wuhan may not coincide with its origin. Similarly, recent research suggests that the bubonic plague may not have come from the East at all, but may well have been incubated in Northern Europe long before it appeared in Asia.⁴ A particularly telling instance of how such scapegoating can function even at the level of what looks like dispassionate scientific discourse is the so-called Spanish flu, “which infected 500 million people — about a third of the world’s population at the time — in four successive waves” lasting from February 1918 to April 1920. “The death toll is typically estimated to have been somewhere between 17 . . . and 50 million, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in human history.” But despite its name, “the first observations of illness and mortality were documented in the United States, France, Germany and the United Kingdom.” How did it come to be called “the Spanish flu”? The explanation is edifying

and all too indicative of the political dimension of all plagues, which affect not just individuals but collectives:

“Spanish flu” is actually a misnomer. The pandemic broke out near the end of World War I, when wartime censors suppressed bad news in the belligerent countries to maintain morale, but newspapers freely reported the outbreak in neutral Spain. These stories created a false impression of Spain as the epicenter, so press outside Spain adopted the name “Spanish” flu. (“Spanish Flu,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu)

Although the origin of this pandemic has never been definitively identified, the name has remained, providing no doubt both a distraction from its probable US origin and from its ties to the war (it was spread by American soldiers going to Europe). Moreover, to name a pandemic by tying it to a locality is in a sense already to “contain” it lexicographically if not physically, and also to assign “blame” and “guilt” to the country of its putative (if false) origin.

The desire to retrace pandemics to their ultimate origin is thus symptomatic not just of the justifiable medical desire to identify the emergence and possible causes of the disease. It also demonstrates the desire to “contain” a phenomenon by distracting from its connection to a more general political and economic system, which, in the case of the 1918 flu pandemic involved the struggle of competing imperial systems and the interests driving them that produced the First World War. Militarization of conflicts works through the attempt to localize opposing forces in order to destroy them. Pandemics work against such localization, while thriving on the concentration of forces that all militarization produces.

We will have the opportunity to discuss the relation between the plague and war later, in reading Thucydides’s account of the plague that afflicted Athens and influenced the course of the Peloponnesian War. For now, however, we should note that the desire to control and eliminate plagues by identifying their origins tends to deny their essentially relational dimension, which in principle cannot be reduced to a single cause or place. Even if Covid-19 first emerged

in Wuhan through the passage of the virus from bats to humans (via the intermediary of the pangolin), this would still not suffice to constitute the ultimate cause of the pandemic, which as many epidemiologists have argued, would have to be related to the ecological and social changes in reducing the areas in which non-human life can exist, thus increasing the likelihood of zoonosis, that is, pathogens jumping from non-human to human organisms.⁵

The desire to retrace a dangerous event or phenomenon to a single originating cause that could then be controlled and made into an object of blame, or even of reparations, is also manifest in the suspicion advanced by the Trump administration that the new Coronavirus could have originated in a Wuhan laboratory engaged in biological research. For much of the media and its consumers, the fact that Trump advocates something—hydroxychloroquine, for instance—is sufficient for it to be relegated to the realm of “fake news” and political posturing, and the same holds for his and Mike Pompeo’s assertions about the probable laboratory origin of Covid-19. Such rapid dismissals of arguments that far more eminent scientists have found worthy of consideration—I am thinking here of Nobel Prize winner and co-discoverer of the HIV virus, Professor Luc Montagnier—is indicative not just of the shrinking of the field of public discussion and its reduction to polemics, but even more of the underlying insistence on certainty and the growing incapacity to accept uncertainty as a condition of dialogue. This too must be counted as a “preexisting condition” that powerfully shapes the responses to and experiences of plagues and pandemics.⁶ Obviously, this is not a controversy that a non-specialist can begin to evaluate fully; but what does seem to emerge is the overhasty tendency to dismiss arguments that do not easily conform to certain expectations or interests, however complex and contradictory those expectations and interests may be.

The idea that the pandemic could have derived from a laboratory mistake is particularly revealing of these contradictions. On the one hand, it presupposes that the origin of the catastrophe involves a

large-scale institutional effort, not just of the Chinese government since the Wuhan laboratory was supported by many international agencies. In one way, this can be reassuring, for instance, as opposed to the more ecological theory. But it is also disconcerting, since the arguments being made by Montagnier, Perez, and Tritto indicate how ill-equipped human society is to control the consequences of its acts and intentions. Putting aside for the moment the fact that one of the supporting studies has been retracted, the arguments made by Montagnier, Perez, and Tritto in favor of a possible laboratory accident as the origin of the virus do not imply that it was intentionally produced as a possible biochemical weapon — an activity that is pursued worldwide by almost all the “major” world powers, despite almost all having signed on to the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention prohibiting the development of such weapons. Rather, what the Montagnier-Perez-Tritto interpretations suggest is that humans risk losing control over their products — a fear that has haunted societies for most of the modern period, which has seen the explosion of technological advances but also their increasing use for military purposes, that is, for destruction and conquest.

This specter both stimulates and discredits what might be called “causal” thinking, and the recent pandemic has both accentuated its loss of authority and the desire to preserve it at any cost. Causal thinking seeks to establish firm links between temporal events in order to exercise a measure of control over the future. But such links presuppose that the events identified as causes can be more or less clearly delineated and defined. The history of the plague provides ample evidence for the effectiveness of such approaches, but also evidence of its limitations. The ravages of the plague, in its bubonic and pneumonic forms, were effectively controlled, if not eliminated, following the identification of the bacillus that causes the illness in 1894 by the Swiss-French physician, Alexandre Yersin. His name has since been attached to the bacillus, although it was more or less simultaneously discovered by a Japanese bacteriologist, Kitasato Shibasaburō, who has been largely forgotten. This discovery, together with the

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development of antibiotics, brought the plague largely under control, although it did not eliminate it: there continue to be isolated outbreaks up until the present (one of which shortly preceded the emergence of Covid-19).

But in the case of illnesses caused by viruses, identification of the causative agent seems to be less propitious to controlling the disease, and this may well have to do with the way viruses interact with host organisms not just to replicate but also to mutate. Such mutations are the main reason why the search for a vaccine against the HIV virus has been unsuccessful and is considered extremely unlikely to succeed. The same capacity to mutate is also the reason why the immunity conferred by the vaccine against the seasonal flu is short-lived and must be renewed each year.

In short, by comparison with bacteria, viruses are much more of a moving target. And in the case of Covid-19, this mobility also affects their targets within the body. They can attack not just the respiratory system, but many other parts of the organism as well: the heart, the circulatory system, and even the brain. Finally, the destructive effects produced seem to survive the disappearance of the virus itself, producing symptoms long after the person has tested negative for the virus and is deemed to have “recovered.”

But as already mentioned, movement is only part of the way in which viruses, and plagues more generally, exist. If movement is defined in the traditional “locomotive” sense, as going from one fixed point to another, the capacity of plagues and pandemics to spread is conditioned by their environment, including the “preexisting conditions” of the places they infest. The words of Antonin Artaud, in his 1931 lecture, “The Theater and the Plague,” echo an insight that resounds throughout the history of plagues: “The *Grand-Saint-Antoine* did not bring the plague to Marseille. It was already there.” In what sense the plague was “already there” we will have the opportunity to discuss later on. But without going into details, we find that again and again, the encounter with the plague is described in a dual and contradictory sense. On the one hand, the plague arrives with a

violent shock, an outbreak, striking not just individuals but places. In this sense, the progress of its infection can be measured in terms of time and space. It ravages specific localities, not just persons, and the speed with which it does so seems measurable. On the other hand, its outbreak is often experienced as a kind of repetition or recurrence, which makes its spatial and temporal measurement more difficult to determine. Thus, some argue that its mortality rate should be measured in comparison to that of previous, pre-plague years. Other arguments include considering the life-expectancy of its victims as part of the calculation. But the movement of the plague is also difficult to gauge because its position is never unequivocally localizable. As Tarrou, one of the main characters in Camus's novel, *The Plague*, tells his friend, Dr. Rieux, "To make things simpler, Rieux, let me begin by saying [that] I had [the] plague already, long before I came to this town and encountered it here."⁸ The shock of the plague as something new is mitigated by the experience of it through a kind of *déjà vu*. This is not the least of its uncanny effects.

In short, if the plague is conditioned by preexisting factors, then its arrival, however abrupt and shocking, is never absolute. Its visitation depends on the "host" who extends it a certain hospitality, however involuntarily. In this sense, the plague is revelatory, but what it reveals is an unsettled relation of the present to the past, and this inevitably emphasizes the uncertainty of the future. It is perhaps this uncertainty that causes many reports of the plague to take the form of retrospective narratives, whether as stories, histories, or a mixture of both. Later on, I will try to characterize these narratives neither as fictional, in the sense of purely imaginary or invented, nor as accurate histories, but as *frictional*. Frictional narratives are both historical and fictional, repetitive and made-up. But this made-up fictional aspect is never absolute, for it involves the way in which the present resonates with the past in anticipating the future. It is this strange mixture of revelation, resonance, and anticipation that tends to comprise every plague, including the coronavirus, which was initially described as being totally "novel" but in the meanwhile

seems to have become uncannily familiar. It is this uncanny novelty that calls for a *recounting*.

The Tell-Tale Story (Walter Benjamin)

Many of the documents that transmit previous experiences of plagues take the form of stories. From the Bible, to Thucydides, to Boccaccio, and beyond, the encounter with the plague is documented in narratives. To understand not “the plague” or “pandemics” in general, but the ways they are experienced, therefore, requires at the outset some reflection on storytelling more generally. Why do people tell stories, and what might this tell us about their — and our — experience of plagues?

In 1936, Walter Benjamin published an essay, whose title has been translated as “The Storyteller,” that sought to address these questions, albeit in a more negative mode. Benjamin began by noting that the art of storytelling seemed to be disappearing, in part because of what today might be called “post-traumatic stress disorder.” People returning from the horrors of the First World War were “not richer but poorer in communicable experience.” Although most dramatically manifested by the effects of the war, this loss of communicable experience was, Benjamin argued, part of a much more general process in which the oral transmission of experiences was increasingly marginalized through technological, socio-economic, and media-historical developments.

Benjamin’s text is curious for a number of reasons. At the time he wrote it, he was increasingly dependent on his writings to finance his life in exile, and this essay was written in response to a commission from a periodical. It was written about a writer who was and probably still is considered to have a minor role in Russian nineteenth-century literature: Nikolai Leskov. And it was written concerning a writer that Benjamin could not read in the original — one of the very few instances where he devoted a major text to someone he could read only in translation. But, above all, it was written about a writer at the same time that the arguments Benjamin seems to be

developing concern the oral medium of storytelling. I will return to this shortly. Perhaps it is one reason why Benjamin, a recent biography claims, “attached no particular importance” to this essay.¹⁰ Nevertheless, despite or perhaps because of the problems just mentioned, the essay outlines a theory of narration that is uniquely illuminating for the texts we are going to be considering in this book.

But before proceeding any further, it is important to note that the English translation of the title as “The Storyteller” is not quite accurate. Benjamin’s title is shorter, simpler, but also more general: “Der Erzähler,” literally, “The Teller.” Something like a “story” may be implied in the German word, but this implication is not absolutely necessary: the emphasis is on the “telling,” not on the “story.” As we will see shortly, this distinction is not insignificant.

Telling, according to Benjamin, proceeds “from mouth to mouth,” a phrase he repeats several times in the first sections of his essay. But here as elsewhere, reading Benjamin requires one to go beyond the individual statements and declarations and to reflect on their relation to other elements of the text. Despite what looks like an emphasis on oral storytelling, the teller that Benjamin is writing about, Nikolai Leskov as mentioned, was a writer, not an oral storyteller. His stories may be related to this tradition, but they remain written texts. Very soon in his essay, it appears that what Benjamin is concerned with is not so much the oral quality of narration, but its corporeal dimension: he will go on to relate the storyteller to handwork, to the hand, and thus to the singular body. It is not so much the mouth or even the voice per se that concern Benjamin as it is the role of the body and everything it involves in the process.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us return to the way Benjamin introduces his subject, which for him means, above all, defining his relationship to it:

Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his vital effectiveness (*Wirksamkeit*) is by no means fully present. He is already remote from us and . . . is becoming ever more distant. To present someone like Leskov as a storyteller does not mean bringing him closer to us but rather increasing our

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separation from him. . . . This separation . . . [is] dictated to us by an experience that is available to us almost daily. It tells us (*sie sagt uns*) that the art of storytelling is coming to an end. (I; translation modified)

There are many reasons that Benjamin gives in this essay to explain the end of the art of storytelling: the traumatic and, above all, mechanical violence done to the human body in war; the rise of information that seeks to explain everything definitively and leave nothing open; the rise of the novel that seeks to present the reader with a complete and meaningful life and thereby once again to close off its possible significance. But as with the roughly contemporaneous and far more famous essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility,” here, too, the contrast between the old and the new — between the oral and the written tradition — is less clear-cut than Benjamin often seems to suggest. And this because, in a strange sense, it is storytelling that is closer to the “reproducibility” manifested by the media technologies of his time — film and photography, but also phonographs — than the more recent forms of the novel or of the Information Age. The latter insists on the immediate and full intelligibility of the news, today emphasized by the cliché “breaking”: the new may break with the old but only in order to demonstrate its self-identity and meaningfulness. The novel, for its part, seeks to compensate for the isolation of its readers by drawing a conclusive and definitive trait at the end of a life. The story, by contrast, is never complete; it is always episodic, part of a discontinuous sequence from which it separates itself but never fully breaks. The storyteller is also not an “author” in the modern sense, since s/he is always a re-teller of tales that preexist and that are transformed in their repetition. In this sense, the story is essentially repeatable. Both its inception and its reception reflect and prolong this process. In German, Benjamin describes its reception as “*Lauschen*,” as a “listening,” which is a far more involving and far less cognitive activity than is “hearing.” One listens to a story, one does not simply “hear” it. Listening is a reproductive and transformative

process, which is therefore linked to the special kind of memory that distinguishes the story from the epic, the novel, as well as from the news media. In section XIII, Benjamin distinguishes “the eternalizing memory of the novelist” (in German, *Gedächtnis*), from the “short-lived one of the teller,” which he calls in German, curiously, *Eingedenken*:

The former is consecrated to the *one* hero, the *one* wandering, or the *one* battle; the second to the *many* dispersed occurrences (XIII).

The German word *Eingedenken* is curious here because normally it designates the opposite of what Benjamin has it signify: it is closer to the English “commemorate” than to simply memory or remembrance. And yet that would imply that it is dedicated precisely to “the one” rather than to the “many.” The distinction Benjamin is trying to articulate here can be clarified, perhaps, if one notices that the prefix of the word he is using — *Ein* (*gedenken*) — is ambiguous, signifying both “one” and “into.” In the case of the epic *Gedächtnis*, “one” stands for unity and individuality — of the hero as of his adventures and accomplishments — in the most literal sense, which is to say, indivisibility. In the case of the story, by contrast, the “one” in German changes from an independent word to a prefix, modifying a thought process of remembrance: *Ein-gedenken*. One could also think of this word as “commemoration.” The point being that the *ein-* changes from something designating individuality and unity to something designating a singularity that is not identical with itself since it requires memory to exist, and yet in being remembered, it is no longer itself, no longer unique. This is why here and elsewhere such singularity is both unique and plural *at the same time*, even if the *sameness* of that time retains a certain heterogeneity and openness.

This also applies to the opening lines of the essay; in the first published translation, words used by Benjamin in German, *lebendige Wirksamkeit*, were translated as “living immediacy.” This has been corrected in the more recent Harvard edition to read “living efficacy.” In my attempt to render it, I opted for “effectiveness.” Still, the

latter two are too teleological, suggesting the accomplishment of a goal rather than the production of effects. There is nothing “immediate” about *Wirksamkeit* but also little that suggests “efficiency” in any form. *Wirksamkeit* involves simply the effects that something can produce, its “working,” and as such implies a certain separation from its present state. This is why Benjamin begins his essay by accentuating and reflecting on our distance from the storyteller; such an awareness, he argues, is indispensable if one is to “present” his “figure,” literally, “place it before us” (in German, *darstellen*: “place there”). Benjamin’s storyteller will thus be placed in front of us and yet also distant from us: in German, this is the important difference between *vorstellen* and *darstellen*: the *dar*, “there,” is neither here nor there in the sense of being essentially related to our position. German distinguishes between two sorts of “there”: *dort*, the opposite of here, and *da*, which is not the opposite of anything, but is simply “there” where we are not.

Although Benjamin’s “story” here suggests a linear decline or loss of experience, as in his roughly contemporaneous essay on reproducibility, he also warns against understanding the crisis of storytelling as a linear process of decline:

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, a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history (IV).

What Benjamin seems to be suggesting is that “the secular productive forces of history” accentuate and accompany, but do not simply cause, the reduction of plurality to unity, of dispersion to concentration, that finds its literary culmination in the novel and its medial culmination in the new media (which Benjamin refers to as “information”), but that can be traced back to emphasis of the ancient epic on the single hero, the single event, the single conquest (XIII).

In short, the storyteller appeals to a memory that is both singular and plural, unique and dispersed, separate and yet connected. This is also why, in the second section of his essay, Benjamin can identify two

figures as constitutive of the storyteller: the seaman, who wanders out into the world, and the landman, who stays at home to cultivate the land and its traditions. But once again this duality should not be construed as a mutually exclusive opposition, since only their “most intimate interpenetration” can allow the story to realize its fullest potential: “In it was combined the lore of faraway places . . . with the lore of the past as it best reveals itself to natives of a place” (II). In short, the story articulates the relation between the local and the general, between what is near and what is distant. In this respect, it has its own aura, which Benjamin famously defined as the appearance of a certain distance in what seems to be near.

But all of these determinations and definitions pale before what I take to be the most significant dimension of Benjamin’s theory of storytelling: the fact that it is first and foremost a *response*, and a response that seeks to evoke further responses. To what does it respond? Above all, to a certain disorientation, my best attempt to render in English the word that Benjamin uses, which is *Ratlosigkeit* (V). This word, based on the root word, *Rat*, is almost impossible to render in idiomatic English. It names a situation of perplexity, in which there is a need or demand for advice, or, as it is translated in the published English versions, for “counsel.” I prefer the word “advice” although the German word used by Benjamin encompasses both advice and counsel. The word *Rat* in German has a much wider range of uses than either of the two English words taken separately. As a verb, *raten*, it implies the notion of conjecture, guessing, divining, with the more everyday and practical idea of “advising.” If the “art of storytelling” is dying out, according to Benjamin — a dramatic assertion that as we have begun to see requires infinite qualification — then it is because the need and demand for advice is diminishing, under the influence, above all, of “information” and related discourses. These discourses provide “answers” that preclude the demand for further responses. Every answer is a response, but not every response is an answer. Responses without definitive answers are what distinguish the story, according to Benjamin, from both the novel and the news media, just as it

distinguishes the medieval “chronicler” from the modern “historian.” The latter explains, whereas the ancient chronicler or historian, such as Herodotus, recounts without providing a definitive conclusion, thus leaving it up to the listener or reader to decide, which is to say, to respond in turn.

In other words, the story cannot be understood as constituting a self-contained totality, literally meaning-ful. Instead, it provides counsel:

In every case the storyteller is someone who has counsel for his readers. . . . Counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story that is just unfolding. To seek this counsel, one would first have to be able to tell the story (IV).

To seek counsel presupposes that “one would first have to be able to tell the story” — but to tell the story in a way that puts it in the present participle, as something ongoing but never complete, as something “that is just unfolding.” In other words, to tell a story means to acknowledge that the telling is caught up in the story as incomplete and ongoing, and therefore can never attain a full overview of its trajectory. Every story is of limited duration, like a limited, mortal life: it cannot hope to go on forever. But it can hope to defer the end and to give rise to new and other stories. As with Scheherazade, whom, according to Benjamin, “thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop” (XIII), every storyteller struggles not to overcome death but to delay its execution by providing a new story. What survives is not the individual story nor the individual storyteller, but the process of telling.

The following textual example given by Benjamin is in this respect very telling; it is drawn from a story told, or retold (because the event recounted existed previously in other stories), by the German writer, Johann Peter Hebel, called “Unhoped-for Reunion” (*Unverhofftes Wiedersehen*). The narrative recounts the story of a young miner who on the eve of his wedding is killed in an accident at the bottom of a mine shaft. Decades later, a body is excavated from the abandoned tunnel, and his former bride to be, now grown old, recognizes her fiancé in

the corpse that has been preserved by being saturated with iron vitriol. This is how Hebel describes the many years between the death of the miner and the rediscovery of his body:

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. King Gustavus of Sweden conquered Russian Finland, and the French Revolution and the long war began, and Emperor Leopold II went to his grave. 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 . . . (XI).

Benjamin gives only a short gloss:

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 that of the Reaper in the processions that pass round the cathedral clock [Strasbourg] at noon (XI).

Let us for a moment dwell on this passage and read it carefully, as Benjamin suggests. Note the repetition of death. In general, those who die are all sovereigns: Emperor Francis I, Empress Maria Theresa, Emperor Joseph, Emperor Leopold II — the one exception being Struensee, a German physician who became the lover of the Danish Queen, Caroline-Mathilde and who was ultimately executed; the death of the poor miner is thus put in parallel with the death of ruling figures. The relation of the story to time is thus marked by the mortality of individual living beings, whether great and powerful or not. The story, in contrast to certain religions, has no “answer” for this, but it nevertheless responds to it, in part by including a certain discontinuity and finitude in its own structure of repetition.

The story is, as Benjamin asserts, coming to an end. But in a certain sense, it has always been both coming to an end and deferring its end through the production of new stories. Although such stories constitute “a chain of tradition” in which “one links to the next,” that link also underscores the gaps that the links bridge but do not eliminate. On both ends of the chain or the more multidirectional “web” (XIII), there are repetitions and a very unusual kind of reproducibility:

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. (VIII)

The repeating of stories is unusual because, Benjamin insists, it goes together not with the prolongation of a self-identical subject, the author, but with a certain self-forgetting, of the listener. In listening to the story, listeners learn to forget their selves, or at least a certain aspect of their histories. This allows what Benjamin calls “the rhythm of work” to take over, and this allows “the retelling” of them to “come to him” as a “gift.” Storytelling is a gift because it is never the property or product of the teller alone.

This passage is a good example of how what Benjamin is describing as “listening” and “telling” converge with a certain form of reading and writing and also, how this convergence demarcates itself from how they might traditionally be construed. When Benjamin calls storytelling an “art” and when he describes its reception as governed by a “rhythm of work” that in turn engenders — “cradles” — “the gift of storytelling,” he is using the words “art” and “work” in a very different way from how they are traditionally conceived; for both words are usually understood as the product of highly self-conscious intentional activity: artists, like workers, are supposed to know what their goal

is, what they are trying to produce. This, as Marx remarks in commenting on Aristotle, is what distinguishes the purposive activity of insects or other animals from human art or work.¹¹ Humans know what they are producing; bees do not. But the work Benjamin is alluding to here is not work as a self-conscious process, which is probably why he introduces the word “rhythm”: it describes a recurrent pattern but not necessarily one that is self-conscious or self-reflexive. Such rhythms mimic the production of identity through their recurrence while at the same time undermining it and allowing the emergence of a certain “self-forgetfulness,” which is nothing more than a sensitivity to impulses that is no longer governed by constraints of identification. This involves “listening” not only to what comes from without but to what usually is denied from within and which therefore constitutes an internal exterior. Affirming our distance from Leskov, and from storytellers in general, involves both acknowledging the power of social constraints to self-identify, and at the same time accepting their limitations. It involves what Nietzsche once called an “active forgetting”¹² and is akin to the receptivity that Freud asked his patients to strive for: that is, he asked them to try to suspend all conscious expectations as much as possible in order to “freely associate,” which is to say, to allow memories, thoughts, and responses that were otherwise inaccessible to become conscious. Translated onto the situation of listening to stories, this suggests an attitude that is neither active, in the sense of mobilizing self-conscious concepts and expectations, nor passive, in the sense of simply reacting to what comes from outside. Rather, *responding* here involves precisely allowing certain impulses — verbal, gestural, etc. — to resonate with previous experiences without demanding that they form a meaningful and unified whole and thereby be assimilated into a sense of oneself as a continuum.

The alternative to this constraining sense of self is a heightened sensitivity to one’s surroundings and to one’s past — to preexisting conditions and circumstances:

Storytelling . . . does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in

order to bring it out of him again. . . . Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow (IX).

To “sink the thing into the life of the storyteller” describes the point of departure of the story: its initiating framework is “the life” of a singular, living being. But this singular living being is not isolated as is the individual in many nineteenth-century novels; life in the singular is indissolubly bound up with its environment, with the lives of others, and with others who are not necessarily alive. This is particularly the case with Boccaccio, who (as we will see) begins the *Decameron* with a long description of the hideous ravages of the plague in Florence, and who insists that this brutal introduction is absolutely necessary in order to appreciate the beauty of the stories that follow. The tension between the fate of singular living beings and their more general environment — which is not just spatial but also temporal — is one of the traits that distinguishes the plague from other catastrophic events. For the plague is both individual and collective: it strikes individuals with deadly force, but it strikes them as members of a collective: of a city, a town, an army, a religion, a region. The plague in this sense is both local and general. The stories it generates must take this into account. As we will see, they will do this in part by trying to count the devastating effects of the plague, and then by recounting those effects insofar as they escape mere enumeration. This counting and recounting also characterizes the position of the storyteller, who, as Benjamin puts it (at the beginning of XI) in one of his most memorable, and enigmatic, phrases, “has borrowed his authority from death.” Because the plague is both local and collective, singular and general, it confronts the limitation of individual living beings with the fate of the group to which they belong but also from which they are always more or less separated. It never strikes individuals in isolation, which is why individuals try to isolate themselves to escape its ravages. But such attempts can never be entirely successful, because the plague reveals how intertwined

individuals are and must be with others. Nevertheless, it still strikes individuals in their singularity, which means in their bodily existence. And the bodies of individuals can never simply be absorbed into or transcended by the “body politic,” the social or religious “body” to which they belong. Benjamin tries to emphasize how this corporeal aspect is both intrinsic to storytelling — it is the corporeal, not the oral, that defines its one pole — but how it at the same time is inevitably distanced through the process of telling, which transforms the body into a signifying agent, in language and in gesture. “The figure of the storyteller,” Benjamin writes, “gets its full corporeality only for someone who can picture” it both as seaman and as cultivator, tied to the ocean and to the earth, to the near as to the distant. But when the plague comes to “visit,” the foreign invades the home, and the two can no longer be easily separated.

Although Benjamin does not mention it, the great Western epic of homecoming, the *Odyssey*, suggests that something similar may apply to life in general, and that the plague only intensifies this indwelling of the foreign in the domestic. The *Odyssey* does not end with the return of Odysseus; it continues beyond the return (*nostos*) through the prophesy of Tiresias, whom Odysseus has encountered on his trip to the land of the dead to see his mother. Tiresias, who alone among the dead seems to have retained his powers, tells him that after returning home and reclaiming his property, he will once again have to leave it and go to foreign lands where the oars he carries on his shoulders will be mistaken for plowshares by those who know nothing of the sea. Only then, in this remote country — according to Tiresias — will Odysseus be able to make proper sacrifices to his arch divine enemy, Poseidon, and thus acquire the possibility of a calm and peaceful end of life. But even then, the *Odyssey* does not come to rest, since its final book describes the danger of civil war — which in Thucydides will turn out to be a close relative of the plague — as the family members of the suitors killed by Odysseus threaten to make war against him. The epic thus does not so much end as it falls

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apart inconclusively, which is perhaps why this non-ending is so little remembered and discussed, and why, like stories, it can give rise to further storytelling.

In short, even the most epic of epics, the *Odyssey*, tends to confirm Benjamin's insight that "there is no story for which the question, 'What comes next?' could not be asked" (XIV).

If the storyteller has only "borrowed" his authority from death, it is because "death" has no authority that it could *give* to anyone, apart from the gift of telling. If death can be imagined as having any authority, it can only be as a result of a Being who has created it along with life and who regards it as his property and prerogative. It is to this Being and to a few of the stories in which his legacy has been transmitted that we will turn next.

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